



BAPTISTS
and the
CHRISTIAN TRADITION

TOWARDS AN EVANGELICAL
BAPTIST CATHOLICITY

edited by

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BH
ACADEMIC
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Baptists and the Christian Tradition

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ABBREVIATIONS

B&H	Broadman and Holman
SBC	Southern Baptist Convention
JSNTSS	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series</i>
SPCK	Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge
IVP	InterVarsity Press
NPNF	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers
AH	<i>Against Heresies</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
S&T	<i>Sword and Trowel</i>
PRSt	Perspectives in Religious Studies
NAC	New American Commentary
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
ODNB	Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

FOREWORD

TIMOTHY GEORGE

Beeson Divinity School

Several years ago Mark Noll wrote an article titled “So You’re a Baptist—What Might That Mean?” in which he asked: “What is the best way to take account of the world’s self-described Baptists? Do they constitute a movement with any real cohesion? Or is the term ‘Baptist’ so flexible that it designates only a loosely defined collection of heterogeneous fragments clustered haphazardly in one vaguely outlined section of the world Christian landscape?”¹

That last question refers to the fact that more Baptists reside in North America than anywhere else—this despite the fact that Baptists are a considerable presence in some non-Western regions, such as Nigeria, Brazil, and Nagaland in India. In his article “The Baptist Exception,” Philip Jenkins observes that this fact makes Baptists an outlier among world Christian communions. In most Christian communions, Global South Christians have strongly outpaced their Northern world counterparts. Jenkins also cautions: “Mere numbers say nothing about the nature of faith or the quality of practice.”²

The nature of faith and the quality of practice, among Baptist Christians especially, are major concerns of the essays in this volume. Each of the contributors is a convinced Baptist committed to an open engagement with the Great Tradition of Christian believing and thinking across the centuries. They are advocates of what has been called

¹ Mark Noll, “So You’re a Baptist—What Might That Mean?” *Books and Culture* 17, no. 4 (July/August 2011): 92.

² Philip Jenkins, “The Baptist Exception,” *Christian Century*, May 10, 2017, 61.

“Baptist catholicity.” This approach presupposes a critical, but charitable, engagement with the whole church, both past and present, along with the desire to move beyond the false polarities of an Enlightenment-based individualism on the one hand and a pastiche of postmodern relativism on the other.

This project is revisionist only in the sense that it dares to challenge the (fairly) recent telling of the Baptist story primarily in terms of the negatives of dissent and nonconformity. It is possible to so emphasize certain Baptist distinctives, such as believer’s baptism, congregational church governance, separation of church and state, and so on, that the weightier matters of Christian faith are neglected—the Bible, the Trinity, salvation by grace alone, and even Jesus’s prayer that his disciples would be one, as he and the Father are one (John 17:20–26). Baptists began as a small, persecuted minority in pre-revolutionary England. As ardent advocates of religious freedom, Baptists have always reacted against the imposition of practices and beliefs they deemed unbiblical. This has sometimes led to our magnifying fences while neglecting foundations. Fences have their place in marking out ecclesial identity, but without a solid foundation, the fences will not long endure.

Seen in a broader context, this volume is part of a deeper Protestant impulse to reclaim the foundations of historic Christian orthodoxy—and to do so precisely as confessional, evangelical Baptists. In the nineteenth century, the Oxford movement attempted to do this within the Anglican tradition. The “Catholic Luther” is a theme rehearsed among Augsburg Christians since the Reformation. The work of Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg is another part of this trajectory. More recently, the late Thomas C. Oden, with his work on patristic exegesis and his call for paleo-orthodoxy, has inspired many in this direction, both within and beyond his own Methodist tradition. Scott Swain and Michael Allen have done something similar for their fellow Presbyterians. Among Baptists, we should note the work of the recently formed Center for Baptist Renewal along with other appeals to Baptist catholicity by Baptist theologians Curtis Freeman, Steve Harmon, and Elizabeth Newman.

Coursing through all these movements, and reflected in the essays in this volume, are three convictions: History counts. Theology matters. Retrieval for the sake of renewal. To take these statements seriously is to recognize the church as a community of memory, a community not only of baptized believers, as Baptists are wont to define the church, but also a community of “remembering believers.” Retrieval for the sake of renewal is also an exercise in humility. We must learn to listen before we can speak. Our hearts must become teachable, pliable, docile—from the Latin *docilitas*, the word Calvin used to describe his own conversion—before we are able to offer instruction to others. This means, among other things, that we must overcome the obstacle of inattentiveness and the culture of competition. All of this points to the centrality of Jesus Christ, who is at once the Savior of the world and the Lord of the church.

INTRODUCTION

Baptists and the Christian Tradition: What Hath Nicaea to Do with Nashville?

MATTHEW Y. EMERSON,
CHRISTOPHER W. MORGAN,
and R. LUCAS STAMPS

In recent years, desire appears to have grown among evangelicals, including evangelical Baptists, for a stronger rootedness in the Christian tradition. Evangelical believers (perhaps especially millennials) appear to have a growing hunger for ancient liturgical forms of church worship. Evangelicals across the theological spectrum are asking how and why millennials are drawn to more traditional forms of worship and an interest in early church doctrine and practice.¹ Further, from an academic standpoint, conservative evangelical scholars are likewise seeking a retrieval of patristic doctrinal formulations and precritical interpretive methods. One recent example is Michael Allen and Scott Swain's *Reformed Catholicity*.² And from an ecclesial perspective, evangelical churches are longing for a greater sense of transcendence in worship and a more robust and multilayered expression of "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3 ESV).

