

EVANGELICAL UNITY *and*  
DENOMINATIONAL DIVERSITY

WHY WE



BELONG

*Edited by* ANTHONY L. CHUTE,  
CHRISTOPHER W. MORGAN, *and* ROBERT A. PETERSON

“Biblical evangelicalism must always be churchly, and churchly evangelicalism today cannot avoid being denominational. And denominational evangelicalism is a spiritual smorgasbord, offering more spiritual wealth and wisdom than any one person can possibly take on board. In these pages, evangelical leaders become tour guides, each to his own denominational heritage. Authoritative? Yes. Absorbing? That too. Enriching? Very much so. Taste and see.”

**J. I. Packer**, Board of Governors’ Professor of Theology,  
Regent College

“The editors have assembled a strong lineup of contributors to explain why they are both evangelicals and members of their specific denominations. The result is a sparkling presentation of the very best in a number of Protestant traditions, but also a welcome prompt to think about denominationalism itself. The book is for those who value history, biblical interpretation, Christian witness, and theology—that is, for nearly everyone.”

**Mark A. Noll**, Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History,  
University of Notre Dame

“The contributors to *Why We Belong* remind us that the strength of American evangelicalism is its unity-in-diversity. Their personal stories help us understand the importance of both our common evangelical faith and our respective denominational distinctives. This twin emphasis avoids narrow sectarianism, on the one hand, and lowest-common-denominator theology, on the other. As a movement, evangelicalism is richer because of the unified diversity displayed in the chapters of this commendable book.”

**George O. Wood**, General Superintendent, Assemblies of God;  
Chairman, World Assemblies of God Fellowship;  
Executive Committee member, National Association of Evangelicals

“These essays reflect the wonderful unity *and* diversity that exist in the body of Christ. Thus, they show evangelicalism at its best. Written by practitioners of irenic Christian cooperation and conviction, this book will instruct young believers in the true purposes of evangelicalism. It will also remind older believers why evangelicalism is worth preserving.”

**Paul House**, Professor of Divinity, Beeson Divinity School;  
President Emeritus, Evangelical Theological Society

“The authors of *Why We Belong* argue for a robustly evangelical ecumenism—one that does not downplay the importance of doctrine or paper over theological differences, but instead recognizes those differences for what they are and moves forward in authentic Christian unity. Highly recommended.”

**Bruce Riley Ashford**, Provost, Dean of Faculty,  
and Associate Professor of Theology and Culture,  
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“The gospel brings life, and that life finds expression in a myriad of institutional forms. This important book shows how evangelicalism, with its gospel-centeredness, transcends any particular denominational form and yet links those who share in the new life that Christ brings. More than that, this work offers a positive theology of denominationalism that is simply refreshing.”

**Graham Cole**, Anglican Professor of Divinity, Beeson Divinity School

“If you find yourself standing over the funeral of either denominationalism or evangelicalism with a smile on your face, then you owe it to yourself to read this book. With biblical wisdom and theological insight (and humor, too) the editors and contributors chart a beautiful path between appreciating all that is good in denominationalism and embracing all that is good in evangelicalism. To put it succinctly, we belong to our churches *and* we belong to each other—and both of these are good for us.”

**Stephen J. Nichols**, Research Professor of Christianity and Culture,  
Lancaster Bible College

“Many of us have long felt that a passion for Christian unity does not mean the abolition of denominational distinctives. Finally, here is a book that supports loyalty to both the unique mission of one’s church and the larger unity of the people of God. We learn in its pages that the future strength of evangelicalism depends on a passion for both. A must read.”

**Frank D. Macchia**, Professor of Systematic Theology,  
Vanguard University

“This book promotes a healthy Christian unity by showing how and why God’s family is much larger than any one denomination.”

**Andy Naselli**, Assistant Professor of New Testament and Biblical  
Theology, Bethlehem College and Seminary, Minneapolis

*Why We Belong: Evangelical Unity and Denominational Diversity*

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# Introduction: Are Denominations Dead? Should They Be?

*Anthony L. Chute*

In the Charles Schulz classic *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, an interesting exchange takes place as Linus pens his annual letter to the Great Pumpkin. “When are you going to stop believing in something that isn’t true?” inquires Charlie, to which Linus shoots back, “When you stop believing in that fellow with a red suit and white beard who goes ‘Ho, Ho, Ho!’” Charlie Brown looks at the camera and says dryly, “We are obviously separated by denominational differences.”

For most outside the church, and increasingly many inside the church, denominational differences are viewed as nothing more than petty disagreements between strong-willed religious partisans. Studies on denominational identity rarely reflect an upward trend, and pastors who reach evangelical stardom hardly do so by clinging to denominational coattails. Americans in particular tend to choose a church because of the people who attend rather than the polity it embraces, and few ever think “Southern Baptist” when they hear the name Billy Graham or Rick Warren.

Opposition to denominational Christianity ranges anywhere from the sophisticated to the simple, yet the negative feelings are generally the same. H. Richard Niebuhr argued that denominations were a moral failure of Christianity since they were based on ethnic, class, and racial divisions more than theological or other principled matters. On a lighter note, yet somewhat of a confirmation of Niebuhr’s concern, humorist Garrison Keillor explained his Lutheran conclave in a song:

We sit in the pew where we always sit,  
And we do not shout Amen.

And if anyone yells or waves their hands,  
They're not invited back again.<sup>1</sup>

And while statistics may provide helpful scientific analysis regarding the level of interest in denominations, the casual observer who sees multiple churches with various names on the same street is often convinced that Christians cannot get along with each other.

