

CHURCH UNITY

THROUGH PAUL'S EYES

BASED ON LECTURES BY N.T. WRIGHT



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— ONLINE —
RENEWING MINDS THROUGH BIBLICAL TEACHING

Throughout his letters to the early Christian churches, Paul's basic point is one of unity. He urges not merely a pat unity of similarity, but one encompassing disparate cultures and individuals. An attuned reading of the New Testament thus reveals that multiculturalism isn't a strange postmodern ideal dreamed up by some liberal thinkers in the 20th or 21st century. Rather, it was built into the Christian vision from the beginning and was part of what spoke to its first adherents.

In many circles today, it seems that the church has either forgotten or abandoned that attractive vision. How come? We can start to recover this message of unity in all its robustness by recovering Paul's message in Philippians of 'having the same mind', which is not to say sharing all the right opinions. 'Having the same mind' entails thinking along the same lines, in a way totally shaped by the reality of Jesus. A unity on these foundations enables much, including hope in the face of opposition. This kind of unity, matched by holiness, exhibits to the world a New Creation lifestyle. Paul longs to see the Jesus followers in Philippi constitute by their life together a statement of God's truth before the watching and suspicious world. Their witness may from time to time be verbal, as apologists explain to the authorities what the new movement is all about, but it must at once involve the common life in which people from many disparate backgrounds have come together in a rich polychrome unity.

A History of Unity in the Church

In the first few centuries after Jesus' death and resurrection, we see a singular, new community in formation. Fast-forward to the 21st century and we have thousands of Christian denominations. Clearly, something went wrong. But what?

Of course, there were always disagreements in the church from the start. Paul and Peter and James come to mind. The first major denominational division in the church, however, occurred a thousand years ago when the West and East split into what became the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches respectively. That split grew out of all sorts of ongoing political and cultural circumstances, as well as the theological. In some obvious ways, it's a tragedy whose effects are still with us. In other ways, there is now much more unity across this particular divide than there has been historically. Recognition of the original shared beliefs has been a sizeable emphasis as of late. One of the last times I was in Rome, for instance, I was a privileged attendee at a service in the Sistine Chapel. The Pope, logically, was presiding, yet the Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church was preaching. It was a wonderful display of ecumenism. Certainly, more than we've seen in the past 100 years for sure.

The other major denominational split occurred in the 16th century, and in reality, this ended up being many splits. This was a result of the Protestant Reformation, to be sure, but even more so it was the result of a logical and necessary movement for believers to read scripture and worship in their own

languages. Quite unintentionally, this allowed believers to silo themselves off into national and ethno-linguistic churches, which then developed along unique theological lines, as groups separated from each other tend to do. Looking back, not too many people seemed to have minded the disunity that was encroaching.

One of the confusing consequences that may have come from this is that many church leaders are perfectly willing to speak out on particular issues, whether social or theological, but will only do so from within the framework of their own tradition. Because the Christian voices come from such limited, niche perspectives, the powers that be and the wider world can basically ignore them. 'Oh, that's just those Methodists ranting about x', or 'that's just the Catholics who have got so worked up over y. Pay them no mind'.

Unsurprisingly, on the rare occasions when various churches have linked arms over some issue, sometimes quite literally, great global change does happen. We need to tap into this powerful influence more often. For instance, before the year 2000 there was a campaign to drop the massive compound interest debt that Western banks were inflicting on the two-thirds world, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. The churches of all different sorts across England got together and lobbied the G8 conference, to great effect. A lot of people saw this instance of various Christians presenting a united front as an anomaly, and one the world should maybe pay attention to. The fragmented church simply doesn't cut much ice.

Unity and Holiness

In Philippians 1:27, Paul, typical for his writing style, compresses a whole lot of theology into one phrase. 'Your public behaviour must match up to the Gospel of the King'. The verb here, *politeuesthai*, doesn't refer to the church as a kind of heavenly commonwealth, detached from the world and living in its own realm. Some people have assumed this meaning. In fact, it refers to how one is on the street, the church living out its messianic allegiance within the dangerous and challenging public square. This practical reading has been left off the agenda for many modern Christians. It's time to put it back on.

