

THRESHOLD  
BIBLE STUDY

UNITY IN  
CHRIST'S  
CHURCH

Colossians,  
Philemon,  
Ephesians

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TWENTY-THIRD  
PUBLICATIONS

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**Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. EPH 4:1–3**

## Unity in Christ's Church

Unity in Jesus Christ is the bond that holds together the worldwide community we call the church. Through his cross and resurrection, Jesus established his church, breaking down “the dividing wall” of hostility and forming his church as one (Eph 2:14). The Scriptures, especially these letters of Paul, can teach us how to support and expand this unity in a way that strengthens the church and enhances its witness in the world.

Genuine unity is foremost a grace, God's precious gift to the church. In its God-given essence, the church is “one body and one Spirit,” joined together in one hope, one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. And the foundation of this unity is our “one God and Father of all” who joins us to his family in Christ (Eph 4:4–6). Such unity involves a profound mutual belonging and responsibility among the church's members.

While unity is God's gift, it is a grace we must maintain and develop. The church's oneness is not a static reality; it grows over time. With the power God gives us through his Spirit, the church is built up in unity as we seek to say and do “everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” (Col 3:17). Truly, growth in unity is the work of our triune God, but something we should pray for and strive toward as we give ourselves over to the truth of the gospel.

There are all sorts of ways that we try to promote unity among ourselves. We join clubs and organizations, support political parties, and cheer for our

favorite teams. But the unity of Christ's church is based on the divine realities of the Spirit. When parish churches try to grow themselves by appealing to cultural styles, economic status, or any other worldly factors, they fail to display the genuine unity that comes only through the gospel of Christ and the salvation he has worked in us. The church is something the world cannot create, and it is the unique result of God's amazing grace.

Paul describes this unity through the image of the one body. Although the body consists of many members, it is one in its essential composition, with Christ as its head (Col 1:18). If the body is to function as God intended, unity among its members must prevail. As the body of Christ, the church must be in vital union with Christ. The church is, in fact, "the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph 1:23). Christ imparts his own fullness to the church, and at the same time, the church is necessary for Christ and his mission to be complete.

The gospel unites people from every nation, race, language, and culture, uniting people that the world cannot and will not unite. This unity, then, is not uniformity. We don't all look the same or think the same. Rather, the rich diversity within the church is transcended by Christ, who "is all and in all" (Col 3:11). In its founding decades, the church was the only place in the ancient world where men and women, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free people, rich and poor, could all join together at the same table and worship God in the same place. People of widely varying classes and status could all call one another brother and sister because they shared the same gospel.

And so, it must be the same today. The church is joined in a dynamic unity, one that leads to increasing maturity as the whole body grows up together in Christ. To facilitate this, God has given gifts to the church so that it might be strengthened in unity. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ," until all come to the unity of faith (Eph 4:11-13). Christ gives each person in the church a gift that makes a contribution to the whole, and with the gift, he offers grace to accomplish the task that the gift requires. The working together of the gifts of all the members produces the unity and growth of the church.

**Reflection and discussion**

- In what ways do I experience disunity in Christ's church?
  
- In what sense is unity a gift of God and in what sense is it the responsibility of its church's members?

**Unity Achieved through Suffering**

Paul writes these letters from prison. He insists that he is “a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (Philm 9) and “an ambassador in chains” for the gospel (Eph 6:20). Writing in his own hand, Paul pleads to those who listen to his letter, “Remember my chains” (Col 4:18). He is convinced that his imprisonment actually advances the gospel and deepens the church's unity. The light of faith and the cross of Christ can change even apparently bad news into good news.

Preaching the gospel, often in the face of opposition from both Jewish and Roman authorities, landed Paul in prison more than once. Although weighty and rusty iron chains chafed the skin and could result in distressing pain, restricting the prisoner's mobility and preventing escape, Paul experienced these times of bondage as unforgettable encounters with God's power and grace.

The paradoxical truth about suffering is that it can create growth, maturity, and resilience. Unity in the church comes through seasons of disunity and difficulty. Because unity is contingent on maturity, unity is a process that

takes time. It grows when it is stretched, pressured, even threatened. As our bodies grow strong when they push against heavy weights, so unity comes through struggle and resistance.

