



# SOUTHWESTERN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

## BAPTISTS AND UNITY

CHARLES BRAY WILLIAMS  
(1869–1952)

*Charles Bray Williams*  
(1869–1952)

**The Christian Unity Set Forth in the New Testament**

Our purpose in this article is not to set forth our particular views on this subject or the views of any modern sect of Christians but to study impartially the teachings of Jesus, Paul, John, and other New Testament writers and then state clearly the conclusions which seem logically to follow the facts ascertained.

**Jesus and Christian Unity**

In the first place it is patent that Jesus did not have much to say concerning the church. Only on two occasions, these recorded in only one Gospel, did He address Himself to the subject of organized Christianity. In Matthew 16:18 He says to Peter immediately after his confession of Christ as the Divine Messiah: “And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” In Matthew 18:17 He says to the aggrieved party in a personal grievance, after all private agencies have been exhausted for settlement, “tell it to the church.”

Broadus thinks the word *ecclesia* is never used in the New Testament in a general sense. “But the word is not used in the New Testament to denote a congregation, actual or imaginary, visible or invisible, of all professed Christians, unless in Acts 9:31 and in 1 Timothy 3:15,” both of which he thinks refer “to the local church.”<sup>1</sup> Professor Bruce thinks Jesus meant to teach three things in Matthew 16:18: “(1) The *ecclesia* is to consist of men believing Jesus to be the Christ. (2) The new society is to be the kingdom realized on earth. (3) In the new society righteousness of the kingdom will find approximate embodiment.”<sup>2</sup> On the passage in Matthew 18:17 he says “The chief interest of historic exegesis is to divest it of an ecclesiastical aspect as much as possible.” We observe that Professor Bruce merely calls the church a “new society” without limiting it to either the local or general sense; that is, it is the “brotherhood of believers in Christ,” which seems to imply that he intended to give the word the general sense. Allen thinks

<sup>1</sup>Comm. on Matt., p. 359.

<sup>2</sup>Expos. Grk. Test., I, 224f.

the author of Matthew had in mind “the Christian society as used in Acts, Paul, John’s epistles, etc.,” and that “Christ used some Aramaic word or phrase” equivalent to it.<sup>3</sup> Other New Testament experts express views quite similar to one or the other of these three representative views of Jesus’ teachings as to the church. But none would assert that in the Gospel of Matthew is given a statement from Jesus that would commit him to any form of ecclesiastical organization.

Jesus, in His use of the Aramaic term equivalent to the Greek word for church, cannot be quoted as direct authority either for or against any particular form of ecclesiastical organization. According to our interpretation of these two passages, we would say that Jesus merely states the fact that He would create an institution on earth called the church which finds its perfect expression in the local assembly, which is to be composed of properly qualified believers in Him as the Divine Messiah, and which has authority from Him to execute His will in the proclamation and establishment of His kingdom. The whole question of the association or unification of these local bodies into larger bodies is left to the wisdom of His followers, as led by the Spirit. Hence, we may positively assert that Jesus taught not a line, or even a word, on the subject of ecclesiastical union, the union of the various societies of Christians as conceived and advocated today in some quarters.

But Jesus does emphatically exhort His followers to maintain spiritual unity. Not only does He exhort them to it, but He even prays to the Father that “they may be one, even as we are one” (John 17:11). Not only does He pray for them to be “one,” but He prays “that they may be perfected into one; that the world may know that Thou didst send them, and lovest them, even as Thou lovest me” (John 17:25). Not only for those who listen to His words did He pray but for succeeding generations of believers in the gospel. He and they preached and prayed and toiled “that they all may be one” (John 17:21).

