



# Truth

## On Tough Texts

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A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

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### *The Grace of Unity (1)*

#### Ephesians 1:1-3

**T**HIS MONTH WE BEGIN EXAMINING A TEXT THAT addresses an ever-increasingly important issue in our day—*unity*. What *is* true unity, and *upon what* can it be based? Can there be unity between greatly diverse groups if we simply agree on some very general “common ground,” or are there definitive, objective truths in Scripture that define the basis of unity?

The Epistle to the Ephesians is a life-long passion of mine. As I have shared in a full exposition of this letter, which I hope to publish soon, while Romans is the most thorough and comprehensive presentation of Gospel doctrine, Ephesians is the most basic, the most profound, and the most awe-inspiring. I am convinced (in my humble opinion) that it is the most basic and foundational New Testament book for the believer.

As is true of most of Paul’s letters, the first half (Eph. 1–3) deals mostly with *doctrine*, while the second (4–6) addresses mostly *duty*. Another way we can say this is that we first see our *riches* in Christ and then *responsibilities*; first comes our *wealth*, and then our *walk*. On the present issue, therefore, Paul first *states* the truth about unity in Christ in 1:22-23, 2:16, 21-22, and 3:6, and then *applies* that truth in 4:1-16 (for the sake of space, we will not quote the passage, but please open your Bible and follow along).

The key word in chapters 4-6 is **walk**, and we find it five times (4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15). The Greek in all five occurrences is *peripateō* (*peri*, “about” or “around,” and *pateō*, “to walk”), and so literally means “to walk about, to walk around, to walk concerning.” In Classical Greek, this word was used only in the literal sense and meant strolling and stopping, as someone would walk about in

the market place. It was never used in a figurative sense as it is in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> Used in such a figurative sense, it speaks of “conduct of life,” that is, “how we walk about,” how we conduct ourselves as we walk through life. How, then, are we to conduct ourselves? Chapters 4-6 reveal seven ways in which we are to walk, each of which in-turn is based on related doctrine in chapters 1-3: *unity* (4:1-16; cf. 1:22-23; 2:16,21-22; 3:6); *purity* (4:17-32; 1:4); *love* (5:1-7; cf. 3:17-19); *light* (5:8-14; cf. 1:18); *wisdom* (5:15-17; cf. 1:8,17; 3:10); *submission* (5:18-6:9; cf. 3:8); *victory* (6:10-20; cf. 1:19-21).

It is extremely significant, therefore, that the very first practical reality in which Paul tells the Christian to walk is **unity**. This is not an accident. Paul, in fact, dealt with this first in another letter, his first letter to the Corinthians. With all the problems in that Church—and there were *many*—he dealt first, and at great length, with **unity** (I Cor. 1:10-3:23). Why? Because without unity, there can be no growth, joy, or effective witness. So important is unity in the Body of Christ that our Lord prayed several times in His high priestly prayer (Jn. 17:11, 21-23) that His people “may be one.” This was also the precedent set in the Early Church. All that they did—their worship, witness, and willingness to serve—was in **unity**. Please read Acts 2:47-48 and note that unity is again listed first (“continuing daily with one accord”). To understand this, we will examine two of four principles in 4:1-16: the *grace* of unity (1-3) and the *ground* of unity (4-6).<sup>2</sup>

In this two-part study, we will first examine three principles concerning the *grace* of **unity**: its *meaning*, *motive*, and *maintenance*.

## I. The Meaning of Unity

Like never before in history we hear much about **unity** today. But much of what we hear is not based on a proper understanding of what *true unity* is. Let us, therefore, consider first what unity is *not* and then what it *is*.

### What Unity is Not

*First*, unity is not “compromise,” or another word that is prevalent today, “tolerance.” Unity does not mean we throw out all doctrine so that everyone can “get along.” This is perhaps the most common misconception of our day. It is argued, “Let’s not have any distinctives or any doctrinal barriers that might divide us; let’s just agree on love and unite on moral issues, such as fighting abortion and gay marriage.”

*Second*, unity is not some common brotherhood or mutual camaraderie. Unity does not necessarily exist just because we are members of the same company, union, association, or even church denomination.