The major emphases of this fall on unity and holiness. Both concepts are vital and non-negotiable. They are part of the attractive new way of being human that the early Christians based their lives and witness around. People today don't tend to think of holiness like that, as attractive, but true holiness really should be. If you know people who are genuinely, joyfully holy, you think, 'Wow, these are good people to be with!' You can rely on them. They are sustaining. They are life-giving.

I've often remarked, having seen this in the churches I've led, that unity and holiness are not only difficult in themselves, but they are very difficult when put together. Unity alone is comparatively easy. If you don't care about holiness, you can all just get together and turn a blind eye to people's behaviour. Likewise, holiness alone is comparatively easy. If you don't care about unity, you just follow the rigorous standards you set for yourself and split off from anyone who disagrees. It's putting

them together that's tough. Of course, many churches don't seem to bother that much about either.

Philippians 1:28 indicates to its original readers that there will be (and indeed in Philippi there already was) stiff opposition to living this way. People are not going to like this new community of simultaneous unity and holiness. The early Christ followers had the same problems we have today, of the wider world mocking them and sneering, so sure that they knew how society and culture ought to work. The Graeco-Roman world had clearly demarcated roles for different categories of people, especially women and slaves and children. The early Church, meeting together in what we now might call fictive kinship groups, upset all that.

Being of the Same Mind

One of the many serious challenges Paul offers to the church today in his letters is, What does it mean to live as an extended family across cultures and traditions? How are we to live together, unified, while being obviously different humans. Paul talks about having the mind of Christ, about all thinking 'in the Messiah way', which will lead naturally to a unified front.

This is a major emphasis in Philippians, where Paul implores his readers to 'be of the same mind', meaning that they should all think in the way of the Messiah, a concept he fleshes out elsewhere. This is important because he expects them to really be living together, entangled in each other's lives, which will inevitably lead to some difficulties which need working through. And they can't be worked through if everyone is operating from

wildly different mental starting points. The starting point must be the Messiah Jesus and his work in their lives, so that issues can be wisely and consistently resolved.

Thus, as always, what the community needs and what Paul prays for them is grace – the grace of Messiah Jesus.

Interestingly, Paul prays that this grace may be ‘with your spirit’, with ‘spirit’ in the singular, and ‘your’ in the plural. It is as though Paul envisages the community as a single whole indwelt together by the one spirit yet retaining their own individual vocations and personalities. He includes the command, almost as an assumption, in the very syntax of his words, that they are to be unified, even in their difference.

This navigation is possible because the basis of their relationship is Messiah Love. Love, in short, is for Paul a new way of seeing and knowing and understanding the world. Love today has regularly been collapsed into mere sentiment or passing whim. It regains its proper stature for Paul here because love respects and celebrates that which is not oneself. It can reach out to understand things that remain opaque to a hurried, or pragmatic, or self-centred glance.

Unity Among Difference

At this point we must ask, Is the development of this Christ-mind naturally transcultural? In a sense, yes, because the Messiah truth transcends and encompasses all particularity. In another sense, however, there is a great importance to being surrounded by people who are different from oneself. Especially today, we must put effort into forming our lives in ways which

foster the transcultural. The church, from very early on, indeed from the day of Pentecost in Acts, was comprised of people from all over. People had come from all over, mostly Jews or proselytes, but very soon the church became a rich mixture. We can point to the church in Antioch within the first 20 years. Antioch was one of the great crossroads of the Mediterranean world in late antiquity. There was no fuss about what eventually became modern hang-ups like skin pigmentation. That was never a discussion in the New Testament or early Christianity.

We know this from the cities that had established churches. Antioch, and Corinth, and Ephesus, and Rome. These were all polychrome cities. The whole church was polychrome. Paul was constantly teaching them how to live with each other. It's almost as if, for Paul, if you find yourself being surrounded only by people who look and sound and act exactly like you, that may be an accident of geography but it's certainly unusual. So, it would behove you to ensure that you're in contact with fellow Christians from other cultures and other parts of the world. Maybe even individuals from the same area who habitually worship in a different style. We all constantly need to be jogged out of our own habits of practice.

