

How Scripture Can Guide Christians to Unity in the Twenty-first Century

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**ARE WE  
MISSING  
SOMETHING?**

*Discovering God's House, God's Church, and  
True Worship*

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## **Are We Missing Something?**

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# Introduction

## 1.

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### **The Church that Christ is Building**

*“The church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”* (Ephesians 1:22,23)

When Christ told His apostles one day in Caesarea Philippi that *“upon this rock I will build My church”* (Matthew 16:18), He was announcing something totally new. Although it would be based on the eternal fact of His deity, as confessed by Peter, this church had not yet been brought into existence. The word “church” as used in the Bible does not have the same meaning as it is often given today, which is a physical building used for religious purposes. The word church in the New Testament is a translation of the Greek word *“ekklesia,”* from which we get our English word “ecclesiastical.” It means people who have been called out to be together, a distinct assembly or congregation. Thus, when the Lord said that He would build His church, He was referring to people, and it was to be spiritual, not physical.

#### **Old Testament clues**

Various clues had been given about this church in the Old Testament, but never before had it been referred to explicitly. Later the apostle Paul would describe it as *“the mystery of Christ”* (Ephesians 3:4). What was this mystery and what were some of these pointers that had been given previously?

First of all, for instance, when God created the first man, Adam, He provided Eve as a wife for him (Genesis 2:21–25). However she was also a picture of this future company of believers who would become Christ’s eternal companion, an illustration of the church the Body of Christ. Eve had been taken from Adam’s side while he was in a deep sleep, just as this church is the result of Christ’s deep ordeal at Calvary.

Another picture that is given is that of Asenath, who was the Gentile bride that Joseph had been given while he was in Egypt (Genesis 41:45). Joseph was heir to the promises that God had given to his great-grandfather Abraham. On the other hand, Asenath was a Gentile, an Egyptian woman, and so she did not have the same heritage. Yet she was given to Joseph to share his life and inheritance. Similarly the church the Body of Christ is not restricted to Jews, but is inclusive of all nationalities.

Although it had been hinted at back in Old Testament times, this

church did not exist at that time. It did not apply to Israel as God's chosen people on Earth. It was something new that began when the present age began, after Christ's exaltation to heaven, on that day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out (Acts 2:1–4). It required that the Gentiles be included so that it might be universal.

### **Building this church**

The details of this church that Christ is building were revealed first to the apostles, including the apostle Paul who provided most of its teaching in Scripture, and through them to all the saints (Ephesians 3:2,5; Colossians 1:26). It was an all-inclusive message: all believers regardless of culture or background were equal members of this church, called "the church which is His body (Ephesians 1:22)." Each believer in Christ was then, and is now, built into it by being baptized by Christ in the Holy Spirit. Today this invisible spiritual baptism takes place simultaneously with the believer's new birth:

*"By one Spirit were we all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free; and were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13)<sup>1</sup>.*

Once believers are in this church, they cannot ever be put out of it or leave it. Their place in it is permanent. It is eternal and the Body itself is indestructible. Each believer is an indispensable member of it, like a part of a human body, and each member is intended to have an important part in its ongoing strengthening (Ephesians 4:16).

We are told that Christ Himself cares for this church and preserves "her", because one day she will be united with Him as His bride (Revelation 19:7):

*"Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5:25-27).*

This church began at Pentecost. Believers will continue to be added to it until the Lord returns to the air for her, at which time she will be complete and intact. Those believers who have died will be raised; those still alive will be changed, and together—as one church—they will meet Him in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16,17). And so the first time that Christ will meet His church bodily will be when He comes to the air for her. That is why the dead in

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<sup>1</sup> The original Greek shows that the baptism is "in" the Spirit. It is not the Holy Spirit who does the baptizing, but Christ Himself (John 1:33).

Christ cannot go to meet Him ahead of those who are alive at His coming. He will meet her intact, as His bride—all believers together at once. That is what He is looking forward to.

