

# New Testament Paradigm of the Unity of Christians

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**Abstract** *The intention of this article is to describe: first, the New Testament paradigm of unity, second, the New Testament nature of unity, and third, the New Testament teaching concerning the responsibility of leaders to maintain unity.*

*Viewed from a New Testament standpoint, the first section discusses the notion of unity: unity of the believers with the Lord, unity of the believers within Christ's body, unity in diversity within Christ's Church, then about unity in the Spirit, and finally about the unity toward which we are to incline. The second section deals with the New Testament nature of the unity of the Church, which is a spiritual unity, though it also must be practical. The third section emphasizes the New Testament teaching concerning pastoral responsibility in maintaining and protecting the fellowship. Application of Peter's, John's and Paul's exhortations is a secure way toward the upkeep and maintenance of true biblical unity and practical spiritual fellowship within Christ's body.*

## Introduction

Jesus Christ builds His Church and it is His building object against which: "the gates of hell will not prevail" (Mt 16:18). The fact that the Church is under the attack of hell suggests that hell tries relentlessly to destroy its credibility, and the most sufficient way to do that is to divide the Church. However, right before His arrest and suffering, the Lord Jesus prayed and interceded before His heavenly Father in His High Priestly Prayer for the spiritual unity of the Church.

Following His prayer on this subject in their sermons, written letters and through the Church establishment, the apostles endeavored to keep the unity of the Church under every condition. In the Book of Acts, Luke writes that the apos-

ties in the early Church in Jerusalem took this important Church aspect into very serious account.<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt that the Lord Jesus desired for the Church as His great project, to be presented to the world in the best light. From His prayer, we can surmise that it is very important to Him that as many as possible will get to know Him and believe in Him as the Messiah while they observe Christians in harmony. Since the Church prevails in the Devil's backyard,<sup>2</sup> Luke reports that the first several years the Early church succeeded in maintaining the unity with the enormous apostolic/pastoral efforts, although in its congregational and mission activities it experienced turbulent periods, for different reasons, that undermined its unity, and made fellowship almost impossible (Gal 2:1-14 and Acts 15:1-2; 4-7).

Looking to Jesus' example, our prayer too must display the desire for spreading the spirit of Christian unity in His Church in this disunified world. Where there is unity, the Church is clothed with whole-hearted fellowship. In spite of the fact that the Church is a group of people with different cultural, national and language characteristics – and its members differ by their position in society, intellectual abilities, skin color, language and culture – it should be a compact group of believers, showing in a concrete and clear way that Jesus' specific prayer request about its unity is truly answered.

All Church leaders, and all believers, notice that among churches and denominations there exists a tension which undermines unity, and that only in some of them is unity at a desirable level. The assumption is that the majority of Christian believers are aware that the biblical concept of *unity* is a supernatural act of God – which is realized by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Word and creates a new nation in Christ (Gal 3:28; Eph 2:15) – and all of them have an immense obligation to be obedient to the Spirit and make that work easier for Him. The believers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century do not have to be hostages of the unfortunate history of the disunified Church, because their pattern and a true model of Christianity is at hand in the New Testament.

## **I. The New Testament Paradigm of Unity**

In His High Priestly Prayer (John 17), Jesus pays special attention to the spiritual needs of the disciples, among which also is care for their unity. This prayer is an important guideline to Jesus' disciples, as Leon Morris has written:

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<sup>1</sup> In Acts 6:3-7, afraid of the danger of a possible division, the apostolic leaders took constructive steps in subduing the dissatisfaction of the Grecian Jews concerning the election of the deacons out of their orders, which proved to be a wise solution.

<sup>2</sup> ...the whole world is under the control of the evil one (1 John 5:19; Gal 1:4).

“This is the longest prayer from our Lord that is kept. Spoken in the shadow of the cross, it is filled with certain extraordinary dignity. No attempt for this prayer to be described could adequately express all the dignity, its pathos, its moving and simultaneously dignifying significance, its tone filled with gentleness and victorious anticipation” (528).

