

# A Divine Platform for Christian Unity

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

The church of Jesus Christ in the city of Ephesus is first mentioned in the latter portion of Acts 18, when certain “brethren” wrote a letter commending the eloquent Apollos (v. 27). Paul visited that great metropolis during his third missionary campaign, probably in the spring of A.D. 54/55, and built upon that foundation (Acts 19:1-7). In this community, he labored for some three years (Acts 20:31).

Probably eight years or so later, he wrote a letter to this congregation, the design of which was to focus upon the realization of God’s eternal plan, as brought to fruition by the work of Jesus Christ. The phrase “in Christ” (or its equivalent) is found some thirty-five times in the epistle. The letter also has a **practical** thrust, beginning in 4:1ff. One element of the practical segment is a solicitation for unity (4:1-6).

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all.

## An Admonition for Unity

Paul begins his petition for “oneness” by appealing to the highest motives of Christian service. First, he underscores his credibility as one who is the Lord’s “prisoner” (cf. 3:1; 6:20). The apostle begs these kinsmen in Christ to “walk” (Greek *peripateo*, literally to “walk around,” i.e., a sphere of existence, a consistent mode of living) “worthily” of their “calling.” “Worthily” is an adverb, expressing manner (cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:12; Colossians 1:10; Philippians 1:27; Romans 16:2). The “calling” has to do with their response to God’s plan of redemption, as revealed in the gospel (cf. Acts 2:38-39; 2 Thessalonians 2:14; 2 Peter 1:10).

Several qualities foundational to unity are emphasized: lowliness, meekness, longsuffering, and forbearance (i.e., restraint, holding back). These are to be exercised in genuine love with due “diligence” (the original word signifies an “exertion”). If these sterling qualities pave the way for oneness, just think what a destructive trail the opposite traits can generate. One thinks of arrogance, self-centeredness, intemperance, and the like. Agitators within the brotherhood of Christ major in these despicable features.

These saints are encouraged to keep the “unity of the Spirit,” i.e., a unity desired by the Spirit, and that which results from following his guidance (as made known currently through the Scriptures; cf. 6:17). Moreover they are to pursue the “bond of peace.” This likely refers to the bond that holds Christians together as a result of the common peace they enjoy. This flows out of Christ’s atoning work, and the saints’ relationship to him (cf. 2:14-17).

Following this introduction is Paul’s platform of fundamentals for unity. In this study, we will arrange them into four thematic segments.

## The Godhead

Christian unity is motivated by the reality of the solidarity of the Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit); these divine persons enjoy a mutual love for one another and for mankind, and share a coordinated activity on behalf of Adam’s posterity.

The concept of the Godhead is not easy to fathom. There is a sense in which God is but “one” (Deuteronomy 6:4; James 2:19). The Hebrew term *echad* reflects a compound unity (Genesis 2:24). “It stresses unity while recognizing diversity within that oneness” (Harris et al. 1980, 30). This is an allusion to the unified **divine nature**. This oneness has to do with the sum total of those characteristics that collectively constitute the “essence” of deity. It includes such qualities as eternal, non-derived existence, omnipotence, omniscience, perfect holiness, etc.

The divine nature is shared by three individual personalities, fully revealed in the New Testament as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In this context, the numeral one is applied to each holy person in the sacred “family,” and the mathematical sum yields a “three.” Obviously God cannot be both one and three, if the numerals are employed in the

**same sense.** However, if they refer to **different aspects** of the Godhead, there is no conflict.

Sometimes the term “God” can be used in a more restricted way, i.e., it may designate but one person of the Sacred Three, in distinction to the others. In Ephesians 4:6, “God” is clearly used of “the Father,” being differentiated both from the “one Spirit” (v. 4) and the “one Lord” (v. 5). In fact, the apostle identifies the “one God” as “Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all” (v. 6). The ultimate thrust of these progressive clauses is the implied cooperation of the Trinity on behalf of the church of Jesus Christ. The Father (in conjunction with the Son and the Spirit as appropriate agents) reigns over all his people (cf. Ephesians 1:20-23), works through them (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:6-9), and also indwells them as his temple (Ephesians 2:19-22).

There are numerous vantage points from which one might discuss “Godhead” (e.g., God’s existence, Christ’s historical reality and identity, the Spirit’s personality and work, etc.). In this context, though, which emphasizes **oneness**, perhaps a consideration of several aspects of the **united activity** of the Holy Three would be appropriate.

