

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

The Effect of Ethnic Identity on Biblical Unity in its role as an Apologetic

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Abstract

This thesis will consider the effect that ethnicity has on identity formation as it impacts church unity. Unity is the chief form of evidence by which the Christian church is supposed to be recognized. The way that believers love one another is how Jesus teaches people will know that they are His disciples (John 13:35). Ethnic tensions are a cause of disunity in both the Old and New Testaments. The issue of ethnic identity and relations and the impact that they have on unity in the church is an apologetic for the power and counter-cultural teachings of Jesus. The purpose of this thesis is to understand the impact that ethnic identity has on unity. The result of this understanding will be a foundation for a church culture that uses unity as an apologetic for Christ. This will be accomplished by outlining the historical ethnic identity and ethnic tensions throughout the Old and New Testament and church history. An understanding of unity as an apologetic, in light of these findings, will create a path to the unification of the church. The intended result of this thesis is two-fold; that those are believers in Christ would step into a role of encouraging the church body towards unity, and that those who do not have faith in Christ would recognize the intention of the biblical text in regard to God's design for ethnicity and unity.

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Introduction

Biblical unity is a powerful apologetic that shows the transforming and counter-cultural impact of the gospel. The unity that is described in the Bible is unique and reflects God's original heart for people. Viewing the trends of unity and love throughout the Bible, and the effect that ethnic identity has on unification equips the Christian to respond to the challenges they face as they strive to build unity. The effect of unity in the church has a far reach and testifies to both the desire and power of Christ.

Statement of Importance of the Problem

In the current world climate, ethnic tensions are a hot talking point. As many secular groups work towards achieving unity, the church should set the tone for what unity looks like. This is a critical apologetic that has been addressed without looking at the implications of historical thought. While there is no lack of research on the issues of ethnic tensions and race relations, biblical unity in light of ethnic identity is a topic that few approach with apologetic intentions. This is due to the shift of understanding of ethnicity from even modernity to postmodernity. Approaching the issue must be done with the mindset of creating an apologetic for the truth and power of Christ. The impact that unity has on the perception of the church is critical and must be addressed.

Statement of Position on the Problem

The ability to achieve true unity is the primary difference between Christianity and secularism. True unity cannot be achieved outside of the intercessory work of the Holy Spirit. Considering the impact that ethnic identity has had on the unity of believers in the history of the church shows the evidence that unity can provide a foundation for evangelism and evidence of

Christ. The brokenness of society and the treatment of other ethnicities in the Old Testament reveals the intention that God has for people groups. Moving on to the New Testament, the significance of unity is a constant theme and considering the teachings of Jesus and the struggles of the early church provide a greater understanding of unity as an apologetic. Additionally, the teachings of the early church fathers also shed light on the reason the contemporary church is in its current state. Considering all these factors, unity as an apologetic for Christ is effectively established.

Limitations

While this thesis has a broad scope, it will not address more modern impacts on the unification of the church. The paper will not look at specific modern cultural climates that affect the unity in the church. It will not address the racial climate in America or in modern society directly. The purpose of this thesis is to address the power of the church's unity, not the state of a specific culture or region.

Delimitations

This thesis will look at historic ethnically rooted issues in the Old Testament, the New Testament church, and during the times of the early church fathers. It will focus on the role that God's desire for unity within the church has as an apologetic evidence to all people. The specification of ethnic identity and unity will all be with the intention of applying the findings to the Christian apologetic effort. The thesis will look at the methods that have been used to achieve unity and consider if the doctrines of the early church fathers align with the biblical desire for unity in all aspects of the church. In the final chapter, there will be an address of what unity should look like as an apologetic and how unity can be used to point people to Christ.

Definitions

For the success of this evaluation the following terms need to be defined: culture, ethnic identity, and biblical unity. In this thesis, culture refers to the societal values that a person has acquired as a result of shared background. This is influenced by heritage and location, as well as the groups that are surrounding the individual and their cultural perspective such as, collectivist values or individualistic values. Edward Tylor says it this way, “culture, or civilization ... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, [etc.] and any other capacities acquired by man as a member of society.”¹ Ethnic identity refers to the perspective that the individual has on themselves that is influenced by the shared ethnic heritage.

Ethnic identity is recognized as a complex, multifaceted, and dynamic process. From a social psychological and developmental perspective, ethnic identity generally refers to individuals’ feelings about their ethnic group membership (e.g., positive affect, pride, attachment), as well as the extent to which individuals have engaged in a process to gain knowledge about their ethnic group (i.e., ethnic identity exploration) and have come to a resolution or sense of clarity regarding the meaning that their ethnicity has in their lives.²

This can be expressed in form by ethnocentrism, the viewing of other people groups out of the values that one’s culture expresses. The theology of biblical unity that is being worked out in this paper is the unity that is to be expressed within the church of Jesus Christ. This thesis will work towards building a case for one humanity. This is based on the teaching found in the Bible and consideration of the teachings that influence what this concept is supposed to look like. The purpose of this internal unity and love is to point to the power and truth of Christianity.

¹ Tylor, Edward B. *Primitive Culture*. (New York, NY: Harper, 1958), 1.

² Santos, Carlos E. and Adriana J. Umaña-Taylor. *Studying Ethnic Identity: Methodological and Conceptual Approaches Across Disciplines*. (Washington, D.C: American Psychological Association, 2015), 11.

Chapter One

Old Testament Teachings on Ethnicity and Unity

The sociocultural context of the ancient Near East has a deep impact on the ability of the reader to understand the New Testament teachings on biblical unity and the effect that ethnic differences have on achieving the ultimate goal of unity. In order to better understand the aim of the New Testament and those who are being addressed, it is critical to understand the ancient Israelites, with whom the Jews in the New Testament would be strongly familiar. To establish context, this chapter will overview the Ancient Near Eastern Culture, the various ethnicities in the Levant and their interactions with Israelites in the Old Testament, and finally examples of Old Testament biblical unity.

Ancient Near Eastern Culture

Understanding the cultural context of the Old Testament is essential to properly interpret the early Jewish texts. The teachings of the biblical writings are more closely understood through understanding the ethnic implications and the culture that these teachings affect directly. An evaluation of the ancient Near Eastern culture considers the surrounding context, tribal organization and race, and finally the Israel-centered writing of the Old Testament.

Israel's Surrounding Context

The geographic location and surrounding cultures paint an understanding of the societal expectations and struggles of the ancient Israelites. Ancient Israel operated in the ancient Near East with the surrounding cultures of Neo-Assyria, Greece, and Egypt; these cultures influenced the Israelite identity and their comprehension of those around them. The concepts of identity reflected by the Assyrian and Egyptians have similarities, while the Greek identity strongly

varies in their expression of culture. The Egyptian and Assyrian peoples were not driven by ethnographic interests, rather the culture and political interests of the society were the foundation of identity.³ Further, based on the research of Kenton Sparks, a better understanding of the foundational influences on the Israelite concept of identity can be identified. Much like the Grecian concept of identity, the Israelites placed an emphasis on ethnic ties as the establishment of culture. The ethnic sentiments of the people were heavily based on their bond of kinship and shared ethnicity.

Looking at the Levant through the history of the Israelite people aids in the understanding of the culture and context in which the Israelite people operated. The early Israelite people can be better understood by looking at the archeology and writings from the geographic area in which they dwelled. While a detailed history cannot be achieved,⁴ the archeology in hand with ancient texts provide the context in which the Israelite people can be understood. The fortified cities of the ancient Levant show that the people groups at the time were complex ethnic groups. The people of the Levant had the resources to establish and sustain cities that many families lived in across the geographic area. The cities that are often attributed to the Israelite people offer archaeology that reveals the presence of ancient Israel. One example of this are city gates that face towards the larger Israelite cities, such as Jerusalem. One occurrence of this evidence is that of the gates at Khirbet Qeiyafa. The placement of the gates are away from the territories of other groups,⁵ which signifies the Israelite presence. Establishing a general idea of the geographic location of the Israelites, the surrounding groups of people become accessible for study.

³ Kenton L. Sparks, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel: Prolegomena to the Study of Ethnic Sentiments and their Expressions in the Hebrew Bible*. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 91.

⁴ John Boardman, *The Cambridge Ancient History*. (v. 1 pt. 2 no.1 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

⁵ Yosef Garfinkel, Saar Ganor and Joseph B. Silver, "Rejected! Qeiyafa's Unlikely Second Gate" (*Biblical Archaeology Review* 43, no.1 2017).

The archeology and iconography give literal pictures of these early societies and offer insight into the cultures. The inscriptions, artwork, and even coins show the student of the Levant the family norms, religious practices, and symbolism. Even the clothing pictured gives insight into the larger socioeconomic context.⁶ While iconography and archeology cannot provide a direct link to the biblical text, it can establish a sociocultural context from which the reader can better understand the society at large. In the case of the Israelite/Canaanite people, the iconoclastic monuments reflect the religious practices of the area. The seals found in the Levant can especially point to which people groups were present. This is critical in differentiating the people groups.

There have been various ancient Near Eastern writings uncovered that give the reader a picture of the laws, ethics, and understanding of gods by the various surrounding cultures. Some of the universal characteristics of these gods recognized in the ancient Near East are that they are natural beings, which possess superhuman powers, but above all, they do not set ethical standards.⁷ Their existence as natural beings establishes they are dependent on resources and are not biologically different than humans. They are affected by nature and are not omnipotent; they are limited by laws of nature even in their superhuman abilities. Finally, these cultural conceptions of understanding led to the belief that the gods were temperamental and must be appeased so they might not do what was ethically wrong in retaliation to the people. Some of the influential codes of law that governed the neighbors of ancient Israel were the legislative texts of the ‘Sumero-Akkadian’, the code of Ur-Nammu which is the foundation of *lex talonis* and the

⁶ Izak. Cornelius, “Introduction to Ancient Near Eastern Iconography”. (In *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament: Cultural, Social and Historical Contexts*. eds. Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, and John H. Walton. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 158.

⁷ Jeremiah Unterman, *Justice for All: How the Jewish Bible Revolutionized Ethics*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 1-2.

code of Hammurabi,⁸ and the Laws of Eshnunna. These law codes all show a legislative foundation and violence as the method of enforcement. These codes all institute social classes and their individual rights are far from fair or equal.⁹ Putting the Israelite people into this context shapes the view of justice in the region.

Tribal Organization and Ethnic Groups

Understanding Israel's tribal organization and their view of races and ethnic groups come from understanding the context of the group. As the surrounding cultures have their identities derived from their own moral teachings and ethnic pride, the Israelite people specifically have unique tribal structure and are less limiting to classes of people. The geographic area where the tribe of Israel dwelt had many various tribes and nomadic people, so the tribal dynamics is a challenge to firmly establish. However, using what is known about the people of the Levant, we can understand and see an environment where heavily agrarian tribes lived. Tribal identity and affiliation defined the people at that time. "Primordial lineage mattered to ancient Israel (e.g., Gen 15:4), so the primary identity marker for an Israelite inevitably was based on common ancestry and loyalty."¹⁰ The bond of kinship was highly valued in this ancient society and is reflected in the family-centered structure of society. The roles of individuals in society were dictated by their family affiliation and position.

In Ancient Israel, the patricentric model of the family showcased the manner in which the society and territory were focused and divided by clan. The fathers were the figurehead of their

⁸ Leon Epsztién, *Social Justice in the Ancient Near East and the People of the Bible*. London: SCM Press Ltd, 1986), 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁰ Thomas D. Petter, "Tribes and Nomads in the Iron Age Levant". (In *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament: Cultural, Social and Historical Contexts*. eds. Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, and John H. Walton. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 392.

clan and managed the land that they were allotted. In the Israelite culture, the family structure modeled that everyone underneath the figurehead was to be protected and provided for by the figurehead. The Israelite tribal structure was modeled as the overall tribe divided by clan followed by family and finally individual houses as the order of social structure in the Israelite society. As the fathers had sons, they would still operate underneath the umbrella of the eldest figurehead in their lineage.¹¹ This was proactive protection for the more vulnerable members of the Israelite society and is seen illustrated in Joshua 7:16-26 and Judges 6-8. The family structure created a strong kinship and tribal mentality as the clans would interact with those outside their family's lineage.

Because the territories did not have official geopolitical borders and enforcement, there were many instances of territorial disputes and conflicts. These conflicts are seen in the biblical narrative as the conquests, which were purposed to return the Holy Land to a pure state, where Yahweh's chosen would live.¹² Only those who were considered pure before God would have His blessing to dwell in His land. The majority of disputes that affected Ancient Israelite people were territorial with those who were outside of their tribal heritage.¹³ This foundation of ethnic dispute, although supposed to be over the physical Holy Land, became a foundation for an embrace of an ethnocentric culture.

The concept of being a Holy nation with Holy land stems out of the identity of Israel as a "chosen nation." Their status as chosen reflects that God chose to use them in his plan to reconcile and redeem all people, through their bloodline. It is not that they are better than one

¹¹ Daniel I. Block, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel". (In *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*. ed. Ken M.Campbell. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 37-39.

¹² Petter, "Tribes and Nomads in the Iron Age Levant"., 393-394.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 394.

people group or another, but that through them all people will be made to be one with God. The hope for all of humanity comes out of the “chosen” status of all of Israel.

The largest and most influential ethnic groups in the ancient Near East were the Hittites, the Egyptians, the Sumerian/Babylonians, the Canaanite, and the Assyrians. During the time of interactions with these cultures, the Levant was filled with fortified city-states, one ethnic group being the Israelite people. The Egyptians occupied the land to the south of the Levant, the Sumerian/ Babylonian to the east, The Hittites to the north, and the Assyrians to the northeast. The Canaanite people inhabited the same part of the land as the Israelites. Understanding the geographic makeup and the location of the other ethnic groups allows a better glimpse into the surroundings of the Israelites.

Israel-Centered Old Testament

The nationalism expressed in the Old Testament is reflected in the territorialism of the Israelite people as well as the textual emphasis on the Israelites. It can become an issue if the perspective on the Old Testament is one that sees the focus of the text as a deterrent to God’s redemption of all people. Rather, that is not the case, “Israel is to serve the marginalized in its midst.”¹⁴ In the actual implementation and accomplishing of this goal, the dilemma that arose out of being the ‘chosen people’ of God created a struggle that is illustrated by the Old Testament texts. Lalsangkima Pachuau phrases it in the following way: “the challenge is to cross the ethnic boundary in showing mercy to the other. Salvation in this text is conditioned upon crossing the boundary to be other-centered.”¹⁵ Because of the language used and the territorial wars of the

¹⁴ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm shifts in Theology of Mission*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 18.