The divide is not merely external. Denominations are often plagued by internal divisions, necessitating the use of adjectival qualifiers in order to distinguish themselves from others who are almost like them. It is hardly enough, for example, to say that one is Presbyterian. Does such a person belong to the Presbyterian Church in America or the Presbyterian Church USA; or the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, or the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America? The most recent edition of Mead's *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* outlines the origins and beliefs of twenty-nine Baptist denominations, twenty-five Pentecostal movements, and eleven different types of Lutheranism, a list that editor Craig Atwood notes is not comprehensive! And a quick glance at the table of contents shows that even peace-loving Mennonites find themselves estranged from one another.<sup>2</sup>

The proposed solution to such divisions is more visible unity, but historically speaking, attempts at establishing visible unity have failed. In the eighteenth century George Whitefield famously asked whether there were any Presbyterians, Methodists, or Baptists in heaven. Playing the role of father Abraham, Whitefield answered himself by saying, "No, there are only Christians up here." And yet, he and his erstwhile preaching partner John Wesley were not on speaking terms owing to a disagreement in doctrine. In the nineteenth century Alexander Campbell used common sense realism to promote Christian unity, attempting to break down barriers between denominations by returning to a simple reading of the Bible. Yet, his desire to speak only where the Bible speaks

<sup>1</sup>Cited in Nancy T. Ammerman, "New Life for Denominationalism," *The Christian Century*, March 15, 2000, 302–3. The rendition quoted here is from Garrison Keillor, "I'm a Lutheran," 1999, accessed January 22, 2013, <http://prairiehome.publicradio.org/programs/19991002/lutheran.htm>.

<sup>2</sup>Frank S. Mead, Samuel S. Hill, and Craig D. Atwood, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, 13th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010).



and to be silent when the Bible is silent later gave rise not to one or two but to three distinct movements. In the twentieth century, Chuck Smith's remarkable ability to connect the gospel with hippies in Southern California led to the formation of Calvary Chapel, a network of churches now ranging in the thousands. Yet even his attempt to avoid denominational division has not been realized, since Calvary Chapel churches have their own "distinctives" that set them apart from other Christian groups.

In spite of the perennial predictions of the death of denominations, the fact remains that evangelical Christians typically have core beliefs that lead them to identify with other like-minded Christians. Given the plausibility of continued division, is there a way in which evangelical Christians can maintain their distinctive doctrinal beliefs while communicating to the church and the world that they have much more in common? We believe there is, and such is the purpose of this book. *Why We Belong* addresses how denominational affiliation can be natural without being negative, and how evangelical identity can help rather than hinder Christian unity.

## How This Book Came About

The idea for this book presented itself in a couple of ways. During my academic excursions through Beeson Divinity School and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, I (a Southern Baptist) came under the tutelage of professors from various denominational backgrounds. Seeing evangelicals work together as colleagues during the week while worshipping in separate churches on the weekend provided a sense of balance between cooperation and conviction. This seemed to be missing in other places where theology was downplayed for the sake of unity or where peripheral issues had become so central that isolationism was the result.

Chris and Robert were especially interested in this topic because they were already collaborating on numerous academic projects in spite of their denominational differences. They found it both frustrating and humorous when people asked whether it is difficult for a Baptist (Chris) and a Presbyterian (Robert) to work together on such projects. Like many engaged evangelicals, they simply took for granted how much they have in common.

The three of us agreed that people who have not witnessed evangelicals working together while maintaining their denominational identities could benefit from a book that presents how both can cohere. We also took note that Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy give the

outward appearance of being unified, leading some evangelicals to convert in hopes of demonstrating visible unity in the body of Christ. Yet, if Christian unity is predicated on the gospel first, as we believe, then the pursuit of visible unity at the expense of core convictions is merely a semblance of unity.

In short, the following chapters give a personal side to the reasons why our contributors belong: why they belong to Christ, why they belong to each other in Christ, and why they belong to denominations that seek to be faithful to Christ. The decision to invite the authors to share their “stories” was intentional as it gives a different flavor to the discussion than would a mere doctrinal defense of each one’s denominational preference. Differences between denominations are too often discussed in the abstract, as if Methodists are totally unaware of passages proof-texted by Baptists regarding believer’s baptism! Consequently, one will readily note that the reasons our contributors belong to a particular tradition also include matters unique to their lives. We suspect our readers will have similar instances in their own backgrounds when they gradually came to see value in their traditions due to both theological and personal factors.

## **What This Book Is Not**

This book is not an attempt to corral readers into a particular denomination, nor is it meant to show the superiority of one denomination over another. Instead, it is designed to demonstrate that godly, thoughtful, and kindhearted Christians have significant reasons for identifying with a denomination, and the Christians represented here have done so in full recognition that God’s family is much larger than their own traditions. They recognize that unity in the church occurs on many levels. So it may be helpful to read each of their stories with the following questions in mind: Why has this person chosen to identify with his particular denomination? Does he see anything that I or others seem to have missed? How much does he hold in common with the other contributors? In what ways does his vision of unity operate on a denominational and transdenominational level?

We have chosen six denominations, each of which has played a key role in the development of the Christian faith. To be sure, more denominations could be included, more stories could be told, more reasons for unity could be expounded, and more interaction with thorny issues could be offered. But we could not include more without changing the

nature of the book. We also recognize that no contributor can speak for his denomination as a whole. As mentioned above, there are divisions within denominations that prevent any one person from representing the entire group. Still, each contributor is an active participant in a local church that identifies with a denomination, and each contributor has a history of working across denominational lines in an evangelical context.

## Summary of Chapters

*Why We Belong* begins with a presentation of the theological basis of church unity, using Ephesians as our guide. Chris Morgan notes in his opening chapter that God is using the church to display his glory to both the world and cosmic powers, and therefore unity among fellow believers is both a current characteristic and a perennial pursuit. In chapter 2, I offer a historical overview of the rise of the denominations covered in this book. The people who started these denominations were not as interested in founding something new as they were in recovering something old, something they felt their traditions had neglected or missed.