These are wonderful words which comprehend a Christian society composed of all believers, not only in all nations and races, but in all the generations of the future, and a society so united as to be “one,” even as the Father and Son are one; a society with a unity which is desirable for the accomplishment of two grand purposes: the moral perfection of the believers themselves—“perfected into one”— and the missionary goal, “that the *world* may believe.” What is the nature of the oneness prayed for by Jesus for His followers? Marcus Dods approvingly quotes Tholuck: “This unity is infinitely more than mere unanimity, since it rests upon unity of spirit

<sup>3</sup>Internat. Crit. Comm. St. Matt., p. 176.

and life.”<sup>4</sup> Westcott says: “The unity is not only of love and will, but of nature, perfectly realized in absolute harmony in Christ.” Hovey quotes and endorses this; if by “nature” he means “disposition or character,” which was what Westcott had in mind.<sup>5</sup>

But what light does this prayer of Jesus for unity throw upon the modern question of church union? None whatever except to rebuke us for making church union rather than spiritual unity our principal goal. There can be no doubt that Jesus is praying for a spiritual unity, because (1) He makes the fellowship between Himself and the Father, which could be nothing but spiritual oneness, the ideal of Christian oneness; (2) He usually emphasized the spiritual versus the formal; the internal versus the external (cf. Matt 23, concerning the Pharisees; Mark 2:18–22, concerning fasting). Jesus was no ritualist nor ecclesiastic, but was preeminently an ethico-spiritual teacher, who regarded moral and spiritual perfection as the ultimate goal of individuals and society (cf. Matt 5:48 and other passages in the Sermon on the Mount). His emphasis on the heart, the seat of soul, as the source of thoughts and desires, of motives and actions; on love as the bond that binds men together as brothers in the family of the Heavenly Father; on sacrificial service as the unmistakable mark of greatness that is real and abiding (cf. parable of the good Samaritan and Mark 10:35–45), commits Jesus to spiritual unity and Christian brotherhood, but not any organic union. His rebuke of James and John in Mark 9:38–40, where He refuses to stop the work of others not organically connected with His apostolic group, and His assertion that they who work “in His name” must be “for us and not against us,” commits Jesus to a broad spiritual brotherhood rather than a narrow organic group union.

To Jesus His church, which He builds upon the rock of spiritual confession of Himself as the divine Messiah, is not an end but a means, a divinely appointed instrument for heralding His gospel in order to establish His kingdom, which on the subjective side is a society of believers in Him, from Jews and “all the nations,” who are “one” in spiritual unity and Christian brotherhood. To Jesus the supreme question is spiritual unity and Christian brotherhood for the different classes and races of men. As President King of Oberlin has aptly said, the emphasis should be put upon “the significance of unity of spirit”; that unity “should be indeed organic,” but mere “mechanism” is not equivalent to such unity.

### **The Apostle Paul and Spiritual Unity**

In the first place we must notice the special emphasis which Paul puts upon the fundamental truths of the gospel and his refusal to fraternize

<sup>4</sup>Expos. Grk. Test., I, p. 845.

<sup>5</sup>Com. on the Gospel of John (Am. Com.), p. 342.

with those rejecting these truths. “But though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathema. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preacheth unto you any gospel other than that which ye received, let him be anathema” (Gal 1 :8–9). To Judaizers he “gave place in the way of subjection, no, not for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue” with the Galatians (2:5): And when Peter came to Antioch and seemed to be compromising the basic principle of spiritual freedom in Christ by his refusing to eat with Gentiles because the Judaizing Christians from Jerusalem were watching him, Paul publicly reprimanded the early Apostle, “because he stood condemned,” and that because “he walked not uprightly according to the truth” (2:11–14). Lightfoot says of Paul’s position here, especially on Galatians 1:10: “The expressed allusion to the Judaizers also explains the particle *gar*: ‘I speak thus strongly, for my language shall not be misunderstood, shall wear no semblance of compromise.’”<sup>6</sup> Observe, Paul says his supreme purpose in thus refusing to compromise with Judaizers is that the truth of the gospel might continue. He had practically carried the Jerusalem Conference with him for the gospel of divine grace and human freedom (Acts 15:22–29). Now this gospel must not be compromised by the foolish act of an Apostle who is not strong enough to stand for his convictions as expressed in the Conference.