¹ See, for example, Gracy Olmstead, "Why Millennials Long for Liturgy: Is the High Church the Christianity of the Future?" *American Conservative*, January 14, 2014, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/why-millennials-long-for-liturgy/>.

² Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015). In their introduction, Allen and Swain highlight a number of recent trends from across the theological landscape toward retrieving the Christian past.

Some evangelical churches are experiencing attrition precisely along these lines, as discontented believers flee the sometimes shallow waters of low-church evangelicalism for higher ecclesiastical, liturgical, and sacramental ground. Others, though, such as Sojourn Church in Louisville, Kentucky,³ Redeemer Fellowship in Chicago, Illinois, and Redeemer Fellowship in Kansas City, Missouri, are seeking to combine conservative evangelical theology with more traditional forms of worship. These churches cooperate with the Southern Baptist Convention—and indeed are among the largest congregations in our denomination. This is not, in other words, an ivory tower discussion but a conversation occurring among Southern Baptists and at growing Southern Baptist churches.

In an academic Baptist context, several prominent Baptists in the United Kingdom⁴ as well as a cadre of moderate Baptists in North America⁵ have been engaged in ongoing projects to reenvision Baptist identity within the context of the broader Christian tradition. But with some important exceptions, these contemporary movements toward “Baptist catholicity” have been relatively unengaged by conservative Baptists in North America. *Baptists and the Christian Tradition* seeks to

³ Sojourn Church is under the worship direction of Mike Cospers, whose *Rhythms of Grace* seeks to retrieve traditional and ancient worship practices in a contemporary context. See Mike Cospers, *Rhythms of Grace: How the Church's Worship Tells the Story of the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

⁴ Many of the volumes in Paternoster's Studies in Baptist History and Thought series highlight this interest among British Baptists.

⁵ Several moderate Baptist theologians who sometimes identify themselves as “Bapto-Catholics” serve as useful dialogue partners. See the programmatic manifesto “Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America (1997),” authored by Mikael Broadway, Curtis Freeman, Barry Harvey, James Wm. McClendon Jr., Elizabeth Newman, and Philip Thompson, http://www.baptistcenter.net/confessions/Re-envisioning_Baptist_Identity.pdf. See also Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006); Harmon, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future: Story, Tradition, and the Recovery of Community* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016); Barry Harvey, *Can These Bones Live? A Catholic Baptist Engagement with Ecclesiology, Hermeneutics, and Social Theory* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008); and Curtis W. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

fill this lacuna by exploring some ways conservative evangelical Baptists might better situate Baptist faith and practice within the historic Christian tradition.⁶

Evangelical Baptists need not surrender their doctrinal distinctives to engage this conversation, nor should they seek simply to mimic the beliefs and practices of other traditions. Baptists have much to teach as well as much to learn from the broader body of Christ. Still, Baptist convictions and catholic sensibilities are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, some of the concerns of Baptist catholicity, such as the desire for a more robust sacramentalism, have important precedents in the Baptist tradition itself. Thus this work aims to be both retrospective and prospective—looking back to the best of the Baptist tradition while pointing the way forward for evangelical Baptists in the changing ecclesial and cultural landscape of the twenty-first century.

This volume includes authors from a variety of higher educational institutions, as well as minority authors. We hope that this reflects the catholic spirit the volume intends to champion. The opening essay by Christopher Morgan and Kristen Ferguson sets the stage by examining the important

⁶ When we use the term “catholic,” we do not mean “Roman Catholic.” Rather, we are taking up the older meaning of catholic as “universal” or “worldwide” (Greek, *katholikos*: *kata*, “through” + *bolos*, “the whole”). In this sense, catholicity is one of the four marks of the church, as confessed in the Nicene Creed: “I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.” While the New Testament most often speaks of the church (*ekklesia*) in local terms, it also makes reference to the church in this collective, universal sense (e.g., Eph 1:22; 3:21; 5:23). To confess the church’s catholicity, then, is to embrace its universal scope and its worldwide dimension—the body of Christ that transcends space and time, province and denomination. A uniquely *Baptist* catholicity seeks to situate the Baptist vision within this broader body of Christ. As the Protestant Reformation was a renewal movement within Western Christianity, so also the Baptist vision is a renewal movement within Protestantism—a renewal within a renewal, we might say. So as we call the church to greater faithfulness to Scripture (as we understand it in terms of Baptist distinctives), so also we seek to learn from other traditions as well. We are especially indebted to what many have called the “Great Tradition” of Christian reflection on the gospel and its triune God. Other Baptist groups and theologians have utilized the notion of “Baptist catholicity” or “Bapto-catholicity” (see, for example, the manifesto “Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity”), but we are seeking to stake a claim for a particularly *evangelical* expression of this impulse.

theme of Christian unity in Scripture and how Baptists have received this teaching. The remaining essays explore how Baptists might interface with the Christian tradition and the broader body of Christ on a number of different fronts, including foundational Christian doctrines (such as the Trinity and the incarnation), essential Christian practices (such as worship, baptism, and the Lord's Supper), and pressing contemporary issues (such as interdenominational relations and racial tensions). The appendix is a response to our work written by a moderate Baptist ecumenical theologian, Steven Harmon. As conservative evangelical Baptists, we part ways with Harmon on some important issues. But we consider him a kind of fellow traveler on the road to recovering the Christian past for the sake of contemporary Baptist renewal, and we gladly welcome his perspective from a different sector of the Baptist movement.