Unity is a result of the church growing up in love. "Speaking the truth in love," Paul writes, "we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (Eph 4:15–16). Although unity is God's gracious gift, it is something that God must do in his church over time. It is a process of maturing that is often filled with pain.

Immature believers are characterized by childlike behavior: self-assertion, self-interest, gullibility, and instability. They can be manipulated by attractive fads and false teachings, resulting in sectarianism and individualism, rather than the mature unity of the apostolic church. In contrast, the church grows toward maturity by seeking its fullness in Christ, the source as well as the goal of the church's growth and unity.

Paul expresses joy in the midst of his sufferings because he knows that his afflictions are for the sake of the church. They are a kind of self-emptying, mirroring the self-gift of Christ for the church. Paul describes his imprisonment and suffering as "completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church" (Col 1:24). Paul is not suggesting, of course, that Christ's atoning sacrifice was somehow incomplete. Rather, "what is lacking" and remains to be completed is the full maturity and unity of his church. Christ is so intimately united to his followers that their sufferings are his own afflictions. Paul's sufferings are "Christ's afflictions," and our own struggles, too, help bring unity and completion to his church.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- Why does Paul urge his readers, "Remember my chains"?

- How can the sufferings of the members of Christ's body complete and unify the church?

### **Unity Glorifies God and Attracts Unbelievers**

The gospel is a message of divine grace, “the word of the truth” (Col 1:5), that is heard not seen. But when that message is believed by a community of faith and that community embodies the gospel and loves one another in Christ, the audible becomes visible, and the power, wisdom, and goodness of God is seen. Thus, pursuing unity in Christ's church results in seeing Christ glorified on earth. And when that happens, believers are strengthened, and unbelievers are drawn to faith.

Gospel-centered, humble-hearted unity can only come through the cross of Christ. It demands that members of the body die to self and live a life empowered by the Spirit. In this way, Christ is glorified for what he did once and for all on the cross, and the Spirit is glorified as the work of Christ is completed in the life of the church. When the church is united in gospel truth and humble love, centered on the cross, it displays the glory of God to the world and witnesses to his kingdom.

Paul's vision of a diversified populace forming a united church was becoming a reality in Colossae. Paul, a Jew, writes to a multi-ethnic community of Gentiles, which includes a slave (Onesimus) and a physician (Luke), all meeting in the home of Nympha, a female homeowner. The gospel unites Jews and Gentiles, wealthy and poor, slaves and masters, as well as women and men, in a culture that generally divided people by ethnicity, socio-economic status, class, and gender. The fact that this community understood themselves as united in Christ Jesus, transcending all cultural barriers, demonstrated that God's new creation was beginning to transform the world.



Paul is concerned in these letters with the quality of the communities, with the vices that create disunity and the virtues that enhance unity. These new followers of Christ have been incorporated, along with the people of Israel, into covenant with God, accepting both its privileges and responsibilities. Through faith and baptism they have become God's people and taken on God's mission in the world.

Paul commands his listeners to strip off "the old self," dominated by pride and self-interest. They must get rid of malice, slander, abusive language, and lies—those sins that cause grave damage to personal relationships and destroy the unity of the church. They must then, as God's chosen, holy, and beloved ones, put on "the new self," clothed with those qualities that create unity (Col 3:9–10). Paul urges them to lead a life worthy of their calling in Christ, "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:2–3). Without these garments of grace, the church cannot effectively spread the gospel and witness to Christ.

Unless the church is firmly joined to Christ, it is susceptible to false teachers and wrong practices. He is the source of nourishment and unity for the whole body. God wills that his church continue to grow and flourish, but only by holding fast to Christ will it grow "with a growth that is from God" (Col 2:19). This growth implies numerical growth, as the church spreads across the Mediterranean world with more and more local churches, and spiritual growth, with an ever-deepening maturity.

Christ's church is a new humanity, in which one's primary identity is found not in ethnicity, heritage, and status in the Roman empire, but in Christ. It is the beginning of God's new creation, in which "Christ is all and in all!" (Col 3:11). He brings together what has always been separate in the world, transcending the boundaries that divide—national partitions, racial barriers, class distinctions, and political partisanship. In Christ, God wants to reconcile the diverse segments of the Roman Empire into the church, a people who glorify God, proclaim the gospel of Christ, and gather people to form his living body in the world.



know about Paul's situation, recognize the events of which he speaks, and understand why he writes in certain ways about the struggles of their own community.