But we hasten to say that Paul does stand positively for a comprehensive spiritual unity. He uses the figure of the human body in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, to illustrate his conception of spiritual unity. “So we who are many, are one body in Christ and severally members one of another.” “Now we are the body of Christ, and severally members thereof.” Sanday says, on the former passage, that Paul is speaking of “the character of Christian unity.” “The use here is based upon that in 1 Corinthians 12:12–30. In the Epistles of the Captivity it is another side of the idea that is expounded, the “unity of the church in Christ as its head.”<sup>7</sup> That is, Paul is emphasizing, under the figure of the human body, the spiritual unity of Christians, in Romans and Corinthians, and not their ecclesiastical union. The terms used—prophecy, miracles, gifts of healing, help, governments, kinds of tongues—make it clear that he is emphasizing the harmonious and sympathetic use of the spiritual gifts.

In the epistle to the Ephesians, Paul’s great theme is unification. Of whom? Of what? First, of God and men and the whole cosmos—“to sum up all things in Christ, the things in the heavens, and the things upon the earth” (1:10); then the unification of men, Jews and Gentiles, of all classes

<sup>6</sup>Com. on Gal., p. 22.

<sup>7</sup>Com. on Rom., p. 355.

and races—that He might reconcile both in one body unto God through the cross” (2:16). In 1:22–23 He refers to the “church,” which is His body, and in 3:21 He sings his doxology to God “in the church and in Christ Jesus.” So, as Sanday suggested above, the ecclesiastical question is involved in the Christian unity which Paul urges in Ephesus, and in the seven unities asserted by the Apostle in 4:3–6 he mentions “one body” and “one baptism.” Is the one body one vast ecclesiastical organization comprehending all nations, all races and all varieties of belief? Sheldon thinks not. “Under the Pauline regime officialism seems not to be prominent—of a monarchical constitution in the church no hint is given.”<sup>8</sup> On the same passage Salmond says: “The soma is the whole fellowship of believers, the mystical body of Christ.”<sup>9</sup> So holds Meyer,<sup>10</sup> Abbott,<sup>11</sup> and many other exegetes.

But what is the mystical body of Christ? Is it the visible organizations called the churches, or the churches combined into one vast piece of ecclesiastical machinery? The non-ecclesiastical spirit and democratic teaching of Paul would forbid us to assert that the latter is his idea of the “one body” of Christ. Perhaps he meant, as Sheldon seems to mean, the whole body of real believers in Christ, which body is tangibly represented by the church in its institutional sense, which is the meaning of the word church in Ephesians and Colossians. In proportion as the church approaches the spiritual ideals of Christ, it approximates identity with the mystical, spiritual body of Christ, the sum total of all real believers in Him. But nowhere does the Apostle assert the absolute identity of the church as an institution with the spiritual, mystical body of Christ.

But what is the one baptism? Salmond again says: “The rite, one and the same for all, by which believers in Christ are admitted into the fellowship of His church.”<sup>12</sup> Others like Meyer<sup>13</sup> think it is “baptism into Christ,” that mentioned in Romans 6:3. Others, the “baptism of the Spirit.” But the weight of exegetical evidence is in favor of the rite initiating the believer into his public Christian career.

But what weight do these conclusions have as to the ecclesiastical union of all the sects of Christendom? Very little, if any, since the question of vast united ecclesiastical machinery was not present in the Apostle’s mind. The absorbing theme of the Ephesian epistle is spiritual unity—the bringing of men into oneness with God and the bringing of men of various nations and races into spiritual fellowship and Christian brotherhood

<sup>8</sup>New Testament Theology, p. 255.

<sup>9</sup>Expos Grk. Test. III, p. 321.

<sup>10</sup>Com., p. 439.

<sup>11</sup>Internat. Crit. Com. Eph. and Col. in loco.

<sup>12</sup>Expos. Grk. Test, III, p. 322.

<sup>13</sup>Com., p. 440.

with one another. (cf. 1:10; 2:14, 16, 18, 19; 4:3, 13, etc.). Of the seven unities in Ephesians 4—one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God—only two refer to the church, the one body and one baptism, while five refer to the fundamental spiritual realities of Christianity.

