

A Summary of the Study Afternoon on the Unity in Christ

Organised by The Open Bible Trust on November 19, 2016 at St. Stephen's Church, Upper Basildon, from 2:30-6:30

By Sonia Khuri

The speakers and their speeches:

Michael Penny (Head of Churches Together in Reading): What does Unity mean?

William Henry: Oneness of all believers (John 17:20-26)

William Henry: Pictures of Unity

Michael Penny: Unity of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:3)

Michael Penny: Unity of the Faith (Ephesians 4:13)

Andrew Marple: Practical Implications of Unity

'Unity does not mean uniformity.'

Unity means to understand the inter-connectedness between God and Son, between Son and man (disciples, believers, and gentiles), and between man and man. **It is a vertical and a horizontal unity.**

John 17:20-26 reads: *'My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 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 so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.'*

Christians are in unity when they believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. In other words, Christian sects who do not believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God (for example Jehovah Witnesses, Mormons, and others) are not in unity with those who do believe.

All believers are one because they have unity through PURPOSE, through LOVE and through TRUTH.

Paul writes in **Philippians 2:1-4**, *'If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.'*

And **John 13:34-35** reads: *'A new command I give you: Love one another as I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'*

Also in **John 8:31-31**: *'So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."' And in John 17:17* Jesus prays: *'Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.'*

Obeying and practicing the commands of Jesus is the path to the truth. 'Walking in the truth' is defined in **1 John 2:3-6**. He writes: *'We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.'*

There are three 'pictures' of Unity in the Bible: one VINE, one STONE and one BODY. All believers are united in these three ways. Here are some references:

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener...I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit, apart from me you can do nothing... As the Father loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remained in his love.' (**John 15:1, 5, 9-10**)

*'As you come to him, the **living Stone**—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.'* (1 Peter 2:4-5) And Paul writes: *'Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.'* (Ephesians 2:19-20)

'As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.' (Ephesians 4:1-6)

'Unity of the Spirit' is GIVEN BY GOD to man.

The unity of the spirit should be kept and guarded. This is done by living a life worthy of Christians: humble and gentle, patient and bearing of one another. It is done by keeping the peace amongst each other.

'And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.' (Ephesians 1:13-14)

The unity of the Spirit is guarded by keeping the peace. By living a life worthy of Christians

'For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.' (Ephesians 2:14-18)

'Unity of the Faith' is A GOAL the believers aspire to attain.

Unity of the faith is unity in the knowledge of the Son of God; it is the full knowledge (or acknowledgement) of the Son of God.

John's goal in writing his gospel is to say that Christ is the Messiah, the Son of God. John opens his Gospel with the words (John 1): *'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made, without him nothing was made that has been made.'* And John ends his Gospel with the words: *'Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.'* (John 20:30-31)

'It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.' (Ephesians 4: 11-13)

In Matthew Christ asked His disciples to tell Him who do people say He is, and who they say He is. When Simon Peter answered, *'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,'* Jesus replied, *'Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.'* (Matthew 16: 13-17)

The Early Church

The early Christians were either **Jews** or **gentiles**. The Jews amongst them had to abide by the law of Moses which did not always conform to Christian teachings. It was a very difficult period for them. The gentiles who converted, on the other hand, did not have this problem. They, however, needed to learn more about God and the teachings of Christ.

In [Acts 14:15-17](#) Paul preached the gentiles without a mention of Christ saying: *‘Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.’*

However, in [Acts 17:29-31](#), Paul addresses the gentile philosophers saying: *‘Therefore, since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man’s design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.’*

Thus, the first century was full of controversies concerning the nature of Christ.

To put things right in Colossi, Paul wrote to them about the supremacy of Christ: *‘He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities, all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. **And he is the head of the body, the church**; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.’* ([Colossians 1:15-20](#))

It was time for a formal organisation of the Church including instructions governing what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in church. Churches had been established for many years when Paul, near the end of his life, wrote his letter to Timothy. In it he writes:

*‘Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. **(If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?)** He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap. Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested, and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.’* ([1 Timothy 3:2-13](#))

The practical applications of the Unity in Christ can be clearly seen in [Philippians 2:1-4](#) (see above). In these verses, we find the why, what, and how of Unity in Christ. The expression **‘like-minded’ in the verse does not mean ‘one mind,’ but rather support one another, love one another and be one in Spirit.**

*‘Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that **you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.**’* ([Philippians 1:27](#))

‘Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.’ ([Philippians 4:8-9](#))

*‘Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you **shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life.**’* ([Philippians 2:14-16](#))