The apostle Paul told the Ephesians that, when Christ returned to heaven, God His Father: *“put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all”* (Ephesians 1:22,23). This tells us that this church, which would consist of all believers in Him from Pentecost on, is intended to be His “fullness,” to magnify the glory of Christ, by being His complement. This will reach its culmination in the future, when all believers are perfectly united with Him and there is no created being outside His active authority.

### **Building up the Body**

Meanwhile Christ continues to build up His church, by feeding her, caring for her, and holding her together, as believers hold fast to Him as Head:

*“no one ever bated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church”* (Ephesians 5:29);

*“...holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God”* (Colossians 2:19).

He takes personal responsibility for her.

He does this through the work of the Holy Spirit, whom He has sent to indwell all believers, as He explained to His apostles on the night before Calvary:

*“I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth...He abides with you and will be in you.”*

*“The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.”*

*“The Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me.”*

*“When He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you.”*

(John 14:16,17,26; 15:26; 16:13,14)

Christ said that the believers who would come after Him would multiply the works of God that He had been doing in His life on Earth: *“I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to My Father”* (John 14:12).

### **What should members of the Body aspire to?**

It is the Lord's desire that the character and unity of this Body be reflected by all living members on Earth. For this to be accomplished, all these members must be fully linked together and be under the direct control of the Head, Christ Himself. Just as a human body cannot function properly if any part is missing, dislocated, or damaged, or if there is any blockage to the brain, so it is with the functioning of this spiritual Body. If there is any disunity or any disconnection from the Head, or any underdevelopment of any part, then the display on Earth of the nature of the relationship into which believers have been brought will be impaired. That is why Christ prayed to His Father on His last night:

*"I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even 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 sent Me" (John 17:20,21).*

Not only would the behaviour of individual believers be impaired, but so would the fulfillment of the Lord's desire for believers to be together in unity.

Paul went on to tell the Ephesians what this building up of the Body was intended to result in. He expressed it this way:

*"until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).*

In other words, full maturity of believers together will mean that they express the divine unity which characterizes the church which is His Body.

This is not just describing the personal spiritual growth of each of us as individual Christians. It is describing the full coordinated development of such believers joined in divine testimony. He described it as the result of each individual member doing its proper part, being equipped spiritually to do so, and being fully joined together with the other parts:

*"He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ ...*

*but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:11,12,15,16).*

Paul said that we are to not be like children, but we are to become

mature. (In 1 Corinthians 14:20 he elaborated on this by referring to being “*children in understanding*.”) As long as we as believers together are lacking in our understanding and in our devoted adherence to all the teaching that Christ has given us to carry out (which is described as “*the faith*”), we will not experience our full relationship with Him. We will limit His work for us today as He lives and serves in the presence of God (the unity of “*the knowledge of the Son of God*”), to progress to this goal of expressing the full relationship implied in the figure of His Body. Paul warned the Colossians about the possibility of falling short of this when he wrote:

*“Not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God”* (Colossians 2:19).

He was talking to them about indulging in worldly things or wrong teaching and practices. In verse 16 he had said, “*Don’t let anyone judge you.*” We are not to be influenced or led astray by any teaching, example, or criticism of others, no matter how convincing it may be. We are to keep pressing on towards the goal together.

### **It is about relationships**

This imagery of a body is all about our relationships—with Christ as our Head, and with each other as members. The Body, with its different but interdependent parts, is all under the control of the Head. The supply of everything it needs in order to grow up and mature as one united person all comes from Him, but it flows to them through each other (Ephesians 4:15,16)<sup>2</sup>.

But there is a lot more in the New Testament that applies to us as Christians than the teaching about the church which is Christ’s Body, as wonderful as that is. When the apostles wanted to provide teaching on how disciples should gather together, how they should serve God, and how they should deal with problems such as sin and disobedience, they did not use the imagery of the Body. Those are things that are dealt with in the teaching about churches of God and the kingdom of God, which are not identical to the church the Body, but are intended to depict it. For example, no person can ever be put away from the Body of Christ; his or her position in it is absolute, unlike their position in a local church of God, which can change. Also there is no reference to admonishing or disciplining other members of the

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<sup>2</sup> This interdependence is illustrated in Ephesians 5:22–33 by marriage between a man and a woman, which is the earliest and most intimate of all human relationships. The ideal in marriage is for the couple to achieve a relationship where each partner is so united with the other that they behave as one.

Body, but there are such references to those in churches of God (Romans 15:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:14). The reason for this is that the church the Body is blameless and perfect (Ephesians 5:25-27), and this is what saints and assemblies on Earth should aspire to.

### **Fellowship within the Body**

While all believers are members of the one Body and therefore do have an invisible spiritual connection with each other “in Christ” (Romans 12:5), in practice there can be limits to the fellowship they should have with each other. Paul shows that the Body can only function and be built up as it receives what it needs from Christ, and as it ministers those things to its members:

*“...and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God” (Colossians 2:19).*

As a result, not all sharing that takes place among believers can automatically be assumed to be the fellowship of the Body. We are each responsible to hold fast to the Head by engaging only in teaching and service that is according to Christ and not to things that are of human origin (Colossians 2:20–23). This means that we each have to learn from Scripture to tell the difference. And so there can be limits in practice to the degree to which Christians may feel free to join in fellowship with others (1 Timothy 1:5).

Understanding this fundamental and unique teaching from Scripture about the church the Body of Christ is important for us as we begin this study of what the Scriptures teach about the three issues of God’s house, God’s church, and true worship. In this way we can properly relate it to, and distinguish it from, other things.

Why is it that this inherent spiritual unity among those who are “in Christ” is not evident today to a greater extent? Why are there so many divisions among Christians? For the answer to these questions, we will have to go back in history to understand how the Christian world developed to the state that it is in today. That is the subject of our next chapter.

## 2.

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### How We Got to Where We are Today

*“I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.” (Acts 20:29)*

The twenty-first century Christian world is very different from what it was in the first century. Unlike then, today there is a multitude of Christian churches, denominations, sects, and groupings. There is also a seemingly endless variety of “doctrines” and practices among them. These days a disciple of the Lord Jesus has to search for the truth of God. And it is not always obvious where to find it.

To understand how the present state of affairs came about, let us quickly trace the development of the Christian faith through the centuries, with particular attention on the teaching of the Lord to His apostles that was to be passed down.

#### **The forty days**

After His resurrection, the Lord Jesus spent forty days with His eleven apostles. He was preparing them to carry on His work after His departure. During that time, *“He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God”* (Acts 1:2,3).

The culmination of that instruction was what is often referred to as the “Great Commission”: *“Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age’”* (Matthew 28:18–20).

We are not told the details of what He taught them during those forty days, but we can deduce it very clearly from what they did after He left, as recorded for us in the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles.

#### **Pentecost**

After the Lord had left His apostles and ascended to heaven, they and His other followers waited together in Jerusalem, as He had told them to. When

the Day of Pentecost arrived, the Holy Spirit descended on them all, and Peter preached the first gospel sermon of the new era to those who came to investigate. The result was that about three thousand of them believed, were baptized, and were added together to those already there. And so there came into existence at the same time two vitally significant but different entities that would continue in parallel—the church the Body of Christ, consisting of all believers in Christ, having been baptized in the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38) (which we looked at in the previous chapter), and the church of God in Jerusalem (see Acts 8:3 and Galatians 1:13), consisting of all baptized disciples who would continue consistently in what they were being taught.

What they were being taught became known as “the apostles’ teaching” (or “apostles’ doctrine,” Acts 2:42). The apostles taught it, but what they taught were the commands that they had originally received from the Lord, which later became known as “the faith” (Acts 6:7).

This church in Jerusalem continued to grow, until persecution from the Jews forced most of them to leave the city. Other churches of God sprang up in the towns and cities where they went. These churches were all founded on the same teaching, and they stayed linked with each other. They were a community, which later was referred to as “*the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord*” (1 Corinthians 1:9 NKJV). This unity of teaching and fellowship was maintained initially by the apostles and other prophets, primarily by their visits (e.g. Acts 8:14; 11:22) and writings. But gradually other elders were appointed in the churches (first mentioned in Acts 11:30) to oversee them and to care for the saints in them. The New Testament records that by the end of the first century the work had spread throughout the eastern and northern Mediterranean areas of the Roman Empire, and it names many individual such churches of God.

