

# The Call for Unity

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The call for unity that is sounding forth from so many among the professed followers of Christ today is nothing new – it is a call that has roots in God and yet it is a dangerous proposition. Consider that this call is nothing new – Luther and Zwingli attempted to unite in the sixteenth century but Luther claimed that Zwingli and his followers were of a different spirit. But the fracture that causes the disunity that prevails today goes much further back. To find that fracture we have to look back to one of the most undocumented periods of church history – the second century. Of all the thousands of people who had come to follow Christ, only a handful of writers are preserved. It is not to be supposed that these few writers acted in some kind of conspiracy but rather that these writers, because their ideas were in error and because they wielded incredible power, the opinions of these men – Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Cyprian – carry an incredible influence, all the more incredible because the vast majority of those today who profess to follow Christ, if they have ever even heard these men’s names, have little or no idea how and to what extent their spiritual lives are impacted by these men’s writings. Thus it remains virtually unknown that the call for unity in the second century resulted in a fracture from which the people of Christ have yet to recover.

## The Cast

Philip Schaff writes, “The fathers of [this] period all saw in the church, though with different degrees of clearness, a divine, supernatural order of things, in a certain sense, the continuation of the life of Christ on earth, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the sole repository of the powers of divine life, the possessor and interpreter of the Holy Scriptures, the mother of all the faithful.” (*History of the Christian Church, Vol. II*, p. 169) Those who have been led into the truth by the Spirit of truth recognize that everything but the last item is true. But in this last item, Satan had successfully inserted one of his lies into their midst.

In spite of believing that the work of the “mother church” is a necessity, men like Augustine, who rightly belongs to the fifth century when the question of sin and grace was in conflict, will also insist that the salvation of man is *wholly* a work of God – and they never saw the contradiction. Augustine had already believed what Cyprian had said in 251 A.D., “No one can have God for his Father, who has not the church for his mother.” (Schaff, *II*, p. 173) This “mother church” error, built upon men like Cyprian’s complete inability to imagine a Christianity outside of the “empirical orthodox church, episcopally organized and centralized in Rome.” (Schaff, *II*, p. 173) And coupled with this blindness, Cyprian and the other “church fathers” built on the error that *Peter* was the rock upon which “the church” was to be built (Schaff, *II*, p. 161) – see Mt. 16:18 which is now clearly recognized by almost all that even the Greek construction used shows that Christ was *not* building His ekklesia on the person or character of Peter!), is Cyprian’s nearly fanatical “horror of schism.” (Schaff, *II*, p. 262) Blindness, error and obsession – these are indications of demonic deception, not the work of Christ.

Ignatius of Antioch (martyred 107 A.D.) wrote that “the catholic church” was the closely united and full totality of His people and “only in her can we eat the bread of God; he, who follows a schismatic, inherits not the kingdom of God.” (Schaff, *II*, p. 171) Ignatius was the first martyr-bishop whose writings supported the exaltation of the episcopate – in the succeeding

centuries those writers who did not agree with this idea would be labeled schismatic, heretics, rebels and antichrists. (Schaff, *II*, p. 170) and their writings – and often they themselves – were very often eradicated and burnt. Modern scholarship even calls Ignatius’ writings into question – “The whole story of Ignatius is more legendary than real, and his writings are subject to grave suspicion of fraudulent interpolation.” (Schaff, *II*, p. 145) Ignatius “is the first time that the term ‘catholic’ is applied to the church, and that episcopacy is made a condition of catholicity” (Schaff, *II*, p. 148) Ignatius’ idea of the episcopacy is found in statements such as

- “Look to the bishop, that God also [may look] upon you...”;
- “He that does anything without the knowledge of the bishop serves the devil...”;
- “...do all things with a divine concord: the bishop presiding in the place of God...”; and
- “follow the bishop, as Jesus Christ [follows] the Father...” (Schaff, *II*, p. 146-148)

Such teachings make salvation virtually dependent upon obedience to the bishop, thus putting upon the bishop a role reserved for Christ alone. (Heb. 5:9, 1 Tim. 2:5) Ignatius’ letters may well represent “a special pleading for a novelty which in the mind of the writer was essential to the very existence of the church” (Schaff, *II*, p. 148) but the overall character of Ignatius pointedly suggests another conclusion: “Ignatius glows with the fire and impetuosity of the Greek and Syrian temper which carries him beyond the bounds of sobriety... Hierarchical pride and humility, Christian charity and churchly exclusiveness are typically represented in Ignatius. ...his enthusiasm for martyrdom ...degenerates into boisterous impatience and morbid fanaticism... There mingles also in all his extravagant professions of humility and entire unworthiness a refined spiritual pride and self-commendation. And, finally, there is something offensive in the tone of his epistle to Polycarp [born about 69 A.D. or earlier] in which he addresses that venerable bishop and apostolic disciple [of the apostle John], who at that time must have already entered upon the years of ripe manhood [Polycarp was at least 50, perhaps older], not as a colleague and brother, but rather as a pupil...” (Schaff, *II*, p. 657-659) Ignatius too appears to have had areas of his soul dominated by demonic influences.