The next six chapters tell the individual stories of why each contributor has chosen his denominational tradition and how he views this position in light of the call for unity in the church. The denominations are presented in alphabetical order. In addition to explaining why he is an Anglican, Gerald Bray discusses in chapter 3 the difficulties associated in defining Anglicanism and the importance of liturgical and organizational structure in the Anglican Church, and he makes crucial observations regarding its relationship with the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox communions. In chapter 4 Timothy George proposes a “hierarchy of ecclesial identity” in his efforts to explain what it means to be a Protestant, evangelical, and Baptist. As dean of Beeson Divinity School, he demonstrates with ease how a Baptist with theological particularities can be a thoroughgoing evangelical ecumenist. In chapter 5, Doug Sweeney, professor of church history at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, discusses his upbringing in a Baptist home and his studies at Wheaton College as background for his journey to Lutheranism. Bringing an academic theological distinction down to the most basic level, Sweeney describes how Luther’s high christology brought him comfort as he learned what Word and sacrament accomplish objectively.

Timothy Tennent, president of Asbury Theological Seminary, reminds us in chapter 6 how the theological teachings and practical emphases of John Wesley transcend time. While admitting that evangelical mainstays such as God's grace, conversion, discipleship, and a global perspective may not be emphasized in all Methodist churches today, Tennent demonstrates that there are many who continue to embrace their founder's godly vision. In chapter 7 Byron Klaus, president of Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, describes the stigma that has long been associated with being Pentecostal and how he has personally experienced such ridicule from others. Nevertheless, in spirited fashion he provides an explanation of Pentecostal belief and practice in a way that defies the typical charges of shallow emotionalism or inane experimentalism, namely, by carefully tying in contemporary Pentecostalism with traditional evangelical emphases. Chapter 8 is from Bryan Chapell, president emeritus of Covenant Theological Seminary. Chapell describes how the providence of God, itself a central doctrine in Presbyterian thought, led him to consider this tradition as a viable possibility. Using a historical and theological approach, Chapell then demonstrates how Presbyterian theology, polity, and worship provide a comprehensive sweep that informs the Christian life.

A concluding chapter, titled "Denominationalism: Historical Developments, Contemporary Challenges, and Global Opportunities," is provided by David Dockery, president of Union University. The chapter provides a recapitulation of the discussion while still pushing the conversation forward. Dockery recognizes the value of renewal movements within the church but warns that over time even they have a tendency to become purveyors of denominational bureaucracy. Moreover, he notes that a weak ecclesiology has too often led evangelicals to elevate parachurch movements over the importance of the local church. His call for a transgenerational and transcontinental approach to the Christian faith, all within the boundaries of orthodoxy, is a fitting close to this book.



# Toward a Theology of the Unity of the Church

*Christopher W. Morgan*

After a worship service one Sunday, I stood in the foyer to greet the church family. In a span of less than thirty minutes, prayer needs abounded: a key leader's mother who is stricken with Alzheimer's has to be placed in a nursing home; some terrific children are stuck in the middle of a messy divorce; missionaries to the Middle East are sorting out how to proclaim the gospel in the midst of a tricky social transition; a solid family has allowed disagreement to create disharmony among them; a deacon, who as a police officer was shot during a seemingly routine traffic stop, still struggles with an excruciatingly painful hip; a nearby church remains embattled by leaders who seem more interested in advancing their agendas than in embodying the love of Christ; the tears and tender hug from a recent widow disclose her continued grief. Add to these the unstated concerns of the people that day—bankruptcy, loneliness, arthritis, barrenness, restlessness, regret, fear, shame, and guilt—and we may safely conclude that we are not in heaven yet!

Not only do our prayer needs remind us that all is not right in the world, but watching the evening news also points to this, as wars, disasters, disease, murder, suicide, starvation, homelessness, and political wrangling fill the hour. Even the seemingly insignificant peace T-shirts and “all we need is love” songs suggest that things are not the way they're supposed to be. Indeed, our longings for peace and love reveal that we do not have peace and love in its fullness; these longings also show that we believe that peace and love are good and right, the way things ought to be.

The Bible acknowledges the rightness of these deep-seated longings and even offers a historical narrative that frames how we understand

them. The narrative begins with God’s creating everything in a way that pleases him and benefits his creatures (Genesis 1–2). The goodness of God and the goodness of his creation are highlighted by the creation account’s refrain, “And God saw that it was good” (see 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). By creating humanity in his image, God distinguishes us from the rest of creation and establishes a Creator-creature distinction. Genesis 1–2 depicts all this as good, as Adam and Eve are blessed with an unhindered relationship with God, intimate enjoyment of each other, and delegated authority over creation.

But rather than submitting to God and finding their pleasure in him, Adam and Eve rebel against God, wanting ultimate autonomy. Genesis 3:6 records the fall in a rapid fashion: “she saw,” “she took,” “she ate,” and “she gave,” culminating in “he ate.” The couple immediately feels shame, realizing they are naked (v. 7), estranged from God (vv. 8–10), and fearful (vv. 9–10). Their alienation from each other also emerges, as the woman blames the serpent and the man blames the woman and even God (vv. 10–13)! Pain, sorrow, and relational disruption also arise (vv. 15–19). Even worse, the couple is banished from Eden and God’s glorious presence (vv. 22–24).

In sum, through their disobedience, sin entered and disrupted their relationship to God, to each other, and to creation. Adam’s sin, while personal and historical, is also corporate and cosmic, plunging all humanity into sin (Rom. 5:12–21) and resulting in a creation that longs for freedom (8:18–28). So disorder and disunity exist—personally, communally, and cosmically.