For example, the entire Godhead was involved in the creation of the universe. The name for “God” (Elohim) in Genesis 1:1 is a plural term, which, together with plural pronouns (Genesis 1:26), certainly lends itself to the revelation of the Trinity, as set forth progressively in Scripture. Both the eternal Word (Christ—John 1:1,14) and the Holy Spirit were involved in the creation activity (cf. Genesis 1:2; Psalm 104:30; John 1:3; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2).

Second, it is apparent, from a consideration of the testimony of biblical history, that each of the divine Persons was operating on behalf of humanity as the great plan of redemption was being prepared across the centuries. That the Father so functioned is beyond dispute. Collateral evidence establishes the fact that both Christ and the Spirit were vital in the preparatory phase of the scheme of redemption as well (see John 8:58; 1 Corinthians 10:4; Acts 1:16; 7:51). Note, for instance, how that divine “grace” (unearned “favor” extended redemptively in a plan) is attributed to God (2 Corinthians 1:12; Titus 2:11), to Christ (Romans 5:15; Galatians 1:6), and to the Spirit (Hebrews 10:29).

Consider the heavenly concord reflected in this passage: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14). With this exalted example before us, surely Christians ought to be motivated toward the type of unity for which the apostle pleads in Ephesians 4:1ff. Let us now focus our attention upon other “ones” chronicled in this text.

## One Faith, One Hope

First, there is the expression “one faith.” “Faith” is used in two prominent senses in the New Testament. Sometimes the noun refers to that personal conviction (or trust) that one entertains with reference to God. For example, Paul told the Roman saints that their “faith” was widely acclaimed throughout the empire (Romans 1:8). Some see a subjective “faith” as the usage in this Ephesian passage, the sense being that children of God are bound together by their “personal commitment” to the Lord (Wood 1994, 767). “Faith” is not independent of obedience (see Jackson 2005, 415ff).

On the other hand, “faith” can be employed of the **objective body of truth** that undergirds the Christian system. Frequently such usage is qualified by the Greek article, i.e., “the faith.” Paul preached “the faith” of which he once made havoc (Galatians 1:23). The man who neglects his family duties has denied “the faith” (1 Timothy 5:8). Each child of God is to contend for “the faith” (Jude 3).

It may be that “faith” in this passage embraces both ideas (Lenski 1961, 512). Hendricksen, who inclines toward subjective faith, nonetheless says that

the subjective and the objective cannot be separated: when a person surrenders himself to Christ as his Lord he at the same time also accepts the body of truth with reference to him (1979, 187).

One thing is certain. People cannot share a “common faith” (cf. Titus 1:4) unless they are united in affirming the “one faith” system, rather than the diverse creeds of denominationalism. It is incredible that some scholars can read this passage and, in spite of its clear language, contend for the validity of sectarian bodies (Earle 2000, 311).

In addition, there is also the question as to whether “hope” here is objective (cf. 1 Timothy 1:1; cf. Jeremiah 17:7, KJV), or subjective (2 Corinthians 3:12; Hebrews 6:11,18). Certainly both enter into the equation.

Though “hope” is “one,” it also is many-faceted. Our anticipation of the Lord’s return is a “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13). [Note: Those who subscribe to the dogma of “realized eschatology,” alleging that Christ’s return occurred with Jerusalem’s fall in A.D. 70, are bereft of the “hope” previewed in this passage.] We entertain the hope of the resurrection from the grave (Acts 23:6). We long for the “hope of salvation,” i.e., ultimate deliverance from this sinful world (1 Thessalonians 5:8; cf. 2 Timothy 4:18), and the realization of heaven (Colossians 1:5; 1 Peter 1:3-4). Those who look to a future “glorified earth” as their hope (e.g., the “Jehovah’s Witnesses” and many denominationalists), languish under a serious deception. The destiny of this earth is destruction (2 Peter 3:5ff).

## One Body

It is hardly a point of controversy that the “one body” of this text represents the church of Jesus Christ. The church and body are seen as equivalents elsewhere in this very book (1:22-23; cf. Colossians 1:18,24), and the apostle makes a similar point in a letter to the church in Corinth. “You are the body of Christ,” he says, “and severally [individually] members thereof” (1 Corinthians 12:27).