Irenaeus too relied on the historical error (deception?) and “calls Rome the greatest, the oldest (?) church, acknowledged by all, founded by the two most illustrious apostles, Peter and Paul, the church, with which, on account of her more important precedence, all Christendom must agree, or (according to another interpretation) to which (as the metropolis of the world) all other churches must resort.” (Schaff, *II*, p. 159) As there are now serious reasons to reject either Peter or Paul as the founders of any Roman Christian assembly, it would seem that Rome certainly inherited (or took upon itself) Peter’s propensity to strive to be “the greatest”! (see Lk. 22:24, 31, etc.) Irenaeus calls the hierarchical church “the haven of rescue, the way of salvation, the entrance to life... Only on the bosom of the church...can we be nursed to life. ...separation from her is separation from the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Heretics...are enemies of the truth and sons of Satan...” (Schaff, *II*, p. 171) “To the ever-shifting and contradictory opinions of the heretics Irenaeus opposes the unchanging faith of the catholic church which is based on the Scriptures and tradition, and compacted together by the Episcopal organization.” (Schaff, *II*, p. 753-754) Unfortunately for the rest of Christianity – all those, like ourselves, who have come after – the Episcopal organization with which the Scriptures and tradition (which those were and

are largely truth) is bound up is not to be found anywhere in the Scriptures. Irenaeus, seeing only the small number of men between himself and the Christ – Irenaeus was the pupil of Polycarp who was the pupil of the apostle John – and seeing the influx of ideas like the Gnostic heresies and, as so many other bishops believed of their position, seeing the primary role of the bishop as a successor of the apostles and guardians of the doctrine of the church (Schaff, *II*, p. 763) – failed to see that he too was under a number of deceptions – the “native language” of the devil and demonic. (Jn. 8:44)

Similar statements and insights can be found in Tertullian (who became a schismatic during the Montanist movement), Clement of Alexandria and Origen (who was condemned as a heretic in a later age), and further evidence can be brought forth that the episcopate arose as a separate office *after* the so-called apostolic age of the original apostles – chief among these evidences being the ample testimony of the New Testament itself that speaks of elders (Greek *presbuteros* [4245]) and overseers (traditionally “bishops,” Greek *episkopos* [1985]) as being the same thing! – but surely the point has been made that an important definition was made by the most visible and the most overlooked sect in church history, the so-called “Catholic” sect. They made these definitions and set the pattern even though the “church fathers” of this age believed that “No heresy can reach the conception of the church, or rightly claim any one of her predicates; it forms at best a sect or party, and consequently falls within the province and the fate of human and perishing things, while the church is divine and indestructible.” (Schaff, *II*, p. 170) To that last, we must also add the Catholic sect’s claim, not only to be exclusive, divine and indestructible, but also to be infallible – a claim proven false time and time again. What we are examining here is the first instance where the Catholic sect took upon itself the role of setting forth a false doctrine and calling it truth. In this case the doctrine was not so much a tenet but a practice that required justification.

Nowhere in the New Testament is the ekklesia called a mother. She *is* called the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:23-24) and it does not take much insight to see that one cannot be the mother of oneself nor that Christ could have the same entity be both mother and bride. The “mother church” error is simply the historical hiding place for Mystery Babylon, the mother of the abominations of the earth. (Rev. 17:5) The teachings of Ignatius, Irenaeus, Cyprian, etc. are simply the proof that “while men slept” the devil, the enemy of the kingdom of God, sowed his sons among the sons of the kingdom. (Mt. 13:25, 38) Whereas men in the second, third and fourth centuries, especially the Catholic sect, could only see the “empirical orthodox church, episcopally organized and centralized in Rome” (Schaff, *II*, p. 173), the “church” – that world-like organization and structure that, being a part of this world, “the field,” that would conceal the real nature of the tares among the wheat (again see Mt. 13:38), only those who remained sons of the kingdom, that realm where Christ is *obeyed*, would be the true wheat. As Paul had precisely prophesied to the elders of Ephesus, “From among yourselves [the ranks of the elders] men [“bishops”] will rise up, speaking corrupted things [subtle distortions of truth], to draw away the disciples after themselves [in their newly-created office].” (Acts 20:30)