¹⁵ Lalsangkima Pachuau, “Ethnic Identity and the Gospel of Reconciliation.” (*Mission Studies: Journal of the International Association for Mission Studies* 26, no. 1, June 2009), 60.

Israelite people, the Old Testament can be wrongly used to create a divide and be used to exclude nonmembers of the Israelite people group. This attitude is seen in the interactions of the New Testament Jews and their interactions with Gentiles. Upon further consideration, there are many instances of inclusion of other ethnic groups and records of the interactions, both of inclusion and extradition.

The Old Testament's centering on the people of Israel narrows in on the plan of redemption for all of humanity. The behaviors of the people exhibit the natural human inclination to rebellion and the grace of God even under the Old Covenant. Pachau claims, "If the self-centeredness of Israel overshadowed this missional nature of Israel's biblical religion, it contradicts the very purpose of election for other-centeredness (other-oriented nature) of God's mission." The point of God making a path for people through one specific group is that the people reach others. This concept of people being redeemed into the elect will be further illustrated in the New Testament. The Israelite people were aware of the common heritage they shared with humanity but had lost sight of their equality that is described in Genesis 1-3. The ethnocentrism exhibited by the Israelites was not intentional, but rather, was a underlying result of their own perception of themselves.

The recordings of the Israelite genealogies have a significant impact not only on the tribal identity but also have enduring importance to the people. Consider the records of the Levite genealogy, which were used to claim their genealogical birthright (Neh 7, 11) and to bring forth a restoration of worship in Israel. This was only possible through an understanding and recording of the tribal history, in both oral and written tradition. The recorded history of the Israelite people would serve them in the work the Lord had for them, as well as, provide the prophetic teachings to be called to remembrance by the people and to be signs in their fulfillment. The writings also

serve as a recording of the cultural memories of society. This literature can be used “as a conception tool for understanding how not only historiography but a variety of other memorial forms”¹⁶ and provide insight based on the cultural perspective.

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentricity is the perspective that one’s ethnic group is superior and that other people groups are inferior. The semantic embrace of the Israelite people as ‘God’s chosen people’ caused an ethnocentric mindset to develop in the Judean culture of the New Testament. This results in an attitude that degrades other ethnic groups and creates nationalism in the interactions with other groups. The culture of the ancient Near East was a heavily collectivist culture, and as a result, the inferences of behavior studies should be considered. In antiquity, the people group of the Israelites would identify heavily in their ethnicity and not give any consideration to their identity as understood as an individual.¹⁷ In addition to this, the ancient Near East was a highly vertical society, where large disparities in status and power were tolerated.¹⁸ Richard Rohrbaugh gives a look into the ancient culture and self-identification saying,

In sum, although the Mediterranean societies of antiquity were predominantly collectivist in outlook, two types of individualistic behavior also existed. First was the vertical, narcissistic, and hedonistic behavior of the urban elite, and second was the horizontal, solitary behavior of the marginalized and degraded. The first outlook derived from privilege and choice, the second from isolation and despair.¹⁹

The cultural construct of self in antiquity allows insight into the perception of individual identity in the Israelite people as they interacted with other people groups. Their collectivist

¹⁶ Jens Bruun Kofoed, “The Old Testament as Cultural Memory”. (In *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture*. eds. James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 304.

¹⁷ Richard L. Rohrbaugh, “Ethnocentrism and Historical Questions about Jesus”. In *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*. (edited by Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J. Malina, and Gerd Theissen. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

culture caused them to bond together strongly, which gives the reader a deeper understanding of the Old Testament and the recorded interactions with outside clans and ethnic groups. The ethnocentric tendencies that the Israelite people struggle with are given context in their socio-cultural background.

The self-identification of the Israelite people is strongly reflected in their own ethnic group. The social organization of the Israelite people can be pictured through the archeological findings of the society. The stratification of the land reflects society and the spread of wealth. This is seen through archeological findings such as buildings, kinds of pottery, and tombs. The differences observed point to a socioeconomic gap in the urban Israelite communities.²⁰ The rural villages did not show the same differentiation in socioeconomic status. This shows that even within the Israelite culture, they were unable to escape all of the societal influences and expectations based on their surroundings.

The ethical and social justice standards revealed by the ethnic centrality of the Israelites primarily influence how the modern reader perceives the text. Thus, it is essential as we transition into ethnic studies on Jesus's teachings of unity to understand the culture that shaped his society. Before the transition, looking at the social norms in comparison to the culture around the Israelites finishes painting the broader contextual picture.

Social Norms

The final reflection of the ancient Near East culture's impact on the Israelites is the social norms of the day that are counter to the cultural norms taught biblically, as well as the differentiation of the Israelite people to those around them. The greatest impacting event that the

²⁰ Avraham Faust, "Social Stratification in the Iron Age Levant". (In *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament: Cultural, Social and Historical Contexts*. edited by Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, and John H. Walton. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 490.

Israelite people encountered was the revelation of God at Mount Sinai (Exod 19). This is unlike any other surrounding cultures because the God of the Israelites chooses to reveal himself to the entire people. “The undeniable message is that every single Israelite is significant to God.”²¹ The covenant that God makes with the people of Israel is reflective of the structure of Hittite treaties, however, it is the exclusive treaty between a people and their deity.²² This established a new form of ethical accountability, one that each individual Israelite held with God. The covenant shifted the responsibility of each individual to consider their actions as they affected society as a whole.

The value of the individual life is set as a standard in the Israelite community, unlike the communities around them. All people have an innate sense of morality, which is exhibited by the existence of laws. Comparing the ancient law codes, the Biblical law holds all life at the same value regardless of social class. This is counter to the law codes of the Hittites, Assyrians, and Egyptians.²³ Life held value in all of these societies, however, it was not viewed entirely the same by all the people groups in the Levant. The classist societies that surrounded and influenced the Israelite people were led by these principles. The people who were most affected by this were the disadvantaged in society: the poor, the widows, the orphans, and the sojourner. The concept of social justice in the ancient Near East societies was primarily the provision for the weaker classes of society to be protected from deprivation. The area that we will consider closely is the sojourner, the stranger who looks and sounds different.

²¹ Unterman, *Justice for All: How the Jewish Bible Revolutionized Ethics.*, 15.

²² *Ibid.*, 18.

²³ Unterman, *Justice for All: How the Jewish Bible Revolutionized Ethics.*, 28-29. The laws of the other ANE cultures enforced the idea that life value was dependent on the class of the person, and further that the death penalty was acceptable even when there had been only loss of property, which is counter to the Biblical law.

The common theme found in the texts of the various ancient Near Eastern cultures is that they all advocate for kind treatment of those around you, reflective of a basic moral good.²⁴ The Biblical text offers tangible instructions for the treatment of both the temporary foreigner and the resident alien. The instructions in the Torah command that the Israelite people do not harm those who are strangers (Exod 22:20), in fact, it commands that they offer provisions and take care of those in need regardless of ethnicity or class (Deut 10:18-19). The Torah even commands that as agricultural work is done, the workers of the field leave the remnants for the destitute (Deut 24:19-22). The Israelites are instructed to do life with those who are not Israelites and invite them to come together for feasts and celebrations (Deut 26:2, 11). In the case of crimes and punishment, unlike the surrounding peoples, the Israelites are commanded that the law is the same for all regardless of status (Lev 24:22).

Ethnicities and Interactions with Israelites in the Old Testament

Understanding the geographic, political, and socioeconomic culture of the ancient Near East gives the reader insight into Scripture. In addition, understanding the different people groups and their involvement with the Israelites shines a light on the biblical text. Beyond merely reading a passage, knowing the people and how they interacted with Israel and other people groups gives us added perspective. This section will highlight the neighbors of Israel who influenced the ancient Near East, enabling the transition into reading the New Testament and knowing the background biases and teachings that affect the Jews based on their proximity and surroundings.

²⁴ Ibid., 42-43.

Hittites

The neighbors to the north of the Israelites were the Hittites. In Genesis 27:46 we see part of a dialogue between Isaac and Rebekah. “Rebekah exclaims her frustration with Esau’s wives, not because he had more than one but because of their ethnicity: “‘I’m disgusted with living because of these Hittite women,’ she says to Isaac.”²⁵ Her plan was to send Jacob, her other son, to live with her brother, Laban to choose a wife who was not Hittite. This glimpse into the relationship and disdain for the Hittites is relevant, as the Hittites have a longstanding relationship with the tribe of Israel (Exod 13:5; Num 13:29; Josh 11:3). They are one of the consistent neighbors who the Israelites will interact with throughout their history. The Hittites were a prominent and large people group that ruled over a vast area of Turkey and controlled a large militant force.²⁶ “The impression is that many Hittites are living in the land of Canaan during the time of the Founding Families (e.g., Gen 15:20; 23; 25:9–10; 50:13). This impression is reinforced by biblical references to Hittites during the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah (e.g., 1 Kgs 9:20; 10:29; 11:1; 2 Kgs 7:6; 2 Chr 1:17; 8:7).”²⁷ The political rival of the Hittites were the Egyptians to the south. Land in between the two was in constant conflict as the two disputed their borders and looked to expand their land.²⁸ Thus, the Israelites faced threats of the Hittites in their land.

Egyptians

South of the Levant, the Egyptian monarchy was a major world power in the ancient Near East. The first encounter with Egypt that is seen in the Biblical text is Joseph being sold into

²⁵ E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 57.

²⁶ “The Hittites: Between Tradition and History,” (*Biblical Archaeology Review* 42, no. 2, 2016), 29.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

slavery and being brought down to Egypt (Gen 39). Joseph, an Israelite became influential and had a huge leadership role in Egypt at the time (Gen 41:41). After some time spent in Egypt, the Israelite people were oppressed and forced into slavery when the work of Joseph had been forgotten (Exod 1). This led to the Israelite exodus from their Egyptian masters. Later in history, the United Monarchy is recorded as doing trade with both the Egyptian and Hittites (1 Kgs 10:29). The Pharaoh Shishak invaded Israel and took many of the treasures of Israel back to Egypt (1 Kgs 14:25-28). The Egyptians found their ethnographic interests through political positions and cultural interests, rather than shared ethnicity.²⁹ They viewed Canaanite and Israelite people as slave labor.³⁰ While there is much known about the well-documented Egyptian people, there is not as much known about their interactions with the people of Israel. The Egyptian records speak of the slave laborers as being foreign but do not specify the people groups enslaved. One evidence that archeology has provided for the Israelite dwelling in Egypt is the excavation of huts similar to those found in other Israelite sites. This kind of four-room hut concept is found only in regions where the Israelite people have been credited in living.³¹

Gileadites and the Ephraimites

One instance of Old Testament ethnic tension and geographic differentiation is found in Judges 12. In this passage, the people of Gilead were at war with the people of Ephraim. These two clans of people shared a common ancestry, yet still had cultural differences.³² The people who were members of the two clans appeared indistinguishable, however, they spoke with different dialects. The Gileadites determined that they could test the pronunciation of a word by a

²⁹ Sparks, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel.*, 91.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

³¹ Bietak, Manfred, "Israelites Found in Egypt," (*Biblical Archaeology Review* 29, no. 5, 2003), 46.

³² Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes.*, 63.

soldier, and if they said it incorrectly, they would be seized and killed. This method of distinction resulted in the deaths of 42,000 men (Judg 12:6). Richards and O'Brien considered this account and summarized it this way: "The trouble was, Ephraimites couldn't say the word correctly because they couldn't pronounce the "sh" sound. If an escaping soldier said *sibboleth*, they were killed on the spot. That's pretty serious discrimination."³³ This account shows an instance of ethnic prejudice, even within common ancestry.

Moses' Wife

Numbers 12 is a narrative that tells of Miriam and Aaron, Moses' siblings speaking against him because he had married a Cushite woman (Num 12:1). "Ancient Egyptians seem to refer to black Africans in their southern border as 'Kushu or Kush'."³⁴ The motivator of their claims against Moses is that his wife is Cushite. They then began to question if he thought he was the only one who could hear from God. The foreignness of Moses' wife is considered by some to be the reason for Aaron and Miriam's opposition to his marriage.³⁵ While the actual reason for the disdain of Moses' wife can only be theorized, it is clear that the Lord supported Moses and that Moses was faithful to God (Num 12:7). It is written that God's anger was kindled against Aaron and Miriam for speaking against Moses (Num 12:9). In fact, in a humorous turn, after the dialogue, Miriam is punished by being struck leprous and pale (Num 12:10). In regard to the disdain towards Moses' wife, Richards and O'Brien write, "The Cushites were not demeaned as a slave race in the ancient world; they were respected as highly skilled soldiers. It is more likely that Miriam and Aaron thought Moses was being presumptuous by marrying *above*

³³ Ibid., 63.

³⁴ David T. Adamo, "A Silent Unheard Voice in the Old Testament: The Cushite Woman Whom Moses Married in Numbers 12:1–10." (*In Die Skriflig* 52, no. 1, 2018).

³⁵ Ibid.

himself.”³⁶ This perspective makes the context much clearer, his siblings were complaining that Moses was not the only one who hears from God, does he think he is better than the rest of Israel?³⁷

Canaanites

Living most closely with the Israelite people, were the Canaanites. They both dwelled in the same land and fought over control of the land. The Canaanites lived in the Levant prior to the covenant of Abram and the promise of the Holy Land to the Israelites (Gen 15:18-21). The Israelites would over time be commanded to regionally wage a conquest on the Holy Land to secure the land promised to them. The men going to war were ordered by God that prior to attacking, to offer peace to each town (Deut 20:10). This conquest was only to extend to cities in the land the Lord had given to the people, in which the Canaanites lived (Deut 20:16-17). The Canaanite people practiced the worship of false gods. There is a long-recorded history of the Israelites rising against the Canaanites and wiping out the people. However, there are also examples of God redeeming the people of Canaan. One example being Rahab who provided shelter for the Israelite spies as they entered Jericho (2:6). Because of her faith in the God of the Israelites, she was redeemed into Israel and was even in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:5). Through Joshua and even after he passed, the Lord commanded that the Israelite people wipe out the Canaanites who were practicing evil in the land of the Lord (Judg 1:1-2). However, the Israelites did not complete this task and rather dwelled in the land with the people who rejected

³⁶ Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes.*, 61.