### **1. Unity of the Believers with the Lord**

A careful reader will extract from that prayer fundamental guarantees which put the real believer in a right relationship with the Lord. There are several binding points that place the child of God into eternal relationship with the Father and the Son. In it, Jesus emphasizes God's self revelation to the disciples, but at the same time He prays for help that they might fulfill their responsibilities, especially in maintaining the unity of the church. He lists eleven components by which one could recognize a converted believer: he has “eternal life” (v. 2), he is under Jesus' authority (v. 2), he “knows the only true God, and Jesus Christ” (v. 3), Jesus has revealed the Father's name to him (v. 6), Jesus gave him God's words (v. 7), he believes in the Lord (v. 8), Christ is glorified through him (v. 10), the unbelieving world hates him (v. 14), he is protected from the evil one (v. 15), he is sanctified by the truth (v. 17) and he is an effective witness of Jesus, for all the people will believe in Christ because of the unity with other believers, that is, “the testimony” (v. 20). Jesus' prayer is saturated with profound biblical/theological doctrines, and at the end He places the cherry on top: “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us...” (v. 20). In these words from Jesus one can sense the mystical and real closeness between Jesus and His Father, and He prays for the same quality of mutual closeness for His followers.

However, through the centuries, certain church leaders have developed some other, unbiblical principles, about the unity of Christians which are not based on Jesus' doctrine. In his book *Ali drugog puta nema (But There is no Other Way)*, the Roman Catholic theologian Šagi-Bunić emphasizes that the unity within his denomination is accomplishable under quite different conditions, about which Jesus does not speak in His High Priestly Prayer. He asserts:

The Church possesses ...outward manifested unity, which allows all nations to see that the Church itself is one and unique. The outward unity is seen in the fact that the Church has a unique organization on whose head is the holy father the Pope. All of God's people listen to the Pope, are subjected to the council of the bishops with the Pope as their head, all the people are confessing the same faith and receive the same sacraments (61).

Since Dr. Šagi-Bunić is a theologian of the Roman Catholic Church, it is quite understandable that the Roman Catholic Church has a legitimate right to speak of any kind of internal unity under the condition proscribed by the Dogmatic

constitution about the Church, but it is quite another question whether or not it can add an unbiblical condition to God's pattern regarding unity: "all God's people listen to the Pope, are subjected to the council of the bishops with the Pope as their head... and receive sacraments." Therefore, the New Testament doctrine of Jesus establishes a perfect paradigm for accomplishing a permanent unity of Christ's church, on the biblical bases of that spiritual *vertical*.

### **2. Unity of Christians within the Body of Christ**

Following the example of Christ concerning unity (Greek: *henetos* – unity),<sup>3</sup> the Apostle Paul emphasized its horizontal dimension. He uses several metaphors about that notion, among which is marriage: "this is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband" (Eph 5:31-32). The metaphor about the body is even stronger (1 Cor 12:12-26). The church fathers have called the local churches communion sanctorum - holy churches – and it would be unimaginable to tolerate disunity of Christians, because in Paul's theology and ecclesiology that is simply unacceptable. He repeatedly insisted that church leaders promote homogeneity in the context of the local holy churches. Luke was inspired by the Holy Spirit to note the Jerusalem' model of unity, closeness and harmony: "All the believers were one in heart and mind (Acts 4:32).

### **3. Unity of Believers in Diversity**

The church is a complex organism with national, social, age and gender differences. Those differences have proven to be potential dangers for unity and there is a constant threat toward division. Corinthian, Galatian and other examples of schisms has brought enormous harm to God's work (Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 11:19-22; Jas 2:1-4). Even the Apostle Paul had to learn about unity in diversity through the vision the Lord showed him: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:35). In the church of Antioch, that same Apostle negatively affected Barnabas when the church forced him, with their immature behavior, to give them a lesson on the elementary factors of the spiritual unity with brothers from another cultural, language and religious background.<sup>4</sup> Only

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<sup>3</sup> In Ephesians 4:4 we find the only place in the Holy Scripture of the New Testament where Paul instructs the mature Ephesian church about maintaining unity.

<sup>4</sup> "When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group" (Gal 2:11-13).

a mature spiritual leader like Paul could intervene effectively and adequately in favor of the endangered unity of the Galatian churches.

Those negative examples from the history of the early mission, just formed communities, are noted by the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, confirming that even the early believers were not spared of the syndrome of creating an environment of disunity in multicultural surroundings. It is also true that the Holy Spirit had messengers whose major concern was to disintegrate spiritual disunity.

#### **4. Unity of Believers in the Spirit**

The Holy Spirit is a divine person. He substituted and replaced Christ on the Earth.<sup>5</sup> He dwells in believers and enables them to live a godly life. Without Him, spiritual life is inconceivable and unrealizable. His presence in all the converted believers makes it possible for Him to affect the spiritual and provide the organizational unity of the church. Paul wrote to the Ephesian church: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit” (Eph 4:3-4). The church is a spiritual community because the Spirit binds it with God’s truth (1 John 2:27). He does not discriminate but indwells every individual believer to the fullness (1 Cor 6:19; Eph 1:13, 22). Because of these reasons it cannot be said that, “the same Spirit indwells, on a special way, those believers who had been (by the sacraments) given the task to be teachers to the others” (Šagi-Bunić, 63). Every converted believer receives the Holy Spirit – the third divine person – in his life completely. If it was not so, then there would be room in the church for spiritual elitism, and that would be a blasphemy.