Thankfully, the biblical story continues and recounts how God is intent on bringing peace out of the disorder through a mission of reconciliation. His plan is astonishing—to glorify himself through a full-scale restoration of cosmic unity. As we will see, the church and its unity are central in this plan. The biblical material on this is massive, but Paul’s letter to the Ephesians emphasizes the church and its unity. Therefore, we will use Ephesians as our guide as we set forth the contours of the theology of church unity.

## **The Unity of the Church Showcases God’s Purpose of Cosmic Unity**

Disorder and disunity will not last forever. God is on a mission to bring about cosmic unity. Whereas sin has resulted in disharmony, God’s eternal plan for reconciliation brings peace and wholeness.

### *God's Purpose of Cosmic Unity*

This plan addresses the personal, communal, and cosmic consequences of the fall by bringing all things together in Christ—uniting people to him, uniting people to one another, and even uniting the cosmos in Christ. And the church plays a central role in this plan.

The essence of God's plan, which is set forth in Christ, is "to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10). Notice that "all things" are specified as "things in heaven and things on earth." This is comprehensive language for an eschatological uniting of the cosmos in Christ (cf. Rom. 8:18–30; 2 Cor. 5:14–21; Col. 1:15–20). Peter O'Brien explains: "The emphasis now is on a universe that is centered and reunited in Christ. The mystery which God has graciously made known refers to the summing up and bringing together of the fragmented and alienated elements of the universe ('all things') in Christ as the focal point."<sup>1</sup>

Accomplishing this eternal plan in history through his saving work, Christ is even called "our peace":

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. (Eph. 2:13–16)

In proclaiming Christ as our peace, Paul puts forward three participles that show how Christ has acted to bring peace: *making* both Jews and

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<sup>1</sup>See Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 112–13. He adds: "Chrys Caragounis claims that as Paul proceeds to amplify and explain throughout the letter the meaning of bringing all things together, he concentrates on the two main representatives of these spheres, namely, the powers representing 'the things in heaven,' and the church (particularly the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the body of Christ), representing 'the things on earth.' He further suggests that the two obstacles which need to be overcome before the divine purpose of bringing everything into unity with Christ can be fulfilled are: (a) the rebellion of the powers, and (b) the alienation of Jews from Gentiles (2:11–22, as well as the estrangement of both from God, 2:16). Much of the rest of Ephesians is given over to explaining, with reference to each of these two spheres, the steps in the process that God has taken in order to achieve this supreme goal" (ibid.). The reference is to C. C. Caragounis, *The Ephesian Mystery: Meaning and Content* (Lund: Gleerup, 1977), 144–46.

Gentiles one, *destroying* the barrier between them, and *abolishing* the hostility. What is this peace? O'Brien explains:

The term "peace" in both Old and New Testaments came to denote well-being in the widest sense, including salvation, the source and giver of which is God alone. "Peace" was used for harmony among people (Acts 7:26; Gal. 5:22; Eph. 4:3; Jas. 3:18) and especially for the messianic salvation (Luke 1:79; 2:14; 19:42). The term could describe the goal and content of all Christian preaching, the message itself being called "the gospel of peace" (Eph. 6:15; cf. Acts 10:36; Eph. 2:17). The biblical concept of peace has to do with wholeness, particularly with reference to personal relationships. Peace describes an order established by the God of peace (1 Cor. 14:33; cf. Rom. 15:33; 16:20; Phil. 4:9). Christ himself is the mediator of that peace (Rom. 5:1; Col. 1:20). He gives peace to believers (2 Thess. 3:16); indeed, he himself is that peace.<sup>2</sup>

Christ's objective accomplishment of this peace is subjectively applied to us by the Holy Spirit through our union with Christ, which addresses the three spheres: personal, communal, and cosmic. In Christ, we as individuals are linked to Christ's death and resurrection and thus receive salvation (Eph. 1:3–14; 2:1–10). In Christ, we are together linked to Christ's death and resurrection and thus are united to each other and become God's people, the church (2:11–22; 3:1–6). And in Christ, the whole cosmos is linked to Christ's saving work and is being reconciled (1:9–10; 3:9–11).

### *The Church and God's Purpose*

God's new creation—including the church—is related to all three spheres of God's plan for cosmic unity. First, the church is composed of believers who were alienated from God but through the saving work of Christ have been united to him by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:1–10). The church consists of believers who no longer live in separation from God but are united to Christ and live with full access to God. Ephesians 1:3–14 depicts the church as the new covenant people of God. We are God's chosen people; we are God's holy people; we are God's worshiping people; we are the children of God, adopted into his family; we are the redeemed people;

<sup>2</sup>O'Brien, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 193.



we are heirs with an inheritance. So, foundationally, the church is the new covenant people who are reconciled to God.

Second, the church is also the people of God reconciled to each other (Eph. 2:11–22). To be united to Christ also means we are united to one another. The reconciliation of the Jews and Gentiles is described as the creation of one new humanity (vv. 13–16). Christ our peace removes the hostility between Jews and Gentiles, and out of the formerly divided peoples he creates a new and unified humanity. Paul has already used new-creation language in verse 10. There it primarily refers to the salvation of believers, but may also include the larger sphere of the church. Here in verses 13–16 the new-creation language clearly refers to the church. As the focal point and inaugurator of the new creation, Christ, the Son of God, bears the divine image and is also “the one who by virtue of his death and resurrection is now re-creating a people into that same image.”<sup>3</sup> Gordon Fee explains:

For here is the one who is himself the “image” of God, who is the Father’s own “firstborn,” and by virtue of his resurrection the “first-born” with regard to the new creation, is now the one who “re-creates” broken and fallen humanity back into the divine image that he himself has perfectly borne. The Creator of the first creation, who himself bears the Father’s image, now is seen as the Creator of the new creation, as he restores his own people back into the divine image.<sup>4</sup>

Because of Christ’s saving work, and through our union with him, we as the church are now the image of God. We are the one new people, the new humanity, the people called to display God to the world—the new creation in the image of God, called to reflect Christ and embody God’s holiness (Eph. 2:14–16; 4:13, 24). As this one new humanity, Jews and Gentiles together form God’s nation, God’s family, and God’s temple:

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

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<sup>3</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 515. See also Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “The Glory of God in Paul’s Epistles,” in *The Glory of God*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, *Theology in Community* 2 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 127–52.