³⁷ There are other interpretations of this passage and the research of David T. Adamo offers a more detailed look into the cultural factors as well as considers of reading of the text. However, I view this interpretation to be most likely. Alternative interpretations view this passage as referring to Moses's wife Zipporah from Midian, as well.

the God of Israel (Judg 1:29-32). This led the Israelites to be influenced and reject their God for the pagan Baals (Judg 2:11).

Looking at the interactions the ancient Israelites had with other ethnic groups and even civil disputes within their own lineage give the reader a foundation to better understand the New Testament Jew and the cultural biases that had influenced them growing up. Observing the biases and attitudes showcase the disunity of humanity and even within God's people. Reading the Old Testament Scriptures provides a look at the Israelites own perception of themselves throughout history and their role as the elect people of God. The Israelite identity that is perceived by those who interacted and engaged with the people of ancient Israel is better understood knowing their placement in the ancient Near East.

Unity in the Old Testament

Having established a contextual understanding of the Old Testament within its sociocultural background, now the Israelite concept of identity can be fully considered, and the cultural implications can be analyzed. The identity formation and the self-identification of the Israelite people are reflected in their ethnocentrism, as well as the social norms of the people. The socio-cultural context of the Old Testament aids in the understanding of the New Testament teachings and the expectations of the people. The concept of unity is broken in the Old Testament. The separations at the tower of Babel and the unification of Israel paint a picture of the desire of God to ultimately reconcile his creation to unity.

Tower of Babel

Before the distinctions and ethnic separations of people occurred, the world looked very different than it does now. After the flood, there were many people who were all members of the line of Noah. These people all spoke the same language and chose to work together to build a

tower to reach heaven (Gen 11:4). Effectively, they were seeking to be able to reach God, himself. They were corrupted and powerful, so God chose to confuse speech by groups (v. 7). This resulted in the peoples scattering and the birth of separation of ethnic groups. These groups became divided by names, languages, and appearances that are seen as a result in the later interactions with the Israelites. While all of humanity has the same roots, the divisions have caused disunity that is seen throughout the rest of the narrative of Scripture.

The separations of the peoples have been observed through the evaluation of the various ethnic groups who interacted with the Israelites. The causes of these divisions that were emphasized by Babel were the resulting war, the familial lines, people group names, and skin coloring, which result in the survival mechanisms of ethnocentricity or nationalism. The language distinctions that are used to scatter the descendants of Noah are later reversed in Acts 2 at Pentecost. These separations resulted in the divisions and cultural distinctions. The reversal of this through the Holy Spirit at Pentecost will be made full and completely harmonized in the song of the Great Day of heavenly gathering (Rev 5:9). The disunity created by the tower of Babel is a result of the corruption of the people. The unification through the Holy Spirit in the New Testament comes as a result of people being made righteous by Christ.

Psalm 133

Perhaps one of the most popular examples of an Old Testament text addressing unity, Psalm 133 praises unity as a gift to the people of God.

Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the

mountains of Zion! For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore (Ps 133).³⁸

The unity of the people of God pleases Him. It is a sign to people who encounter this brotherly unity of the blessings of God on his people. The picture of the oil and dew in this poem show the anointing that takes place through unity. In addition, “how the poem’s opening line in praise of ‘unity’, and the closing line—the Lord’s ‘commanded blessing’—correspond to each other, and hold together these effusive reciprocal metaphors for the cosmic effect of unity in creation and community alike.”³⁹ The psalmist compares unity to two aspects of Jewish life, their pursuit of righteousness and dependence on God. The purification brought through unity is seen by the reference to the oil that anoints the priest, by which the people are represented in front of God and forgiven. The oil unites the head of Aaron and his collar. The dependence on God for physical protection and connection with the Lord is expressed by the mountains of Zion. The desire of God is that his people would be unified as it glorifies him and blesses them.

Nehemiah 3

The third chapter of Nehemiah offers a detailed description of the reconstruction of the city walls. This passage illustrates the people of God working together and the result being success. The chapter shows the delegation of tasks and that all the people were involved in the work that the Lord had set before the people (Neh 2:20). The people worked in a unified manner, the entire community harmoniously serving the cause to rebuild the city. God rewarded them for the work and blessed the people for restoring the Holy city. Not only was the effort successful, but the people were recognized for their work. This is demonstrated by the readiness to recognize

³⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

³⁹ David Reimer, “The Old Testament and the Unity of the People of God”. (*Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 30.1, 2012), 11.

and record who had accomplished what task. The unity of the people is seen in their ability to complete the rebuilding in a peaceful manner with the intention of glorifying the Lord.⁴⁰

Ezekiel 37:15-28

This passage largely points to the unification of God's people and his desires for them. "Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I am about to take the stick of Joseph (that is in the hand of Ephraim) and the tribes of Israel associated with him. And I will join with it the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, that they may be one in my hand" (Ezek 37:19). The Lord declares in this text that he is the one who will create unity with his people. It is his desire that Judah and the Israelites who are divided from Joseph and the house of Israel would all be one, and that he is the one who will unify them. The Lord commands that both groups would turn away from idolatry and that he would be their God, that they would be united to him (v. 23). There would not be a drawn-out process of achieving peace and unity, but rather, through the people's surrender to him they would become unified. "The Ezekiel text in particular in its healing trajectory tacitly assumed unity's opposite: division. For a community to be 'unified' implies some boundary formation within which that unity is expressed, but outside of which membership is not possible. There are insiders; there must be outsiders."⁴¹ This unity is achievable within its context, the people of God.

The unity of the church, of God's people, is to be grounded in their dwelling with God; the temple of the Lord is in their presence. The Israelites unity was based on the literal, physical temple as the only method that God could dwell with them and unify them. With the Holy Spirit, the individual becomes the dwelling place and thus, unity is possible only through the power of

⁴⁰ James M. Boice, *Nehemiah: An Expository Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 47.

⁴¹ Reimer, "The Old Testament and the Unity of the People of God", 14.

the Spirit. As J. K. S. Reid says, “The church is not an association or corporation of like-minded individuals; and its unity does not have only such strength as their like-mindedness possesses and so can confer. On the contrary, its unity rests upon what Christ has done and is thus complete and inviolate.”⁴² The indwelling of God with his people is the source of unity.

Looking at the surrounding culture of the ancient Near East shows the countercultural behaviors and expectations on the Israelite people. In the Old Testament, we see multiple passages that illustrate God’s desire for the unity of his people and what the expression looks like. Additionally, this provides the reader with an understanding of the ethnic identities within the ANE and their formation. Without a full understanding of the Old Testament culture, the study of ethnicities and their impact on the New Testament teachings miss the depth of their impact. The contextual teachings that influence the New Testament Jew to give a better understanding to modern readers as they process ethnic studies and biblical unity. Approaching the New Testament with the cultural background of the Old Testament illustrates the experiences of the Israelite people in the metanarrative of the Bible. Equipped with this foundation, the New Testament is better understood.

⁴² J. K. S. Reid, *Our Life in Christ*. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1963), 99.

Chapter Two

New Testament Teachings on Ethnicity and Unity

In order to establish a biblical theology of unity, there must be a consideration of not only the Old Testament and the effect that ethnicity had on the Israelite perception of unity, but also the New Testament. The ultimate grounds for understanding church unity is in light of the unity that is expressed in the trinitarian nature of God. This is accomplished through understanding the teachings of the New Testament in their context, with their specific audience in mind. Seeing the ethnic relations and perceptions that shaped the early Christians comes out of proper knowledge of their cultural context, including the context of the Old Testament. Further, an evaluation of cultural tensions and their sources is essential to the effective study of unity. This equips the study to approach the teachings of the New Testament and in the first church.

Ethnic Relations

Cultural Context

Understanding of the Old Testament factors that shaped Judaism in the early first century is the foundation of a proper understanding of unity is established. To engage with the New Testament texts, an understanding of the cultural and social background of Palestine during the first century must be understood. Encountering Jesus in his historical setting gives the reader a better look into the meaning of Scripture and the societal norms that would have dictated the actions of the people. Additionally, reading the New Testament in its context gives awareness of the honor and shame culture and allows the reader to understand the implication of the

collectivist culture.⁴³ Collectivism shows the emphasis placed on shared ethnic identity and viewing oneself as a member of a greater community rather than as an individual.

The geographic region where Jesus did his ministry was strongly influenced by Judaism and Hellenism. Greek culture heavily influenced the thought and political values of the people.⁴⁴ This led to the Greek and Roman philosopher's approaches to thought and discussion influencing first century Jews. Judaism was also influenced by the religious practices of the Babylonians during their period of captivity.⁴⁵ This Jewish backdrop was the foundation on which Christianity was formed.

The Palestinian region was not a large area, but around twelve to fourteen thousand square miles of territory.⁴⁶ Its borders were set by the natural terrain borders of the mountainous regions and the Mediterranean Sea, as well as the other inhabitants of the land. The centrality of the Palestinian land to trade routes made it the center of business and exportation during the first century. The Romans even served to pave several of the major trade route highways in the region.⁴⁷ The ethnic groups that interacted frequently with the early Christians were those of Asiatic descent, the Greeks, the indigenous people of the Palestinian region, as well as the Romans.

⁴³ John J. Pilch, *Introducing the Cultural Context of the New Testament*. vol. 2 of *Hear the Word*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1991), 66.

⁴⁴ H. E. Dana, *The New Testament World: A Brief Sketch of the History and Conditions which Composed the Background of the New Testament*. 3rd ed, rev. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 18.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

Tensions between Jew and Non-Jew

The greatest tensions observed in the New Testament were ethnically based, rooted in the Jewish attitudes towards Christians.⁴⁸ The various people groups that engaged with those of Israelite descent faced challenges as they do so. The influence that Greek and Roman culture had on the regions where the Jewish people lived affected the way that they viewed people from other ethnic groups. The strong ethnic-tied identity and values along with the collectivist culture caused the Jewish people to reject those who did not have the same shared cultural experience. This is seen in the study of ethnocentrism in the previous chapter. The cultural ties and the collectivist society that the Jewish people operated in is the foundation of the New Testament world. Christianity in the early church and New Testament must be put into the original Jewish context to be best understood. The Jewish peoples' value in their ethnic identity had been clung to, especially in times of the Babylonian captivity, as the cultural roots and the anthropological evidence shows.⁴⁹ The evidence that is often pointed to is the similarity between early Judaic archeology and the Babylonian archeology. These similarities show that the Jewish people were influenced by the Babylonians but separated themselves in their religious practices.⁵⁰ This created a strong ethnic bond in Judaism to resist being completely changed by their captor's culture.

The cultural dynamic that surrounded the Jews was one with many religions and cultures. There was a Jewish proselytizing movement that led to the conversions of Roman inhabitants in the land to Judaism. In addition, many pagan gods were worshiped by the non-Jews that

⁴⁸ Tet-Lim N. Yee, *Jews, Gentiles and Ethnic Reconciliation: Paul's Jewish Identity and Ephesians*. (Monograph Series / Society for New Testament Studies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1.

⁴⁹ Kenton L. Sparks, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel.*, 217. The Babylonian captivity of the Israelites led to a heavy embrace of the law, and a renewed legalism. This is a large part of the religiosity of the Jewish culture and rejection of people from other cultures.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

interacted with the Jewish people. The Romans were known for their many deities, as were the Greeks, Paul even used the religious nature of the people to share the gospel in Athens (Acts 17). Alf Walle considered many of the pagan religions that the New Testament believer would interact with and they are numerous. The rival religions, Epicureans, Stoic philosophies, and Hellenistic philosophies are all intentionally addressed in the New Testament, he explains.⁵¹

These people from Israelite descent saw their identity in their ethnic group, which led to an attitude of superiority that they were the people who ‘chosen’ for salvation. They used this message of their chosen nature to share their religion and to convert non-Jews to Judaism. However, even in the conversion of the Hellenists, the more traditional Jews still were hesitant to embrace and accept those who were not from the same background. An example of this issue arising is in Acts 15, and it will be considered at a later point. Rather than following the Old Testament commands, the Jews who interacted with Jesus leaned into the teachings of the Pharisees and were hyper-legalistic in their application of the laws to the individual. Most of the Jews did not live in the cities interacting with those of other cultures, rather most of the Jews in the first century were farmers who owned small plots of land.⁵² The rural Jews did not encounter those who utilized the trade routes that were throughout the land or interact with those in large cities.

The writings of Josephus reveal that there was a large level of Hellenization and the spread of Greek culture and ideas was widespread throughout the Palestinian land. As a result, the Israelites commonly spoke Greek even if they did not interact deeply with Greeks.⁵³ This

⁵¹ Alf H. Walle, *Pagans and Practitioners: Expanding Biblical Scholarship*. (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2010), 43.

⁵² Louis H. Feldman, *Jew & Gentile in the Ancient World*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 24.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 24.

factor along with others led to ethnic division and separation among the early Jews, Christians, and other ethnic groups. Those who found their identity in their Jewish roots held strong bonds that prohibited associating deeply with those outside of the cultural group.

Jesus's Teachings and Interactions

The concept of unity is one that is taught repetitively throughout the ministry of Jesus. It is critical to consider the implications of ethnic relations inside of unity as taught by Jesus. The ministry of Jesus heavily countered the society around him. Looking at Jesus's desire for his followers, the identity formation that comes through Christ, and the reconciliation in Christ reveals a doctrine of unity. The embrace of unity in those who followed Jesus is foundational to the spread of Christianity. Beginning with the Spiritual unity of believers, it is essential to note that Jesus calls his followers to unity and love among each other, to ultimately be a sign for other people (John 13:35).

John 17:20-21

In his final prayer, Jesus prayed, "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" (John 17:21). This prayer is for all his followers, both then and in the future, that they would be a unified body. This missional theology teaches that those who believed in Jesus, both at that time and in the future will love one another as evidence for Christ's power. George Newton writes that "though this will not convert the world, and bring them to be true believers, yet this will very much convince the world, and make them look with a better eye on Christ."⁵⁴ Here the heart of Christ is evident, unity is supposed to point the world to him.

⁵⁴ George Newton, *An Exposition of John 17*. (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 324.