#### **5. Striving for Unity among Believers**

The prayer “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you,” does not have an eschatological overtone (Lindars, 531) as Bultmann asserts because the verb “to be” is in the present tense. We should agree with Lindars who has said that unity “must be effectuated and progressively attained” (531). Since the church is not a group of perfect people, there is a spiritual need for writing and speaking about unity – unity is hard to maintain even on the local basis, among the spiritual believers of one local church, let alone on the (inter) denominational platform. About this acute problem of the Corinthian church, Beach writes:

Loyalty to the eminent leaders as Cephas and Apollos also produced rivalry and division. There were cases, especially in the Corinth church, of “quarre-

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<sup>5</sup> John 14:15-17; 16:7. The Pope is not the Christ substitute (pontiff on the Earth), rather the Holy Spirit who is another comforter, *parakletos* like Jesus.

ling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder” (2 Cor 12:20). Paul called this jealousy and conflicts as living “still worldly”, that is, fleshly (1 Cor 3:3) (27-28).

Since such occurrences in the early church, historians have unfortunately had plenty of material that dealt with church divisions in the past centuries. Theological and conceptual differences about the constitution of the church have contributed to the breaking up of the churches. The separation of the western Church from the East on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July, 1054, and then the division within the Roman Catholic Church from which the Lutheran Church sprang up later on 31<sup>st</sup> of October, 1517, and the separation of the Anabaptists from the Lutheran and the Reformed Church on 21<sup>st</sup> of January, 1525 (just to mention a few), are the bitter realities of disunity. Therefore, every effort toward uniting the churches and healing the wounds of disunity should be welcomed.

## **II. The New Testament Nature of the Unity of the Church**

Prior to his arrest and suffering, the Arch Shepherd of the church prayed for the future of the church. He prayed for the unity of His people – in agony in the garden of Gethsemane He prayed that His disciples would live in a Christ-like manner and maintain the highest possible level of unity “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.” The world carefully observes disunited churches and is scandalized by the fact that Christians are disunited. Jesus prayed for the perfection of His followers, like the one the Father and the Son had. Therefore, He expects the church to be a leader of unity in the disunited world. But unity must not be a mere theory.

### **1. Unity must be Spiritual**

The church is primarily a spiritual institution. The Holy Spirit birthed her on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). He had administered her. On the Day of Pentecost, 3000 thousand people joined the church, so it was a large church in which, all of a sudden, there was a presupposition for spiritual fellowship that came out of spiritual unity. Luke writes that her positive feature was steadiness as they “were together and continued to meet together ...had everything in common...they broke bread...and ate together with glad and sincere hearts” (Acts 2:44-46). Therefore, when God’s Spirit governs the church, then fellowship and unity are “natural” outcomes among the numerous fruits. This can only be said about a spiritual church.

It is appropriate to say that these positive virtues of the early church are scarce in many contemporary churches, while they should be our particular guiding star in reaching the spirit of unity and fellowship. Jerusalem’s example (Acts 2:37-47)

which the Apostles have built through biblical teaching (Acts 2:42; 6:4) and lifted in prayers,<sup>6</sup> is the only proper method for believers to become one and remain together. Under strict apostolic theological mentorship and spiritual oversight it was easier to understand and live spiritually in agreement with Jesus' High Priestly Prayer (John 17:20-23).

## **2. Unity must be Practical**

Spiritual believers cannot exist without fellowship. They are referred to each other. Alone and isolated, they cannot practice Jesus' teaching because it is lived much easier in an adequate spiritual climate and in a strongly connected fellowship. Jesus' disciples are sent as "sheep among wolves" (Mt 10:16), and in the face of fiercely inclined observers, the church breaths easier and lives Christ' life if it narrows its lines. Love, harmony and unity inject hope into God's people that they will outlive the infernally inclined world and manifest the new command of love in an adverse environment (John 15:33-34). Unity has provided them with credibility for evangelistic enterprises in the unbelieving world. Stott's interpretation of adequately understood brotherly relationships in the context of the church is significant and useful. He says:

Jesus will finally point the thoughts toward the relationships of a Christian. For Christian counter-culture is not a matter of individuals but the congregation, and the relationships within the congregation and between the congregation and others are most important (184).