<sup>4</sup>Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 515.

the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (2:19–22)

Third, the church plays a key role in the cosmic dimension. As the people reconciled to God and to each other, the church showcases God's plan of cosmic reconciliation. Paul portrays this astonishing purpose of the church:

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Eph. 3:8–11)

So the current existence of the one new people, the church, testifies that God is on a project to create unity; the reality of the unity of Jews and Gentiles together as the one new humanity is an amazing testimony of God's broader purposes. Notice that the intended audience of this showcase is here described as the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, likely referring to both angels and demons. The point seems to be that the beings in the heavenly realms are put on notice: God is going to do cosmically what he has already done for individuals in Christ; and God is going to do cosmically what he has done corporately with the Jews and Gentiles. All things in heaven and on earth will be brought together in Christ; all things will highlight Christ as the focal point of the cosmos. So not only is Christ the Savior of sinners and the Head of the church; he is the goal of the entire cosmos! Paul's idea here is similar to that of Colossians 1:16, where he instructs us that all things are created by Christ and for Christ.

Amazingly, it is the church as God's visible exhibition that proclaims these cosmic purposes. In a sense, the church preaches Christ not only to humanity in the verbal proclamation of the gospel, but also to the entire cosmos through the visible display of unity. Bryan Chapell captures Paul's astounding point:

This grafting of the redeemed is so amazing that it was God's intent to use it to display his wisdom to the heavenly beings. Thus Paul's words create a celestial stage to display the wonders of grace. . . . In union with other sinners made perfect, and as members of one body, we who come from every tribe and nation, people and personality, are on display as a church before the heavenly hosts as a testimony to the wisdom of God. . . . Just as Paul's sin makes the grace of God more apparent, the uniting of sinners in the body of Christ makes the grace of God more brilliant—even to the hosts of heaven. By our unity in Christ's body, the church, we are preaching to the angels about the power, wisdom, and glory of God who made us.

This is the apex of Paul's thought about the church. . . . Here we learn that the church is intended not only to transform the world but also to transfix heaven.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, as the church we showcase God's purposes not just to each other and to the world, but according to Ephesians 3:9–12, even to the heavenly realms! And as we showcase God's eternal purpose of cosmic unity to the world, we are demonstrating that the kingdom of God has already broken into history. Certainly, there is a "not yet" aspect of the kingdom still to come. God's eternal purpose of cosmic reconciliation is not perfectly realized yet—sin and injustice still occur. But sin will not have the last word; disorder and division will not last forever. Though the present age can still be characterized as not the way things are supposed to be, God will bring about a new creation.

And what is so striking is that the apostle Paul asserts that God's new creation is already under way—in the church! The church is the firstfruits of the ultimate new creation that is still to come; as the firstfruits, we are both the genuine reality of the new creation and the foretaste of more to come. Thus, as the church, we are the new humanity, new society, new temple—a new creation. We are a foretaste of heaven on earth, a genuine embodiment of the kingdom, a glimpse of the way things are supposed to be, and a glimpse of the way the cosmos ultimately will be; we are a showcase of God's eternal plan of cosmic unity.

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<sup>5</sup>Bryan Chapell, *Ephesians*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 144–45.

## The Unity of the Church Displays the Unity of God

God creates the church as the one new humanity not only to display his eternal plan of cosmic reconciliation, but also to display himself and thus glorify himself. God has eternally planned to glorify himself by displaying himself through the church. In other words, God creates the church in order to display himself, and as he displays himself, he glorifies himself.

In the creation of the cosmos, God communicates himself (Ps. 19:1–6). And in the formation of Israel, God displayed himself. Israel was called to embody God’s holiness. Israel’s holiness was essential not only to their proper worship of God, but also to their mission; they accurately reflected the true God to the nations only when they lived in a way that reflected him (Ex. 19:5–6; Deut. 28:9–10). As a kingdom of priests, Israel was to be committed to the ministry of God’s presence throughout the earth; and as a holy nation, Israel was “to be a people set apart, different from all other people by what they are and are becoming—a display people, a showcase to the world of how being in covenant with Yahweh changes a people.”<sup>6</sup>

In the new creation of the church, God also displays himself. The church too is rightly described as “a display people, a showcase to the world of how being in covenant with Yahweh changes a people.”<sup>7</sup> In Ephesians, Paul often underscores that God saves and creates the church to display himself, for example:

... so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (2:7)

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (2:10)

... so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. (3:10)

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<sup>6</sup>John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 263. I first noticed this quote in Graham A. Cole, *God the Peacemaker: How Atonement Brings Shalom*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 94.

<sup>7</sup>Durham, *Exodus*, 263.

Ephesians demonstrates how the church showcases God in several ways. Even in the basic structure of the exhortations in Ephesians, Paul calls attention to how God's people are to "walk" or "live." Before knowing Christ, we walked according to the world, the flesh, and Satan (Eph. 2:1–3). But God graciously steps in and rescues us through the saving work of Christ. Through uniting us to Christ, God makes us alive (vv. 4–7). In turn, our entire "walk" has been transformed (v. 10). We used to bear resemblance to the way of the world, but now we walk in good works, in a way that bears family resemblance with our good God. We have been re-created by God to display his goodness to the world and are now exhorted to walk in ways that reflect God and his purposes. We are to walk in unity (4:1–3), in holiness (vv. 17–24), in love (5:2), in the light (v. 8), and in wisdom (v. 15). In so doing, we serve as God's "display people": our salvation glorifies God by displaying his grace (1:6, 12, 14; 2:7); our existence as the church glorifies God by displaying his wisdom (3:10); our love glorifies God by displaying his love (3:14–19; 4:11–16; 5:2, 22–33); our holiness glorifies God by displaying his holiness (1:4; 4:24; 5:25–27).