So, this gospel movement, of which Paul is such a key part, is a translocal as well as a transethnic family. It's possible today to take that for granted, but no one in the ancient world would have taken it for granted. Nothing like that had been known in the world before. The closest you'd come would be the Jewish synagogue community, where synagogues would support one another as a kind of global family. They were though, of course,

entirely Jewish. In the early Christian church, you've got people of all sorts, every ethnic background you can imagine (and some we probably can't), striving to live as a single family spread across the world. The only other community in Paul's world that worked as a single body across large distances was the Roman army, where a centurion in Palestine might be a colleague and friend of someone currently stationed in the wilds of northern Britain.

This parallel is the more interesting in view of the imperial echoes Paul includes throughout Philippians. Christians are in the service of *Kurios Iesous*, the Lord Jesus, and regardless of where we find ourselves, we're all part of this same family. Of course, the Roman army was an elite organization, all-male and built on aspiration to high social standing. The church was completely different. It was functioning as a family – mutually supportive, forgetting social and ethnic distinctions.

Ironically, though we in the modern world are capable of travelling to the other side of the world quite easily, many churches in the West are still very homogeneous and regard their foreign cousins as exotic, distant relatives – but perhaps not really one's type. That's sad. Or, even sadder, some Christians inadvertently imply that Christians in another place need to become 'like us Westerners' to really get along, as if our mould is somehow the 'correct' type. To state it plainly, the only type that matters is allegiance to the Messiah and being shaped by his gospel. The gospel itself, the lived-out good news, insists that the church should live as family in this way. I sometimes wonder whether the right and proper evangelical

emphasis on individual personal faith has unintentionally stopped us thinking about our membership in the larger worldwide community of Jesus-followers.

We should ponder the fact that, in the early second century, this question of translocal unity (making sure that you are linking arms with and holding the faith together with Christians in very different parts of the then-known world), was so important that the Bishop of Antioch, Ignatius, developed the view that if we're going to maintain this link, it has got to be through the infrastructure of bishops. A church in one place has a bishop, and he was tasked to pray and communicate and link arms with another bishop in some other place, who was in turn connected to another bishop in another place, and so on and so forth. That's how the chain stayed connected. My point is not whether that's the right way to do it. My point is that that was one formal, practical way of addressing the problems which otherwise occur when trying to maintain a translocal family.

There are other, less formal ways to do this as well. When I was a practicing bishop in Durham, UK, the many churches in the diocese had quite different worship styles and ethnic backgrounds. I felt very privileged to go around and visit and learn from all these churches. Unless we are actively thinking translocally in this way, we are at danger of absolutizing our own way of doing things. The dangerous implication of this is the false belief, implicit or explicit, that one's own faith practice is the real deal, and those people elsewhere, in sub-Saharan Africa, or down the street, or wherever, are just copies. That we somehow inhabit the 'correct' way of being and must bestow

this on others. We all need to be dissuaded of this parochial insularity, which is really a manifestation of self-idolatry.

Unity Requires Discernment

Not everything about living in a translocal way would have been simple for the fictive kinship groups of the early church, just as not everything is simple today for the Church. In fact, fewer and fewer issues are simple, which is part of why we have such division, rightly or wrongly. Paul discusses the importance of discernment in Philippians 1:10. Rarely do we have specific yet eternal answers to every circumstance that might crop up. Rather, the life of the early church was more complex. This again is why Paul hammers home the importance of having the same mind, because he knew how necessary that would be for resolving complex issues, both as a shared basis for argumentation and as a keystone for maintaining unity through any disagreements.