Yet, understanding a correspondence that was not originally intended for us is quite a different matter. It is like finding an open letter on the street and daring to enter into the unique relationship of the sender and receiver. We will need to examine the text imaginatively to see what the correspondence implies about the relationship between the sender and receiver. For this reason, studying the letters of Paul requires examination, speculation, and learning what we can about the world of each. This is the kind of guidance this Bible study offers you.

There is an important sense, however, in which Paul's letters are not someone else's mail. Soon after their writing, these correspondences were recognized as having value beyond their original occasion and context. They speak insightfully to the questions and struggles faced by Christians of any era. They began to be shared and read at the liturgies of communities in different places as the church spread. And eventually Christian communities recognized these letters as inspired writings, addressing the whole church with the living word of God.

So, we can expect these letters to speak personally and powerfully to us today. The task of seeking what Paul intended to say when he was writing in his own time and culture, communicating with specific communities in Asia Minor, enhances our understanding of the text today. Our search for the original meaning helps us to discover what Paul's letters imply for our living the Christian faith today.

At the time Paul wrote these three letters he was in prison, not as a murderer or thief but for courageously pursuing his mission of proclaiming the gospel. From his jail—perhaps in Caesarea, in Rome, or somewhere else—Paul asks those who read his correspondence to pray “that God will open to us a door for the word” (Col 4:3). He doesn't want an open door to escape from prison but an open door for the message of the gospel. He desires opportunities to proclaim the good news, openings to move God's saving work forward in the world.

For Paul in prison, that open door for the word became these three letters, sent to communities of Christians in Asia Minor. Through that portal,

he declared the mystery of Christ, the gift of forgiveness, and the hope of salvation. Because that door remains open, we are able to study God's word through these letters during the coming weeks. Let us ask that God will open to us, too, a door for the word: that that door will open inwardly, so that Paul's words will penetrate our minds and hearts, and that it will open outwardly, so that we may bring God's word and its fruits to others.

### Reflection and discussion

- What are some of the reasons why each of Paul's letters is different in topic and style?
- How do I hope this study will open "a door for the word" in my own life?

### Prayer

*Lord God, you led your inspired writer Paul to offer these letters to the early Christians and to the church today. Prepare my mind and heart to study these sacred texts so that I will understand more fully the riches of Christ and his saving work in the world. Guide my reading and meditation so that it creates an open door for the word within me. Keep me faithful during these weeks to the challenges that your word offers to me.*

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR FACILITATORS, GROUP SESSION 1**

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1. If the group is meeting for the first time, or if there are newcomers joining the group, it is helpful to provide name tags.
2. Distribute the books to the members of the group.
3. You may want to ask the participants to introduce themselves and tell the group a bit about themselves.
4. Ask one or more of these introductory questions:
  - What drew you to join this group?
  - What is your biggest fear in beginning this Bible study?
  - How is beginning this study like a “threshold” for you?
5. You may want to pray this prayer as a group:

*Come upon us, Holy Spirit, to enlighten and guide us as we begin this study of Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians. You inspired the authors of Scripture to reveal your presence throughout the history of salvation. This inspired word has the power to convert our hearts and change our lives. Fill our hearts with desire, trust, and confidence as you shine the light of your truth within us. Motivate us to read the Scriptures and give us a deeper love for God’s word each day. Bless us during this session and throughout the coming week with the fire of your love.*
6. Read the Introduction aloud, pausing at each question for discussion. Group members may wish to write the insights of the group as each question is discussed. Encourage several members of the group to respond to each question.
7. Don’t feel compelled to finish the complete Introduction during the session. It is better to allow sufficient time to talk about the questions raised than to rush to the end. Group members may read any remaining sections on their own after the group meeting.
8. Instruct group members to read the first six lessons on their own during the six days before the next group meeting. They should write out their own answers to the questions as preparation for next week’s group discussion.
9. Fill in the date for each group meeting under “Schedule for Group Study.”
10. Conclude by praying aloud together the prayer at the end of the Introduction.