In the same way, our unity as a church glorifies God by displaying his oneness. In Ephesians 4:1–6, Paul powerfully shows this link:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

That God is one and not many means that he is the only God and is alone worthy to receive worship (Deut. 6:4–5). Being the only God also means that he deserves to be worshiped universally. The sheer diversity of human beings would make it appear unlikely that unity would characterize God's people. But in God's eternal plan, he actually displays his oneness through the unity of his church, which is united to Christ and to each other (see also John 17:20–23). Our church unity is grounded in and declares the fact that there is one God, who is over all, through all, and in all. The truth that the church is one body is grounded in and declares the fact that there is one Lord, one Spirit, one faith, one hope,

one baptism. The church's oneness also points to its inherent universality, which also results from and displays God's universality.

## **The Unity of the Church Is Both a Current Characteristic and a Perennial Pursuit**

We have seen that the unity of the church not only showcases God's cosmic purpose of unity, but also displays the unity of God. In addition, the unity of the church is both a current characteristic and a perennial pursuit.

### *Church Unity as a Current Characteristic*

As we saw in Ephesians 2:11–22, the unity of the church is a reality. God has created one new people. The one church is one with Christ and with one another.

It is important to remember that while recounting our union with Christ and our manifold resultant privileges, Paul also maintains that Christ possesses a unique identity, retains ultimate and universal authority, and is the sole Head of the church (Eph. 1:20–23). As Michael Horton reminds us, “The church is always on the receiving end in its relationship to Christ; it is never the redeemer, but always the redeemed; never the head, but always the body.”<sup>8</sup> So, as much as we are united to Christ, we are distinguished from Christ.

Yet there is a real unity between Christ and his church, as well as the corollary: the unity of the church itself. John Stott points this out as he comments on Ephesians 4:3–6:

We must assert that there can only be one Christian family, only one Christian faith, hope and baptism, and only one Christian body, because there is only one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. You can no more multiply churches than you can multiply Gods. Is there only one God? Then he has only one church. Is the unity of God inviolable? Then so is the unity of the church.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, unity marks the church as a whole, or what is often called the universal church. Unity also marks the local church. As we previously

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<sup>8</sup>Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 31.

<sup>9</sup>John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God's New Society*, 2nd ed., *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 151.

noted, the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles into one new people is across a vast scale. It is sweeping, salvation-historical, and global, and it requires belief in some sort of universal church. Yet the very fact that the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles into this one new people serves as a showcase of God's eternal purposes of cosmic unity also requires the church's visibility, and thus the local church.

### *Church Unity as a Perennial Pursuit*

What is so peculiar, though, is that while the church is already one, it is exhorted to maintain unity (Eph. 4:1–3). Thus, the unity of the church is both a current reality and a perennial pursuit.

This means that the unity of the church bears witness to “the already and not yet” of the kingdom. Because of its location in salvation history as a part of, an agent of, the community of, and a display of Jesus's messianic kingdom, the church is necessarily characterized by the nature of the kingdom, including its already-and-not-yet tension. Other attributes of the church also reflect this tension, as Donald Bloesch observes:

The church is already one, but it must become more visibly one . . . in faith and practice. The church is already holy in its source and foundation, but it must strive to produce fruits of holiness in its sojourn in the world. . . . The church is already apostolic, but it must become more consciously apostolic by allowing the gospel to reform and sometimes even overturn its time-honored rites and interpretations.<sup>10</sup>

Even more, the exhortation to maintain this unity is grounded in the reality of its existent unity. Using what some refer to as “the indicative and the imperative,” Paul teaches that what the church is drives how the church should behave. Thus, he urges the church toward specific behaviors and grounds those exhortations on the theological realities of the church's identity.

Ephesians regularly points to these already-and-not-yet and indicative-imperative aspects of the church. The church is currently the fullness of Christ (1:23), but Paul prays that it will be filled with the fullness of Christ (3:19), and the church is to attain to the measure of the stature

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<sup>10</sup>Donald Bloesch, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 103.

of the fullness of Christ (4:13).<sup>11</sup> The church is currently the one new humanity (2:14–18), but it is to attain unto a mature humanity (4:13) and put on the new humanity (4:20–24). The church is under its Head, Christ (1:22–23), but is to grow up into Christ, who is the Head (4:15). The church is now holy (2:19–22), but it is also to walk in holiness, put on the new humanity and holiness, become more and more holy, and one day be ultimately presented to Christ as holy (4:20–24; 5:2–21, 27). The church is already grounded in truth and built on Christ as the cornerstone, with the apostles and prophets as the foundation (2:19–22), yet the church is to teach truth, speak truth in love, walk in truth, and stand firm as an army with truth (4:5, 11, 14–15, 21; 6:10–18). The church is glorious now, as the fullness of Christ (1:22–23), but one day it will be presented to Christ as fully glorious (5:25–28).

In the same way, the church already is one, united in Christ (2:12–22; 4:4–6), yet the church is also to be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit, as Ephesians 4:1–3 states: “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Note that Paul calls the church not to create unity but to maintain the unity of the Spirit, thus living out visibly the reality of its inherent unity.