Part of this discernment is in picking which battles to fight, which I have experienced first-hand many times. When I was Bishop of Durham, I would constantly receive letters and phone calls and emails from people around the country imploring me to speak out about one issue or another. Or they would appeal to some problem that was happening in my diocese and wonder how I was going to deal with it right that very minute. There were then, as there are now, only 24 hours in the day, and I usually had a lot of things on my plate simultaneously. I had to choose very carefully which issues I would actually give my personal attention to and when, knowing that there would then be half a dozen other issues I wouldn't have time for, but it

really would have been nice if I had. Part of my process involved praying over each issue and determining where there were other people who could sensitively handle those issues I didn't have time for.

We cannot all deal with all the issues, all the time. We need to focus and discern where our own particular vocation may be. There is the potential for real danger here too. Sometimes it's a temptation for Christian leaders to be so fired up about one particular issue or another that they preach and talk about nothing else until everyone just wishes they'd shut up. Then the issue inadvertently ends up receiving less attention than it deserves.

For Paul, the advice is that it's much better to prioritise, within the complex work of attending to individual issues, the constant, ongoing work of sustaining and nurturing unified communities. This prioritisation holds even more weight when we consider that sometimes – not all the time, but sometimes – when we find ourselves fired up about a particular issue, it may be because there's something unresolved nagging away inside ourselves in need of resolving, be it guilt or hatred or repression. We need a mature wisdom. Not to back off from all the issues, because they do need to be addressed, but to pray for wisdom in knowing whose turn it is to address the issues and how it's to be done. That's tough on its own, but it's especially tough without a unified community of faith to share in discernment, resolution, and implementation.

Discernment is important precisely because unity doesn't mean that everyone must hold exactly the same opinions or practice

in the exact same fashion. That's part of the colonialist danger hinted at above, where sometimes white preachers like myself get to talking about unity in contexts where that word has been a cover for oppression or just sheer arrogance, as if allowing others the chance to become honorary versions of oneself. I've had this pointed out in myself, and I'm glad to have been reminded by gracious Christian brothers and sisters how certain words in certain circumstances carry baggage that might actually harm the case for the Gospel of Jesus.

Neither, though, does unity mean that we ignore important discussions in the name of 'keeping the peace'. Each church family has to settle for themselves where the line of importance rests, but I've seen a troubling persistence of this stance, especially in America. A number of years ago I was brought in to do a series of lectures for a group of megachurch pastors, and I learned that many of their churches had forbidden them, as leaders, to talk about ecological issues and climate change. They were told they'd be fired or forced out for bringing it up. Having taught often on New Creation, Romans 8, responsibility for Creation, this was a theological tragedy to me. It's also a tragedy from the unity standpoint. When churches say these issues are off limits, they really mean, 'We've made up our mind about that'. The danger in making up your mind in this way is that all too often Scripture is bubbling away in the background, saying, 'Hang on, hang on, you're missing something here!'

This ever-present intrusion of scripture into our minds should better enable us to have these discussions within our church families, knowing that unity in the Messiah is the basis which

will see us through any issue, and not the other way around. Obviously, there are some things which are a given for that unity to be maintained – the Trinity, the Resurrection, some others are fundamental and non-negotiable. But the work is to discern between the differences that make a difference, and the differences that don't, or that we can at least have a conversation about.

We see Paul modelling how to behave like this in Romans 14 and 15, where he's wrestling over the food laws and Sabbath observance. He comes down on the side that these actually don't mark the fundamental difference. Crucially, he's able to look at the churches he's working with, and if any of them insist on doing things one way and not talking to anyone who disagrees, Paul shows them how to do the ecumenical work of 'with one heart and one voice glorify[ing] the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Romans 15:6). That's always the aim. We need to, with Paul, figure out what things are getting in the way of that and whether they really should, or whether we're letting our local issues become too much of a barrier to Christ. It's tough, but Paul over and over again tells us that we really don't have a choice. We've got to work it out.

In the present day, God appears to be doing a new thing and stirring up the multiple different Christian denominations to see that, actually, that which we have in common is much more important than that which divides us. Realizing this allows us to find ways of working together for the good of the Church and of the world.