Baptists, the Unity of the Church, and the Christian Tradition

CHRISTOPHER W. MORGAN
and KRISTEN FERGUSON

Introduction: Unity Matters

As Baptists, we prize the autonomy of the local church and the priesthood of believers; at the same time, we also cooperate in a common mission to plant churches, mobilize missionaries, educate pastors, and provide relief to those in need. We combine our resources to do more together than we would otherwise be able to do on our own. This cooperation has been transformational, accomplishing much for the cause of God's kingdom. But many are concerned that this cooperation is crumbling. The decline of denominationalism, questions concerning institutional effectiveness, financial challenges, generational priorities, diversity of cultural understandings, conflicts among powerful personalities and agencies, and the manifold array of ministry networks are commonly cited as factors in this perceived weakening.

Another factor is rarely mentioned: our theology of the unity of the church. Without a strong understanding of the theological basis for the unity of the church, practical reasons for unity can eventually shift and fracture. Our historical context will change, generations will cling to different priorities, financial strategies will vary, and institutional structures and systems will adapt accordingly. But our cooperation does not have to

be like “a rope of sand” but rather can be “cables of steel”¹ if wed together with and sustained by the reality of our union with Christ and each other. Our cooperation can be grounded on the biblical teaching about our unity as his church, living in community, believing his truth, and serving his mission. Our deep-seated conviction concerning the unity of Christ’s church can more consistently drive our genuine love for one another, our willingness to listen to each other humbly amid cultural and generational differences, and our commitment to serve alongside each other even when we may differ on matters that are not of the essence of Christianity.

Unity matters—theologically and practically. It can be traced throughout redemptive history, is embedded throughout Christian theology, and has implications for the everyday operations of local church life. Unity is a core doctrine of our faith that should inform our hearts and propel our practice.

This chapter will discuss matters related to what the Bible says about unity, especially the unity of the church. We will first consider the historical narrative of redemption and discover that unity is personal, communal, and cosmic. We will then highlight specific aspects of the nature of unity, namely, that unity is covenantal, transcendent, missional, and inaugurated. We will further explore the highly practical teaching on unity found in the Bible by advocating that unity is indeed possible. Finally, we will end the chapter with a review of Baptist confessions and why unity is, and ought to be, Baptist. Because this topic is so vast and integrated into the rest of theology, we will follow Ephesians as a guide and incorporate John 17 along the way.

¹ This language was used by W. A. Criswell in his presidential address at the 1970 SBC annual meeting in Denver, Colorado. See Baptist Press, “Criswell Urges SBC: Hold Fast to Doctrine, Missions,” news release, June 1, 1970, <http://media.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/3003,01-Jun-1970.pdf>. See also James L. Sullivan, *Rope of Sand with Strength of Steel* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1974); and Roger S. Oldham’s insightful article “Synergy, Cooperation, and Autonomy: The Southern Baptist Experience,” *Journal of the Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary* (2017), <https://www.mabts.edu/sites/all/themes/midamerica/uploads/Oldham%20article%20jp%20edit%201%20proof1.pdf>.

Unity Is Personal, Communal, and Cosmic

Throughout history, God's plan has been to unite all things in Christ, "things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:10). In the grand narrative of God's Word, we see that God's plan incorporates personal, communal, and cosmic spheres as he unites people to himself, unites people to one another, and even unites the cosmos in Christ.²

The Bible begins with God. From all eternity, our triune God exists. The Father, Son, and Spirit are perfectly one and yet exist as distinct persons within that divine unity. The triune God has created everything by his word in a way that pleases him and is good for his creation (Genesis 1–2; John 1). Genesis repeats, "And God saw that it was good," indicating that God has embedded his goodness in his creation (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). God's declaration that humanity was created in his own image sets us apart as uniquely able and responsible to show his likeness to the rest of creation (Gen 1:26). Unstained from sin, Adam and Eve each were personally united to God without fear, enjoyed communion with one another without shame, and were together commissioned for dominion over creation without the curse.

Temptation soon confronted Adam and Eve, and, in disobeying God's righteous rule, they severed the unity woven into God's good creation. The rapid and definite fall of Adam and Eve took place as Eve saw, took, ate, and gave to Adam, and he finally ate too. The image bearers of God then realized that they were each personally distanced from God. Knowing they were naked, they were ashamed and hid from him in fear (Gen 3:7–10). Their communion was devoured by sin when they experienced alienation from one another, assigning blame and bearing guilt (vv. 10–13). Evicted from their perfect home, the couple knew their sin had brought strife and relational conflict as they were sent away from God's presence (vv. 15–24). "Through their disobedience, sin entered and disrupted their relationship to God, to each other, and to creation. Adam's

² This chapter builds on Christopher W. Morgan, "Toward a Theology of the Unity of the Church," in *Why We Belong: Evangelical Unity and Denominational Diversity*, ed. Anthony L. Chute, Christopher W. Morgan, and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 19–36.

sin, while personal and historical, is also communal and cosmic, plunging all humanity into sin (Rom 5:12–21) and resulting in a creation that longs for freedom (8:18–28).³

Thankfully, the biblical story continues to reveal that God himself would bring peace through a mission of reconciliation. God not only brought peace, but his own Son is called “our peace” as he orchestrates personal and communal reconciliation within this cosmic plan of restoration (Eph 2:14). Through his death and resurrection, the Son offers full forgiveness of sin and brings unity in all three spheres. As individuals, we are united to Christ in his death and resurrection, in which we are given every spiritual blessing, including redemption, forgiveness, reconciliation, adoption, and an eternal inheritance (1:3–14; 2:1–10). As the church, we are each united to Christ, who in turn unites us to one another as his people, regardless of our ethnicity or past sin (2:11–22; 3:1–6). Finally, the cosmos is being united by the work of Christ toward complete reconciliation in the new creation (1:9–10; 3:9–11).