*Third*, unity is not uniformity. As Webster (11<sup>th</sup> Edition Collegiate) defines it, “uniformity” means “having always the same form, manner, or degree; not varying . . . of the same form with others . . . unvaried appearance of surface, pattern, or color.” Unity does not exist just because everyone is a cookie cutter cutout who walks, talks, acts, thinks, and even dresses alike. Such uniformity is not biblical. As once can see in the *gifts* for unity in verses 7-11, this violates the context of the passage. God didn’t make us alike, and neither does He give us all the same spiritual gifts. God gives us *unity*, but He also gives us *diversity*. You can create uniformity from *pressure without*, but unity comes only from *power within*.

### What Unity Is

The Greek for **unity** is *henotēs*, which basically means “unanimity and agreement.” One Greek authority, however, provides a marvelous contrast between how the Greeks, the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), and the New Testament use this word:

In Greek and Roman philosophy the unity of God and the world is demanded by educated *reason*. In the Old Testament [the Septuagint], the unity of God is a confession derived from *experience* of God’s unique reality. The decisive advance in the New Testament, caused by God Himself, is the basing of the unity and uniqueness of God on *the unique revelation through and in the one man Jesus Christ*.<sup>3</sup>

To simplify, we base unity either on *reason*, *experience*, or *the person and work of Jesus Christ*. Most of today’s so-called unity is based either on *experience* (“We’ve all experienced the same thing, so we’re in this thing together”) or *reason* (“To accomplish more, we’ll get rid of our doctrinal differences”). While such platitudes sound noble, they are unscriptural. True, biblical unity is this: *the unanimous agreement concerning the unique revelation of God through Jesus Christ*. Unless we can agree on the person and work of Jesus Christ, there can be no unity. It is as simple as that.

As Paul told the Galatians, “As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:9). The words “as we have said before,” indicate that Paul had said this many times in his ministry. Doctrine, therefore, *must* be the ground of unity, as Paul makes clear here in verses 4–6.

Who, then, produces this unity? Certainly not man. This is not something we can produce like we would create “school spirit.” Rather, as our text says, it is the Holy Spirit who *produces* this unity. What we are to do is *keep* the unity the Spirit has produced through Christ.

Notice the subtlety of the word **keep**, which translates the Greek *tēreō*, “to keep by guarding, to guard by exercising watchful care, to guard as with a fortress.” The picture here is a fortress around which we post armed guards, set Claymore mines, erect concertina wire, and do all else that we can to guard this unity. But this is not enough for Paul, for he adds the word **endeavoring**, which is *spoudazō*, “to make haste, to be zealous or eager, to give diligence.” It speaks of determined effort and exertion. It is, therefore, the responsibility of every believer to diligently, zealously, absorbingly guard the unity that Christ has provided. We do not *produce* unity because we *can’t* produce it. When we try, we end up with a false unity. Rather we are to *guard* the unity that the Spirit produces in Christ. In essence, Paul is saying, “Don’t muck it up. Don’t try to make something you can’t. Just guard what God has already done.”

As commentator William Hendrickson observes, the unity in this passage “is not external and mechanical, but internal and organic. It is not superimposed, but, by virtue of the power of the indwelling Christ, proceeds from within the organism of the church. Those, therefore, who in ecumenical zeal are anxious to erase all denominational boundaries and to create a mammoth super-church can find no comfort here.”<sup>4</sup>

A graphic example in recent history of such an attempt to *create* unity where there can *be* no unity was the “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium” (ECT) document that was written by two evangelicals a few years ago and signed by several others. It was designed to bring together Roman Catholics and Evangelicals for the pur-

pose of evangelism and a “betterment of life in America.” While it clearly notes certain differences between Catholics and Protestants, it flatly denies the most important difference, namely, *what it means to be saved!* That fact immediately and fundamentally violates the true basis of unity we just examined. The ECT document also states that all Catholics and Evangelicals hold the same faith and are brothers and sisters in Christ, when in reality, *the two systems are exact opposites.* Roman Catholicism is based *solely* on a sacramental, works-oriented “salvation,” not on God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. All you have to do to prove this is ask anyone who was saved out of it. There can be no unity between these diametrically opposed systems.