### **The Basis of Unity**

Paul wrote clearly about the body of Christ in his letter to the Ephesians. One of his instructions was that we should “endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Eph. 4:3) One thing that ought to jump out at us immediately is that the unity based on the Spirit of God is not nearly the same thing as a unity based on the catholic system under an exalted bishop! And it is here that we can best see the fracture, even rupture, that occurred in the

second century. Because these men (“bishops”) believed themselves to be the exclusive possessors of the “keys of the kingdom,” the right to forgive and absolve sins (see however Mt. 16:19, 18:18, Jn. 20:23 – a function that belongs to all genuine members of the priesthood of *all* believers provided they act in the unity of the Spirit on such occasions), all manner of non-Scriptural abominations have been perpetuated in the “church” – both the original Catholic sect and all her prostitute daughters (“denominations”) that have broken away, many of which until the sixteenth century were eradicated in blood. This *is* the mother of abominations – a “mother” who destroys her own offspring because they are too much like herself!

The Greek word translated “unity” is *henotes* [1775] and it really should be rendered “unanimity.” Strong’s defines it as “oneness or unanimity.” A.T. Robertson, one of the most respected Greek scholars to date because he only rarely lets his “theology” define the Greek but rather lets the Greek speak for itself, writes, “Late and rare word (from *heis*, one) in Aristotle and Plutarch, though in [the New Testament] only in [Eph. 4:3, 13].” (*Word Pictures in the New Testament, Vol. IV*, p. 535) Kenneth Wuest, another respectable Greek scholar, writes, “‘Unity’ is *henotes*, ‘unanimity, agreement.’ It is the unanimity or agreement among Christians that is the product of the Holy Spirit.” Wuest then renders the passage as “...doing your best to safeguard the unanimity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (*Word Studies in the New Testament, Vol. I*, p. 95-96, on Eph. 4:3) This is the idea of being in “one accord” as practiced by the first believers. (Acts 2:46, etc.)

### **The Marburg Confrontation**

Imagine, if you can, how different church history would be if men had not slept but had instead remained alert to the spiritual realities and consequences of their actions. We can only engage in a small bit of imaginative speculation, however, because over all human history God is still enthroned and it was He who chose, for His own purpose and glory, to allow the devil to slip into the field while men slept. Men slept – God did not. But let us consider how some specific things would have been handled differently if all the people had operated in the unanimity of the Spirit.

The Marburg conference (1529 A.D.), the conflict between Luther and Zwingli, was attended by about a dozen men. Imagine now how different this conference might have been if all those in attendance knew that the Lord Himself expected them to come together in unanimous agreement and that this was *His* highest priority. Thus when Luther doggedly held onto his faulty idea that “This is My body” (Mt. 26:26, 1 Cor. 11:24) meant the literal presence of Christ’s body in the bread served at communion, the simple fact that there were others in the room who disagreed should have told Luther that one – or both! – parties were wrong. But Luther’s bull-headedness, which had served him well throughout his conflict against the Catholic sect, was completely inappropriate at this conference and prevented the bringing about of the unanimity of the Spirit of God. Luther’s parting shot when the conference ended with no resolution, “Yours is a different spirit from ours” (Schaff, *VII*, p. 644), holds more truth than Luther intended and Luther’s rude and obstinate refusal to receive from the Spirit of truth indicates that Luther was under more demonic control than he thought or believed. His letter to his wife, written on the last day of the Marburg conference, betrays that Luther wanted “no brotherhood and membership, only peace and good-will” – the latter meaning, as was actually stated to the Swiss in a final thrust, “‘We cannot acknowledge you as brethren.’ They were willing, however, to include them in that universal charity which we owe to our enemies.” And

after listing Zwingli's "best arguments," he arrogantly writes to his wife, "I think God has blinded their eyes." (Schaff, VII, p. 645)

Another historian notes,

After Augsburg [1530, one year after Marburg] Luther continued to preach and teach the Bible in Wittenburg, but even sympathetic biographers have found it hard to justify some of the actions of his declining years. As *Time* once put it, "He endorsed the bigamous marriage of his supporter, Prince Philip of Hesse. He denounced reformers who disagreed with him in terms that he had once reserved for the papacy. His statements about the Jews would sound excessive on the tongue of a Hitler." By the time of his death in 1546, says biographer Roland Bainton, Luther was "an irascible old man, petulant, peevish, unrestrained, and at times positively coarse." (Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, p. 263)

It is not really all that difficult to discern which spirit Luther was of at the Marburg conference and in the last seventeen years of his life. And it is these last years that betray the previously hidden presence of demonic control even in the man who helped bring many of the sixteenth century people of Christ into greater light and liberty than was available under the Catholic "church." Indeed, his blindness about the bread and body which he used to separate the body of Christ stands as a witness of just how powerful the fracture of failing to practice unanimity of the Spirit really is.