This, of course, is where discernment comes in. It's crucial to be able to discern between the differences that really make a difference and those that don't. So many church splits, whether local or national, have seemed so important at the time, but in retrospect seem silly. Christians all over are asking, 'Why did we have to split over that?' We must think through how we get back from the insular traditions we've now dug ourselves into. There is all sorts of ecumenical work in need of doing, and being done. Fifty or a hundred years ago, the different denominations simply didn't talk to each other, whether to cooperate or to debate. We are now much closer together, in terms of dialogue, and I think we are seeing much more clearly that, globally, our commonalities are stronger than our differences. There's some oversimplification inherent in that view, and there's much more work to be done, but it's a commitment we need to make.

Implications of Disunity

One of the great powers in the Western world is media influence, and many media organizations are attracted to stories highlighting church disunity. Human nature laps up stories of scandal, split, or division, and even more so when it occurs within the church as an apparent example of incongruity. Partly because that then discredits the Christian witness, and the world need not pay attention. The church does need to recover the public voice, but it can only do so if it speaks as one, at least in some broad ways; and even more so if it does so out of a lifestyle that is living the Jesus-way.

The point of unity, in Paul's letters, isn't unity for its own sake, though this is sometimes what modern Christians have wanted it to be. No, for Paul, the point is about witness. In Jesus followers, the world is to see who the true God really is. The world isn't going to like this very much. The vision of the crucified and risen Jesus as the true Lord of the world stands on its head the assumptions that normally rule in the wider world. Christianity doesn't just change who the ruler happens to be, but upends the very definitions of 'lordship', of 'rule', of 'authority'.

Much of the Western church has forgotten entirely that it is our vocation to be living and modelling the new way of being human before the eyes of a watching world. Our own modern theological controversies, particularly about salvation, tend to turn inward on ourselves. As a result, the only kind of outward vocation that many Christians are aware of is the call to tell others about Jesus. This kind of entirely cognitive, conversational evangelism is fine, but rather insufficient. Paul envisages the church – within its context of threats and dark patterns of behaviour – living as a community in such a way that people look at the whole life of God's people and say to themselves, 'I didn't know it was possible to live like this. To live as distinct individuals, but as a unified family, full of grace and concern for one another. It's very attractive'.

At the same time, Paul wants the community to be known for one particular quality. In Philippians 4:5, as Paul builds to a conclusion, he uses the word *epieikes*, which is very hard to translate. Some versions say 'gentleness'. 'Let your *gentleness*

be known to all people'. In my own translation, I've paraphrased it as 'gentle and gracious'. I've chased out the dictionaries on this one. We actually don't have any one English word that captures all that the Greek word implies. The quality in question has to do with compassion. It also has to do with giving others the benefit of the doubt. It also indicates meeting other people halfway with forbearing and not retaliating. If you roll all that into one, then you have the public face that Paul wants the community to present to all people. That plays in consort with the 'defence and confirmation of the gospel' which Paul mentions in Philippians 1:7. We seem not to have majored on the kind of outward facing tasks Paul has in mind here.

Then as now, failure to maintain a public witness of unity and gentleness and discernment allows anyone looking on, especially from outside, to shake their heads and say, 'There you are, that strange new social experiment has imploded. It's all gone wrong. I knew it wouldn't last. Much better to stick to the old ways'.

It's vital that the unity of the church is maintained for the sake of the public life of the people of the Messiah. That's part of why in Philippians 4 Paul brings up what, thousands of years later, appears like a random leadership quarrel between Euodia and Syntyche. Paul knows that a deep division unresolved could do major damage to the young church. It might make outsiders sneer at them for their crazy ideas about unity, and especially for promoting the then-radical idea of female inclusion.

Unity Done Right

What Paul was describing throughout his letters to the early churches was a unity that was completely inexplicable by the cultural standards of the day. Equally, Paul was thinking of the work of God in terms of the new community, which had sprung up against all normal social and cultural expectations. A work of new creation in which neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female would count as membership-defining categories. God had created a single, extraordinary, culturally inexplicable family. Without a robust understanding of what was accomplished in and through Jesus, the unity and behaviour of the earliest Christians would be baffling.