One of the authors of the ECT document compounds his error in a book he wrote on unity. In it he “expounds” on our text like no one I have ever read or heard before. He maintains that while doctrinal agreement is essential in the Local Church (what he calls “the church particular”), such agreement is not required in “the church universal.” He further maintains that the reason it is essential at the local level is that without it the local church’s ability to worship is destroyed. He concludes, “The distinction is critical: uniformity within the church particular, but unity with diversity in the Body or church universal.”<sup>5</sup>

Lest I be accused of promoting disunity, I’ll say only one thing in love: that is appallingly unscriptural. The text simply does not say that, nor does the Bible *anywhere* differentiate between the local assembly and the universal body *in respect to doctrinal purity.* Scripture *repeatedly* speaks of right doctrine and discernment of error. Again, as Paul plainly states in Galatians 1:9, we anyone who preaches another Gospel, and Roman Catholicism (like Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witness, and others) *is* another Gospel, are cursed.

The author not only misuses the word “uniformity,” but then makes an even more serious error by implying that “diversity” refers to “doctrinal differences,” that we in the Universal Church can get along even in our diverse doctrinal positions. Such error is common when we fail to exposit the Scriptures, which this author fails to do. *The context of 4:1-16 clearly shows that “diversity” refers to spiritual gifts NOT doctrine.* Paul’s point here is the same one he makes even more strongly in I Corinthians 12. Each one of us, having our own unique spiritual gifts, which have been imparted by the Holy Spirit, is as diverse in function and purpose as are an arm, a leg, and an eye on the body. But all those differences work together in harmony to edify the entire body.

Another even more appalling development is the more recent “A Common Word Between Us and You” document, which “identifies some core common ground between Christianity and Islam” and seeks unity between them. Unbelievably, this document has been en-

dorsed by many noted “evangelicals,” such as, Timothy George, Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, Rich Nathan, David Neff, and, not surprisingly, Robert Schuller. But we are compelled to ask here: *how can there be a “common word” between two groups with different Gods?*

So we say again, true biblical unity is this: *the unanimous agreement concerning the unique revelation of God through Jesus Christ.* Where that cannot be agreed upon, there can be no unity. Tragically, more and more evangelicals are abandoning this by redefining the Gospel and preaching Relativism, as seen in the ministries of those listed above, as well as the apostate “Emerging Church” movement and other false teaching.

Having emphasized that, let us not fail to recognize how truly sweet **unity** is when based on the right doctrine concerning Christ. It is **unity** that transcends denominations. We can agree to disagree on *non-essentials*, but we can unify on the one *reality of Christ.*

This is no better illustration than in an incident recorded by Harry Ironside. Taken ill with typhoid during a series of meetings in Minneapolis, he was down for six weeks. After gaining enough strength to return home to California, friends helped him to the train and the conductor made up a special berth for him. As he lay in his berth the first morning out, he took out his Bible and began to read. As he read, a stout-looking German woman came walking by, noticed Ironside, and then stopped and asked, “Vat’s dat? A Bible?” “Yes,” Ironside replied. “Vell, you haf your morning vorship all by yourself?” she asked. “Vait, I go get my Bible and ve haf it together.”

A little later a tall Norwegian gentleman came and stopped and said, “Reading ze Bible. Vell, I tank I get mine, too.” After a few minutes, Ironside was amazed at how many had gathered. Every day a crowd gathered, one day totaling twenty-eight. The conductor walked through all the cars announcing, “The camp meeting is starting in car number so-in-so. Any wanting to take advantage are invited.” They would sing, read, pray, and ask questions.

At the end of the trip in Sacramento, as people came to say goodbye, that dear German woman asked Ironside, “Vat denomination are you?” “Well,” Ironside replied, “I belong to the same denomination that David did.” “Vat vas dat?” she asked. “I didn’t know David belonged to any.” Ironside replied, “David said, ‘I am a companion to all them that fear Thee and keep Thy precepts’ [Ps. 119:63].” “Yah, yah,” she said, “dat is a gute church to belong to.”<sup>6</sup>

Ironside went on to write that no doubt there were many denominations represented in that group, but what mattered was that they were one in Christ. *Minor* points didn’t matter; the *main* point did, *the unique revelation of God through Jesus Christ.* As we will see in subse-

quent installments, *Ephesians 4:4-6*, in fact, lists doctrines that form the ground of unity.

