

STUDY 17

There Is *One* Baptism

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INTRODUCTION

I have worked for a number of ministries that are quite keen to hold onto the label ‘Interdenominational’. In doing so, they have automatically excluded some churches or individuals who see this claim as disingenuous because it is either:

1. Unrealistic, in that they see denominational differences as irreconcilable, and therefore seeking unity is a lost cause and a waste of time that might otherwise be spent in proclaiming the gospel;
2. Insincere, in that the group may still hold to doctrinal positions that make it closer to a particular denomination or theological tradition and by definition exclude those sincere Christians who cannot agree with every point of the doctrinal statement; or
3. Flirting with a liberal ecumenicalism in which central gospel truths are watered down or avoided for the sake of visible and practical ‘unity’.

I have seen all three of these show themselves to be valid criticisms to some degree within some of the groups with which I have worked. Taking a purely horizontal view of the issue and struggle of unity might lead one to ask the question, ‘Is unity just a pipedream—and if so, does this render oxymoronic the numerous calls in scripture for the church to seek unity?’ Mark Johnston writes:

There has never been a time in the life or experience of the church when the unity of the body has not been disrupted in some way or another. Even the best of relationships within the wider whole have all too often been impaired: Paul had a major disagreement with Barnabas which led to a parting of their ways (Acts 15:36–41); the two key figures in the revival years of the eighteenth century—George Whitefield and John Wesley—divided over doctrinal differences; and many others, perhaps with a lesser profile, stand with them in the messy, painful and embarrassing divisions which litter the path along which the pilgrim people of God have walked through the centuries. Over and above the breakdown at the level of inter-personal relationships, there has been the catalogue of disruption at an infra-church and inter-church level throughout history as well. The story of secessions and schisms—some of them justifiable, some not—is a significant element in the history of the church. What are we to make of such tragic tales of breakdown and fragmentation?¹

¹ Mark G. Johnston, *You in Your Small Corner: The Elusive Dream of Evangelical Unity*, Christian Focus,

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EPHESIANS 4:1–16: THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift (Eph. 4:1–7).²

Paul makes it clear that unity in the body of Christ is not ‘automatic’ in the sense that we are called to ‘be watchful’ or ‘take care of’ (τηρεῖν) the unity of the Spirit, and to do so with eagerness (ESV) (σπουδάζοντες). This unity is experienced as we walk in humility, gentleness, patience and loving tolerance,³ living lives that are worthy of the calling we have received. Yet our actions and behaviour are not the foundation for the unity of the Spirit; this unity is ‘in the bond of peace’ (v. 3), a term we understand more fully when we look back in the book of Ephesians and see that the purpose of the Father from eternity is ‘to unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth’ (1:10) with Christ as head over all things ‘for the church’ (1:22, NRSV), including the breaking down of hostility between Jew and Gentile, and forming one new humanity out of the two (2:13–16). This unification is ‘by the blood of Christ’ (2:13)—the cross (2:16) in which is found the only basis for reconciliation. One could suggest that a reason for the Lord ordaining and forming the nations of humanity that have been set against one another and are perpetually raging, was so that he might display the riches of His glorious grace in His Son who comes and breaks down hostile barriers between languages, tribes and tongues in a definitive way that no human effort will or can ever achieve. As he bore the wrath of God upon human sin, he also bore the wrath of the human race upon himself and against one another and expiated it, bringing their raging to nothing. Thus Rwandan students who refused to participate in or perpetuate the genocide of 1994 are seeing the fruits of gospel unity as over 3000 university students (¾ of the nation’s student population) now meet weekly to study the Bible.

This grace of unity-through-reconciliation is to be displayed first and foremost in the body of Christ. So unity in the body is no small thing—nor is it simply a functional or institutional issue; the unity of the Spirit is inextricably linked with the redemption of the nations! It is no wonder then that Jesus prayed for the church:

... 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. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, *so that the world may know* that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me (John 17:21–23, italics mine).