In the fullness of time, the work of reconciliation will be complete, and we will see realized the plan of God to unite all things in Christ (1:9–10). Believers will each receive the promised inheritance because of their personal union with Christ (1:11–14). Christ’s bride, the corporate people of God (5:22–23; Rev 19:6–9), will be united with Christ at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:6–9). As a united people, we will comprise every tribe, tongue, and nation (Rev 5:9), primarily identified no longer by our diversity but by our union with our Savior (Eph 2:14–15). Finally, the entire cosmos will pass away so that the new creation, rightly ordered and subjected to Christ, can take its place. Personally, communally, and cosmically, God’s plan of unity will ultimately be fulfilled.

From the foundation of the world until the fullness of time, God’s plan is to bring all things into union with Christ. Although humanity was created to experience perfect unity, its fall into sin has severed the unity between God and humanity, between one person and another, and between humanity and creation. Through Christ’s saving work, which

³ Morgan, 20.

we receive by faith, we are reconciled to God, to one another, and to creation. We await the consummation of history, at which time our union with Christ, one another, and the new creation will be fully realized. This plan of unity, as Ephesians reiterates, is all for the glory of our Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer, and Savior.

Unity Is Covenantal

Between the cross and new creation, the church testifies to the true reconciliation found only in Christ. As each member of the body is united to Christ, so the body as a whole is united to each of its members. According to Ephesians, to experience and demonstrate this communion among believers, we must not dissolve the theological realities that define biblical unity but instead must uphold them as fundamental prerequisites on which that unity relies.

Ephesians describes entrance into the new covenant church as based not on the law (2:15) but on the death and resurrection of Christ (1:3–14; 2:1–10). The chosen, holy, forgiven, and redeemed children of God (1:3–14) were alienated from God but through the atonement of Christ, have been united to him (2:1–10). Further, having been raised from the dead and seated at God’s right hand in the heavenly places, Christ is not only the necessary access point of unity but also now is given as “head over all things to the church, which is his body” (1:20–23 ESV). Foundationally, the church is the new covenant people of God, each member of which is personally reconciled to God.

Paul unveils the mystery of God’s plan for corporate unity by describing the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God (2:11–12). By nature of their birth, Gentiles were outside of Israel and thus had no hope that the Messiah would benefit them in any way.⁴ After reminding them of this hopeless state, Paul reveals that Gentiles are now welcome in the new covenant and “brought near by the blood of Christ” (v. 13).

⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 294.

Those who were once without even the promise of hope can now be full participants in God's plan of reconciliation, regardless of their standing in the old covenant.

Therefore, the church is not only the new-covenant people reconciled to God but is also the new-covenant people reconciled to one another (2:11–22). As one new humanity, the once divided Jew and Gentile are together united in Christ (2:15). Christ is “our peace” and establishes among us a sort of unity that negates the worldly divisions that often define societal norms (2:14). Where there was once a “wall of hostility” (2:14), there is now common access to the Spirit of God and one new building that has Christ as its perfect cornerstone (2:18–21).

Although this new covenant invites both Jew and Gentile, it does not permit entrance apart from Christ. In Ephesians 2, we see Paul exhort those who believe in Christ to be united on the basis of faith in Christ, not right of birth. Conversely, Ephesians 5 prohibits this newly united people from being “partners” with immoral people (5:7). Andrew T. Lincoln describes this forbidden partnership as bearing “the connotation of intimate involvement and participation with the other party.”⁵ Having become “light” through their union with Christ, Paul's readers are now not to identify themselves with darkness through partnering with unbelievers in sinful acts (2:1–3; 5:8). Therefore, Paul promotes a unity that defies cultural boundaries, but not a unity that denies Christ.

While there certainly are practical reasons to cooperate with those outside the church, the biblical sense of unity relates to church unity. Individuals who had nothing in common now have the most vital thing in common: Christ. The theological realities of our new identity in Christ reorient our social affinities and bring reconciliation where division once persisted.⁶ We were separated people, strangers alienated from one another. Now, as one new man (2:15), fellow citizens of a new

⁵ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Bible Commentary 42, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 326.

⁶ See Jarvis Williams and Thomas R. Schreiner, *One New Man: The Cross and Racial Reconciliation in Pauline Theology* (Nashville: B&H, 2010).

kingdom (2:19), and building blocks in the new holy temple (2:21), we are one in Christ.

Ephesians thus stresses that our personal union with Christ through his saving work is necessary for new covenant unity. This theological basis for unity grounds our cooperation for a common cause. It provides ample motive for reordering allegiances that once defined our social interactions because our new identity in Christ determines our closest bonds.

Unity Is Transcendent

The unity of the church not only defines our relationships with other believers; it also pictures God himself. As individuals are united to Christ and those individuals to one another, truth about God is displayed. Throughout Ephesians, Paul demonstrates how God reveals his divine attributes through uniting believers to Christ:

according to the riches of his grace that he richly poured out on us with all wisdom and understanding. (1:7–8)

the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the mighty working of his strength. (1:19)

so that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. (2:7)

so that God's multi-faceted wisdom may now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavens. (3:10)

In the unveiling of his plan for the unity and restoration of the cosmos through Christ, God reveals his grace, wisdom, power, and kindness.

United to Christ and to one another, we partially display God's character in our lives. By walking in good works, we follow after our Father (2:10). Once dead but now alive, we who are united to Christ are new creatures who no longer walk according to the way of the world but walk in good works, making it our aim to imitate the Father as he exposes to light the works once done in darkness (2:1–20; 4:1; 5:11–14).