## II. The Motive for Unity

The motive for unity is two-fold in verse 1.

### God Brought Unity Through Christ

The key here is the word **therefore**, and its importance cannot be overemphasized. It stands as a signpost to announce that there can be no separating *doctrine* from *duty*, that we simply cannot rightly *accomplish* the *duty* of chapters 4-6 until we *assimilate* the *doctrine* of chapters 1-3.

Space does not allow us to go into detail, but it is truly amazing how many times the word **therefore** appears in Scripture, and it is a worthwhile study in itself. Of its some 1,237 instances in our Authorized Version, about 356 are in the New Testament, and every one is significant. The **therefore** of Matthew 3:7-8, for example, demonstrates that true repentance results in fruit. The **therefore** of 28:18-20 shows that without Christ's power the commission could have no success. And of special significance in our day are Paul's parting words to Timothy. In light of growing apostasy, what did Paul challenge Timothy to do? Did he challenge Him to be an entertainer, or "appeal to seekers," or be "user-friendly" or "purpose-driven." Hardly! He commanded, "I charge thee **therefore** before God . . . Preach the word" (II Tim. 4:1-2).

That great word, then, carries a three-fold significance in Scripture: *First*, it reminds us of the wholeness of scripture. It reminds us always to be looking at the context, as well as *analogia scripturae*, "the analogy of Scripture" (see TOTT issues 26 & 27 on "Biblical Interpretation"). *Second*, the word **therefore** is a word that indicates application. I am always struck here by Galatians 4:16, of which every Christian needs reminding. What is the application when we tell rebellious people the Truth? Bewildered, and perhaps even asking rhetorically, Paul puts writes, "Am I **therefore** become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?" *Third*, and most important of all, the word **therefore** shows not only *application* but also that *application is always a result of doctrine*.

That third application leads us to the importance of **therefore** is our present text. Since the passage deals with unity, the word **therefore** clearly and dramatically demonstrates that we cannot have unity without the doctrine of chapters 1-3. Martyn Lloyd-Jones rightly made this a major emphasis in his exposition of this passage:

Whatever be the unity of which the Apostle speaks, it is a unity that results directly from all he has been saying the first three chapters of the Epis-

tle. You must not start in chapter 4 of the Epistle to the Ephesians. To do so is to violate the context and to ignore the word "Therefore." In other words, you cannot have Christian unity unless it is based upon the great doctrines outlined in chapters 1-3. "Therefore!" So if anyone comes to you and says, "It does not much matter what you believe; if we call ourselves Christians, or if we believe in God in any sense, come let us all work together," you should say in reply, "But, my dear sir, what about chapters 1 to 3 of the Epistle to the Ephesians? I know of no unity except that which is the outcome of, and the offspring of, all the great doctrines which the Apostle lays down in those chapters." What ever this unity may be, we are compelled to say that it must be theological, it must be doctrinal, it must be based upon an understanding of the truth.<sup>7</sup>

Biblically, Lloyd-Jones was correct decades ago, and is still correct today. With few exceptions, people go right to Ephesians 4 when talking about unity without even acknowledging the doctrine that precedes it. The author we noted earlier is guilty of this; he builds his entire argument for unity upon his *opinion*, not on the *doctrine* outlined earlier in the Epistle. This doctrine appears in no less than three passages (please read 1:22-23; 2:16, 21-22; 3:6).

Both a *body* and a *building* must be unified, and all this has been accomplished by the true gospel of Christ. Most unity talk today is based upon one word—*love*. But the Bible says no such thing. Only when we acknowledge the finished work of Christ, that salvation is only in Him by grace through faith, can there be unity. As we will see in verse 5, there is only "one Lord" and "one faith."

As Lloyd-Jones also observes here, and I have verified this in my own reading, many commentators and expositors miss this point. While many mention the transition from doctrine to duty marked by the word **therefore**, it is tragic that most fail to drive home the principle that *doctrine matters when it comes to unity* and that the word **therefore** underscores this truth. It is essential that we recognize that if we do not base unity on the truths of chapters 1-3, we do *not* have and *cannot* have true unity. As we saw earlier, true Biblical unity is this: *the unanimous agreement concerning the unique revelation of God through Jesus Christ*, and it is this that Paul details in chapters 1-3. As we'll see later, Paul makes this even clearer in 4:4-6, where he gives us the *ground*, that is, the *basis*, for unity.