### **Back to the Second Century**

If we indulge in a bit more imaginative speculation and apply the notion of the unanimity of the Spirit to the second century, it is not difficult to conclude that there would be no bishops, no basilica (judgment hall) temples (that English-speaking men would come to call "churches") and no "church" laws by which one could choose to follow the Spirit of truth or follow the bishop who taught what seemed right to his listeners and followers. Thus many of the situations that were insurmountable in the second century would never have even come up for consideration.

- The men whose writings helped bring about the Catholic "church" as it was in the Middle Ages would never have been bishops, probably would never have written down anything (certainly not what they did write) and other men truly led only by the Spirit of truth might have written things that could have been included in what we now call "the New Testament."

- Rather than Montanus being forced to break away from the Catholic sect because the bishops relied on synods and councils and the power they wielded as bishops of "the church" (all while they practiced whatever was right in their own eyes, lawlessness – Jdgs. 21:25), perhaps Montanus' call for moral improvements would have been heeded and his own spiritual, moral and aestic excesses would have been restrained and curbed.

- The persecutions (303-311 A.D.) of the Roman emperor Diocletian produced literally thousands who, rather than be tortured or killed, bowed to Caesar as God. After the persecutions were over, many repented of this and sought to be restored to the faith. These people were called “the lapsed” because it was said their faith lapsed during their persecution. The reaction to the lapsed produced the system of outward penance and was the trigger for six major schisms. But suppose each local assembly had been trusted to restore each individual as the Lord led each assembly – evidenced by the unanimous agreement of all genuine and confirmed members of that local assembly. There is no reason to suppose the lapsed shouldn’t be forgiven – Jesus Himself had said, “...every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men.” (Mt. 12:31) But there is no need, as is evidenced by the silence of the New Testament, for any kind of ritualized penance. But, under practice of unanimity, there would have been no ritualized system of penance and there would not have been six divisions of the people of Christ. The Head of the body, the Lord Jesus Christ, would have restored the lapsed in ways that would have greatly surpassed the method of penance.

### **Practicalities**

The objection that unanimity is impractical only gives evidence of the carnal perspective of the one giving this response. In truth, it is an objection rooted in unbelief and lack of faith. The unanimity of the Spirit is a work in and of the eternal God whose fruit is patience and long suffering. (Gal. 5:22) Though men are anxious and hurriedly strive to build their fiefdoms, God is patient in His dealings with men. Christ, who is building His eternal body and bride, does not take quick, slip-shod shortcuts. If we are not willing to wait for God to bring His people into unanimity on a given issue, then that is our impatience or our own striving to build some kingdom other than His. It is our sin.

It is also true that leftover elements of the “church” paradigm will prevent us from seeing how possible and even necessary this unanimity really is. Because we see huge mega-“churches” herd its people in and out several times a week, we will tend to think we need to bring all this diverse and divided crowd, in truth an abominable mixed multitude, into unanimous agreement. Or we’ll see the vast number of sects and divisions and dissensions (the real names for “denominations” – see Gal. 5:20) and we’ll despair of ever bringing them into unanimity. But this is reaching too far. The mega-“church” and the denominations (especially the “non-denominational” ones) are, *at best*, a mixed multitude and, at worst, the *apostasy*, the great falling away from the faith that occurs before the return of Christ. (Mt. 24:10, 2 Ths. 2:3) We cannot hope – nor should we even try – for unanimity of the Spirit with those who have not yet drunk of the one Spirit. (1 Cor. 12:13) We can neither judge nor unite with large, ill-defined groups of people – we can only interact with those we come into contact and respond accordingly to what spirit or Spirit controls their life.

The principle that will guide us best in seeking to practice unanimity with any group of genuine believers we come in contact with is the question: “Who is impacted?” If we will take care to include every known genuine follower of Christ (evidenced by their personal obedience to Him and not to the “church”) that is likely to be impacted by the given question or issue at hand, then we are literally insisting that Christ be the literal Head – and not just the nominal “Head” He is to the “church” – and Director of our work and assembling in His name.