The church (the “called out” of God) is viewed under the figure of a “body” for at least two reasons. First, the body is under the control of the “head.” Even so, Christ is the head of his spiritual body, and the members are subject to his sovereignty (Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:22ff; Colossians 1:18). Second, as a body cannot function with precision unless there is unity of operation among its members (1 Corinthians 12:12ff; Romans 12:4-8), even so the kingdom of Christ cannot be effective where there is an absence of cooperation among its fellow-citizens (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:10ff).

That this “body” was divinely designed to be “one” is graphically revealed in a number of ways.

1. The Old Testament prophets suggested such. Isaiah spoke of the coming of Jehovah’s “house” (2:2-4).
2. Ezekiel wrote of the coming day when the Lord’s people would be of “one nation” (37:22), under “one shepherd” (34:23).
3. Daniel foretold the arrival of the Lord’s “kingdom” (2:44). Note that “house,” “nation,” and “kingdom” all are **singular** in number.
4. Jesus spoke of the time when his people would be “one flock” (John 10:16), and he prayed for the abiding unity of that flock (John 17:20-21).
5. Caiaphas unwittingly prophesied that God would gather together his scattered children (potentially so) into “one” (John 11:52). The understood object of the numeral would seem to be “house” or “family,” since the term “children” is employed (cf. 1 Timothy 3:15; Ephesians 2:19).
6. The early church, under the oversight of inspired apostles, was “one” (Acts 4:32).
7. Simple logic reveals that if the body is the church (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18,24), and there is but one body (Ephesians 4:4; 1 Corinthians 12:20), then there is but one church (in its **universal** aspect). This information represents an unequivocal condemnation of the denominational system that clutters the world of “Christendom” today. Unfortunately, men, wedded to their sectarian ideologies, applaud this factious system, which facilitates a repudiation of the relationship of Jesus Christ to his Father (see “that the world may believe”—John 17:22).

## One Baptism

Finally, there is the apostle’s allusion to the “one baptism.” What is the “one baptism” of this passage? The most condensed expression of the truth of this matter is this: the “one baptism” is that baptism which **embodies all of the features of the rite that collectively are set forth in the New Testament documents**, which act of obedience leads to the full complement of blessings to be accessed by the “in Christ” relationship (cf. Ephesians 1:3).

### A Baptism of Water

The one baptism of this passage is administered in water. As elementary as this point seems to be, many are confused about it. For example, those who subscribe to the dogma of “ultra-dispensationalism” contend that the “water baptism” of the Gospels and Acts narratives was but a mere “Jewish purification ceremony,” that became obsolete by the end of

the book of Acts. There is, they claim, no water baptism for today. Elsewhere we have reviewed this doctrine more specifically (Jackson 1978, 1-3).

Even some of the more mainline scholars have a tendency to drain the water from passages dealing with baptism. Concerning Galatians 3:27, Kenneth Wuest, a Baptist writer, asserted: "The reference cannot be to water baptism, for that never put a believing sinner into Christ" (1973, 111). He would make this baptism a "spiritual" one, administered by the Spirit of God directly. The gentleman's preconceived theology obscured his vision of the passage.

The above ideas are misguided. It is conceded, well nigh universally, that the "one baptism" of Ephesians 4:5 is the **same** as that commissioned by Christ at the conclusion of his earthly ministry (Matthew 28:20; Mark 16:16). And **that** baptism, which was to last "unto the end of the world," was implemented by **human** administrators. Jesus charged the apostles to "make disciples, baptizing them" (Matthew 28:20). The only baptism ever administered by men was **water** baptism. Spirit "baptism" (i.e., the overwhelming endowment of the Spirit's power) was administered directly by Christ (Matthew 3:11). The careful student, therefore, is forced to conclude that the "one baptism" of Ephesians 4:5 is water baptism.

## A Baptism of Immersion

The "one baptism" of this remarkable text involves an "immersion" in water. In reality, this is a redundant statement, equivalent to saying the "one immersion" is immersion.

The noun *baptisma*, like its kindred verb, *baptizo*, signifies a dipping, a submersion, an immersion. The action is not the equivalent of either "pouring" or "sprinkling" water. This fact is forcefully demonstrated by a passage in the Greek version of the Old Testament. In the ceremony involving the cleansing of a leper, the Hebrew priest was to "pour" (*cheo*) oil into the palm of his left hand. He then was to "dip" (*baptizo*) his finger into the oil, and finally, "sprinkle" (*rhantizo*) the oil before the Lord (Leviticus 14:15-16). These verbs express different actions; they are not interchangeable.