Establishing a proper theology of unity is accomplished by first looking at the teachings of Christ and his desires for his followers. Throughout his ministry, Jesus constantly acted counter to than the societal norms around him dictated. God's concern for people from all tribes and cultures is evident. Jesus had many encounters with those who were outside of Jewish lineage. He exorcized men from Gadarenes (Matt 8:28-32), he healed the leprous Samaritan (Luke 17:12-19), he forgave the sinful Samaritan woman (John 4), healed the Roman centurion's servant (Matt 8:8), and many other examples. He did not run from those who were different than him, rather, he loved them as members of his father's creation. This love for those around him is seen in His theology. Jesus teaches that the greatest commands are to love God wholly and to love your neighbor as yourself (Matt 22:36-40). This teaching shows the direct relationship between loving God and loving others as an expression of that love. Jesus was committed to preaching love and unity amongst his followers. He told his disciples that the world would know they followed him based on their love and unity (John 13:35). Jesus recognized that he came for all people and that through his death all people would be reconciled to the Father (John 12:28).

Jesus' love is the greatest picture of unity. This is clear as the evaluation of Genesis and the picture of a close relationship with God is experienced in the garden of Eden (Gen 2). The entire goal of the gospel is to restore this kind of close dwelling relationship that is severed by sin. Jesus is the one sent by God to bring his peace to his followers (John 14:27) and to establish God's justice to those who do not follow God (Matt 10:34). Only when we understand the unity that Christ desires for Christians to fulfill, will we be living in the fullness of Christ and bringing him glory.

Identity Formation in Christ

Jesus's teachings of unity can be tangibly experienced by Christians through the source of their identity being placed in him. His desire, as seen in John 17, is that his followers would be one in him and love each other well. As the identity of an individual is placed in Christ, they take on membership of a new race. 1 Peter 2:10 teaches this sentiment, that upon receiving the mercy of Christ, one becomes a member of this new race. When the identity of an individual is placed in their understanding of who they are in Christ, they no longer are bound by their ethnic identity. In Christ, there are neither Jew nor Greek (Col 3:11).

The social identity of the people that would have interacted with Jesus can be observed through the written texts. The identification of an individual with the other members of the group they identify is dependent on the culture surrounding that group.⁵⁵ Using the writings of the New Testament and secular texts, a clear understanding of the emphasis of cultural identity becomes clear. Josephus writes multiple accounts of the Jewish people and their interactions with other groups during this time in history. One record of the Samaritan people defiling a Jewish temple is an example of the conflict and disrespect between the two groups.⁵⁶ This dynamic is seen in the reaction of the Samaritan woman as she interacted with Christ (John 4:9). The intergroup tension pictured provides insight into the cultural influence that each people group is operating in.

In traditional Jewish interpretation, the Samaritans were the descendants of immigrants imported into the land from foreign territories (e.g., ancient Babylonia). Employing the biblical account of the (northern) Israelite exile in 722 BCE (2 Kings 17) as a key source, Jews claimed that Samaritans were of foreign origin or at best had a mixed pedigree. According to the influential paradigm, the Samaritans were the descendants of the

⁵⁵ Philip F. Esler, "Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict". (In *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*. Edited by Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J. Malina, and Gerd Theissen. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 186.

⁵⁶ Josephus Flavius, *Jewish Antiquities: Books XVII-XIX*. (Translated by Louis H. Feldman. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

polytheistic foreign settlers whom the Assyrians had imported into the land in the late 8th century BCE to replace the departed Israelites... The question of poor relations did not have to do, therefore, so much with the observance of particular rituals as with genealogy, history, and blood.⁵⁷

After the captivity by the Assyrians, the Jewish people began to marry cross-culturally, which resulted in the new ethnic group referred to as the Samaritans. When the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, to maintain the purity of the Jewish race, Samaritans were not allowed to be involved in the rebuilding of the temple (Neh 2:10; 6:14). The feud that began continued into the cultural backdrop that Jesus operated in. Jesus chose to go through Samaria, knowing that they had a need for a savior, and he was intentional to meet it.⁵⁸

After Jesus told the woman who he was, she went into the town where she lived and told everyone. The whole city then came out to see the man she was talking about (John 4:30). Jesus spent time ministering to this community of non-Jews and showed that his mercy was not exclusively for the Jewish people. Jesus did not abandon his cultural upbringing to engage the woman and share the truth, rather he loved the woman and gave her spiritual revelation. This stunned his disciples because their culture insisted that these people were a lesser group. Having an encounter with Christ gave the Samaritan woman, who was at the well by herself, new confidence and identity. The simple fact that she was at the well during the day points out that she was not accepted even by her own people, yet Jesus still extended his mercy to her. Upon experiencing the grace of Christ, her identity was transformed, and she rushed back to share the news, knowing her identity was now in Jesus since she met the Christ.

⁵⁷ Gary N. Knoppers, *Jews and Samaritans: The Origins and History of their Early Relations*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

⁵⁸ Anthony Evans, *Oneness Embraced: Through the Eyes of Tony Evans*. (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2011), 60.

Reconciliation in Christ

The reconciliation of people from different cultures and the heart of Jesus is clearly seen in Luke 10:29-37. The entire encounter that Jesus has with the lawyer in Luke creates a theology of cultural interaction. The parable of ‘the good Samaritan’ is a response to a question of who the Jewish lawyer should treat with love. This question is looking to draw an exclusionary line of whom it is required to treat as a neighbor.⁵⁹ Jesus responds showing the lawyer that one should treat those who fall into the non-Israelite category with love. The response of Christ calls out the lawyer’s indisputable desire to only accept certain groups as a neighbor, his attitude “inevitably conveys an invitation to engage in group differentiation and stereotyping.”⁶⁰

There is a tension between people groups that God seeks to reconcile. Bianchi writes that “the marrow of biblical revelation [is] God’s will for the universal reconciliation of all men with himself.”⁶¹ Grasping the desire that God has to reconcile people to himself, the next foundation is that people are to be reconciled to live in community with one another. Showing mercy to one another is the call of Christianity (Luke 10:36-37). Regardless of what culture a person comes from, Jesus teaches that grace and mercy should be extended to all people. This thought was unlike any other in the cultural environment that surrounded Christ. The embrace of this teaching resulted in the countercultural impact that the Christian movement had during the time of the New Testament church.

The reconciliation of the body of Christ in himself is seen not only in Jesus’s teachings but also as the rest of the New Testament is considered. In the text the believers are seen to be reconciled through the work of the Holy Spirit is seen. The role of the Holy Spirit working to

⁵⁹ Philip F. Esler, “Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict”, 190.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 190.

⁶¹ Eugene C. Bianchi, *Reconciliation: The Function of the Church*. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), 6.

unite the body of Christ is taught by Jesus as he prepares his followers that he will be leaving them and he assures that the Spirit will reveal his teachings to them (John 14:26). This does not look like individual cultures being abandoned but rather expressed through the love of Christ. Christ's love for his church is how he prays that the corporate church should love one another, as has already been seen. It is reasonable to understand that as God reconciles all people to himself through Christ, they should reconcile together with one another to form the body of Christ.

Acts

Having considered the teachings of Christ, looking at the manner in which the early church interacted in light of Christ's desire for unity provides insight into biblical unity. The spiritual unity established in the people of God overflows in a tangible way that can be seen displayed through the unity of the church. The doctrine of unity in the early church plays an important role in providing an example of the Holy Spirit's moving through the people of Christ.

Acts 2:42-47

The early church in Acts had been growing with the experience of the Holy Spirit coming at Pentecost. The people groups present in Jerusalem were from all over the known world at that time (Acts 2:9-11). This passage immediately follows the massive conversions that took place upon the coming of the Holy Spirit. The many different ethnic groups that were represented in this brand-new group were described as "together and [they] had all things in common" (Acts 2:44). While at this time the various people who experienced the gospel all came from Jewish roots, it would not stay like that. The commonality experienced here was not that all the people became the same, with the same cultural experiences and perspectives. It is rather, in Christ their identity was no longer based on their ethnic background but now placed in their relation to Christ. This commonality was one that connected the believers from all different ethnic identities

underneath a new identity. The behaviors of the people became ones where they embraced those who had come together to follow the teachings of Christ. These converts to Christianity shared an understanding of Judaism and shared the understanding of traditional Jewish social structure.⁶²

This first interaction of mixed ethnic identities shared a common religious background. As the early church continued to grow, more individuals from diverse religious backgrounds began to join the movement of early Christianity. The clear evidence of the unity amongst ethnic groups is seen from the beginning of the evangelistic movement in chapter 2 of Acts. The diverse group of people that heard the preaching at Pentecost experienced the Holy Spirit speaking through the apostles in their own languages. The apostles spoke in their own distinct ethnic accents (Acts 2:7), yet nonetheless, they were able to engage people from different geopolitical contexts.

Acts 4:32-35

Continuing to look at the early church and the way that the individuals related provides insight into what biblical unity is supposed to look like. Following the desire of Christ that his church would be united, the early church created a culture that provided for other members in all stations of life. The interaction between the people was driven by the movement of the Holy Spirit. Alan Thompson points out that the Holy Spirit's movement emphasizes "the unifying role of the Spirit in the reign of the Lord Jesus; and (2) clarifies that although the 'present' reign of the Lord Jesus must be qualified by the 'not yet' removal of all sin, the relational unity of

⁶² Bruce J. Malina, and John J. Pilch, *Social Science Commentary on the Book of Acts*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 36.

Christian community is bound up with common submission to one Lord.”⁶³ Unity is reached through the Holy Spirit’s guiding and enabling of his people. The people of God should live in a manner that follows the teachings of Christ and as a result, be unified as a community.

The unity of the community that is spoken of is within God’s church and does not hold individuals outside of the faith to behave in the same manner as those who are Christ followers. The early church was so unified that members of the community were selling their excess and giving back to the group to take care of all those in need so that none would be lacking. Seeing the fulfillment of the desires of Christ in the coming together of all followers of Christ points to the devoted nature of the people to learn about and follow Christ.

Acts 11:1-18

Peter was being criticized by Jewish Christians who believed that the fulfillment of prophecy and salvation through Jesus was only for circumcised Jews (v. 2-3). He had been eating and affiliating with non-Jews. Peter and Paul later discuss this same issue in Galatians where Paul confronts Peter’s hypocrisy of eating with Gentiles and then not eating with them when Jews were around. Eating and affiliating with Gentiles was highly frowned upon in the Jewish culture and the men of the church confronted Peter for being around these people. However, Peter had received a vision from God that what God has made clean should not be referred to by his people as unclean (Acts 11:9). The perception that the unclean people should not associate or be accepted into Christianity was countered by Peter’s vision. The Holy Spirit revealed that Peter was to go and spend time with Caesarians. While he was with them, the people heard the message of the gospel and received the gift of the Holy Spirit. When responding to the

⁶³Alan J. Thompson, *One Lord, One People: The Unity of the Church in Acts in its Literary Setting*. (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2008), 71.

complaints of the others, Peter told them, “If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way” (Acts 11:17)? This revelation gave apostolic authority to spreading the gospel to those of non-Jewish heritage. God gave the Gentile people access to the same salvation as the Jewish people and showed the Jewish converts that those who were from other backgrounds were welcomed by the Holy Spirit just the same.

Acts 15

Another instance of Jewish Christians complaining of the salvation of the Gentiles. In this passage, some believers from Judea were coming forward saying that only those who were circumcised could be saved (v.1). This argument raised the greater question of if the Mosaic Law would still apply to the new Christians and if those who had not been raised Jewish could still be included in salvation. Paul and Barnabus were sent to Jerusalem to discuss this question (v. 2), but also reported the success of converted Jews living in community with those who were not born as Jews. The unity of the Jewish and Gentile believers proves to show that salvation is not solely for the Jews but also for those who are uncircumcised. Peter shared that the gift of the Holy Spirit reveals and testifies as to who are believers. He included that he had seen Gentiles receive the Spirit, just as the Jewish believers received the Spirit at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit manifesting himself in both Jew and non-Jew believers showed that God had made salvation for all people.

At this point in Acts, the apostles are encouraged the body of believers to come together in commonality, embracing the unity that comes in Christ. The church in Acts struggled with the embracing of other cultures, even with the commonality of Christ. The encouragement of the apostles pushed them to be more open to the reality that Christ had bonded them together as his

church. Alan Thompson argues that “the themes of unity and law indicate that Luke is highlighting the unity of the Christian community as evidence that it is the ‘best’ constitution in contrast to the competing claims of Hellenistic ideals and contemporary Jewish adherence to the law.”⁶⁴ The understanding that the law is surpassed by the power that comes from Christ to his church serves as powerful evidence for Christ. Throughout Acts, the struggle of the Jewish believers to accept Gentile believers is clearly seen, but the apostles encouraged the members of the church to embrace one another and take care of the community.

Galatians

In Galatians, Paul writes to the church as they are facing disputes, especially regarding the social impact of the Judaic law. Thus, as the letter is read, it must be done in the same way as Paul’s other letters, giving attention to the context and the audience of the letter. The Galatian church was one that had primarily Gentile members. When Paul preached salvation to this community through the unconditional grace of Christ, the Holy Spirit confirmed their salvation through the evidence of signs and tongues (Gal 3:1-4). “After Paul left, there came to Galatia some Judean Christian missionaries (1:6-7), who believed that in order to be saved by the Judean Messiah Jesus, people had to become *Judean* followers of Jesus.”⁶⁵ This meant observing the ritualistic practices of the law in the Torah and insisting that all men be circumcised. This letter responds and reminds the church of the grace from God they have received.

⁶⁴ Alan J. Thompson, *One Lord, One People: The Unity of the Church in Acts in its Literary Setting.*, 102.

⁶⁵ David Rhodes, *The Challenge of Diversity: The Witness of Paul and the Gospels.* (Minneapolis: MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 39.

Galatians 2

Galatians chapter 2 works through a few issues that created disunity in the church that was rooted in ethnic disputes. Paul reminds the church of how they took him in and cared for him while he was sick, and he shared the gospel with him. Accompanying him at that time was Titus, a Greek, who was uncircumcised (2:3). The missionaries to the church had called into question Paul's authority and whether his apostolicity should be accepted. He responds to these charges against himself reminding the church of what he had taught them and of his acceptance by the other Apostles. Further, Paul writes that he confronted Peter for his hypocrisy amongst the church in Galatia. This is contrasting to the account in Acts where Peter stood his ground and revealed the vision that God had given him (Acts 11). In Galatians, Paul writes that prior to the arrival of the certain men from James (Gal 2:12), Peter had been eating and associating with the Gentile believers in Galatia. However, when these men arrived, he withdrew from spending time with them and in doing so led other Jews to do the same. Paul confronted this hypocrisy (2:14).