The genitive in the phrase “the unity of Spirit” (4:3) is either descriptive or subjective, and so means the spiritual unity, or the unity which the Spirit gives. The one Spirit meant by Paul is the Holy Spirit, the source of spiritual life of the individuals and of the spiritual unity of the Christian society. The one hope is the common spiritual expectancy which the believer’s calling by grace imparts to him. The one Lord is Christ Jesus. The one faith is not the things believed, the doctrines of faith, but the common faith of personal committal to Christ by which each Christian is saved. The one God is the common spiritual Father of the believers. Of the five spiritual realities, three set forth the basal theological teachings of Christianity; the unity of the Spirit, the unity and Lordship of Christ, the unity, Fatherhood and sovereignty of God—all to set forth the common spiritual possessions of all believers, faith and hope. No one can experience the transformations of the one Spirit, the fellowship with the one Lord Jesus, the spiritual Sonship with the one sovereign Father, and enjoy the blissful hope of oneness with God, except by the one common process—faith.

So it strikes us, as one seeking to interpret Paul as impartially as possible, that he is aiming at a magnificent realization by all believers of a final ethical and spiritual unity. This conclusion is borne out by the assertion of the Apostle that the purpose of the various spiritual gifts and functions to men was “the perfecting of the saints, into the work of ministering, into building up the body of Christ; until we attain unto the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a full-grown man; unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:12–13). The final goal of all God’s grace and gifts to men is the attainment by believers of the moral character of Christ and the spiritual unity of all as brothers of the common Father. “The unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” means one common personal faith and experimental knowledge of Christ as the Son of God and personal Lord, and this oneness of experience (the Greek word *epignosis*, experimental knowledge) makes us one in Christ and brothers in the family of God. It is the oneness of spiritual experience, the grace of one Spirit, of one Lord and one Father, coupled with the one hope as to eternal destiny, which inspires the Apostle to exhort the Christians to love and forgive, to live and act as brothers. The seven unities set forth by the Apostle suggest the perfection of spiritual fellowship desired by him.

Observe these four conclusions from the Apostle's discussion in Ephesians: (1) It is spiritual rather than ecclesiastical unity aimed at by him. (2) It is universal spiritual unity—the fellowship of all nations and races as one spiritual family of God. (3) A common spiritual experience of Christ as the Son of God and as personal Lord is emphasized as the one indispensable prerequisite of spiritual fellowship. Only kindred spirits can be united in real fellowship and only those who have had like experiences of trust and hope in Christ as the Son of God and as their personal Lord can be kindred spirits. (4) False teachings will take care of themselves—i.e., they will not trouble us if we cherish and live and proclaim experimental Christianity, for Paul exhorts in 4:14, “that we may be no longer children tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine.” Paul's program for spiritual unity calls for, not the binding together of different sects or the signing of the same creed, but the one common spiritual experience in Christ. To the great Apostle Christian experience is the unifying force of Christendom.

So it follows that Paul makes much of love and of brotherhood. Witness his panegyric on love in 1 Corinthians 13, the greatest love poem ever written. “Love beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.” But it believes only those things that are in accord with spiritual truth, for he has just said “love rejoiceth with the truth” (v. 6). There is no clash between love and truth. Love does not believe a falsehood to be true but it makes us tolerant with others who may honestly differ from us as to what is true—“beareth all things.” Love is more—it is “the bond of perfectness” (Col 3:14). Like a Jewish girdle holding all the pieces of clothing into a perfect fit, so is love the tie that binds all Christian graces and virtues into a perfect moral fit. More than this, Paul stood for a universal spiritual brotherhood of man—a brotherhood of Jews and Gentiles, masters and slaves, bond and free, wise and foolish, through Christ the personal bond of unity (Rom 1:14; Eph 4:14; Col 3:11; Phlm 15, 16).

### **John and Christian Unity**

Three conclusions are evident from the Johannine writing: (1) The Apostle urges the beautiful spirit of love and Christian brotherhood. He does not emphasize, as does Paul, the universal extent of this brotherhood, although it is there (1 John 1:9–11; 3:11, 13, 17; 4:7–11, 14, 16–21, etc.) (2) He emphasizes the harmony of love with truth. “Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is begotten of God; and whosoever loveth Him that begetteth loveth him also that is begotten” (1 John 5:1). “Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus is come in the flesh is of God” (1 John 4:2). “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and everyone that loveth is begotten of God” (1 John 4:7).