If a congregation of believers is truly a harmonious institution, with Christ-like living, then it will surpass every institutionalism and will not be an obstacle to proclaiming the Gospel. For this reason it is necessary to fight for unity that gives authenticity to Christians. The Early church is recognizable by evangelism, but the believers also helped each other financially, they were hospitable, their homes were open for church meetings, they cared for the widows, cried when some of them suffered... Solidarity with others in the life of the early church manifested itself in every step, and the pagans commented: "just watch how they love each other!"

## **III. The New Testament Teaching about Pastoral Responsibility in Sustaining Unity**

The unity of Jesus' disciples is a priority and precious Christian value that could be easily endangered, but the pastoral responsibility is to sustain that unity by

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<sup>6</sup> Acts 1:14; 2:42; 3:1; 4:24-31; 6:4 only to mention some of the countless other examples.

every means. Knowing the nature of His followers, the Lord prayed for their unity and by the most inspired – most authoritative – Apostles gave clear written instructions for all centuries.

### **1. Peter's Instruction**

The Apostle Peter as a true shepherd heartily cared for the unity of the church and removed from it any apparition that threatened its sanctification. In the fifth chapter of Acts, Peter punished Ananias and Sapphira most severely (Acts 5:1-11) for sinning, money fraud, lying and tempting God. Today we would be astounded if some members with the same problems were treated so rigorously. However, no one could accuse him of having acted with a lack of love towards them or to have been out of the control of the Holy Spirit. Did he act towards them without love? Of course not! Peter delivered the punishment of the aforementioned couple out of love towards the Lord and the church. Peter was really concerned about the unity of the church, so he removed Ananias and Sapphira from the church because they were working against the unity.

During the apostolic council Peter publicly named some members of the Jerusalem church for proselytism, chauvinism and nationalism (Acts 15:7-11). He lifted his voice during the fierce discussion in defense of the New Testament soteriological truth, and no one could reproach him in that moment for speaking without love or working against the unity and the fellowship of that admirable church. It was he that later wrote: "Above all, love each other deeply" (1 Pt 4:8). About the purity of the biblical doctrine in the church, John Stott has written the following:

The inclination of the Christians toward the visible unity of the Church is worthy. But only if there is no demand for a compromise with the teaching of the church in order to achieve that unity. Jesus prayed for His disciples to be one. He also prayed for them to be kept from evil and remain in the truth. Christ didn't command us to incline toward fellowship without purity, and that is, purity in reference to doctrine and behavior. If there is a "cheap uniting", there is also a "cheap evangelism", namely, proclaiming the Gospel without the price required by the discipleship, or seeking faith without repenting. Such shortcuts are forbidden, (because) they turn the evangelist into a fraud, cheapen the Gospel and harm the cause of Christ (45).

Achieving spiritual unity and fellowship in local congregations is possible, but in Christian organizations and denominations there should be spiritual leaders like Peter who could solve the numerous and serious theological obstacles by power of their authority. One obstacle to Christian unity is the lack of spiritual authority such as the Apostles enjoyed amid different church beliefs (credos) and different liturgical forms of church worships. The churches simply are not willing to de-



part from their convictions. While quoting Blais Pascal, R. Albert Mohler Jr. has written about this important aspect of church practice:

It is a real crime to disturb the peace when the truth prevails, as it would be to remain undisturbed when the truth is being violated. There are moments when the peace is justified, and in others unjustified. Because it is written that there is time of war and time of peace, and the law of truth differentiates that. But, it should never exist simultaneously time for truth and delusion, for it's written that God's truth stays forever. That's why Jesus said that He brought peace, and at the same time He said He brought a sword. However, He never said He brought both, truth and delusion (62).

Peter, who was considered as a church pivot, was categorical in this area and he was not ready for theological retreat.

## **2. John's Instruction**

From his biblical opus, John is recognized as an Apostle of love. Out of that reason the advocates of the more inclusive church fellowship often cite him as the greatest authority. The most widely spread motto for achieving unity in the complex confessional coloring is: "let's love each other and forget the doctrinal differences" and "let's point to what unites us and not to what divides us." This sounds very attractive and affects Christians emotionally, but we must not allow it to blunt our theological and believing minds.

John the evangelist may not be also known by many as an apostle of truth. In his work, he has written about the preservation of the church from the false influence of the so-called Christian teaching profession. One of his expressions sounds very rough, it even borders on being considered rude: "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work" (2 John 10-11). Beach is in solidarity with John's approach:

There surely exists a level where the obvious deviating in the faith and the unchristian living totally justifies separation and breaking the fellowship. After all, separation and division in order to protect the purity of the Gospel and the Church is better than unity in delusion and distortion. To put split, animosity and disharmony under one big church roof can hide the division from the rain of blame and judgments that washes, but cannot undo the fact that there is disunity; instead, it makes it less visible and therefore harder to improve (110).