Paul invites the church into unity reminding them in the letter that no one is justified by the law or their ethnicity, rather it is dependent only upon the grace that comes through Christ (2:15-16). Encouraging the church as they have fallen into disunity, Paul writes that even in the endeavor to live a Christian life, that as there is sin, the sin does not nullify the grace of God. Jesus makes his followers righteous as they submit themselves to him and he lives in them by the Spirit (2:17-21). The cause of disunity in the church of Galatia is tied closely to the tensions between the Jews and the Gentiles. He urges the church to remember their commonality in the eyes of Christ and the grace they have received through faith that is not tied to ethnicity or religious practice.

Galatians 3

Chapter 3 continues the letter with Paul's chastisement of how quickly the church in Galatia embraced the law and viewing salvation through works rather than by the grace of the Holy Spirit that they experienced initially. In this chapter, Paul pushes into the fact that only faith is counted as righteousness in the eyes of God (Gal 3:6). He encourages the church that the work in them that is performed by the Holy Spirit is not completed by the flesh, so they should not try to work in their own strength (3:3). Paul writes to the church and shows the promises that apply to those who are the offspring of Abraham, he is quick to include that those who are in Christ receive this, not those who are ethnically designated. He writes to the church that following the law, as they have embraced, is not good enough for God, if it had been Jesus' death is unnecessary (3:20-22). Because they know the truth of Christ they can live in the Spirit, confident in their positioning as children of God, not distinguished by or dependent their ethnicity to receive God's promises (3:26-29).

This chapter is critical in the formation of a biblical theology of unity. The mindset shift from God's promises being received based on the individual commitment to the Judaic law to the promises being received only out of righteousness through Christ should reveal God's perception of people. God counts right-standing based on the individual's belief in Jesus. As a result, all members of Christ's body have the same standing before God. It is not influenced in any manner by the actions or the ethnicity of a person. The community that is shaped by Paul's writings is one that is marked by its unconditional acceptance of all. "The mission of the community would be to create righteousness in society, and it would include a strong commitment to overcome all forms of discrimination."⁶⁶

⁶⁶ David Rhodes, *The Challenge of Diversity*, 57.

Galatians 6:1-10

The final consideration in Galatians for the purpose of this thesis considers how the body of Christ ought to treat other members. The underlying theme of unity in support is evident. Paul writes for the members of the church to bear one another's burdens, and in doing so they will fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2). This is to say that the support of the community is essential not only for the individual's spiritual growth but also for the growth of the body as a whole. The salvation of a person is not impacted by their good works, but the growth of the body is connected to how the members support one another. "And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal 6:9-10). The church is to be unified; this is expressed by their encouragement of one another and support out of love. Fulfilling the law and desire of Christ is tied directly back to Jesus teaching his disciples that the way the world knows they are his followers is by how they love one another (John 13:35).

Unity in Galatians

In the letter to the church in Galatia, Paul preaches the sentiment that in Christ all people become sons and daughters of God, no longer identifying outside of one another, but in Christ, all people are one in the eyes of the Lord. Paul writes there is no distinction of male nor female, slave nor free, or Jew nor Gentile through the sacrificial death of Jesus (Gal 3:28-29). He points out that if someone is in Christ, they are now recognized as offspring of Abraham, members of the chosen people of Israel. This attitude does not elevate the Israelite people as better than all others but rather uses the illustration of being part of God's elect to show that in Christ, the church is one regardless of ethnic background.

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose (Gal 2:15-21).

In this passage, the sentiment that Jews are holier than Gentiles is expressed to be countered by the grace of Christ being extended to all people. Paul opens with blatant Jewish stereotyping to point out that it is not through the law that people are justified, rather, through the death of Christ. He proposes an argument that just because an individual is reconciled in Christ does not mean they can go on living in sin, rather because of the grace extended to them, they should be the first to live unto Christ. This does not look like justification by the law but living for Christ. Because of the new creation that each follower of Christ becomes, they do not have to rely on their old identity, but rather take on a new identity in Christ that is unified with the body.

The result of all this is that the purpose for which Christ died was to fulfill the requirements of the law and to unify his followers. Don Garlington writes of this:

[J]ustification functions to delineate just who are the latter-day people of God. In the eschatological new exodus which had been brought to pass in Christ, *it is Gentiles who are as much the vindicated people as Jews*, and this quite irrespective of Torah-loyalty, inclusive of circumcision and the other tradition badges of self-identity. Therefore, justification is very much a covenantal term, speaking to the issue of the identity of the people of God.⁶⁷

Thus, the people of God are no longer considered based on their ethnic identity, rather their identification with Christ and chosen submission to him. This results in the unification of

⁶⁷ Don Garlington, *An Exposition of Galatians: A Reading from the New Perspective*. (Third Ed. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 147.

the body made possible only by Christ and not rooted in any manner the ethnicity of an individual. The unity that is experienced by believers is not a result of anything that they did, rather it is through God alone that unity is established.

Unity is by the power of Christ and is made available to believers out of the sacrifice on the cross. It is the purpose of the suffering of Christ that “might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility” (Eph 2:16). The divisions that are experienced by the church are meant to be eradicated. Divisions should not have a stand, rather the love that God has extended to people ought to be the source of the church’s ability to be unified. If the global church is unable to love one another, they are not fully experiencing the love that Christ has offered to them (1John 4:8). It is with this mindset that unity becomes an essential part of the effective Christian church and its apologetic strategy.

Ephesians

Culture of Ephesus

The City of Ephesus was one of the largest at that time and was filled with many different cultures. It was a religious epicenter of the world and was the home to the Temple of Artemis. The city celebrated the Greek goddess Diana and the worship of pagan gods influenced the city broadly.⁶⁸ The city was located in a strategic area to take advantage of imports and exports as well as the major trade routes of the day.⁶⁹ Many people from other cultures interacted in this city and the city was one of the largest in Asia during the Roman empire.⁷⁰ The city had influence that reached around the world and was recognized by many leaders of the known world

⁶⁸ Charles Hodge, *Ephesians*. (First British ed. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 1994), xii.

⁶⁹ Mark R. Fairchild, *Christian Origins in Ephesus and Asia Minor*. (Beyoglu-İstanbul Turkey: Arkeooge, 2015), 23.

⁷⁰ Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 16-17.

at that time. The Christians in the city of Ephesus were not well liked, which can be seen in Acts 19. There was mass rioting because one of the men who sold idols to worship Artemis thought the Christians would ruin the temple and the economy that surrounded idol worship. The temple was a large factor in the economic success of the region as it took in many assets.⁷¹ The Roman occupation of Ephesus also had a large impact on the converts to Christianity and the methods of worship that the Christians practiced. The cult's practices were sexually driven and praised youth.⁷² This influence led to heretical practices being embraced in the church.

The diverse membership of the Ephesian church including many from Jewish backgrounds, as well as Gentiles who came from various regions and spiritual experiences prior to their encounter with Christ. It is known that the Jewish people who resided in Ephesus are considered indigenous people in Josephus's *Contra Apionem* 2:39.⁷³ There is reason to believe that the Jews were a significant group in Ephesian citizenship. Josephus wrote to Rome outlining some of their practices, such as transporting temple tax to Jerusalem and an inability to work and appear in court on the Sabbath.⁷⁴ From the various writings, conclusions about the Jews at Ephesus can be drawn. It can be known that they were an active group in Ephesian culture although they did not practice the prominent pagan religions that were popular due to the presence of various cults.⁷⁵

Ephesians 2:11-22

Beginning in chapter 2, verse 11 of Ephesians, Paul writes "that at one time you [were] Gentiles in the flesh" he further explains in verse 12 this means the Christian believer, regardless

⁷¹ Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius.*, 26.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷³ See also Ant 12:119-21.

⁷⁴ Ant 16:167-8

⁷⁵ Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius.*, 39.

of ethnic upbringing was at one time separated from God with no hope until Jesus. Even in the way this is phrased, one can see how the Jewish perspective of the Gentiles was a negative one. The grand idea in verses 11-22 in chapter 2 is that all believers are one in Christ. There is achievable unity through the sanctification of Christ. The blood sacrifice of Jesus served to bring even the Gentiles who were ‘far off’ (2:13) close. These people were seen to the Jews as the worst of the Gentiles, as they were not even seeking the truth. But Paul uses the imagery of destroying the wall of hostility between the Jews and Gentiles, making them one in Christ. This echoes the imagery of the wall of the temple dividing those inside and out of the ability to interact with God.

The polarity between the Jews and the Gentiles is interacted with as the text is read. The perceptions of the Jews towards all others during the early first century comes as a result of the ethnic identity that shaped Israelite’s thoughts for centuries. Dr. Tet-Lim N. Yee articulates this thought saying, “in short, covenantal ethnocentrism interposed itself between Jews and Gentiles, creating as its net result a social distance between Jews and Gentiles.”⁷⁶ This social gap is being bridged by Jesus and his sacrifice. As a result, the rest of this passage addresses the unity that can be achieved.

Jesus is said to have established his peace with the purpose, “that he might create in himself one new man in place of two” (Eph 2:15) and “reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross” (2:16). This language shows the church in Ephesus that they are meant to be both Jew in Gentile because in Christ they are made into a new race. This idea is rooted in his earlier discussion of the gospel being the work of Christ and an inheritance for all believers (1:18). The old covenant that drew ethnic distinctions is no longer relevant because, in Christ, all

⁷⁶ Tet-Lim N. Yee, *Jews, Gentiles and Ethnic Reconciliation*, 112.

believers are made into one body. Paul affirms this saying that Christ preached peace to both those who were far off and those who were near. This signifies that the same peace and revelation are available to all people regardless of if they are Jewish or Gentile.

Ephesians 3:1-13

Paul has been given the task of preaching to the Gentiles (Eph 3:2-3) and is writing his letter and sharing his experiences. This passage outlines that the grace of God and the plan for salvation has been kept a mystery but is now revealed in the coming of Christ. This revelation came through the Holy Spirit (3:5). As a result of the grace of God, the Holy Spirit works in the lives of both Jews and Gentiles (3:6). The beginning of this passage illustrates that Paul is writing to fulfill his calling of being a servant of the gospel who proclaims it to all people. This revolutionary concept of Jews and Gentiles being equal in Christ (3:6), comes as a revelation of the mystery. Colossians 1:26 designates the word of God in its fullness as the revelation of the mystery which is revealed in Christ who is the source of all knowledge (Col 2:2-3). If sharing the mystery means sharing Christ, Paul is telling the church in Ephesus that his calling is to share the message of Christ with the Gentiles. The Gentiles have now become fellow heirs. The Law of the Old Testament is fulfilled in the life of Jesus. The Jews and Gentiles that place their belief in Jesus as the revelation of the mystery become equal in the sight of God. This continues the imagery of a new race in Christ that is described in the chapter before (Eph 2:15).

Paul's confidence in Christ is articulated in his saying that it is of this mystery and good news that he is a minister (Eph 3:7). Only through the power of God is Paul able to do ministry, as he testifies that he is the very least of all believers, yet he has been given the grace to preach the news that saved him to the Gentiles (3:8). Further, he writes that his preaching's purpose is to shed light and share the revelation that God has graciously given him. Here the unity of the body

is seen as the preaching of the gospel is for all people and applies to all. In his letter to the Romans, Paul shares this same sentiment, that those who are led by the Spirit of God are have become his (Rom 8:14). The Spirit of God gives believers from all backgrounds the testimony that they are heirs of Christ (Rom 8:16). This same language is seen in Ephesians, as those who have understood the mystery of God, that is his salvation, become his heirs (Eph 3:6). The significance of the gospel is that it gives those who follow it eternal purpose, boldness, confidence in the work of Christ (3:11-12). The result of preaching to the Gentiles (3:8) and explaining the mystery of the gospel (3:9) is making the wisdom of God that comes through revelation known to all, even those who are authorities in the heavenly realms (3:10).

All of this goes back to see that this revelation is for all people, not separated or given in different measures. The wisdom of God is for Jews and Gentiles and in the gospel, all are perceived equally. When this is understood the body becomes unified, understanding their roles as co-heirs. It is for this cause that Paul says suffering results in glory (3:13).

Ephesians 4:1-16

The church in action is described in this passage, the consequences of God's grace equip the body of Christ to live together in unity. The call of the believer is to unity (John 17:21) and the prayer of Christ for all people who believed in him is to be one body. This idea of unity is fleshed out in the letter to the Ephesians. The believers in Ephesus have been charged by Paul to live with humility, gentleness, patience, and love to maintain the unity they are called to (Eph 4:1-3). Paul challenged them to bear with one another in love (4:2), this is significant as "Christians are part of each other, and are to receive one another, think about one another, serve one another, love one another, build up one another, bear each other's burdens, submit to each

other, and encourage one another.”⁷⁷ The same Spirit is inside of all believers and as a result, the bond of the community should be evident. Paul writes this letter urging those who are believers to live the way that they have been called, and further to live with Christlikeness with the purpose of maintaining the ‘unity of the Spirit’ (4:3). Obedience to the commands of God is the direct response to the work of grace in a believer’s life. Paul writes that, “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” (4:4-6).

The unity that is written of can be achieved through the power of Christ, it reflects that the very nature of God is oneness. This unity can only be experienced through the grace of Christ, which is extended to those who believe in him. The unity that is being spoken of is only accomplished through the work of the Spirit on the individual’s life. The theological representation of the divine being one is reinforced by the illustration that all believers are a part of one body. The Trinitarian concept of God is seen in 4:4-6 and echoes the doctrine taught by Paul in his various letters.⁷⁸ Paul refers to there being one body of Christ, one Holy Spirit that indwells believers, one hope—being in Jesus, one Lord, one faith being exclusively truthful, one baptism—through the Holy Spirit, and One God and Father of all who has omnipotence and is supreme. The Oneness that is central to the Christian religion is illustrated in the unity of those who follow the teachings of Christ.

Paul writes that the church is to live in this manner, considering the work of Christ in their lives. He writes that they should work to attain unity through humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another (4:2). These behaviors are only possible when the church is

⁷⁷ Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians: From Biblical Text-- to Contemporary Life*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 197.

⁷⁸ Snodgrass, *Ephesians.*, 198.

equipped by Christ to live in their righteousness that comes from his grace. He encourages that they should behave in these ways, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit. This again ties into the trinitarian concept, as well as the reminder that these are all accomplished in the Spirit through the bond of his peace (4:3). This is the foundation of unity and the manner by which unity is achieved.