This is a passage that has been popularly interpreted as relating directly to the great commission and an incentive to the church to work hard at visible unity for the sake of effective evangelism and missions. While this incentive is no doubt there, we need

Fearn, 1999, p. 125.

² Unless otherwise stated, all scripture quotations in this study are from the English Standard Version.

³ See the NASB. Other translations commonly render ἀνεχόμενοι as ‘bearing with one another’.

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to widen our vision to that of Jesus' view of the Father's purpose: the world *will* ultimately know and believe (even if it is not a saving faith) the glorious grace of the Father in sending His Son, when in the new Jerusalem every nation, tribe, people and tongue are gathered before the throne upon which sits the Lamb who is their object of worship (Rev. 7:10) and the source of their light (Rev. 21:23; 22:5).

It is, then, on the basis of the cross and its 'bond of peace' that we are called to be eager in maintaining the unity of the Spirit. The verses that follow (Eph. 4:4, 6) give an explication of this unity, speaking clearly of the action of the Triune God rather than our own:

The Spirit (4:4), who manifests himself dynamically in the body of Christ by empowering the members and giving them grace to operate for the sake of 'the common good' (1 Cor. 12:7). This baptism in the Spirit of Christ unites 'Jews [and] Greeks, slaves [and] free' (v. 13), and enables them together to make the declaration, 'Jesus is Lord' (v. 3); just as any people or nation is united in their common allegiance to their leader or regent, so the Spirit is active in forming this 'holy nation' (1 Pet. 2:9) that is united in (not just under) its Head, Jesus (Col. 1:18).

The baptism in the Spirit also unites the people of God in a common hope: to corporate certainty of the ultimate revelation of the glory of the sons of God that will bring about the renewal and liberation of the total cosmos (Rom. 8:19–25). This hope of our calling gives a great confidence for prayer in the midst of our weakness, not just because we know the Spirit intercedes for us, but because we know that he does so for the saints (plural), and that our predestination, calling, justification and glorification (vv. 26–30) are not individualistic phenomena, but corporate, and only fully experienced by the individual believer in the context of being a member of the one body.

Pastoral care that does not continually point people back to their Spirit baptism, and therefore to their place in the body will serve only to perpetuate the rampant individualism of our culture that has invaded the church. Likewise, gospel proclamation that does not also declare to sinners that, 'the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself' (Acts 2:39).

The Lord (4:5), the founder and perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12:1–2), an image we only see clearly and completely in the context of the great cloud of witnesses, who are not, as in some popular interpretations, the crowd in the stadium watching and cheering us on, but the fellowship of all the saints through all the ages who stand beyond the finish line, having fought the fight, run the race and kept the faith (2 Tim. 4:7), their weary joints renewed, who testify by their lives of faith to the enduring faithfulness of the Son of God who loved them and gave himself for them (Gal. 2:20). Steve Estes records how news of the martyrdom of Wycliffe missionary Chet Bitterman at the hands of Columbian guerillas in 1981 resulted in the doubling of the rate of applications for overseas work with Wycliffe in the following year.⁴

Was this merely a rash of masochistic Christian Jihadism, or the dynamic of the communion of saints as the Spirit opened their eyes to see 'the assembly of the firstborn

⁴ Quoted in 'Why God Appoints Suffering for His Servants' in John Piper & Justin Taylor (eds), *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (Crossway, Wheaton, 2006), p. 97.

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who are enrolled in heaven . . . the spirits of the righteous made perfect' (Heb. 12:23) and they saw that they were together in the one body in which, 'If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together' (1 Cor. 12:26)?

Over, through and in all is **the Father**, who planned, initiated and fulfilled the goal of creating for His Son a Bride who is spotless in her purity and beautiful in her unity; this goal was fulfilled in the giving of His Son in order for him to sanctify and wash her by giving up himself for her (Eph. 5:25–26), and as far as the work of Christ is complete, so too is the Bride's preparation.

THE PRACTICAL REALITY OF UNITY

So the 'one baptism' of this 'one Lord' is incredibly significant. If we reduce it to a proof text to assert our theology of the sacraments over and against others or to refute Anabaptists we miss the point entirely. If this statement points to an event in time, it is not to our own baptism done at the hands of pastors, priests or elders, but to the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan at the hands of John the Baptist and affirmed by the Father:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased' (Matt. 3:13–17).