The fact is that there were not always theological reasons for church divisions, but the brothers separated because of doctrinal delusions.

### **3. Paul's Instruction**

The Apostle Paul was a missionary and it is a real miracle that he had time to care for the churches he planted and left. The Holy Spirit has driven his pastoral heart to solve conflicts while building up the churches on solid biblical foundations. When the spirit of disunity emerged in a church, he reacted immediately. The disputes of the believers in various churches forced him to write imperatively: "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1 Cor 1:10). The unity in the Galatian churches was endangered because some of the believers had preconditioned unity with gender, nationality and social status (Gal 3:28; Eph 2:15), and Paul did not tolerate that.

In such delicate pastoral responsibilities, Paul did not have the freedom to speak with hatred, instead, he was always under the supervision of the Holy Spirit. In spite of the strict words he directed toward some believers of the churches, he remained theologically and spiritually composed. He did not lose his testimony, as it could be said for today's churches. Although he sometimes used harsh words, he was always "speaking the truth in love" (Eph 4:15). The truth hurts, but it should be learned, however that might be. Everyone who belonged to Christ was obligated to submit to God's truth, and so should it be today.

### **Conclusion**

Well-meaning spiritual fathers have invested great efforts in ancient and contemporary times during the countless councils and conventions, to homogenize the church, but they have not achieved great success. About the division already in the Early church, Beach has written the following:

In the first days the Church was featured with intimacy and harmony. The almost idyllic picture that the Book of Acts portray for us, "All the believers were one in heart and mind (Acts 4:32), soon was distorted by the darker colors and the shouts of arguments. In short time the unity was disturbed by personal arrogance, theological ferment, compromises and at the end the deviation from the apostolic faith. Therefore, it didn't take long before one could see a totally different portrayal of Christianity on the history scene (40).

The general church has acted scandalously, but it is also true that through all the centuries certain churches have been a great blessing to the local communities. The inclination to achieve a visible and organizational global unity of the churches is foredoomed to failure. In an attempt to achieve interdenominational unity and the merge of the churches into one global organization with one common denominator, some church leaders and mission workers have invested a lot

of time and energy. However, that is not a biblical concept. All the congregations mentioned in the New Testament are recognized as independent congregations. No local church had power over another. It is good to remember Jesus' words: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom" (Lk 12:32). Unfortunately, the unity and fellowship on these levels are an unfulfilled dream. But, we should not forget that the paradigm of unity and fellowship within the local churches should be based on the example of the apostolic church (Acts 2:37-47).

In the dark (church) middle ages, theologians had discussions about trivial issues, like the one about how many angels can dance on the tip of a needle. However, we will do well if we put emphasis on what is most important: solid biblical teaching and sanctified living. It is not deniable that the church of Christ in our regions needs a fresh wind of the Holy Spirit, who will accomplish unity in the local congregations, and that we need spiritual ability to know how to discern doctrine, in the context of the New Testament paradigm, and to live sanctified lives for the ideal of the Lord's High Priestly Prayer – to fight for unity and live in the fellowship with our brothers for the glory of God.

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**Sažetak** *Ovim se člankom namjerava opisati: prvo, novozavjetna paradigma jedinstva, drugo, novozavjetna narav jedinstva, i treće, novozavjetno učenje o odgovornosti duhovnih pastira da čuvaju jedinstvo.*

*Promatrano s novozavjetnog stajališta, o pojmu jedinstva u prvom poglavlju se razmatra: jedinstvo vjernika s Gospodinom, zatim o jedinstvu vjernika unutar Kristovog tijela, onda i o jedinstvu u različitosti unutar Kristove crkve, potom o jedinstvu u Duhu, te jedinstvu za kojim nam*

*je težiti. Drugo poglavlje se bavi novozavjetnom naravi jedinstva crkve, koje je duhovno, ali ono mora biti i praktično. Treće poglavlje naglašava novozavjetno učenje pastoralne odgovornosti u održavanju jedinstva i zaštiti zajedništva. Primjenjivanje Petrovih, Ivanovih i Pavlovih naputaka je siguran put u (o)čuvanju i održavanju zbiljskog svetopisamskog jedinstva i praktičnog duhovnog zajedništva unutar Kristovog tijela.*

Translated by Ljubinka Jambreč