Further, the body of Christ is called to build up one another through the grace that has been extended to them. Paul reminds his readers that God has equipped the individual with gifts that are to be used to help the body of Christ grow. That each person has a role that will help others to grow deeper in their faith. Through the Spirit, the believers should not listen to everything they hear and believe aimlessly, but rather, they ought to speak the truth to one another. Speaking the truth and calling other believers to not follow lies and schemes of the enemy must be done in love (4:14-15). When every believer is fulfilling their individual purpose, the entire body prospers and grows (4:16). This passage emphasizes the importance of unity in the followers of Christ. As unity is achieved, God is glorified. Recognizing the characteristics that God has called his people to emulate through the Spirit enables them to live in unity with one another.

Ephesians 5

Paul continues in chapter 5 to support the concept that the Christians are to be imitators of God (Eph 5:1). This is to show the importance of loving others as God loves. The same way that Christ loves people and gave himself up for all people, Christians are to show the same kind of love towards all people. Being imitators means looking different than the world and rather than making crude jokes or feeding into disunity, those who follow Christ are to refrain as Christ did (5:2-4). This discussion of not living like those who are nonbelievers raises the concept of

mutual submission as it relates to marriage. Paul uses an illustration of marriage to paint the picture of how humanity ought to relate to God. He says that the same way God loves humanity is how a man should love his wife (5:25). This is a picture of sacrificial love to the point of death. He includes that wives should submit to their husbands, as to the Lord (5:22). This picture shows that the honor and respect that humanity ought to give to God is the same kind of respect a woman should have for her husband. This teaching looks at the marital covenant to illustrate how God feels about his church. The relationship between the singular married couple also reminds them that this is within the marriage context and the woman is not to submit to other men in this way as the church is not to submit to other deities. The same context extends to the husband who is to love his wife modeled in Christ loves the church, his sacrificial love is not to extend to other women, but to chase after his wife. Paul writes, “no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body” (5:29-30). The way that a person loves their own flesh and will sin against God shows the degree of love that Christ has for all people. He cannot hate them even when they hurt him. This kind of love ought to be extended from believers to other members of the body, as Christ loves all.

Unity in Ephesians

This paper has already observed in depth the culture and teachings that impacted the Ephesian people. Because of these doctrines, we can see clearly that unity is formed through the bond of the Holy Spirit. The implications of embracing the teachings of unity in Ephesians create a foundation by which all people, regardless of ethnic identity are reconciled together through the work of Christ. The oneness that is a result of the unification of the body can only be achieved by the power of Christ. Without the observational power of God working in the lives of the members of the church, this unity is impossible.

Christ's work in the lives of the church and Paul's writings to the Ephesians show that there is critical importance that not only does the church become unified, but also the manner in which the oneness is attained is expressed. Yee observes that "a genuine concordance could and should be made possible out of ethnic differences rather than similarities."⁷⁹ The Gentile people have become fellow citizens with the circumcised Jews, as it is no longer an ethnically based path to reconciliation with God. Now the definition of the relationship that God has with Gentiles is seen in a new and fresh light. Prior to the intercession of Christ, there was no path to a renewed or expanded Israel, only the Jews could truly be a part of the chosen people. While there are examples in the of Gentiles being brought into the Israelite people, especially in the genealogy of Jesus, the attitude of Israelites towards the Gentiles created a challenge in their inclusion. The inclusive community that is created by Christ is one of unity that builds the body.

This gospel that unites the body of Christ is uniquely equipped to do so. Nothing else can truly bring people together in the way that Christ's unification can. The unity that is possessed by the church is one that is set apart from the world. It is the foundation on which people from different cultures, upbringings, worldviews, and prejudices can be brought together and transformed to result in unity despite their differences through a shared following of Christ. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes, "unity is not something that man has to produce or to arrange: true unity between Christians is inevitable and unavoidable. It is not man's creation; it is, as we have been shown so clearly, the creation of the Holy Spirit Himself."⁸⁰

Paul's letter to the Ephesians clearly illustrates his desire for the community to come together despite their differences and ethnically charged prejudices in the name of Jesus. This

⁷⁹ Tet-Lim N. Yee, *Jews, Gentiles and Ethnic Reconciliation.*, 218.

⁸⁰ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God's Way of Reconciliation (Studies in Ephesians Chapter 2)*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1972), 281.

unity is presented as the desire of Christ and Paul is passionate about encouraging the church body to continue in the unity that is only possible through the work of Christ. It is not possible to achieve this unity without Christ, and in the power of Christ, the unity is transformational and the greatest evidence of the veracity of Jesus' power.

Other Key Passages

Philemon provides a look into the reconciliation that occurs within the church. The runaway slave, Onesimus, is being sent back to his master Philemon. Paul pleads on his behalf that Philemon would extend grace and mercy to Onesimus as he is welcomed back into the household (v.12). The charge Paul offers reminds that in Christ, all people, regardless of status are viewed in equal standing in the eyes of God. This is why Paul asks that Philemon receive Onesimus the same way that he would be received (v.17). This shows the relationship that ought to be established within members of the believing body. The common brotherhood establishes a relationship that unites and causes all parties to treat each other as equals, achieving the picture of Christ's desire for his followers. This extends in the case of slave and master, but further to people of different cultural classes being equal in the eyes of God.

Philippians 2 is another New Testament passage that illustrates Christ's desire for those who believe in him. "So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (Phil 2:1-2). Here Paul again is writing to a church on the joy that results in the unity of the church. The desire of Christ for the unity of the church is equally a source of joy for the believer and should be the desire that the church strives towards. The action steps that Paul uses to illustrate that steps towards unity are seen in the subsequent verses. The believer should not act selfishly or be conceited but

should humbly be of one mind and purpose-to fulfill the will of God (v. 2-4). This is achieved by modeling their life after Jesus, who served humbly and was exalted by God (v.5-9). Through this humility and unity, the glory of God in Christ is manifested by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul writes to the church in Colossae that after being made new in Christ “there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all” (Col 3:11). Again, the sentiment that in Christ there is a unity that surpasses any previous identity. The Holy Spirit empowers believers to no longer to live in sin or disunity and can now live in unity and love. This also extends that as a Christian, one ought to view others in the same way, no longer in their old identity, but as transformed by Christ.

Finally, Romans 12 outlines the character of a true Christian. This letter, written to Gentiles, gives a look at the desire for Christianity to be for all people, regardless of ethnic or religious background. The individual who professes Christ should be found to have these characteristics and live their life growing in these. While this outline does offer many different attributes, the repetitive concept of living in peace and harmony out of love is consistent. The root of true Christianity is observed as living out of love and expressing that through expressing unity. The character traits of loving, serving, rejoicing, being generous and blessing others (v. 9-21) show different parts of being unified through the Holy Spirit. This expression of unity also champions equality, encouraging the believer to associate even with people who they perceive as lowly (v.16). Paul’s heart for salvation for all people, and specifically for Gentiles is a prevalent theme in Romans.

The thread of unity knits together the New Testament and is seen in different perspectives throughout texts. The New Testament offers a look into Jesus’s heart for his people and the tangible way the church strove to live in unity across ethnic differences. As an apologetic for

Christianity, unity provides tangible evidence for the power of Christ. The power of the gospel is verified in the examples of unification that can only be achieved through the power of Christ.

The Holy Spirit's equipping of the early church to come together so that the world would recognize them as disciples of Christ should be taken note of as it applies to modernity. As the modern church looks to unity as a powerful polemic, they must consider how the teachings of church fathers have shaped the perspective of unification of the body of Christ.

Chapter Three

Church Father's Teachings on Ethnicity and Unity

In the eyes of the historical church fathers, the drive for unity was strong. This resulted in a strong push out of the Catholic church for the pope as a figurehead to lead the universal church towards unification. Reviewing church history paints a picture of the doctrinal foundations that have shaped the current state of the church, as well as the function of unity as an apologetic. The writings of the fathers of the church provide a look at the church's development of ecumenology and the integration of unification into the universal church. As the writings of the early church fathers are considered, the theme of unity arises as a picture of the consistency of divine unity. The influence of various early patristic leaders in Christianity will be outlined and highlighted so that the reader can better picture the doctrine of unity that has shaped the church historically. This chapter will consider the writings of Clement, Origen, Ignatius, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine.

Clement

In First Clement, the author writes urging the audience not to forget that they are unified as members of one another (46:7). Stirring up malice, deceit, and factions do nothing but create a rift in the functioning community of Christ. The result of this disunity is the church falling apart and schisms being created. Clement chastises the disunity and division, claiming that just as Christ warns not to lead the body astray (Luke 17:2), the one who creates division will bring despair to the church and to themselves. The church of Alexandria was one that had a distrust of the teachings and great philosophers who lived in their city.⁸¹ They viewed that only faith was

⁸¹ Henry Chadwick, and J. E. L. Oulton, *Alexandrian Christianity: Selected Translations of Clement and Origen*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 18

required and that education would lead the church astray. Clement led this church to a greater understanding of God, despite their disregard for the intellectual aspect of Christ.

And so, brothers, we, too, must cling to models such as these. For it is written: ‘cling to saints for they who cleave to them shall become saints.’ And again in another place: ‘With the innocent man, Thou shalt be innocent; and with the elect man, Thou shalt be elect; and with the perverse man, Thou shalt be perverse.’ Let us cling, then, to the innocent and just, for they are God’s elect. Why are there quarrels and ill will and dissensions and schism and fighting among you? Do we not have one God and one Christ, and one Spirit of Grace poured out upon us? And is there not one calling in Christ?⁸²

Clement saw the need for the individual to be surrounded by and an active part of the Christian community. The bond of unity that the church has in Christ equips the believer to grow in faith. The church in Alexandria was on the defense from the Greek philosophy and pagan worship and literature. Clement provided to them a deeper understanding and used philosophy to provide reasonable belief and support of Christianity.⁸³ The importance of studying the Scriptures and how they applied in the lives of the church was of the utmost significance to Clement. He used higher reasoning to draw the local church together through Scriptural authority. His letters had unifying themes that encouraged this early church to bond together, rather than to allow themselves to be swayed by false teachings. When divisions are created, they manifest as rifts that must be addressed for the success of the church and continued spiritual growth of the body.

⁸² Clement, “The Letter to the Corinthians” (trans. by Francis X. Glimm, Joseph M.-F. Marique, and Gerald G. Walsh, In *Fathers of The Church A New Translation: The Apostolic Fathers*. vol. 1 of Fathers of The Church, Inc., Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1947), 45.

⁸³ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*. (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1983), 96.

Origen

Origen held the belief that the same way that the Israelites were the chosen people of God, that the Christians became the new chosen race, with Jesus as the patristic leader.⁸⁴ Seeing the Christian church as the reflection of the new law of Christ was the foundation for Origen. “The kind of Christianity that revolutionizes the world and is not in the least concerned to hide or lie about its revolutionary character is marked by an eschatological radicalness.”⁸⁵ This radicalness was the effect of following the law of Christ as a unified body. He placed a strong emphasis on praying for the church as a nation, that all believers are a part of the one nation and race as followers of Christ.

But the only people to fight for religion are “the elect race, the royal priesthood, the holy nation, a people for God’s possession.” The rest of mankind do not even try to make it appear that, if there is persecution of religious people, they intend to die for religion and to prefer death rather than deny their religion and live. And each of those who wish to be members of the elect race is convinced at all times, even when he is attacked by those who are supposed to be polytheists but are really atheists, he must listen to God who says, “Thou shalt have no other gods but me,” and “The name of other gods ye shall not remember in your hearts, nor mention with your mouth.”⁸⁶

The devotion of a believer is based on their position as a member of the body of Christ. Origen points this out and encourages the believers to continue to pursue Christ and not deny their Lord, rather, support other believers as they also stand against the persecution of the world, as a unified army of God. Without this unity and support the body is not as strong as it could be when it is unified.

This view of unity flows out of the Scripture, as Origen points out in his writings. Seeing the Christians as a new race follows the writings of Paul. Origen heavily considered the

⁸⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Unity of the Nations: A Vision of the Church Fathers*. (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 57.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸⁶ Chadwick, *Alexandrian Christianity.*, 396.

philosophical implications of Christianity. In his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, Origen writes that “it is clear that just as each of our members has some ability for which it is naturally fitted, the eyes to see visible things, and the ears to hear sounds, so the mind is for intelligible things and God who transcends them.”⁸⁷ The concept that God transcends all the naturalistic, tangible things and furthermore that the believer's mind is shaped by him is what Origen points to, and out of this mindset, the unity of believers is achieved.

Ignatius

Unity was a chief theme in the writings of Ignatius. In his letter to the Magnesians 1.2, Ignatius encourages the church that they continue in unity. This community of people is living in great unity and Ignatius recognized the strength that came through their camaraderie.⁸⁸ His letter contains a prayer for the church to continue in their unity.⁸⁹ He spoke against the heresies and schisms facing the church as they threatened to negatively influence the church.⁹⁰ “Ignatius advocated unity against the divisions accompanying these practices and obedience to the ministry of the church as the means of achieving this unity.”⁹¹ He was a strong proponent of the threefold ministry model that worked underneath the administration of one bishop, presbyters, and deacons in each church. For Ignatius, the unity of the church was an essential concept to Christianity. This relationship of unity that he teaches of is both the relationship of man with God and the relationship of Christian brotherhood.

And if I, in a short time, have achieved such spiritual and not merely human communion with your bishop, all the more do I congratulate you who have become one with him, as

⁸⁷ Chadwick, *Alexandrian Christianity*, 426.

⁸⁸ William R. Schoedel, Ignatius, and Helmut Koester, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986), 104.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁹⁰ Cyril C. Richardson, "The Church in Ignatius of Antioch." (*The Journal of Religion* 17, no. 4, 1937), 429.

⁹¹ "Ignatius of Antioch." (In *Understandings of the Church*, edited by Ferguson Everett, 27-30. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 2016), 27.

the Church is one with Jesus Christ and as Jesus Christ is one with the Father, so that all things may be in harmony. Let no man be deceived. If a person is not inside the sanctuary he is deprived of the Bread of God. For if the prayer of one or two men has so much force, how much greater is that of the bishop and the whole church. Any one, therefore, who fails to assemble with the others has already shown pride and set himself apart. For it is written: 'God resists the proud.' Let us be careful, therefore, not to oppose the bishop, so that we may be obedient to God.⁹²

This excerpt clearly portrays Ignatius's view of church unity as a direct reflection of God's nature and the hope that is extended to the church. In his view, the leadership of the church, the bishop, had been placed by God and the unity of the church and the bishop was to create a picture of the unity of God. When the people of the church experience unity, Ignatius asserts that they will grow and be blessed by God. However, when someone alienates themselves from the church body, Ignatius, in turn, sees that they are cutting themselves off from God.