Individually and collectively, we now exhibit God's character to the world as we "walk in a manner worthy of [our] calling" (4:1 ESV). As the church, we are called to live in unity (4:3, 13), holiness (4:24 ESV), light (5:8), and wisdom (5:15), all of which reflect our God. As we walk accordingly, we bear God's image to the world and glorify him by partially displaying who he is.

Our union with Christ and with one another also points to God's unity. In Eph 4:1–6, Paul writes:

I, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to live worthy of the calling you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making 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 at your calling—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Paul grounds the reality of the oneness of the church in the oneness of God. The Father, Son, and Spirit are all mentioned in this passage, but the emphasis is on God's unity even amid the uniqueness of each person. In God's eternal plan, he displays his oneness through our unity as his church.

Similarly, in his high priestly prayer Jesus draws a connection between his own unity with the Father and our oneness as his church. The Father reveals himself to his people through Christ. He says he has manifested the Father's name to the people whom the Father has given him, and he has made known to them the Father's words; thus they now believe that the Father sent the Son (John 17:5–8). Jesus then identifies an exchange between the Father and himself: Christ gives back to the Father those people initially given to him by the Father (v. 10). Further, Jesus highlights that the love and glory experienced between the Father and the Son are displayed in his people as they are one (vv. 10, 23).

Jesus also prays that those people who believe that the Father sent the Son would themselves be one. The oneness of God's people is established in the oneness of the Father and the Son. Jesus prays for the unity of his people three times (vv. 11, 21, and 22). The rationale for each request is

striking. Their basis is the Father's oneness with the Son: "even as we are one" (v. 11 ESV); "just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you" (v. 21 ESV); and "even as we are one" (v. 22 ESV). Incredibly, oneness with each other in Christ both displays and is rooted in the unity of our triune God.

Unity Is Missional

Our unity with Christ and with each other also testifies to the world that we have been reconciled to God—and that others can be too. Biblical unity reaches inside the church to bind us together in Christ, and it reaches out to all people in hope that they too might be united to Christ and his church. At least two missional obligations spring from our own union with Christ. First, we help others to be reconciled to God through sharing the gospel. Second, we enhance the believability of the gospel by living in unity.

In Ephesians Paul urges Jewish and Gentile believers to be unified as one new humanity (2:13–22). His intent for unity does not end there, however. While Paul sees unity as uniquely experienced by believers, his mission is to bring more people to Christ (3:8–11). Paul models the mission of unity in his call to preach to the Gentiles:

This grace was given to me—the least of all the saints—to proclaim to the Gentiles the incalculable riches of Christ, and to shed light for all about the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things. This is so that God's multi-faceted wisdom may now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavens. This is according to his eternal purpose accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Eph 3:8–11)

Paul is called to proclaim the truth that Gentiles are now included in the promises of God. They too can be united to Christ. The possibility of Gentile union with Christ is so magnificent to Paul that he considers himself unworthy of the calling to proclaim it (v. 8). The glorious weight of his mission is such an honor to him that he is willing to suffer

in pursuit of it (vv. 12–13). Therefore, Paul shares the gospel from an appreciation and amazement that God would unite himself to his people through Christ.

United to Christ and to each other, we accentuate our verbal gospel witness with a visible gospel witness. The surprising union of Jewish and Gentile believers has incredible power to persuade the world that God is at work. Ephesians 3:10 indicates that the unity of the church collectively illustrates the wisdom of God. The oneness of Jews and Gentiles in Christ alerts the rulers and authorities in the heavens that God's plan for cosmic unity is moving forward (1:10): "By her very existence as a new humanity, in which the major division of the first-century world has been overcome, the Church reveals God's secret in action and heralds to the hostile heavenly powers the overcoming of cosmic divisions with their defeat."⁷ In a fallen world, where disunity pervades, the presence of true unity among believers serves as a window to God's plan for the cosmos and attests to the gospel's power to change lives.

John 17 also highlights God's missional purpose in the unity of believers with God and the unity of believers with one another. Jesus prays that through the word and the unity of believers, the world would believe in him: "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (vv. 20–21 ESV). The message of the gospel is the means by which the world will believe in Christ (v. 20), and the unity of the believers testifies to the validity of that message (v. 21). The oneness of believers demonstrates the oneness of the Son and Father and the fact that the Father sent the Son. So our unity does not merely affect our own fellowship; it also provides convincing testimony to the world that the gospel is true. As people hear the word and see it enacted in the unity of believers, the gospel message becomes even more compelling.

Both Ephesians and John 17 not only provide theological reflection on biblical unity but also demonstrate its power to further the gospel.

⁷ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 187.

The movement of redemptive history presses forward until all things are united in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. Believers participate in this cosmic movement toward union by sharing the gospel that unites people to Christ and by living in unity with one another.

Unity Is Inaugurated

As we showcase God's eternal purpose of cosmic unity to the world, we demonstrate that the kingdom of God has already broken into history. Although we await its final completion, a foretaste of the kingdom is already present in the church. God is making all things new, and he has begun to do so with the church. As we live out the unity we have in Christ in this inaugurated state, we see that the church is already one but must also pursue unity.

The church is one. The unity of the church is a current reality. Ephesians presents at least three truths that account for the presence of church unity. Paul teaches that the church is already one through his reflection on Christ's headship, his description of the transformation of the Gentiles, and his teaching on the connection between church unity and the oneness of God.

Ephesians 1:22–23 states that Christ has already been made our head and that all things are already under his feet. Our communion as believers is founded upon the reality of Christ's headship over us. With Christ as our head, we are together submitted to his authority over us as we live in this world (compare 5:23). Michael Horton points out, "The church is always on the receiving end in its relationship to Christ; it is never the redeemer, but always the redeemed; never the head, but always the body."⁸ Together as a unified body, we require the direction and leadership of our head, Christ (4:15). Just as Christ is already the head of the church, so the church is already one under his headship.

