

# Unity

by Tom Macartney

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*The new birth is crucial for unity among Christians, and we must seek to attain the unity of the faith, the full knowledge of the Son of God.*

**Scripture:** Ezekiel 37:7, Acts 19:9, 1 Corinthians 12:12, Ephesians 1:22, Revelation 3:21

**Topics:** "Church Unity", "Spiritual Maturity"

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## Description

Tom Macartney emphasizes the importance of church unity, highlighting that only those united to Christ through the new birth can truly be one. He points out that a divided world will only listen to a united church and that unity is essential for fully knowing Christ and being effective against spiritual opposition. Macartney stresses the unity of the Spirit and the unity of the faith as crucial aspects for believers to guard and progress towards, promoting understanding, experience, and maturity among Christians. He challenges the notion of unity based on identical experiences or complete doctrinal agreement, emphasizing that unity is a shared life in Christ, not uniformity in beliefs.

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## Transcript

Church unity is a favourite talking point today but unhappily much of the talk by-passes the fact that only those united to Christ in saving experience can possibly be one. The new birth is crucial. Born-again believers alone can be one. They are already members of the same family and only need to honour the fact.

Now while we live in a day when it is vital for Christians to close their ranks, and while many are longing to drop their labels and get together with other Christians, it is clear there are subtle and powerful forces at work more determined than ever to divide us. We should consider this carefully in the light of John 17. Why did the Lord Jesus pray so definitely for the unity of His church? He knew that a divided world would only listen to a united church. He knew that only together could we fully know Him and be His weapons for Satan's overthrow. No wonder the devil works overtime to keep us in our own little circles. He is afraid of real unity, the fruit of Christ's triumph over human nature, but not in the least worried by the kind found within any circle of like-minded people even in this world. When Christians who disagree on various issues maintain their unity in Christ the devil knows his kingdom is threatened.

The word unity occurs only twice in the New Testament, in Ephesians 4, where two kinds are mentioned. In verse 3 there is the unity of the Spirit, our sharing the same life because we have the same Father through new birth. This is the starting point of unity which must be jealously guarded, the oneness of all

true believers. In verse 13 there is the unity of the faith, towards which we are progressing. This is the destination to be reached, the full knowledge of the Son of God. We must maintain the first which already exists, and seek to attain the second by growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. All Christians are one because members of the same family, yet they are to become one in understanding, experience and maturity. In these verses we have the secret of real and growing unity here and now.

In verses 4-6 Paul goes on to stress this basic oneness: "There is one body and one Spirit ... one hope ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all." Dare we ignore the challenging implications of such words?

Note, this is the unity of a shared life and not of an identical experience. The Lord made us different and deals with and gifts us all differently. We must not make our experience the basis of fellowship nor imagine it is the only valid one. Division is inevitable if we try to make others conform to our mould or only have full fellowship with those on our wave-length.

Note further, this is not the unity of complete doctrinal agreement. Naturally there will be a saving knowledge and acceptance of the great truths of the gospel. There can be no salvation or new birth otherwise. A true relationship to Christ, the central issue, only follows a scriptural view of Christ crucified and risen. There are many false Christs being proclaimed and followed today so that we cannot take it for granted that all who name the name of Jesus are truly His. But if a person is rightly related to Christ by saving faith, then he is a member of the family of God and we must receive him, adding no extra conditions. His wrong ideas, and ours, on many things will be corrected in time.

"The unity of the faith and of the full know-ledge of the Son of God," is our destination, when the church and every member attain full manhood, a glorious church fit for Christ. The faith is the whole counsel of God, the unsearchable riches of Christ, contained in the gospel. Clearly this unity will only be fully known in eternity and can only be gradually attained now, for Christians are at such different stages of understanding, growth and development.

But what are we to do about expressing our unity here and now where we live? This is the question. To do anything we shall have to face the awkward implications that follow looking at things from the Lord's angle and be willing to pay the price attached to all real spiritual endeavour. Most Christians choose to make the best of the existing situation and so perpetuate it. If, however, we want to know something of the reality of the church, we must grasp that Christ is the living and present Head in control of His church; that it is a living body with living and active members; and that it is one family, so that the only kind of division permitted by the Lord is practical and geographical.

In the New Testament there is only one church, the church of the living God, to be found on earth in the churches of God, or churches of Christ, in different localities. The point we must see is that there can only be one church in one place because the church is one.

The whole church in a given locality may not be able to meet together because of numbers, but there is still only one church there. Paul wrote to the church of God at Corinth because there was only one church there, but clearly there were too many Christians in Corinth for them all to meet together regularly. Similarly, there was only one church in Ephesus for Paul sent for its elders (Acts 20:17), but verse 20 shows that the one church in fact met in a number of houses which he visited. His public preaching ministry was in the hall of Tyrannus. To meet on the basis of doctrinal agreement or common experience

or some vision or view of church life and order is therefore ruled out. Christ sees only one church in any given place, His church. He recognises none of our divisions, He only grieves over them. Is it not time we stopped excusing and defending these?

What then can we do about the existing, complex situation? We can at least start looking at things as the Lord does and be prepared for Him to work. We can recognise the main hindrances to any change for the better: the blind insistence that our version of the church is the best and everyone should join us; adding to Christ some doctrine, practice, experience or vision as the basis of full fellowship with us; our preference for the safe status quo rather than difficult, untried paths; the spirit of compromise which always finds a good reason for evading the will of God; and the pride and self-seeking found everywhere.

We can also overcome the temptation to discouragement, that feeling that nothing can be done about it, and the lie that the Lord Himself has given up. We can seek fellowship with all even when we cannot surmount the barriers erected by others. We can see to it that we erect no barriers ourselves and that there are none in our hearts. We can encourage Christians to meet together as Christians.

The Lord's desire for the oneness of His church is clear and unchanging. Those who seek it will surely find Him with them. While neither scripture nor church history give any grounds for expecting all Christians to respond to the challenge of His will, both teach that God always has something better for those willing to pay the price of obedience.

When the Lord set Ezekiel down in the middle of the valley of dry and scattered bones, he was overwhelmed by the impossibility of the situation. It is the same in the church at large today, but note that the first step towards a new day was the coming together of these bones in obedience to the word of the Lord. When Christians start coming together in the bonds of Christ alone, in obedience to the will of God, things will begin to happen. But it will have to be at the local, practical level and not just at conventions and conferences. There's the rub. Most people prefer fellowship without involvement, fellowship at a safe distance. It is so much easier. But the Lord wants the reality of the church. Are we settling for something less?

Bible references: Acts 19:9; 20:27; Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 10:32; 11:16; 12:12, 13; Eph. 1:22, 23; 3:8; 1 Tim. 3:15; 2 Pet. 3:18; Rev. 1:12, 13; 3:21; Ezek. 37:7

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