Ignatius of Antioch did his ministry in a religiously diverse city where many members of the church had converted to Christianity from paganism.⁹³ It was in Antioch that some of the Christian-Jews began to open up membership to the church and fellowship of the believers to Gentiles (Acts 15:1-11; Gal 2:1-10). This beginning of unity was reflected in Ignatius's writings and his desire for unity in the church as an illustration of the divine unity of God. He saw the trinitarian doctrine represented by the unity of the body through the Holy Spirit. This consideration leads to a better understanding of the influence that a desire for biblical unity had on the church that Ignatius ministered to. Ignatius pointed to unity for doctrinal purposes. He pointed out that a unified church structure mirrored God's divine unity. This structural unity was to apply to the church catholic, that is all Christian churches.

⁹² Ignatius, "To the Ephesians" (trans. by Francis X. Glimm, Joseph M.-F. Marique, and Gerald G. Walsh, In *Fathers of The Church A New Translation: The Apostolic Fathers*. vol. 1 of Fathers of The Church, Inc., Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1947), 89.

⁹³ Thomas A. Robinson, *Ignatius of Antioch and the Parting of the Ways: Early Jewish-Christian Relations*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 17.

Tertullian

Tertullian viewed the love of Christians and the unity that resulted out of that love as the true sign of Christian religion. This manifested itself in his writing, that he wrote of the essential call of the church to be one. The church members should share what they have, as modeled by the church in Acts. Further, the body should live in community, living openly with one another. “When men who are upright and good assemble, when the pious and virtuous gather together, the meeting should be called not a secret society but a senate.”⁹⁴ He writes this to encourage the church as they continue in their path to God.

Additionally, he writes of the oneness of God:

The object of our worship is the one God, who, out of nothing, simply for the glory of His majesty, fashioned this enormous universe with its whole supply of elements, bodies, and spirits, and did so simply by the Word wherewith He bade it, the Reason whereby He ordered it, the Power wherewith He was powerful. Hence it is that even the Greeks apply the appropriate word ‘cosmos’ to the universe.⁹⁵

Tertullian was a well-educated man and employed philosophical thought to illustrate religious ideals and teachings. This can be seen in his encouragement. He wrote to the community that as they are living in unity and following the commands of the Lord, they will grow and not to let the demonizing of the Roman rulers to dissuade their devotion. Additionally, he provided an argument that linked the grandeur of the universe to the majesty and unity of God. The nature of God in His oneness is a foundation that the church’s unity is built on.

While Tertullian did leave the church to join the monastic movement, his contributions to understanding the doctrine of the early church give the modern reader better insight into the challenges that were being faced by the church and the teachings that the church leaders were

⁹⁴ Tertullian, “Apology” (trans. by Rudolph Arbesmann, Emily Joseph Daly, and Edwin A. Quain, In *Fathers of The Church A New Translation: Tertullian, Apologetical Works and Minucius Felix, Octavius*. vol. 10 of *Fathers of The Church*, Inc., Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1950), 102.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

emphasizing. In his *Apology*, he encourages believers who are lacking in faith to even look at martyrdom as evidence of the truth and devotion of the body of the church. This perspective adds to the reader's understanding of the foundational teachings of the church fathers and the way they impacted doctrine in the modern church.

Cyprian

Cyprian served as the bishop of Carthage and led the African Church from AD 248-258, he was martyred for his faith.⁹⁶ “*On the Unity of the Catholic Church*... [was written] in response to the schism created by clergy supporting immediate reconciliation of all the fallen.”⁹⁷ In this treatise, Cyprian writes a commentary on Paul's writing, “‘Never’ he says, ‘will charity fall away’ (1 Cor 13:2-5,7,8). For she will always be in the kingdom and will endure forever in the unity of the brotherhood clinging to it. Discord cannot come to the kingdom of heaven”.⁹⁸ This concept of love unifying the body enforces the idea that in heaven all people will be unified regardless of their background. Cyprian is emphasizing that the bond of unity that comes through Christ is one that will withstand even into eternity. Looking at the church, there is an overall theme in Cyprian's writings on unity, that it leads to the strengthening of the body and preservation of the church.⁹⁹ This should affect the way that the church interacts as well as shape the attitude that believers have in their roles as members of the church. The Holy Spirit equips the believers to live in this unity.¹⁰⁰ Further unity provides accountability to the believer, that they not be caught up in the attacks and temptations that come from the enemy.¹⁰¹ Cyprian saw

⁹⁶ J. Patout Burns, “Cyprian of Carthage.” (*The Expository Times* 120, no. 10, July 2009): 469.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 471.

⁹⁸ Cyprian, “The Unity of the Church” (trans. by Roy J. Deferrari, In *Fathers of The Church A New Translation: Saint Cyprian Treatises*. vol. 36 of *Fathers of The Church*, Inc., Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 109-110.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

that, “[t]he unity of the church was not, however, the result of human co-operation: it was a created expression of the indivisible unity of the Trinity.”¹⁰²

Take away a ray of light from the body of the sun, its unity does not take on any division of its light; break a branch from a tree, the branch thus broken will not be able to bud; cut off a stream from its source, the stream thus dries up. Thus too the Church bathed in the light of the Lord projects its rays over the whole world, yet there is one light that is diffused everywhere, and the unity of the body is not separated. She [the unity of the Church] extends her branches over the whole earth in fruitful abundance; she extends her richly flowing streams far and wide; yet her head is one, and her source is one, and she is the one mother copious in the results of her fruitfulness. By her womb we are born; by her milk we are nourished; by her spirit we are animated.¹⁰³

The picture of the unified church as the link of all believers on earth shows the importance of unity and the deep impact that unity has on the church. On a global level, Cyprian writes that the presence of the Holy Spirit is diffused on earth through the unified global church. The very testimony of the Spirit that works through believers encounters all members of the body through this unification. It is by the Spirit that the bond of unity is strengthened and through the people of God that unity is used to spread the gospel to the nations. The behavioral teachings of Cyprian on the body of believers heavily taught unity as the end goal. In heaven, true unity in the Spirit will be achieved and the individual believers will be a part of that unity.

The teachings of unity by Cyprian serve to show the role that biblical unity has of on the local church body. This portrayal of unity as empowered by the Spirit is to serve to encourage the church to persevere. His teachings that discord would not come into heaven was to encourage reconciliation within the body of Christ. With this in mind, Cyprian encouraged the members of the church to seek to be unified in the Spirit. The use of unity to shape the behavior of the body was an apparent technique for Cyprian.

¹⁰² Patout Burns, “Cyprian of Carthage”, 472.

¹⁰³ Cyprian, “The Unity of the Church”, 100.

Augustine

“Truth testifies that we are in one house, since the Holy Scripture, which says that the Church is the body of Christ, likewise says that the same Church is the house of God.”¹⁰⁴ Being a member of one body and one church was a critical aspect of the teachings of Augustine. As a leader of the African church, he encouraged those to whom he ministered to engage in active pursuit of unification. While unity was not a topic on which he wrote frequently, Augustine did address church unity regularly in his sermons. He uses an illustration to draw the attention of the listener to the importance of unity.

But when God created man, he made only one individual from whom the whole human race has descended. He did not even choose to make two separate individuals, male and female; but first one man, and then from him one woman. What was the reason for this? Why did the whole human race spring from a single individual, except that thereby God might recommend unity to the attention of us all? And Christ our Lord was born of a single human parent, a woman; unity is a virgin, it preserves virginity and incorruptibility.¹⁰⁵

Thus, Augustine paints a picture that even in God’s redemptive plan in which unity is a theme that can be observed even from the beginning of time. Augustine’s illustration of the unity of people being revealed through the observation of humanity being created out of one man provides a continuation of this idea that even Jesus was born of one human parent. The purpose of all these things is to point people back to God and his nature of oneness. With this understanding of unity, Augustine taught that the church was indeed called to unity. The apostles of Christ were commanded by Christ that through the Holy Spirit, they would be empowered to achieve the unity that has been integrated into the whole of the narrative of Christianity.

¹⁰⁴ Augustine, “142” (trans. by Sister Wilifred Parsons, In *Fathers of The Church A New Translation: Saint Augustine Letters, Volume III (131-164)*. vol. 20 of Fathers of The Church, Inc., Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 147.

¹⁰⁵ Hugh Farmer, "A Pentecost Sermon of St Augustine on The Unity of The Church." *Life of the Spirit (1946-1964)*12, no. 139/140, 1958), 356.

Another attribute of the unified church that Augustine viewed as integral to unity was the humility of the church:

For Augustine, Christ's poverty is the root of the richness of the poor in the sense that Christ's death is the basis for the resurrection and for the justification of sinners. Clearly, Christ's reason to become poor must be situated within Augustine's doctrine of grace. Christ's voluntary poverty has its foundation in his humble attitude, which in turn should also be the essence of his Body (Phil 2:5-8). Indeed, it was particularly Augustine who saw the theological and ethical connection between the humility of Christ and the humble church.¹⁰⁶

The connection between unity and humility are causal and linked together. The thriving church could not have one without the other. The relationship that humility had on the ministry of the church and the body becoming unified in their efforts are in direct correlation to the reconciliation that Christ offers to the church and his attitude towards people. To maintain unity, the church must come together humbly as individuals and view each other in the light that God sees people. The essence of salvation reflects the humble nature of God and the grace extended to people even when they lack humility.

As can be seen, the doctrine of unity is consistent in the writings of the church fathers. As the early Christians faced schisms, heresy, and persecution, through the unity of the Holy Spirit they were strengthened together. This crossed the cultural boundaries that had previously divided them and established a unity that was a strong apologetic of the veracity of Christianity and the power of God to work in and through his people.

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Lam. "Humilitas Iesu Christi as Model of a Poor Church: Augustine's Idea of a Humble Church for the Poor" [online]. *The Australasian Catholic Record*, Vol. 93, No. 2, 2016), 182.

Chapter Four

Unity as an Apologetic

After the consideration of the foundational teaching of the Old Testament and the extension of unity in the New Testament, the use of unity as a powerful apologetic for Christianity is the logical result. This final chapter will look to apply the principles of biblical unity that have been observed so that it can be better understood what unity as an apologetic looks like practically.

As has been established earlier in the thesis, the task of church unity is established the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of members of the church. This unity can only be accomplished in Christ and it is seen evidently in the biblical teachings of the New Testament. The unity achieved through the power of Christ is a major doctrine in Paul's letters. The unity that is preserved by the church (Eph 4:3) is not created by the church but merely preserved through the intercession of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the members of the body of Christ.

Unity as Evidence of Christ

The gospel claims that have been made regarding the unity of the body and the fulfillment of those claims is critical to Christianity. The gospels are the four narratives of the life of Jesus that serve to provide insight into the life and behavior of Jesus. In each gospel record, there are claims and theologies established that we have previously discussed that are foundational to the unity of the church body. These claims can be used in the evangelistic effort, that the counter-cultural message of Christ is authentic and has power. Without a unified church, the teachings of the Bible cannot be fully lived out by believers in the truth. Unity's purpose in the church is the fulfillment of the old covenant and the protection of the patricentric society, as addressed in the earlier chapters, is fulfilled in the new race, through salvation in Christ. This is

an echo of Israel's purpose to be a light to the Gentiles and be the people group from which unity springs. The church body is to be unified through the Holy Spirit and seek to draw people to unification with God. The difference between the unity of the church and any other group should be significantly different. The unity should point people to Christ, as they recognize that only through Christ this can be achieved. When this is experienced by someone who has not put their faith in Christ, they will recognize the power and counter-cultural unity that is only found in Christ.

Gospel Claims

In each of the gospels, there are different allusions to the Gentiles and God's plan of restoration for all people. The heart of Christ for unity has already been established in this paper and now the implications will be considered in greater detail. In Luke 1 there is a reminder of the promise in Genesis 12, 18, 22, and 26 that through Abraham's offspring that all nations will be blessed. This foreshadows that salvation is not for the Jewish people alone, rather, that through God's plan all people will have the opportunity of reconciliation to God. Luke's narrative is written as a continuation of the grand metanarrative of God's plan for humanity's redemption.¹⁰⁷

The staggering claims of Jesus about his people showcase the heart that Christ has for his people to use unity as evidence of his transformation of their lives. Jesus tells his disciples that the way by which they love one another, in unity, is how the world around them will know that they follow him (John 13:35). Without unity, there is no tangible picture of the radical, counter-cultural change that an individual undergoes when they submit to following Christ fully. The cross-cultural impact of Christ is evidenced in the unity expressed by the power of Christ.

¹⁰⁷ J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 161.

Dr. Tony Evans talks of the unity that should be clearly evident in the lives of believers in light of understanding biblical unity:

Unity is not uniformity, nor is it sameness. Just as the Godhead is made up of three distinct Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—each unique in personhood and yet at the same time one in essence, unity reflects a oneness that does not negate individuality. Unity does not mean everyone needs to be like everyone else. God’s creative variety is replete with displaying itself through a humanity crafted in different shapes, colors, and styles. Each of us, in one form or another, is unique. Unity occurs when we combine our unique differences together as we head toward a common goal. It is the sense that the thing that we are gathered for and moving toward is bigger than our own individual preferences.¹⁰⁸

In light of the transformation of the gospel, the people who follow Christ should be unified in this way, so that their very interactions begin to point people to Christ. This is the result of the work of God in the individual life and the common purpose of glorifying God that motivates the believers. Without unity, there is no fulfillment of the gospel-expressed desire of Christ.