⁸ Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 31.

We know that the church is already one also because the inclusion of the Gentiles is a present reality. Ephesians 2:11–22 clarifies that Jew and Gentile, once separated by the wall of hostility, are now one new humanity, members of one household, fellow citizens, and parts of the same temple joined together in Christ. Paul's description of this unity rests on a temporal distinction: "remember that at one time" (v. 11) versus "but now" (v. 13). The Gentiles are now one with the Jews because of the work of Christ. They are not waiting for this unity to occur in the future but are encouraged to enjoy it now.

Finally, we see that the current unity of the church is an accurate reflection of the unity of God. In his comments on Eph 4:3–6, John Stott maintains:

We must assert that there can only be one Christian family, only one Christian faith, hope and baptism, and only one Christian body, because there is only one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You can no more multiply churches than you can multiply Gods. Is there only one God? Then he has only one church. Is the unity of God inviolable? Then so is the unity of the church.⁹

The church manifests the reality of God's nature, and thus the church is already one because God himself is one.

Note that unity marks the church as a whole, or what is often called the universal church. Unity also marks the local church. As we previously noted, the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles into one new people is across a vast scale. It is sweeping, salvation-historical, and global, and it requires belief in some sort of universal church. Yet the very fact that the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles into this one new people serves as a showcase of God's eternal purposes of cosmic unity also requires the church's visibility, and thus the local church.¹⁰

⁹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God's New Society*, 2nd ed., The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 151.

¹⁰ For more on the local and/or universal church, see Morgan, "Theology of the Unity," 19–36. For more on the church in Baptist history, see Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story: From*

In sum, Ephesians describes unity as a present characteristic of the church. The church is not anticipating Christ to become its head but submits to his authority now. Gentiles do not await union with Jews but can enjoy full fellowship now. And the oneness of the church will not eventually display the oneness of God but does so now.

The church pursues unity. Although the church's unity is a present reality, Paul teaches that the church must continue to pursue unity as well. Ephesians 4:1–3 exhorts the church to live according to its calling, “making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” The church is not the creator of this unity, but the church is required to strive to guard and promote the unity that has already been established by the Spirit.¹¹

The church is already one, but the church is not yet fully one. This already/not yet reality characterizes not only church unity but other attributes of the church as well. Donald Bloesch observes:

The church is already one, but it must become more visibly one . . . in faith and in practice. The church is already holy in its source and foundation, but it must strive to produce fruits of holiness in its sojourn in the world. . . . The church is already apostolic, but it must become more consciously apostolic by allowing the gospel to reform and sometimes even overturn its time-honored rites and interpretations.¹²

Similarly, Paul presents the paradox of the “already” and the “not yet” throughout Ephesians. He says the church is the fullness of Christ (1:23) but must still be filled (3:19; 4:13). The church is the one new humanity

English Sect to Global Movement (Nashville: B&H, 2015). For more on a central figure in such debates, see James A. Patterson, *James Robinson Graves: Staking the Boundaries of Baptist Identity*, Studies in Baptist Life, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin (Nashville: B&H, 2012).

¹¹ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 79.

¹² Donald Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission*, Christian Foundations (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 103.

(2:14–18) but must grow into a mature humanity (4:13) and put on the new humanity (4:20–24). In the same way, as the church, we are already one in Christ, yet we must live out our oneness in humility, gentleness, patience, and love (4:2).

Unity Is Possible

By God's grace, such unity is possible. Paul urges the church to prize unity and calls us to live together in a way that fosters unity and does not undermine it. Ephesians 4:1–6 encourages the church to exhibit the moral qualities necessary for unity; Eph 4:7–16 explains that diverse gifts are supplied to the church to cultivate unity; and Eph 4:17–32 exhorts believers to engage in actions that build unity.

Having discussed the theological realities of unity in Christ in chapters 1–3, in Eph 4:1–3 Paul calls us to promote the practical outworking of this unity through humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, and an eagerness to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Paul understands that unity must begin in the heart as the local church cultivates the sort of care and kindness that is required when living in community with other sinners saved by grace. John Stott states, "Too many start with structures (and structures of some kind are indispensable), but the apostle starts with moral qualities."¹³ The unity of the church, grounded in the theological teachings of chapters 1–3, reminds us that our unity is not based on the perfect harmony of like-minded people with common affinities but is rooted firmly in the gospel, which is marked by grace, forgiveness, love, and sacrifice.

After Paul reiterates the oneness of God and the oneness of the church (4:4–6), Eph 4:7 introduces the diversity of gifts given to the unified church: "Now grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift." The variety of gifts granted to the church is meant to build up the body "until we all reach unity in the faith and in

¹³ Stott, *Message of Ephesians*, 148.

the knowledge of God's Son" (4:13). Paul sees the gifts given by Christ to the church as tools to be utilized to promote unity, especially regarding the faith and the knowledge of Christ (4:13).¹⁴ As every believer engages in ministry through his or her gifts, the church together progresses toward spiritual maturity in Christ.

Moral qualities and gifts in the body both are supplied by God to make unity possible. Ephesians 4:17–32 addresses the actions of believers that directly affect the unity of the local churches. As members of one another, the church is to replace the old self with the new (vv. 20–24) in several ways: by putting away falsehood and speaking the truth (v. 25), resolving anger quickly (v. 26), not stealing but working and giving generously (v. 28), and not speaking corruptly but building each other up (v. 29). More generally, Paul summarizes that the church must not be characterized by bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, or slander but instead must be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving of one another (vv. 31–32). He reminds them again that these new habits grow out of an appreciation of the theological reality that "God in Christ forgave you" (v. 32 ESV). Each of these commands has a direct impact on the quality of community life as believers live as one.