## The Unity of the Church Fosters and Is Itself Fostered by Love and Humility

To recap, God has eternally purposed to restore his fallen creation. He will bring about cosmic unity through Christ, and he has already taken steps toward this end by Christ’s reconciling work. Christ has broken down the wall of hostility and has become our peace, bringing us into a right relationship with God and also bringing all believers—Jews and Gentiles—into unity with each other. We are now one body, one temple, one family. God has purposed that the church give a foretaste of this ultimate cosmic unity. The church is to display unity, and as it does so it showcases God and his plan for cosmic unity to the world.

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<sup>11</sup>For how the “already and not yet” relates to the church as temple, see the insightful work by G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 392–93.



But on this side of heaven, unity is hard to come by. It is much easier to bring disunity than unity. So Paul urges the church to prioritize unity—to live in unity, to prize it, to be eager to maintain it, and to avoid doing, thinking, and saying things that undercut it. He does this strategically and often.

So how does the church visibly display this unity? John Stott comments perceptively, “Too many start with structures (and structures of some kind are indispensable), but the apostle starts with moral qualities.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, a large portion of Paul’s moral exhortations in Ephesians relates to living in unity. Two passages in Ephesians prominently underline this. Both are in chapter 4, which begins and ends with an emphasis on promoting church unity.

In Ephesians 4:1–3, Paul exhorts the church to live out its unity through humility, gentleness, and patience, its members bearing with one another in love and being eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Therefore, in keeping with the church’s already-and-not-yet aspect, unity both fosters love and humility among God’s people and is itself fostered by their love and humility.

It is important to note that in 4:1–6, unity does not emerge through theological vagueness, theological minimalism, or a lack of doctrinal conviction. Rather, church unity is built upon the theological foundations of the one God, one Lord, one Spirit, one faith, and so forth. And Paul’s emphases on love, humility, and patience do not point to an epistemic uncertainty about core components of the Christian faith. Instead, Paul clarifies that such unity simultaneously requires both doctrinal truth and love. As the people of God love one another, they value each other and subdue their own egos. They refuse to treat others with roughness but are gentle and considerate, willing to give up their agendas for the sake of others. They put up with each others’ faults, realizing they too need the patience of others. Because they prize the church, they uphold the truth and make every effort to promote its health and unity.

In Ephesians 4:17–32, Paul continues this emphasis. The church is to put off the old ways, be renewed, and put on the new ways (vv. 20–24). How does Paul characterize this new way, the way of the new humanity, the church? He stresses that being united to one another means that we must speak truth to each other (not using spin and manipulation), refuse

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<sup>12</sup>Stott, *Message of Ephesians*, 148.

to nurse anger, give generously to others, refrain from using words to hurt, build others up, and avoid grieving the Spirit via disunity (vv. 25–30). Indeed, he urges church unity as he commands the Ephesians to put away bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and malice, and instead to be kind to one another, tenderhearted, and forgiving. For Paul, the unity of the church is a theological reality and a perennial pursuit. Therefore, he consistently strives to promote love, humility, patience, self-control, and forgiveness. Indeed, he summarizes this section by exhorting the church to live in love (5:1–2; see also 1 Corinthians 12–14; Gal. 5:18–25; Phil. 2:1–4).

## **The Unity of the Church Is Both an Important Doctrine and an Important Praxis**

Because of all this, it is crucial that we see the unity of the church as both an important doctrine and a day-to-day practical challenge (Eph. 4:1–6).

### *Church Unity as a Doctrine*

That the unity of the church is itself a doctrine is frequently forgotten.<sup>13</sup> This is significant because too often the unity of the church is thereby viewed as a nice additive to the church, something to be preferred but not necessarily something formative. Ephesians makes it clear that the opposite is the case. As we have seen, the unity of the church is itself a doctrine and is linked to God’s ultimate end of glorifying himself, to God’s eternal purpose of cosmic reconciliation, to union with Christ, and to the doctrine of the church. And as Ephesians makes plain, the unity of the church is highlighted by the images of being one body, one temple, one nation, one people, one new humanity, one bride, and so on.

But clarification is in order: though the unity of the church is a formative part of the doctrine of the church, it does not exhaust biblical ecclesiology. After all, unity is not the only attribute of the

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<sup>13</sup>Unfortunately, even some significant confessions of faith neglect the doctrine of the unity of the church. For example, “The Baptist Faith and Message 2000” (along with its 1925 and 1963 predecessors) does not speak to the doctrine of the unity of the church under “The Church” but only addresses “Christian unity” as a practical matter under “Cooperation.” Interestingly, “The London Baptist Confession of Faith” (1677 and 1689) and “The Philadelphia Baptist Confession of Faith” (1742) each include in their ecclesiology sections a reference to the church’s being one.

church.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as the Nicene Creed states, “We believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic Church.” Or, in the language of Ephesians, the church is one, holy, and grounded in the teachings of the apostles. As such, Ephesians stresses that the church is marked by oneness, universality, holiness, truth, and love, and it must therefore walk in unity, holiness, truth, and love.

Even more foundational, church unity is a meaningful concept only in terms of genuine Christianity. The Christian church is created in and through the gospel; it is not and cannot be united with those who deny the gospel, the deity of Christ, or any other core truths of the faith (cf. Gal. 1:6–10). Any approach to ecumenism that seeks church unity by minimizing the gospel may promote some sort of amorphous religious unity—but not authentic *church* unity. Such sentiments are too generic and stand contrary to biblical theology, historic Christianity, and even the very doctrine of the unity of the church. True church unity exists among, and can only be found among, true Christians. It presupposes a biblical understanding of the church itself—as the new covenant people of Jesus (Eph. 2:11–22).