One of the key things that I think I was at least partly able to work towards during my time as Bishop of Durham was a bit of unity work. I and others would often get together with quite different groups of Christians in the northeast of England. One of the things which I'm most pleased we were able to accomplish as a group, during Lent one year, was called a Big Read, where we had Christians of all different stripes participate in a shared activity. We had Syrian Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Salvation Army, Presbyterians, you name it. All sorts of people getting together in local groups, meaning one neighbourhood or district within a city, many of whom had never really met each other before. Each group got together and read through Luke's Gospel in a very simple way, as a catalyst to talk about what it was meaning to them during that time. Then the individuals would bring those conversations and ideas and meditations back to their regular Sunday

worship, for everyone in their congregation to learn from the insights.

One of the troubles, I've found, is how tempting it can be to enter unity work and focus only on the difficulties. If you try to do unity in ecumenism and start off saying, 'Oh boy, we had a big fight about justification by faith 500 years ago, how are we going to get around that now?' you get into all sorts of messes. Whereas, if you meet your fellow Christians on the street and sit down and read and pray together, there's room to work in that. No church I know of forbids its members to pray and read scripture with people of other traditions. (Other church practices, like taking eucharist together or ministering to those in need can function similarly, but there's sometimes more difficulty there based on different churches' stances.) When we read the Bible together, and pray for and with one another, naturally all sorts of other issues come up. Sometimes these help us contextualize the hot button issues and where we each stand on them. Other times this just gives us a window into our mutual desire for belonging.

Of course, we did our experiment during Lent, but this is certainly not something that can be accomplished in that short amount of time. It's not even something that can be accomplished in an entire lifetime of ministry. It's ongoing and never-ending. You have to plant seeds and pray for them to grow. Grow they will, and people will come out of the woodwork who never realised we could do this kind of unified thing, but really want to give it a go. Then we can learn from each other, see the wisdom in what we've maybe never heard before, look

at things a different way because a brother or sister in Christ shared a new perspective with you. I find a sense of joy in that discovery of new facets of my faith, and find that it so helps in contextualising the many issues we're deeply divided on. The sense of unity and humility built through these activities can grow to outflank the divisions we've grown up with. Which in turn creates a context of trust. Only where there is trust can we examine the difficult issues without at once frightening the horses, as it were. I've seen it happen and pray that it will happen more.

The Present Situation

Given how concerned Paul was for the early church, he might well be dismayed at our situation now. The whole idea of this new community was to live in a way that was so attractive as to influence the culture around itself for the better. That goal still remains, even if it feels nearly impossible. The world doesn't see much clarity on cultural issue from the church, mostly because we can't agree within ourselves. In fact, various media outlets, following our lead, can easily pick and choose churches that agree with their ideology and say that Christians on the other side are crazy or less-than-valid. How then, can we expect to influence culture towards the *epieikes* Paul desired?

I'm privileged to know a few Christian thinkers and leaders of the younger generation who, I think, see that we have to think and teach freshly and wisely about the key cultural issues of our day. I look forward to that happening, to the church recapturing the skill of speaking into the public sphere gently, winsomely, and convincingly. This only happens when we generate

communities that are living by what they say: that are neither compromising nor standoffish; communities that are wise and cheerful and helpful; the sort of people other people like to have as neighbours.

Of course, our situation isn't new. When you look back into church history, there have been many, many times when the churches have been all over the map, been very confused, and the public witness has been badly damaged. But we must remember, again and again, that the public witness is first and foremost *local*. It's with the people you know on the street. It's your neighbours. It's the people who come to help when somebody is sick. Those are the times when the church really displays the attractive elements of this community that's living by a different rule. Everything else has to work itself out from there.

So, we have a long way to go. It's not easy, but this is the challenge that Paul was holding up before the Philippians and the other churches of the time. And it's the challenge his letters still hold up before us. We need to pray for that witness to shine through.

About the Author

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