Paul's logic in the practical teachings of Ephesians 4 is dependent on chapters 1–3. Just as it is possible for God to make alive those who were once dead (2:1–4), to make citizens those who were once strangers (3:19), or to make a new humanity out of those who were once hostile (3:14–15), so too it is possible for the redeemed to live out their oneness in Christ. The apparent unlikelihood of unity in the church—because of our differences, disagreements, and divisions—makes unity a powerful witness to the world and evidence of our salvation in Christ. The supernatural ability to lay down our own egos, agendas, preferences, and habits for the sake of others continues to demonstrate that God indeed has made us one as he is one.

¹⁴ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 553.

Unity Is Baptist?

Unity is clearly biblical and thoroughly Christian. As the Christian tradition and much of this volume underlines, we believe in the church, marked by unity, holiness, truth, and universality.

But is unity Baptist? Some might suggest that Baptist unity is an oxymoron. After all, Baptist churches are notorious for division, and the number of Baptist denominations is hard to track without an advanced degree in statistics. Baptist denominations and institutions have splintered over Calvinism/Arminianism, education, revivals, missions, slavery, the Sabbath, creation/evolution, the inerrancy of the Bible, the role of women, cooperative structures, and more. And Baptist churches have split over much less as well.

From such matters, many might conclude that Baptists have nothing to say about unity. To be sure, more still needs to be said, and a thorough doctrine of the unity of the church for Baptists remains to be developed.¹⁵ But Baptists have addressed the topic of church unity, and in a wide variety

¹⁵ See Christopher W. Morgan, "Baptists and the Unity of the Church," *Journal of Baptist Studies* 7 (Feb. 2015): 4–5. "First, note the many-faceted applications and contexts: unity within local church, unity in relationships among believers and families in the local church, unity within denominational agencies, unity within a denomination, unity among segments of denominations (state, associational, organizations), unity in ministry action and vision (Cooperative Program, missions, etc.), unity among different denominations, unity among ethnicities, and social structures, and unity with all believers in all true churches. Second, consider the breadth of sources: Baptist confessions, church covenants, catechisms, institutional documents, theological works, commentaries on key passages, pastoral books, ecclesiology—let alone a wide selection of sermons by representative Baptists. Third, note the wide variety of types of Baptists and how various stripes would approach a theology of church unity differently. Fourth, consider ever-changing historical contexts and how each distinct context shapes the theology of church unity. Unity when under persecution, unity when successful, unity amidst denominational rivalry, and unity amidst evangelical marginalization all affect how unity is discussed and understood. Plus, unity would need to be evaluated in its absence by examining the all-too-common Baptist splits—in denominations, organizations, and local churches. Praxis (or even the lack thereof) teaches much about theology, especially a theology of church unity."

of ways. Some of the most important of these include Baptist confessions of faith.¹⁶ Examples of references to biblical unity with Christ and with one another found within Baptist confessions include the following:¹⁷

Thomas Helwys Confession, 1611. The Helwys Confession makes mention of the church as united to one another, the church as one yet many congregations, and the local church as the body of Christ. The confession also teaches that one local church ought not challenge any prerogative of any other, that the Lord's Supper is an illustration of the church's communion with Christ, and that the members of the church ought to love one another.

First London Confession of Faith, 1644. The First London Confession of Faith provides ample description of Baptists' conviction regarding unity. In summary, it explains that the unity of believers is tied to the unity of the Trinity and the union of each believer to Christ. In the local church, believers are to have and value communion with one another as well as to endure the faults and sins of others in patience. Likewise, the local church, though itself a unique body, should also walk together with other local churches, who are fellow members of one body in the common faith under Christ.

Second London Confession, 1689. The Second London Confession also includes an abundance of doctrinal teaching on unity for Baptists. To stress Baptist unity with other Christians and to avoid persecution, the

¹⁶ See many Baptist confessions at <http://baptiststudiesonline.com/confessions-of-faith/>. In personal conversation, Baptist historian Tony Chute observed that the very fact that we have multiple confessions says something in and of itself about Baptists and the unity of the church. Multiple confessions can be good, but their existence does underline our tendency to keep adding distinctions from each other.

¹⁷ For more details on what these confessions teach about church unity, see Morgan, "Baptists and the Unity," 4–23.

confession asserts that it follows the example and even most of the wording of other significant Christian confessions.¹⁸

The confession teaches that Christ alone is the head of the church, and church membership is understood as covenantal. The unity of the church is applied to the one universal church as well as to local churches. Church members are urged to prize unity by viewing the church as more significant than their personal offenses with others, praying for the good and success of all churches, living in community with one another, and serving one another for the mutual good. Baptism is a sign of our union with Christ, and the Lord's Supper is a bond and pledge of our union with Christ and with each other. The confession ends as it begins, stressing the unity of Baptists with other Christians. Baptists share the core of Christian beliefs in common with other Christians, strive to keep theological disagreements in perspective, and seek to unite and show as much agreement with other believers as possible. The confession notes that the unity of the church still exists amid—and is consistent with—the reality of some disagreements within local churches and denominations. The unity of the church is also consistent with the recognition of levels of significance of various doctrines: those of the essence of Christianity and those of personal conviction or liberty. As a result, the confession urges those who hold to the doctrines of the essence of Christianity to put