Love and the acceptance of the elemental truths of Christianity must go together. Love without truth, or truth without love, is a bird with a broken pinion, and cannot reach the heights of spiritual experience and achievement. He who loves God and his brother as he should will also love the revealed truths of the Father and Lord Jesus and he who really believes and experiences the basal truths of Christianity will love his fellowmen as brothers. (3) John puts no emphasis upon ecclesiastical organization. The word church never occurs in his writings, except in the third epistle and in Revelation—and there always in the local sense. The words baptize and baptism occur not in his writings, except in the early chapters of the Gospel, where he refers to the fact of John and Jesus' baptizing their disciples. The supper is never mentioned by him—not even its origin, which he witnessed (Mark 14:17, 22–24).

Notice also in his third epistle his denunciation of Diotrephes, whom Harnack regards as possibly the first monarchical bishop, and his ambitious movement in the church as the first tendency toward the complex ecclesiastical government of succeeding generations. If Harnack's supposition is correct, John stands for the democratic administration of church affairs.

### **Other New Testament Writers on Christian Unity**

The author of Hebrews has no message on ecclesiastical union but exhorts to spiritual unity in the terms of a loving brotherhood, which is broad enough to include "strangers" (13:1). He also exhorts them, "Be not carried away by divers and strange teachings; for it is good that the heart be established by grace" (13:17). In other words, he urges love and truth to lock hands and unite in spiritual unity. Moreover, he regards one's spiritual experience in "grace" as the only safeguard against false teachings. So we find Jesus, John and the author of Hebrews in perfect harmony in making spiritual experience of Christian truths the one and only process of unifying all believers in Christ.

James has no message on church union and very little on Christian unity, except that all Christians, rich and poor, should have faith in Christ, the Lord of glory, "without respect of persons," and should show their faith by their works of philanthropy (2:1, 18).

Peter exhorts, "Love the brethren." "Finally, be ye all like-minded, compassionate, loving as brethren, tenderhearted." (1 Pet 2:17; 3:8), but he has no message on church union and only once mentions baptism in its symbolic significance (1 Pet 3:2) and never the supper.

Jude has no specific note on this subject but refers to "our common salvation" and exhorts his readers to "contend earnestly for the faith once

delivered unto the saints" (23).<sup>14</sup> Mayor explains "the faith" as the "truth of the gospel."

From this survey of the facts on the subject of Christian unity in the New Testament we deduce the following summary:

(1) *Spiritual unity and Christian brotherhood* are emphasized throughout the New Testament—by Jesus, Paul, Hebrews, John, James and Peter.

(2) *Democracy* is the emphatic note of Christ, Paul and John as to the method of administration in church affairs.

(3) *Co-operation* and sympathy of all believers in their functioning as members of the mystical body of Christ are urged by Paul (cf. Rom 12, 1 Cor 12).

(4) *Spiritual experience* of the great elemental truths of Christianity is the one New Testament method of unification of all Christians.

(5) *Love, experience and truth* are in *perfect harmony* in their operation. True love to Christ and our brothers cannot compromise significant truths. A genuine Christian experience of great truths will show what is truth (cf. John 7:17) and the oneness of our experiences will unify us all in a loving brotherhood.

(6) Individual *freedom of conscience* rings out as the message of the first century. Every Christian is both a king and a priest. He alone for himself can come to God to offer his love and his life. His conscience, enlightened by revealed truth, is his guide in matters of faith and conduct. No man can be Lord over another's conscience and none can stand before God for another (Gal 6:5; 2 Cor 1:24).

*SWJT* Vol. 3 No. 1 (January 1919)

<sup>14</sup>Expos. Grk. Test., V, 255.

# BaptistTheology.org

PROVIDING BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR LOCAL CHURCH LEADERS

A Ministry of the Center for Theological Research,  
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary



SOUTHWESTERN  
BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY