

Article: UNION OR UNITY?

What is the difference between union and unity? Is there any distinction? Union refers to the act of coming together, while unity signifies harmony, agreement, and concord—sameness of heart and mind—reflecting shared goals and purposes.

Think of marriage. Holy Scripture defines marriage as the union of one man [male] and one woman [female] (Genesis 2:22) living in that union until death parts them (Matthew 19:6). As we reflect on our own marriages, is the union always a genuine expression of unity? Consider the disunity that fractures the marital bond, disrupts the family, and often leads to divorce. Union alone does not necessarily mean unity.

Throughout the world, many Christian denominations exist, distinct from non-Christian religions or groups. Among those who identify as Christian, *doctrinal differences* divide various denominations from one another. Additionally, even within Christian denominations that regard the Bible as their sole source of doctrine and thus expect doctrinal unity, discrepancies still exist. In other words, these groups accept disunity within congregations and among clergy who make up the church. Such a state of union without true unity is known as *unionism* in the church.

The AELC Statement of Faith says regarding union without unity: *“If a church body’s written confession is contradicted by its public practice, and if it does not practise doctrinal discipline against persistent error, its confession is to that degree rendered false or meaningless. Faithful Christians should avoid worshipping or practising fellowship in sacred things with such false church bodies.¹ To do so is “sinful unionism”* (The Unity of the Church, and Church Fellowship).

That should be the stance of any Lutheran Church that wants to be seen as orthodox. It is also the challenge faced by every orthodox church today, in a time when the attitude that getting along is more loving and attractive than standing for the truth is common. This echoes the scripture that exhorts, if necessary, *“Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I shall receive you. I shall be a Father to you, and you will be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty”* (2 Corinthians 6:17-18).

Union belongs to man. Unity belongs to God. Therefore, the Church does not tolerate division. The high standard of Scripture is clear. All members of the Church are to confess the same truth on all matters of faith. This is explicitly stated by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:10, *“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.”* This statement is limited to the Scriptures.

In marriage, union without unity is a failure waiting to happen. In the Church, union without unity in the Word of God is living a lie.

The Holy Christian Church is not denominational; it is spiritual. The Holy Christian Church, the Body of Christ, consists solely of believers. It is a fruit of Gospel preaching through which the Lord claims for His own everyone who believes. It is the Lord’s will that believers gather in worship and ministry. Such a union of believers assembles not on the basis of faith that cannot be seen, but on the basis of the *confession* of faith. Consequently, within the visible church, there may be some hypocrites in the visible fellowship, such as those who put on airs of being Christian but do not believe in the Lord Jesus. Within the external fellowship of Christian churches, the Lord knows those who are His (2 Timothy 2:19). He will do the sorting on Judgment Day.

The union of Christians where there is agreement in the Word is a beautiful gift of the Spirit and reflects the unity within the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints. Therefore, the Lord has reasons for instructing that the union of churches or church bodies be based on agreement in all matters of faith and doctrine. Besides the danger of false doctrine to souls (Romans 16:17-18), compromising on matters of faith for the sake of union disrupts the unity that reflects the essence of the Body of Christ. It is the Lord’s will that the unity of His Body be reflected on earth within the external fellowship of believers.

¹ 1 Kings 18:21; Matthew 7:15-16; Romans 16:17; Ephesians 4:3-5; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18; 2 John 10-11.

While imprisoned in Rome, the Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the believers in Philippi. This congregation was the first in Europe established by the Spirit through Paul's Gospel ministry. The tone of the letter shows that the congregation was very dear to Paul. He encouraged them, as members of the Body of Christ, the Holy Christian Church, to mirror the spirit and mind of the Lord Jesus (Philippians 2:5-8), who is both the Head of the Church and the Saviour. We do not see, "*Fulfil my joy by being likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind*" (2:2), as a rebuke or reprimand, but as an evangelical encouragement. Apparently, word had reached the Apostle about some tension within the congregation that was threatening its unity. Some members were displaying "*selfish ambition or conceit*" (2:3, 4:2). Backsliding Christians also posed a danger (3:17-19). False teachers and supporters of error sow dissension. Even in fellowships where the Word is taught in its truth and purity as the Lord commands and encourages, tensions can sometimes arise over material or temporal issues. Being of one mind and spirit was vital for both the internal life of the congregation and its outward ministry.

Church unity is honest, peaceful, and joyful when there is agreement in doctrine and fellowship within a congregation or church body. What Paul wrote to the Philippians about unity, he also wrote to the Ephesians, urging them to reflect the true unity that exists in the Body of Christ, of which He is the Source, and the Spirit is the power.

In Ephesians 4:1-6, he wrote: "*I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called,* ² *with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,* ³ *eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.* ⁴ *There is **one** body and **one** Spirit—just as you were called to the **one** hope that belongs to your call—* ⁵ ***one** Lord, **one** faith, **one** baptism,* ⁶ ***one** God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*"

There is not and cannot be division or disunity in the Body of Christ. Paul was not describing what the Ephesians should become, but what they *already were and possessed*. The unity Paul referred to was a description of their status as members of the Church through faith in Christ. He wrote to them (and to us), therefore, to help preserve and maintain this unity, which reflects the identity of Christ-believers within the Holy Christian Church. Both in doctrine and in their relationships, Christ-believers are called to mirror their relationship with Him.

Union or unity? "*Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!*" (Psalm 133:1). While it is pleasant to enjoy unity in marriage and when citizens live together in peace and with a single purpose, the context of the Psalm emphasises *religious unity* among those who are of one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all. How blessed is the union of all who have come to the "*until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,* ¹⁴ *so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.* ¹⁵ *Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ*" (Ephesians 4:13-15).