¹⁸ For the context of these confessions, see James M. Renihan, "Confessing the Faith in 1644 and 1689," *The Reformed Reader*, <http://www.reformedreader.org/ctf.htm>: "This Confession, influential as it is, may perhaps best be understood against its historical and theological backgrounds. It did not appear out of the blue, the product of a sudden burst of theological insight on the part of an author or authors, but in the tradition of good Confession making, it is largely dependent on the statements of earlier Reformed Confessions. A quick glance will demonstrate that it is based, to a large degree, on that most Puritan of documents, the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647. A closer inspection will reveal that it is even more intimately related to the revision of the Westminster Confession made by John Owen and others in 1658, popularly known as the Savoy Declaration and Platform of Polity. In almost every case the editors of the Baptist Confession follow the revisions of the Savoy editors when they differ from the Westminster document. In addition, the Baptists make occasional use of phraseology from the First London Confession. When all of this material is accounted for, there is very little . . . that is new and original to the 1677/89 Confession."

aside smaller differences, embrace each other in love and meekness, and give each other liberty on smaller matters.¹⁹

Baptist Faith and Message, 1925, 1963, 2000. The three Baptist Faith and Message editions speak very little about the doctrine of the unity of the church. The Scriptures are said to be “the true center of Christian union,” but the unity of the church is not mentioned explicitly in the sections on the church, baptism and Lord’s Supper, the kingdom, evangelism and missions, or stewardship. The 1963 edition adds (and the 2000 edition retains) material on the universal church but nothing on unity.

Instead, the Baptist Faith and Message speaks of “cooperation.” The confession urges individual members of churches and the churches themselves to cooperate with one another for the organization of associations and conventions for kingdom purposes. These organizations should carry no authority over the believers, the churches, or each other; they should remain voluntary and advisory, cooperating for missions, education, and benevolence ministries.

The article on cooperation continues, “Christian unity in the New Testament sense is spiritual harmony and voluntary cooperation for common ends by various groups of Christ’s people.” There is a reference not to church unity but to “Christian unity,” and this unity is not theologically grounded but practically defined. The article adds that cooperation among Christian denominations is “permissible and desirable” (1925 BFM) when the goal is right and when there is “no violation of the conscience or compromise of loyalty to Christ and his Word.”²⁰

¹⁹ The Philadelphia Confession of Faith, 1742, essentially follows the Second London Confession of 1689, so there is no need to rehearse it here. Interestingly and sadly, I could find no direct teaching on the unity of the church in the following important Baptist confessions: the Principles of Faith of the Sandy Creek Association, 1758; the New Hampshire Confession of Faith, 1833; and the Abstract of Principles, 1859. For more, see Morgan, “Baptists and the Unity,” 4–23.

²⁰ “Comparison of 1925, 1963 and 2000 Baptist Faith and Message,” Southern Baptist Convention, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfmcomparison.asp>. See under “Cooperation.”

The Baptist Faith and Message urges churches to work together, Christians to work together, and denominations to work together. The confession also calls for Christians to work with all people “of good will in any good cause,”²¹ acting in love without compromising loyalty to Christ and his truth.

So, is unity Baptist? Yes, but the unity of the church is not as much of a driving force as it was and as it should be. The best of what we do have on the unity of the church in Baptist confessions stems from the earlier Baptists. The Second London Confession stands head and shoulders above the others in terms of coverage and depth on the unity of the church, with the next closest being the First London Confession. Yet much of the best material in Baptist confessions on the unity of the church was stressed out of necessity, to avoid persecution and to avoid being understood as schismatic or heretical. Further, while a good portion of the material on the unity of the church was indeed written by Baptists, quite a bit of the Second London Confession was borrowed—copied verbatim from the Westminster Confession and the Savoy Declaration—and thus originated with Anglicans, Nonconformists, and Puritans. The 1742 Philadelphia Confession of Faith also references church unity, but it was based on the Second London Confession.

The unity of the church apparently has not been framed theologically in Baptist confessions since 1742. This means that a large portion of the best material on church unity in Baptist confessions is more than 300 years old, borrowed from other Christian traditions, and partially occasioned by the need to avoid persecution.

The language of “cooperation” has emerged as the basis for working together. While a fine term in what it stresses (cooperation is indeed good and desirable), it seems to shift the approach from “we work together because we are united together in Christ” to “we cooperate because of shared goals and mission” (which is also good but less permanent and more dependent on extensive relationships). This might inadvertently

²¹ “Comparison of 1925, 1963 and 2000 Baptist Faith and Message”: “The Christian and the Social Order.”

ground our unity in practical concerns rather than on a theology of church unity.

It is also important to note that the ways Baptists have understood and articulated the doctrine of the unity of the church have been heavily shaped by the historical context. When Baptists were under persecution by the Church of England, unity was prized and sought after. When Baptists pursued evangelism on the American frontier, unity often took a back seat. When denominational distinctives were highlighted, unity was often neglected. When historic Christian teachings were being redefined by theological liberalism, unity with churches of mainline denominations seemed like disloyalty to Christ and his truth. When denominational agencies and seminaries were led largely by theological moderates and the neoorthodox, unity felt like compromise. And when Christians are increasingly persecuted around the globe and marginalized in this pluralistic age, true church unity again seems vital.

And church unity *is* vital—but not just because of the current context. The unity of the church is a core doctrine of the Christian faith. The unity of the church is an essential spiritual reality for every believer in Christ. The unity of the church is a beautiful goal in God’s eternal plan. And the unity of the church is a transformative agent in God’s mission. We are united to Christ, indeed to the whole Trinity. In Christ, we are united to each other and are now constituted as the people of God, the church. Our unity as the church grounds our common mission and obliges our cooperation. This cooperation includes churches working together, Christians working together, and, as much as is good and possible, denominations working together for kingdom purposes.