This is the 'baptism [that] now saves you' (1 Pet. 3:21) as the Son unites all of humanity in his body of flesh and undergoes John's baptism of repentance as 'the righteous for the unrighteous' (v. 18), and begins the inexorable journey to the cross in which he draws all men to himself (John 12:32). In this *one* action (spanning baptism to ascension), the human race as *one* entity is judged in the *one* person who is qualified to pay the price of being baptised into the fire of God's wrath. All those who are united with him through faith and baptised by him with the Holy Spirit also know the reality of life and joy through their union with him (and therefore with one another) in his resurrection.

The power of this truth is immensely practical. A student recently wrote, in reflection on Philippians 1:3 ('I thank my God in all my remembrance of you'):

I don't know about you, but there's one community of people who has always been there for me and carried me through things in my life that have been hard. This community is the community of God's people. These people come from our churches, families, universities, home groups, bible studies, at work and even overseas. Only a child of God really understands the love that God has for us (although we can never truly grasp the extent of this love) and has love for their brothers and sisters in Christ. So when we think of the relationships we have with our brothers and sisters in Christ, please thank God for that relationship and that He has chosen them to also be one of His children.

Personal experience and the testimony of church history will tell us that man-made methods designed to maintain both institutional and communal unity in the church

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have been dismal failures, and are foolish in the presumption that unity is both authored and maintained by us. However, a statement as simple as ‘I thank my God in all my remembrance of you’ forces us to discard all our sophistication and to acknowledge that unity is a gift of grace:

... always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, *for you are all partakers with me of grace*, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:4–8, italics mine).

And in the passage we have already examined:

... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift (Eph. 4:5–7).

Verse 7 might not normally be included in the opening pericope of Ephesians 4, yet it provides the basis for all our eagerness to maintain the unity of the Spirit: the lavish grace that comes to us from Christ in all his fullness.

A CASE STUDY: WESLEY, WHITEFIELD AND THE DOCTRINE OF ELECTION⁵

Both prominent co-workers and preachers in the ‘Great Awakening’ of the 18th century, John Wesley and George Whitefield found themselves diverging in their views on election towards the end of the 1730’s:

Wesley: Salvation is available universally and should be preached to all; ‘The doctrine of predestination is not a doctrine of God’.⁶

Whitefield: Salvation should be preached to all, but ultimately only the elect will be saved; ‘as many as the Lord hath ordained to eternal life, shall certainly be quickened and enabled to believe’.⁷

Both agreed that the gospel should be proclaimed to all, and both agreed on the content of the gospel. George was of the view that their differences were not enough to warrant division:

I hear, honoured sir, you are about to print a sermon on predestination. It shocks me to think of it; what will be the consequences but controversy? If people ask me my opinion, what shall I do? I have a critical part to act, God enable me to behave aright! Silence on both sides will be best. It is

⁵ Based on material by Iain Murray, originally published as part of ‘Whitefield’s Journals’ (Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1960). This was accessed 4 June 2009 on <<http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/wesley.htm>>.

⁶ John Wesley, ‘Free Grace’, preached at Bristol, 1740. Text obtained from the following website, accessed on 4 June 2009: <<http://gbgm-umc.org/UMW/wesley/serm-128.stm>>.

⁷ A letter from George Whitefield to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley in answer to Mr. Wesley’s sermon entitled ‘Free Grace’ (end of section 1), from <<http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/wesley.htm>> accessed on 4 June 2009.

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noised abroad already, that there is a division between you and me. Oh, my heart within me is grieved . . . (Letter from George to John, June 25, 1739).

Dear, honoured sir, if you have any regard for the peace of the church, keep in your sermon on predestination. But you have cast a lot. Oh! my heart, in the midst of my body, is like melted wax. The Lord direct us all! (July 2, 1739).

George waited nearly 18 months before making his disagreement with John public, seeking to settle the issues privately:

How would the cause of our common Master suffer by our raising disputes about particular points of doctrines! . . . For Christ's sake, let us not be divided amongst ourselves . . . Avoid all disputation. Do not oblige me to preach against you; I had rather die . . .

And John's response:

My dear Brother,

I thank you for yours . . . The case is quite plain. There are bigots both for predestination and against it. God is sending a message to those on either side. But neither will receive it, unless from one who is of their own opinion. Therefore, for a time you are suffered to be of one opinion, and I of another. But when his time is come, God will do what man cannot, namely, make us both of one mind. Then persecution will flame out, and it will be seen whether we count our lives dear unto ourselves, so that we may finish our course with joy. I am, my dearest brother,

Ever yours,

J. Wesley

August 9, 1740.

To which George replied:

Dear Sir, these things ought not so to be. God knows my heart, as I told you before, so I declare again, nothing but a single regard to the honour of Christ has forced this letter from me. I love and honour you for his sake; and when I come to judgement, will thank you before men and angels, for what you have, under God, done for my soul . . . Yours affectionate, though unworthy brother and servant in Christ,

George Whitefield.

December 24, 1740.

Eventually, because the dispute had become public, George realised that he must speak publicly:

If you go on thus, honoured sir, how can I concur with you? It is impossible. I must speak what I know . . . (September 25, 1740). I must preach the gospel of Christ, and that I cannot now do, without speaking of election . . . (February 1, 1741).

From this point onwards, Evangelicalism in England (and subsequently in America and elsewhere) was divided:

. . . it led them to build separate chapels, form separate societies, and pursue, to the end of life, separate lines of action . . . the gulf between Wesley and Whitefield was immense.⁸

⁸ Luke Tyerman, *Life of Wesley*, vol. 1, pp. 351–2. Cited by Iain Murray—see footnote 5 above.

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Yet did this structural and theological rift undo the work of the one Lord who had given one baptism? In actual fact this division, while causing tension, did not end their friendship, and great affection was known between them. Many years later, John Wesley preached the sermon at George's funeral:

... Mention has already been made of his unparalleled zeal, his indefatigable activity, his tender-heartedness to the afflicted, and charitableness toward the poor. But should we not likewise mention his deep *gratitude* to all whom God had used as instruments of good to him?—of whom he did not cease to speak in the most respectful manner, even to his dying day. Should we not mention, that he had a heart susceptible of the most generous and the most tender *friendship*? I have frequently thought that this, of all others, was the distinguishing part of his character. How few have we known of so kind a temper, of such large and flowing affections! Was it not principally by this, that the hearts of others were so strangely drawn and knit to him? Can anything but love beget love? This shone in his very countenance, and continually breathed in all his words, whether in public or private. Was it not this, which, quick and penetrating as lightning, flew from heart to heart? which gave that life to his sermons, his conversations, his letters? Ye are witnesses!⁹

John also commissioned his brother Charles to write a hymn for the occasion, published as 'An Hymn on the Death of the Rev. Mr. Whitefield':

Servant of God, well done!
Thy glorious warfare's past;
The battle's fought, the race is won,
And thou art crown'd at last;
Of all thy heart's desire
Triumphantly possess'd,
Lodged by the ministerial choir
In thy Redeemer's breast.

In condescending love,
Thy ceaseless prayer He heard;
And bade thee suddenly remove
To thy complete reward:
Ready to bring the peace,
Thy beauteous feet were shod,
When mercy sign'd thy soul's release,
And caught thee up to God.

With saints enthroned on high,
Thou dost thy Lord proclaim,
And still To God salvation cry,
Salvation to the Lamb!
O happy, happy soul!
In ecstasies of praise,
Long as eternal ages roll,
Thou seest thy Saviour's face!

Redeem'd from earth and pain,
Ah! when shall we ascend,
And all in Jesu's presence reign
With our translated friend?
Come, Lord, and quickly come!
And, when in Thee complete,
Receive Thy longing servants home,
To triumph at Thy feet!

⁹ John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, Methodist Publ. House, London, n.d., p. 755.