### *The Doctrine of Church Unity Shapes Church Praxis*

The doctrine of church unity shapes the church’s praxis. This is clear from what we have seen in Ephesians 4:1–6, 17–32. Similarly, Romans is laden with how the unity of the church relates to our theology and praxis. Romans 14:1–15:13 is particularly instructive as it shows how the doctrine of church unity functions in relationship to other doctrines and practices. In this passage, Paul entwines a matrix of concerns that shape ethical decision making, including the unity of the church, the good of others, conscience, culture and tradition, love for others, what is appropriate for the kingdom, God’s global mission, truth, the example of Jesus, the uniqueness of God and his judgment, Christian liberty, the eschatological inclusion of Gentiles and Jews into one body, and the glory of God. In an incredible way, Paul weaves in and out of some major cultural issues and points the church at Rome in a healthy direction based on such ethical guidelines. Paul addresses the unity of the church as both an important doctrine and an important practice, and he promotes the unity of the church through his explanation of truth. The doctrine and practice of

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<sup>14</sup>And the attributes of the church are a part of a larger set of topics in ecclesiology, which also includes the nature, images, place in salvation history, marks, structure, ordinances, and purposes of the church.

the unity of the church are directly tied to theology and are particularly related to salvation history, the reality of the new covenant, the example of Jesus, the uniqueness of God and his right to judge, the nature of Christian liberty, the nature of the kingdom and what is consistent with it, the nature and mission of the church, the greater significance of the covenant community than the individual, and more.

It is precisely *because* of the unity of the church and these truths that the church lives with certain differences of opinion on culture and tradition. Indeed, in this particular case, Paul deems such biblical teachings as freedom from food laws and the freedom of the conscience as less important than the unity of the church. Thus, the doctrine of church unity is of greater importance than many (other) doctrines, cultural norms, and personal preferences.<sup>15</sup>

Note also that church unity can exist even *in the midst* of certain differences of opinion. It is striking that Paul never urges the church at Rome to agree on the particulars of food laws and custom, but urges them to worship God with one voice despite such differences: “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom. 15:5–7). Amazingly, church unity can and does exist amid some theological and cultural differences, so long as the church practices deference, patience, mutual acceptance, love, and shared mission.<sup>16</sup>

### *Church Unity as Praxis*

So Ephesians underlines the theological realities of God’s oneness, of cosmic unity, and of church unity, in part, to stress the importance of living out the realities of such unity. The day-to-day practice of such unity is shown in Christian relationships to the church as a whole and to individual believers.

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<sup>15</sup>When faced with a divisive issue, we would be wise to ask, is the topic of our disagreement more or less important than the doctrine of the unity of the church? If it is not more important, then why would we divide over it?

<sup>16</sup>Though, as my previous discussion stressed, there cannot be differences on core issues like the gospel, the deity of Christ, etc.

As we noted, Paul's words in Ephesians 4:1–6, 17–32 connect living out this church unity to the following:

- valuing others
- being gentle, not rough, with others
- being patient with others
- putting up with quirks in others
- eagerly promoting the peace and unity of the community more than oneself or one's own way
- genuinely telling the truth rather than manipulating through deception
- refusing to nurse anger
- working hard, not to accumulate wealth but to share with others who need it
- refusing to speak negatively about the church or others but using words to strengthen one another and to build up the church
- putting away bitterness, anger, slander
- showing kindness to others
- being tenderhearted
- forgiving one another

Paul then summarizes these: walk in love (5:1–2).

Note also that Paul assumes here that unity is hard to maintain and that Christians will face challenges in getting along with others. Paul assumes that Christians will be hurt, be offended, and need to work hard to relate appropriately to others—yes, even in (and especially in) the church.

Paul later shows how the holiness (5:3–18) and worship of the church (vv. 18–21) are also to display God and church unity. As the church lives out its holy calling, it displays the kingdom of light as one temple, blessed with and characterized by God's holy presence. As the church worships, the people of God demonstrate their oneness with God and one another, genuinely addressing one another in psalms, singing to the Lord, giving thanks to God in the name of Christ, and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ (vv. 18–21).<sup>17</sup> These “one another” responsibilities flow from and lead to church unity.

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<sup>17</sup>The unity of the church is similarly portrayed through baptism (Eph. 4:4–6), communion (1 Corinthians 10–11), and the sharing of resources (Acts 2:42–47; 4:34–37).

Such unity is also expressed in Christian families or households. For example, the husband and wife relate to one another in a way that reflects Christ and his bride, the church. Love, self-sacrifice, submission, respect, and holiness characterize marriage, which, in and of itself, testifies to the unity of Christ and the church (vv. 21–33).

The parent-child relationship is also to reflect such unity. As the children obey their parents, and as the parents raise their children with patient love and careful instruction, God’s families display God’s purposes (6:1–4).

Church unity is also to be expressed in extended household relationships, even those of a master and bondservant. As the bondservant works hard, respects authority, and serves sincerely as unto Christ the preeminent Lord, he honors Christ with his vocation. The master, too, is to live out such unity as he treats the bondservant with respect, refuses to bully, and recognizes that he will also stand before his Master, the Lord Jesus—who is not impressed with his position and will judge without any partiality (6:5–9).

## Conclusion

So, in Ephesians, Paul addresses church unity from the macro to the micro level. He teaches us that church unity showcases God’s purpose of cosmic unity, displays the unity of God, is both a current characteristic and a perennial pursuit, fosters and is fostered by love and humility, and is an important doctrine and important praxis, especially affecting church relationships, from the use of words to community worship, and household relationships, from the approach to marriage and parenting to even a view of work.

But questions naturally arise: If this is the biblical teaching on the unity of the church, then how do we minimize the disunity sometimes exacerbated by denominations? How do we avoid the pride, narrowness, self-promotion, and myopia that too often characterize denominations? Can denominations play a role in advancing the unity of the church? Can Christians committed to the unity of the church promote such unity from within denominations? *How do we prize and promote the unity of the church in our world of denominations?* The following chapters address these and other questions.



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