This leads to a second principle.

### We Are Commanded to Keep this Unity

Once we recognize the true basis for our unity, we are then (and only then) commanded to "keep" (v. 3,

*tereō*, “to guard as with a fortress”) that unity. To show how imperative this is, Paul uses the word **beseech**. The Greek here is *parakaleō*, a compound word made up of *para*, “beside,” and *kaleō*, “to call,” yielding the meaning “to call alongside.” Originally, it spoke of summoning someone and at times “to summon to one’s aid for help.” Its main three meanings in the New Testament, however, are reflected in our Authorized Version by three translations: “beseech,” that is, to plead with or implore (43 times), “comfort” (23 times), and “exhort” (21 times). In the present context, there is no doubt as to how Paul uses it; he implores and pleads with the Ephesians to certain behavior based on the doctrine of chapters 1-3.

Specifically, Paul implores us to **walk worthy**. As noted earlier, **walk** is *peripateō*, “to walk about,” and figuratively speaks of how we conduct ourselves as we walk through life. The Greek behind **worthy** is *axios*, which in Classical Greek carried the idea of balancing scales, of one side of the scale counter-balancing the other side.<sup>8</sup> We are **therefore** to **walk** in balance to something. And to what are we to walk in balance? What is the “counter-balance” on the scales? **The vocation wherewith [we] are called**. **Vocation** translates *klēsis*, “a call or invitation to a banquet.” With only a few exceptions,<sup>9</sup> Paul uses this word and related words (such as the verb *kaleō* for the word **called** in our text) to refer to the Divine calling of the elect to salvation. So the full thrust of Paul’s statement here is that we are to **walk** in balance to the salvation to which we’ve been **called**; in other words, we are to **walk** as believers ought to walk. *And the first way we are to walk is in unity.*

Just as a broken bone in the physical body brings pain and debilitation, it is a terrible thing to fracture the Body of Christ through disunity. Once the doctrinal truth of Christ is settled, there had better be unity, not warring factions (as in the Corinthian church), not individuals

fighting for whatever reason (as the two women in Philippians 4:2-3), rather true unity.

It is also significant that Paul refers to himself for the second time as **the prisoner of the Lord**. Why a second mention of this (cf. 3:1)? It is a simple reminder that a worthy walk will be costly, but the blessings far outweigh the suffering. “For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18).

Oh, how important unity is! It is to be the *practical result* of a *doctrinal reality*. Let us do all we can to keep that unity. This leads us right to a third principle, which we will, Lord willing, explore next time.

Dr. J. D. Watson  
Pastor-Teacher  
Grace Bible Church

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1975), Vol. III, p. 943.
- <sup>2</sup> The other two are: the *gifts* for unity (7-11) and the *growth* of unity (12-16). This entire study, and the author’s complete Ephesians exposition, are on our web site.
- <sup>3</sup> Brown, Vol. II, p. 722 (emphasis added).
- <sup>4</sup> William Hendrickson, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Ephesians*. (Baker Book House), p. 181-182. p. 181-182.
- <sup>5</sup> Charles Colson, *The Body*, p. 105.
- <sup>6</sup> Harry Ironside, *In The Heavens: Practical Expository Addresses on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Loizeaux Brothers, 1977), pp. 173-175.
- <sup>7</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:1-16* (Baker Book House, 1982), p. 37.
- <sup>8</sup> Brown, Vol. III, p. 348.
- <sup>9</sup> I Cor. 15:9, 10:27, and three quotations from the LXX: Rom. 9:7 (Gen 21:12), Rom. 9:25 (Hos. 2:23(25)), Rom. 9:26 (Hos. 1:10). Brown, Vol. I, p. 275.

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A Ministry of  
Grace Bible Church  
P.O. Box 235  
Meeker, CO 81641  
www.TheScriptureAlone.com  
docwatson3228@qwest.net

This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God’s people to carefully examine and discern Truth. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful Biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

If you have a question that perplexes you, please send it along so that we might address it either in an article or in our “Q & A” section. Other comments are also warmly welcomed, and letters to the editor will be published.

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