### **The end of the apostolic period**

By the end of the first century, all the apostles had died. They could not be replaced by others because a requirement to be an apostle of the Lord Jesus was that a man must have seen Him in resurrection and have been personally commissioned by Him. The foundation teaching that the apostles had laid down in every place was complete by this time. It was, as Jude described it, “*the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints*” (Jude verse 3). However, as the years went by, many of these fundamental teachings began to be lost, and the churches increasingly allowed error and human tradition to come in. This inevitably brought divisions among them. The apostle Paul had seen this coming. In his epistles to Timothy, he wrote,

*“The Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith” (1 Timothy 4:1).*

*“The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.” (2 Timothy 4:3,4)*

For example, the church in Ephesus to which Paul had previously written an epistle (Ephesians 1:1) was in danger of having its divine lamp stand removed (Revelation 2:5); that is, God would no longer have recognized it as one of His churches. In that epistle, Paul had been able to dwell at length on the marvellous truth of the church which is the Body of Christ (as we looked at in the last chapter), but by this time the saints needed to be warned that they had left their first love and needed to repent.

### **Deepening decline**

The deterioration continued and the Scriptures became practically unavailable to most people, many of whom were illiterate, and they were eventually banned from public use in many places. Some of the developments that eroded the teaching of the Lord were as follows:

- By the second century, baptism came to be regarded as necessary for salvation. Later immersion was replaced by sprinkling, and then infants began to be sprinkled in the hope of ensuring their salvation.
- Around the same time, a trend was emerging whereby clergy were being appointed, distinct from the congregations, headed by a “president” (presiding bishop) in each church, taking over the leadership and all active service. The people were told that they could not serve God without these men as priests.
- As early as the second century, a variety of holy days and mandatory days of fasting was introduced and legislated.
- In the third century, the concept was introduced (later called “purgatory”) of an intermediate destination of the souls of the dead. These souls, it was taught, could only be released to heaven by payment of money and by prayers to dead saints. This eventually led to the idolatrous worship of Mary the mother of Jesus.
- By the fourth century, the simple remembrance of the Lord Jesus in the bread and wine was replaced by a sacrificial “mass,” in which the bread and wine were considered to be “trans-substantiated” into the actual body and blood of the Lord (although this term was not used

until later).

- In the fourth century, the adoption of the Christian religion by the emperor Constantine brought about the union of church and state, and the doctrines of the church were formalized at the Council of Nicea. It declared, among other things, that eternal salvation was only available by keeping a number of “sacraments” (such as baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, and penance).
- This was followed by a split between the Roman church in the west, and the orthodox churches in the east. In the Roman church, the Bible began to be withheld from everyone other than the clergy. It was generally only available in Latin, which very few people could read. Other books came to be regarded as of equal or greater authority, and the hierarchy of the church set itself up as the sole interpreter of the Bible.
- Subsequently, indulgences to atone for wrongdoing began to be sold (sometimes in advance) to raise funds for building basilicas and for other church purposes.
- In the sixth century, the position of pope (“father”) was established as the leader of the Roman church. By the twelfth century popes were being established as heads of state, and in the nineteenth century the pope came to be considered as infallible.

### **Rediscovering the light**

In the midst of all this darkness and error, it was the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries that largely began to reverse the decline. Beginning with godly men such as John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, and William Tyndale, the essential truth of salvation by the grace of God, by faith alone, was rediscovered. The Reformers’ motto was “*sola scriptura*”—“by the Scriptures alone.” They rejected the church’s claim to be solely entitled to interpret Scripture and to modify its teaching in the light of experience. They studied the Scriptures for themselves. Wycliffe, Tyndale and others began making Bibles available. Wycliffe stated: “The knowledge of the revealed will of God is to be found alone in the Scriptures.” The invention of the printing press by Johan Gutenberg in 1454 made possible more widespread distribution of Bibles and accelerated this process.

