

3. ECCLESIASTICAL UNITY

Thesis: Christian oneness characterizes God's church as organism and organization.

I. Unity as Organism (spiritual)

"For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13).

*"As the invisible Church of Christ, the unity characteristic of it is a spiritual unity, susceptible of a much higher character, as well as of a more complete realization, than in the case of the visible Church."*¹

*"...unity is of the essence of the body of Christ."*²

A. The Fact of Invisible Unity

"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph. 2:19-21).

"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing" (Eph. 5:25, 27).

*"We believe in one...church."*³

*"The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all."*⁴

*It is not for nothing that in the Old Testament the elect people of God, divided though it was into twelve tribes and later grouped into two kingdoms, consisted of a single race tracing its descent from a single progenitor...There might be all kinds of breaches of this unity, from civil war on the one side to foreign marriages on the other. But nothing could shake the oneness of divine election, redemption, and overruling as focused in the common descent and national membership."*⁵

*"Unbelievable though it may seem, the church of Jesus Christ is really one."*⁶

B. The Fount of Invisible Unity

"And he is the head of the body, the church" (Col. 1:18).

"All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by his Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with him in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory: and, being united to one another in love,

¹ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2015), 53.

² R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 49.

³ *The Nicene Creed*.

⁴ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 25.1.

⁵ G. W. Bromiley, *The Unity and Disunity of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 9-10.

⁶ Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ*, 41.

*they have communion in each other's gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man."*⁷

*"There could be no union in the body if the Head did not unite it. All union that believers experience flows from Christ first as their Head and Mediator. Whatever unity they may have which does not first rise from this spring is merely human and of the flesh."*⁸

*"The prayer of our Lord [John 17] was not primarily for organizational unity but for spiritual unity."*⁹

II. Unity as Organization (institutional)

"And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd" (Jn. 10:16).

*"All societies who profess Christianity and retain the foundational principles thereof, notwithstanding their different denominations and diversity of sentiments in smaller things, are in reality but one Church of Christ, but several branches (more or less pure in minuter points) of one visible kingdom of the Messiah."*¹⁰

A. Prizing Visible Unity

"I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them" (Rom. 16:17).

*"This visible union of believers in church ordinances is their highest beauty and their greatest advantage."*¹¹

*"Although most people are not aware of it, the denominational experience is actually an acknowledgment that a denomination—as well as a congregation or person—is part of something bigger. That 'something bigger' is the church."*¹²

B. Pursuing Visible Unity

"I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment" (1 Cor. 1:10).

*"To strive without sacrifice of truth for the visible unity of the body of Christ is to enhance its glory."*¹³

*"Diverse churches in diverse denominations must begin to cultivate the desire to live together in, with, and through our differences."*¹⁴

*"If the unity of the church is as important as the Bible says it is, aren't we obligated to attempt to surmount all impediments to its achievement to the greatest degree possible?"*¹⁵

⁷ Westminster Confession of Faith 26.1.

⁸ Anthony Burgess, *Advancing Christian Unity*, ed. Matthew Vogan (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2019), 112.

⁹ Conrad Mbewe, *Unity: Striving Side by Side for the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024), 6.

¹⁰ Gilbert Tennent, quoted in Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition: A Re-Examination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1949), 132.

¹¹ Burgess, *Advancing Christian Unity*, 29.

¹² Luder G. Whitlock Jr., *Divided We Fall: Overcoming a History of Christian Disunity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), 78.

¹³ Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ*, 55.

¹⁴ Richard Lints, *Uncommon Unity: Wisdom for the Church in an Age of Division* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022), 197.

¹⁵ Whitlock, *Divided We Fall*, 139.