The call for unity is genuine – but it is dangerous. It is dangerous because most people who claim to be followers of Christ don't recognize this call as a call to unanimity and they do not recognize the parameters God has set for this unity. It is dangerous because men do not know how to follow God without the input of their Luther, Ignatius or Diotrephes (see 3 Jn. 9) who stealthily and subtly follow, practice and teach things they've learned from cleverly concealed demonic sources. (see 1 Tim. 4:1)

For these reason, a call for “ecumenical” unity of the denominations is similarly short-sighted. The “church” pattern and denominationalism are carnal, worldly add-ons to the way of following Christ. One cannot practice the unanimity of the Spirit, perhaps God's highest calling for any corporate body or group, within the context of these aberrations. It simply cannot – and will not – happen. This is why God continues to call His people out from the “Christian” idolaters (see 2 Cor. 6:17, 1 Cor. 5:10-11) and to go to meet Jesus “outside the camp.” (Heb. 13:12-13) The genuine ekklesia begins to function wherever “two or three are gathered together in [His] name and [Christ as King is] there in the midst of them.” (Mt. 18:20) If we will but let Him be King in our “twos and threes,” and walk in the unanimity of the Spirit in the bond of peaceful resolution of our differences of opinion, doctrine, practice and “theology,” we can simultaneously trust Him to build His eternal globe-spanning ekklesia of which He is the Head. (Mt. 16:18, Eph. 4:16, Col. 1:18) After all, He has much more invested in this process than we do and He alone has the right and ability to build it – He *is* the Blueprint, the Architect and the Builder all in one! (Heb. 12:2, Jn. 13:15, 1 Pet. 2:21, etc.)

Paul warned those who would come after him (in imitation or in time) that “each one [should] take heed how he builds on [the only foundation, Christ],” stating that he, by the grace (power) of God given to him, was God's fellow-worker or co-laborer. (see 1 Cor. 3:9-11) Paul, in this metaphor of building gives *three* (although most “churches” teach only two) possible outcomes. Paul wrote, “If anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw...” (1 Cor. 3:12) and goes on to say, “If anyone's work which he has built on [the foundation of Christ] endures [the fires of testing on judgment day], he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.” (1 Cor. 3:13-15) Many teachers stop there but fail to recognize that Paul does not end his metaphor here.

Paul continues, “Do you not know that you are the temple [the *whole* building, temple, house, body, ekklesia, bride – Eph. 1:22-23, 2:21-22, 5:30, 32] of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.” (1 Cor. 3:16-17) *This* is where Paul ends his metaphor. We will have to wait until judgment day to see whether God will consider the demonically-tainted works of the men whose words we've already examined will be “wood, hay or straw” or an actual defilement of God's temple for which they will have earned destruction. But we must not rule out this third possibility and this is precisely why we must work out our own salvation with fear and trembling (Phlp. 2:12), aware that through negligence we can fall short of the grace of God that leads us into true holiness and out of defilement and wickedness, and thus be disinherited as Esau was. (Heb. 12:14-17) We know that “Many will say to [Christ] in that day [of final judgment], ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then [Christ] will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness [what is right in your own eyes]!’” (Mt. 7:22-23) Lawlessness, that which is right in one's own eyes, the fruit of the tree of the

independent knowledge of good and evil, is diametrically opposed to righteousness, what is right and true in *God's* eyes and He alone *is* the tree of life. (2 Cor. 6:14, Gen. 2:17, Rev. 22:14)

The real call to unity that comes from the Spirit of God is a call to the kingdom of God, that realm where Christ is literally and consistently obeyed. The commands and directives of the King will be confirmed and accomplished by “endeavoring to keep the unanimity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Eph. 4:3) Only by returning to being sons of the kingdom will we “shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of [our] Father.” (Mt. 13:43) No other Person can be – or should be – the focus of our unity and He alone is capable of bringing any group of humans together in unanimous harmony regarding such controversial and diverse and divisive issues. In this way, He demonstrates that He is God and that He is in our midst. (Jn. 17:21-23) That the “church,” after two thousand years of trying, cannot produce anything but rampant division and dissension is only proof that the “church” is not the way God has proscribed for men to follow Him. Only those who dare to step out in obedience to God’s command to practice unanimity with all of His other true children will discover what God had in mind all along.

Let he who has ears hear.

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