In classical Greek, *baptizo* could be used in a variety of ways, e.g., of a "sinking" ship, or of one who was "over his head" in debt (Liddell 1869, 283). In a few New Testament passages, where no theological bias was involved, the translators bring the Greek across into pure English as "dip" (cf. John 13:26; Luke 16:24; Revelation 19:13)—a very telling procedure.

The practice of pouring or sprinkling water, as a substitute for immersion, is a post-apostolic departure from the New Testament pattern. The first mention of a change in mode of "baptism" is in a document known as the *Didache* (ca. A.D. 120-60), which mentions the possibility of "pouring" water upon the candidate's head in unusual circumstances. Cyprian, a scholar in Carthage (ca. A.D. 200-58), made the first defense of sprinkling, but only on behalf of the sick (*Epistle 75*). The first documented case of affusion involved a citizen of Rome named Novatian, who had water administered while in his bed, being at the point of death (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 266). It was not until A.D. 1311, at the Council of Ravenna, that pouring and sprinkling were officially approved as alternatives to immersion (Schaff 1894, 201).

## A Baptism of Faith

A third criterion that identifies the "one baptism" of the New Testament has to do with the appropriate candidate. In the apostolic age, immersion was administered only to those capable of **understanding** the elements of the gospel, and, correspondingly, having the **need** to receive its benefit. For example, in the Great Commission, Jesus made "believing" a requisite for being baptized (Mark 16:16). Since infants cannot "believe" in Christ, in any legitimate sense of that expression, they obviously are not subject to the ordinance. Moreover, the obligation to "repent" is preliminary to immersion (Acts 2:38). Babies have no comprehension of repentance (cf. 2 Corinthians 7:10), nor have they a need for such, having never sinned (see Genesis 8:21; Ezekiel 18:20). Innocent children, therefore, are not amenable to the rite of immersion.

But fairly early in the post-apostolic age (ca. A.D. 130-200), Irenaeus in southern Gaul began to teach that even "infants" needed to be "born again to God" (*Against Heresies* 2.22.4), thus paving the way for infant baptism. Tertullian (ca. 160-220) vigorously opposed infant baptism (*On Baptism* 18), which shows that "the practice had not as yet come to be regarded as an apostolical institution" (Neander 1850, 432). It was not until the middle of the third century that infant baptism became a common practice (Brauer 1971, 83).

## A Baptism of Purpose

Another aspect of New Testament baptism has to do with its design. While the biblical teaching concerning both the form and subjects of baptism was to erode relatively quickly, it was otherwise with reference to the **purpose** of the ordinance. From the apostolic age onward—for many centuries—it would be argued strongly that immersion was requisite to the pardon of sins for the penitent believer. Testimony in abundance from the post-apostolic “church fathers” is available to buttress this statement. After a survey of the literature, one historian observes:

Only a few Gnostics on the remote fringes of Christianity denied water baptism or its necessity for the remission of sins (Ferguson 1971, 36).

The militant opposition to “baptism-for-forgiveness” became popular only with the dawning of the Protestant Reformation, and the reaction of this movement to the false notion of meritorious works for salvation, as advocated by the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

From time-to-time it has been argued that one’s understanding relative to the purpose of immersion is of no major consequence; supposedly, the candidate’s sincerity is really all that matters. While it appears that this idea of a “generic” baptism is gaining some momentum within our own brotherhood these days (Osburn 1993, 91), the evidence of the inspired record is decidedly against such a theory.

There is no question but that Peter proclaimed immersion “for the forgiveness of sins” on Pentecost (Acts 2:38), and that Saul of Tarsus was instructed to be immersed to have his sins “washed away” (Acts 22:16). The issue, then, is this: were these “purpose” explanations meaningless appendages to the apostolic sermons, or, were they **functional**?

Biblical revelation forcefully makes the point, time and again, that Christianity is an intellectual religion, i.e., it requires a conviction of faith regarding certain facts. True obedience is based upon an understanding within the “mind” (Matthew 22:37; cf. Ephesians 6:17); it is not an emotional response yielded to blindly. Teaching, learning, and understanding **precede** a genuine submission to God (Matthew 13:15b; John 6:45). If the purpose of baptism is really of no significance in the mind of the candidate, why did the inspired spokesmen make it a point to emphasize that matter so emphatically?