In the centuries that followed, more and more of the fundamentals of the apostles’ original teaching were uncovered, as the Word of God became increasingly the subject of enlightened study by Christians. Valuable truths emerged, such as those pertaining to the church the Body of Christ, disciples’

baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the importance of evangelism and good works. Gradually these truths began to be put into practice in place of the wrong teachings and practices that were so entrenched. It is always the case that, when the truth of God is discovered from the Word of God and is then applied, things begin to change.

It was in many ways similar to what had happened late in Israel's history, when the book of the law was found after it had been missing for many years. This was the book in which Moses had written the commandments of the Lord at Sinai centuries before. Hilkiah the priest found it in the house of the Lord, which was in disuse and disarray at that time, and it led to the reforms that King Josiah initiated:

*"Then Hilkiah the high priest said ... 'I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD.' And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan who read it ... And Shaphan read it in the presence of the king ... When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes ... The king went up to the house of the LORD and all the men of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem with him, and the priests and the prophets and all the people, both small and great; and he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant which was found in the house of the LORD. The king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the LORD, to walk after the LORD, and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes with all his heart and all his soul, to carry out the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people entered into the covenant" (2 Kings 22:8–11; 2 Kings 23:2,3).*

However, as a general rule, as truth was rediscovered from the Bible it was not widely embraced. There tended to be resistance to any such change and new teaching. Just as today, it was hard to distinguish between what was true scriptural teaching and what was human tradition, and it was even harder to reach agreement and to institute changes as a result of new scriptural revelation. It therefore usually required those who held a conviction about such truth to break away from existing churches in order to put into practice what they had learned. Inevitably this process was slow and not at all peaceful.

That is why the Christian world today is so fragmented. That is why there is such a variety of denominations, with so many different versions of "the truth" and differing views on the relevance of certain aspects of the Lord's teaching.

### **Unfinished business**

However, in all this marvellous recovery, some key aspects remained hidden to many Christians. These included God's continuing desire to have a collec-

tive people gathered on Earth that He could call His own and live among—an identifiable people who were living holy and obedient lives in unity with one another. This unity, not achieved by compromise, but by reaching a common and proper understanding of, and subjection to, the complete revealed truth of God, has been elusive over the years, and yet it is vital. To some Christians, the present diversity of belief and practice among believers appears not to give cause for concern. Rejoicing in the fact of us being “*all one in Christ Jesus*” (Galatians 3:28), as we do, they appear never to have seen what God intends for us beyond that. Surely if we miss that, we are missing much—and so is the Lord.

As we saw previously, on the last night of His life the Lord Jesus prayed for this unity of those who would believe on Him through what the apostles would teach:

*“I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even 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 sent Me. The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me”* (John 17:20–23).

His prayer, “*that they all may be one,*” was not a reference to their unity as members of the Body of Christ. That spiritual unity is guaranteed and cannot be lost. He did not need to pray for that. He was praying that believers would all be united in their service and lives for Him—that they might all truly be “one.” And yet that certainly is not the case today. The unity of the Body of Christ is not seen in practice amongst believers today. Expressing that unity remains unfinished business of the highest priority.

### **The path to unity**

What then is the key to achieving this unity that Christ prayed for? Is it for us to disregard our differences of views and just all get along with each other? No—surely it is much, much more than that. It is nothing less than having a united understanding and adherence to all that the Lord taught His apostles and that they then taught to others. It involves putting it into practice in an actual fellowship, “*the fellowship of God’s Son*” (1 Corinthians 1:9 NKJV). This requires that we understand from Scripture all that He has commanded us, as the Great Commission states.

If this goal is to be achieved to any degree today, it has to begin with us having a proper and shared understanding of the Word of God, and how it applies to us today. Any accord has to be based firmly on what the Scriptures

actually say and mean in order to be "*the unity of the Spirit*" (Ephesians 4:3). The Holy Spirit will not lead us into anything that is contrary to His Word. The Lord Jesus said that one of the reasons the Spirit would be given would be to lead us into the truth (John 16:13).