For Evangelism

Having interacted with the gospel claims about unity and built the case for a picture of biblical unity, the ultimate purpose of unity as an apologetic can now be considered. If unity is the best apologetic evidence because of its unique power to unite cross-culturally like no other unifier, then it must be used to fulfill the command directed to all believers, that they share the gospel. This is to be understood and extended to even viewing denominational issues through the understanding of primary and secondary doctrines. Primary doctrines are those that are necessary to a faith in Jesus, such as: the deity of Jesus, the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the trinitarian nature of God. Secondary doctrines are those which members of the Christian body can disagree on without sacrificing salvific tenants. These issues have more to do with practices

¹⁰⁸ Anthony Evans, *Oneness Embraced.*, 44.

and symbolic meaning of the sacraments of Christianity as well as a different interpretation of passages of Scripture.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:19-20). The great commission is given to the disciples of Jesus as the final command he has for them. In response to witnessing his resurrection, he commissions them to go to people from all ethnicities and tell them of his salvation. In building his kingdom of followers, they are to teach them to obey the commands that he has given to the disciples. This includes his desire for unity in perpetuity for the lives of all believers that is seen in John 17:20-21.

Seeing unity as an apologetic necessarily connects it to evangelism. The purpose of an apologetic is to aid in evangelistic efforts and to create argumentation and evidence that points to the Christian God as the One true Deity. The use of unity as observational evidence is the most critical, as it showcases the power that Christ equips believers with, should they obey his commands and fulfill his desire. This use of unity for the purpose of transformation in the lives of others as they encounter Christ followers should result in broad evidencing claims of the counter-culture nature of Christianity.

Unity, when seen as an apologetic, becomes a powerful tool for evangelism. The unity that is possible for the Christian church is unlike any other group. It is based on the commonality of Christ, which becomes the new identity of a follower, regardless of their ethnicity. In Christ, all people now have a common bond that should shift their treatment of others. The Christian expression of unity should be a counter-cultural and impossible evidence that points to the power of God. As believers work in an evangelistic effort to share the message of Jesus, if they have

experienced the true transformation and resulting unity of the body, it should be a significant marker of Christianity. The unity displayed should be evidence of the veracity of Christianity and stand out from other groups of people in its diversity.

In a study on Mission and Evangelism in Unity, the ramifications that unity has on the impact on those hearing the missionaries teach of Christ is substantial. Thus, it is out of the evangelistic effort that an effort towards unity arises with the intention of evangelism. “The missionaries were among the first to look for ways and styles of witness in unity, recognizing that the scandal of Christian divisions and denominational rivalries hindered greatly the impact of their message.”¹⁰⁹ It is the divisions that have separated different sects of Christianity that cause dilemmas in a nonbeliever receiving Christianity. When members of the body of Christ follow the teachings of Christ and are not separated in their disagreements, unity ensues. This kind of unity is a living testament to those who observe it of the veracity of Christianity.

Unity and Reconciliation

The ultimate goal of the unifying work of Christ is to draw the body together as an expression of the power and love that God has. This unifying power seeks to reconcile not only believers together with Christ but also with one another. The heart of unity must become one of reconciliation in light of observing the biblical expression of unity. The expression of reconciliation between humanity and God and within the body of Christ should be considered the most valuable apologetic tool and demonstration of the gospel’s power. Reconciliation is to restore a broken relationship. This is seen in humanity’s restoration to God through Christ’s sacrifice and in turn the reconciliation of the members of the church to one body.

¹⁰⁹ "Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today." *International Review of Mission*, (1999), 109.

The unity with Christ that is experienced is a result of the work of reconciliation in the lives of those who choose to follow Christ. Paul writes it this way:

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:18-20).

Through the gospel of Jesus Christ, those who have chosen to follow him become unified with him. In turn, they become his ambassadors, unified in their evangelistic effort of reconciliation. Understanding the transformational value of following Christ and the reconciliation that becomes a reality for the follower of Christ, the responsibility shifts for the individual. Now, they ought to share the good news they have received, as well as, work to reconcile with those around them who are also in Christ. The role of the believer is to become an ambassador of Christ, one who speaks to others on his behalf so that they might come to the same reconciliation.

Biblical unity strives to achieve unity with Christ and unity with others through Christ. Unity is the practical evidence of reconciliation in the life of a Christian. This is a clear illustration of the teachings in Ephesians 4:1-16. In light of the identity that a follower of Christ gains, Paul writes that they should live in a manner worthy of their calling. This teaching is simply saying that having encountered Christ, there should be a shift of identity as believers are called to place their identity in Christ. The shift to embrace unity both with Christ and with others is the first tangible expression of living up to the calling that Christ has on the life a believer. Their identification no longer is rooted in anything outside of Christ and at this point they can surrender to him. To live in unity is to first acknowledge that God is the one who establishes unity.

It is not in the power of Christians to create unity. God, the father is the one who creates unity (Eph 2:14). The responsibility of the believers is to maintain the unity that God has established. This can be done by following the methodology that Paul uses to teach this point. By treating the body, that is, the church, with humility, gentleness, patience, and longsuffering, the unity of the body can be achieved. This communal service to one another comes out of the identity that the individual has and whether they identify with the body or their old ways and groups. These attributes that Paul encourages as the foundation of unity are ramifications of living according to the teachings of Christ. They become evident in the life of an individual who pursues Christ and loves others out of the love that they have experienced from God.

It is the responsibility of those who are members of the united body of Christ to work towards reconciling all members of the body who are outside of that unity. It is a responsibility that extends out of the grace that has been extended to believers.¹¹⁰ God, through Christ, reconciles the world to himself. So, in the same manner, the church ought to be reconciled to unity. The connection of restoration of relationships to unity serves as an example of the power of Christ in the world. This unity should point people to God and his power.

Brenda McNeil and Rick Richardson present their five-step model of reconciliation as it stems out of unity. The steps that they highlight are:

First, reconciliation is above all the work of God and happens best in the power and presence of God... Second, reconciliation with others is based on having a healthy sense of one's own identity... Third, reconciliation is above all rooted in the work of Christ on the cross... Fourth, as we experience forgiveness and the possibility of a new future together, we will realize that there have been larger, destructive forces at work in our common life... The fifth and final step is to individually and corporately embrace being a new creation.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Will D. Campbell, *Writings on Reconciliation and Resistance*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 97.

¹¹¹ Brenda S. McNeil, and Rick Richardson, *The Heart of Racial Justice: How Soul Change Leads to Social Change*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 52-56.

Through the power of Christ, all parties who experience or cause dissention become new creations. This equips them to embrace unity through the power of their new identities. It is only when members of the body of Christ recognize their own experience with the reconciliation of Christ that they can be reconciled to unity with one another. This shift creates a foundation for unity in the church body that is only achievable in Christ.

The heart of the gospel is the reconciliation of humanity back to God. From the closeness that God intended for humanity in Genesis and the brokenness of the relationship as a result of their sin to the death of Jesus to restore the relationship, the desire for unity is clear. The individual should recognize this expression that is desired by God and strive towards it as they follow him. Ultimately, as one submits to their identity in Christ above another identifications, they will prioritize the desires of God. They will not lose their ethnic identity or other form of identity, but rather their identity in Christ will influence their expression of identity.

Apologetic Strategy

The outflow of this study is the proposal of an apologetic strategy for the effective leveraging of unity in the church. This strategy begins on the individual level of each believer and ultimately extends to the corporate church. Having seen unity as being only feasible through the power of Christ, as evidence of Christ, and its role in reconciliation, believers must consider what their responsibility is in achieving unity as well as steps that they can begin to take to champion unity as an apologetic.

First, there must be an identity shift to one wholeheartedly in Christ. With Christ as the source of unity, identity must be rooted in him. Priorities follow identity. When people place their identity outside of God, their desire to live in unity with other believers will not be grounded in truth. There will be a foundation from which the believer bases their actions. This is

the principle of where one's heart is, there they will find what they treasure (Matt 6:21). If the identity of a person places their ethnicity above Christ, they will discriminate against those who are outside of their shared identity, even if unintentionally. This same principle goes for political preference, sexuality, and any other identifier that someone can find shared value in. When the identity of a person is in Christ, their shared values come with those who are living in a manner that is pursuing loving others well and striving for unity.

Even when it is in the best intention to be distinguished by denomination, should someone's identity be in their denomination rather than solely in Christ, the disunity that arises becomes evident. God desires for his church to be one in Christ, as his own oneness. It is this unity that is the foundational evidence of Christ's power that surpasses all others. The identity of Christ creates unity in people from groups that otherwise would never affiliate.

Second, there must be an understanding of how God perceives others. When the individual sees their identity as in Christ, the next outflow is that they see others the way that God directs them to. This is a result of their own shift in thinking and putting their identity in Christ. The perception of people that Christians ought to have is revealed in the Bible. When someone's identity is in Christ, they should be growing towards having the mind of Christ. It is clear that God loves and intentionally created all people. Every person was made in the image of God (Gen 1:26) and the response of Christians ought to be to treat people in the way that they are valued.

The value of a person is not dependent on their perceived identity, rather on the image in which they were created. In Psalms, it is written that God knits the person together in the womb of their mother (Ps 119:11). This shows the intentional creation of each individual by God and the value that each life has as they have been intentionally created in his image. With this

perspective, knowing their own identity in Christ, the members of the church should be compelled to live in the unity that they are called to by Christ. This is an act of obedience and follows the desire of God so that others might see their own worth and value as God sees them as they encounter Christians. When people see that they are loved and valued, they will be compelled to follow Christ and find their identity in him.

Third, there should be repentance of past disunity. Disunity breaks the heart of God, as can be observed in Paul's writing to the church in Corinth.

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul (1 Cor 1:10-13)?

As the body of Christ, when something has been done that is against God, there must be a response of repentance. Paul writes that they ought to be united with the same mind and judgment. This is to say that those who have their identity in Christ ought to also have the mind of Christ. With the knowledge of the shared identity in Christ that members of the church have and the understanding of others in light of Christ, there should be a recognition that arises when disunity occurs.

Repentance is essential to the continued growth of the Christian and also to the continued strength of the church. God promises that he will be faithful to forgive those who sin when they repent (1 John 1:9). The process of repentance is to not simply ask for forgiveness but to live in light of the forgiveness that has been received. Therefore, it is essential that someone whose identity is in Christ is not living in rebellion against their identity but is repentant when they fall short of Christ's perfection.

Fourth and finally, the biblical church should live in the freedom of Christian brotherhood. When the power of Christ has been experienced and the foundation of the believer and their role in the body is firstly in their identity in Christ, unity can be experienced. This is the unity that God intended for his church and is recorded throughout Scripture. There is a freedom that is experienced in a unified community. This community follows the model of the church in Acts. They come together to support each other and carry one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). Those who live in Christian community work towards obeying Christ together and serving those around them as a community. Unity in the community builds up the individual members and does not allow for divisive and slanderous comments to undermine their fellowship (Eph 4:29).

The Christian church is called to showcase unity by being of one mind and spirit, out of the same love that they experience from God (Phil 2:1-2). It is with this heart and mindset that unity must surpass the barriers and divisions that come from ethnic identity and a new identity should be found in Christ. Out of this identity, unity is formed through the power of God. This unity is the most foundational apologetic because it presents evidence that is unachievable in any other manner. Only in Christ is true unity known and maintained. Thus, the unity of the Christian church must be a priority as an apologetic. The task of evangelism relies on the Holy Spirit and the powerful apologetics that it equips believers with. Unity through the Holy Spirit is the most counter-cultural display of Christianity and cannot be dismissed by skeptics. The world strives towards unity, yet their efforts are futile outside of God's power to establish unity.

Understanding what biblical unity in the body of Christ is historically and how should live shapes the world's encounters with Christianity.

Conclusion

After looking at ethnic identity and the interactions of people from different ethnic groups throughout the Bible, a biblical theology of unity is created. With the biblical understanding of what unity ought to be, an apologetic should naturally result. The Old Testament shows the surrounding culture of the ancient Near East shows the countercultural behaviors and expectations on the Israelite people. The ethnic identities within the ANE and their formation provide historical context and the emotional ties that the Jewish people in the New Testament experienced. Without a full understanding of the Old Testament culture, the study of ethnicities and their impact on the New Testament teachings miss the depth of their impact. The contextual teachings that influence the New Testament Jew to give a better understanding to modern readers as they process ethnic studies and biblical unity. Approaching the New Testament with the cultural background of the Old Testament illustrates the experiences of the Israelite people in the metanarrative of the Bible. Equipped with this foundation, the New Testament is better understood.

The New Testament offers a look into Jesus's heart for his people and the tangible way the church was called to live in unity in their ethnic differences. The sociopolitical framework and the culture that surrounded the first Christians shows the transformation in the hearts and attitudes of key apostles and their ministries, such as Peter and Paul. As an apologetic for Christianity, unity provides tangible evidence for the power of Christ. The veracity of the gospel is provided through the examples of unification in the early church only be achievable through the power of Christ. The Holy Spirit's design of unity as a reflection of the trinitarian nature of God carries heavy doctrinal value. The equipping of the early church to come together so that the world would recognize them as disciples of Christ should be taken note of as it applies to

modernity. As the modern church looks to unity as a powerful polemic, they must consider how the teachings of church fathers have shaped the perspective of unification of the body of Christ. The doctrine of unity is consistent in the writings of the church fathers. It is a topic that is in the foundation of many writings and the patristic fathers saw unity as the foundation of their teachings. This is evident as they used unity to show Christianity and create the theology that has shaped modern Christianity. As the early Christians faced schisms, heresy, and persecution, through the unity of the Holy Spirit they were strengthened together. This unity strengthened the early church and broke down cultural boundaries that had previously divided them. The unity created formed a strong apologetic of the veracity of Christianity and the power of God to work in and through his people.

With this theology of biblical unity, the value of unity as an apologetic results out of the work of Christ. Unity is the desire of Christ, the evidence of Christ as active in the world, and the platform for his reconciliation. Through unity, the church is grown and strengthened. In response to this thesis, an apologetic strategy for unity is formed. First, there must be an identity shift to one wholeheartedly in Christ. Second, there must be an understanding of how God perceives others. Third, there should be repentance of past disunity. Fourth and finally, the biblical church should live in the freedom of Christian brotherhood. This can only be accomplished through Christ. Thus, the unity of the universal Christian church must be a priority to all Christians. It has an incredible amount of power as an apologetic. The task of evangelism relies on the Holy Spirit and the powerful apologetics that it equips believers with. Unity through the Holy Spirit is the desired by the world but is a futile pursuit without the Spirit. The desire for Christian ethics and the expressions of Christ, such as unity, in this world, are only truly possible through Christ. All efforts that disregard Christ are futile because they lack God's power to establish unity. Through

this understanding of biblical unity, the church is equipped, and the world gets to encounter the unity of Christianity, apologetically.

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