And what of other issues wherein the same grammatical phraseology is employed? Is comprehension in such cases a trivial detail as well? For instance, when Christ affirmed that the shedding of his blood was “for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:28), was he stressing a fact to be believed? Or might one submit to immersion for some other noble reason, disdaining the notion that Christ’s death was efficacious for the atonement of sin (as modernists do)?

Not a few have argued that one need not **believe** that baptism is “for the forgiveness of sins,” but he may not **dis**-believe it is essential. To such a proposition, reason is a perfect stranger! But some, following the trail of their own “logic,” contend that **anyone**, who is immersed with a view to obeying God, is a Christian. This, of course, means that virtually everyone immersed is a Christian; who in the world ever submits to baptism with a view to disobeying the Lord? The resulting extension of these premises then is this: a sizable number of souls within the world of “Christendom” are our kinsmen in Christ. We must not, therefore, according to some recent writers, “allow our resolute stance” on baptism “keep us isolated” from godly folks who may not share our view of this sacred ordinance (Childers et al. 2001, 124).

## **A Baptism into the Body of Christ, the Church**

Not only is it the case that, in baptism, our sins are purged by the Savior’s blood, it also is a fact that at this point we are made a part of the spiritual body of Christ. Paul writes: “For in one Spirit were we all baptized into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13). Inasmuch as this passage is so misunderstood so frequently, some attention must be given to it.

It is commonly asserted that the baptism here contemplated is a “Spirit” baptism, by which one is mysteriously translated into Christ’s kingdom. The truth is, the baptism of 1 Corinthians 12:13 can easily be demonstrated to be immersion in **water**. Note the following logical flow.

The baptism of this passage is said to put one into the “one body.” But that body is the church (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18,24). Thus, this baptism inducts one into the church.

Add to this the fact that elsewhere the church is identified as the “kingdom” (Matthew 16:18-19). Accordingly, to enter the church (by baptism) is likewise to enter the kingdom by the identical process.

Finally, the Bible student must observe that the Lord Jesus, in his conversation with Nicodemus, explicitly stated that the “kingdom” is entered at the point of the birth of “water” (John 3:3-5). Ancient testimony is virtually uniform that this “water” is a reference to water baptism. William Wall, a scholar of the Church of England, went so far as to say no one argued otherwise before John Calvin (1509-64), who gave the passage a novel interpretation, and conceded that his view was a “new” one (quoted in Shepherd 1950, 336).

An immersion in water, therefore, that is grounded in penitent faith, and with a view to receiving pardon and entering a relationship with Jesus Christ (Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:26-27), is a crucial component in the wonderful plan of God for human redemption. Who, thinking clearly, would reject such a gift of grace?

## Conclusion

What a grand scope of sacred information is packed into Ephesians 4:1-6. There is the affirmation of a heavenly orchestration of the purpose of God. Likewise there is the suggestion of a unified plan of obedience to which the saints must yield. And there is the glorious common hope that awaits the faithful. What an admonition this is for all who profess to honor Jesus Christ. What a warning it suggests for those who glory in factionism!

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1:12; Titus 2:11; Romans 5:15; Galatians 1:6; Hebrews 10:29; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 4:1; Romans 1:8; Galatians 1:23; 1 Timothy 5:8; Jude 3; Titus 1:4; 1 Timothy 1:1; Jeremiah 17:7; 2 Corinthians 3:12; Hebrews 6:11, 18; Titus 2:13; Acts 23:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:8; 1 Timothy 4:16; Colossians 1:5; 1 Peter 1:3-4; 2 Peter 3:5; Colossians 1:18, 24; 1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 1:22-23, 5:22; Colossians 1:18; 1 Corinthians 12:12; Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 1:10; John 10:16; John 17:20-21; John 11:52; 1 Timothy 3:15; Ephesians 2:19; Acts 4:32; Ephesians 1:22-23; 1 Corinthians 12:20; John 17:22; Ephesians 1:3; Galatians 3:27; Ephesians 4:5; Matthew 28:20; Mark 16:16; Matthew 3:11; Leviticus 14:15-16; John 13:26; Luke 16:24; Revelation 19:13; Acts 2:38; 1 Corinthians 7:10; Genesis 8:21; Ezekiel 18:20; Acts 22:16; Matthew 22:37; Ephesians 6:17; Matthew 13:15; John 6:45; Matthew 26:28; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Matthew 16:18-19; John 3:3-5; Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:26-27; Ephesians 4:1-6

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