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& Their Implications for Christian Growth

Sunny Tan

Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary

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The wider interest of this essay is the challenge for Christians to better demonstrate unity among themselves as a witness to a divided and fragmented world. The divisions among persons and between people groups remain deep; but the good news of Christianity is that the Triune God has broken down the walls that divide. How then should Christians be formed so that reconciliation, love, and unity become a deep personal and corporate concern and action? This article proposes that when Christian unity becomes a vital part of the language and goal of Christian discipleship and growth, then perhaps believers will be better characterized to keep and reach the unity which is intrinsic of faith in Jesus and which is continuously being effected by the Holy Spirit. Such a proposal comes from a close study of the Epistle to the Ephesians, especially of Eph. 4:1-16. This essay, therefore, examines the two expressions, “keep the unity of the Spirit” and “until we all reach the unity of the faith” in their occurrences in 4:3 and 4:13 respectively; and discusses the implications of the exhortations for the discipling effort in a local church context. The study and reflection are carried out under four subheadings: (A) Christian Unity in Ephesians, (B) The Word ἐνότης in 4:3 & 13, (C) The Two Expressions on Unity in 4:3 & 13 (D) Conclusion: Christian Unity &

Christian Growth in Eph. 4:1-16.

(A) Christian Unity in Ephesians

This essay assumes the Apostle Paul as the epistle's author; and he wrote it as a circular letter while in prison. The reflective style and content of the letter suggest Paul to be in worshipful mood as he contemplates the place of the church in God's economy, the entrance of the Gentiles into the church and his own role in it. The letter was probably written to Gentile Christians in the Lycus Valley with the purpose of inspiring them to a greater love for the church of Jesus Christ. Paul hopes that the Gentile believers would be filled with wonder and gratitude as they better grasped God's purpose in bringing people together to be the church of Jesus Christ.

Most scholars agree that "unity" is the dominant theme of the epistle. F.C. Syngé describes it as the "one majestic theme" (Syngé:1)¹ and J.L. Houlden declares that it is the "single motif which embraces almost the whole of Ephesians" (Houlden: 237).² The Apostle speaks of various dimensions of unity in the epistle: (a) The dimension of mystical union between Christ and the believers (e.g., in the use of the ἐν Χριστῷ phrase; the declaration in 5:31-32 that flesh union in marriage is actually patterned on Christ's union with the church), (b) The dimension of "cosmological unity" in 1:9-10 (Patzia:118)³; (c) The dimension of relational unity and practical unity which is found mainly in chapters 4-6; and (d) The dimension of ecclesiastical unity is evident in the following ways: As the main subject of 2:11-22, in the use of the σύν-compounds in 3:1-13, in the conscious use of pronoun changes in 1:11-14, in the

phrase πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους, and choice of metaphors (e.g., ἐκκλησία is explicitly equated with the body of Christ in 1:23, 5:23, 30). For this essay’s purpose, the theme of unity is examined through the Apostle’s choice of the word ἐνότης in 4:3 & 13.

(B) The Word ἐνότης in 4:3 & 13

The concern of this section is to explore the contribution of the term ἐνότης to the meaning of the two expressions, “unity of the Spirit” and “unity of the faith.” The term is only found here in the New Testament. Armitage Robinson observes that it is not “the characteristically Christian word” used by Paul to express Christian unity; and κοινωνία is a more “living and fruitful term” (Robinson: 92)⁴. Hence, the choice of the term ἐνότης is deliberate; and the differences between ἐνότης and terms like κοινωνία and other more usual expressions, such as τὸ αὐτὸ φρονῆτε (Phil.2:2) should indicate a different approach is being taken on the subject of unity in Ephesians. The discussion below will briefly comment on examples of possible expressions of unity in the New Testament and then focus on the word ἐνότης itself.

Other Expressions of Unity

The word κοινωνία, like ἐνότης, is an abstract noun; but unlike ἐνότης it can also acquire a concrete sense, e.g., community or society (Campbell: 356)⁵. In the New Testament, the word κοινωνία denotes the intimate communal and inter-personal relationships made possible because of the intrinsic unity which now exists among believers. The two words, therefore, may be contrasted in this way: κοινωνία among believers is the

manifestation of an existing ἐνότης. Another word that Paul could have used is ὁμοθυμαδόν, which is often translated “united” in the English versions. The word occurs ten times in the Book of Acts and elsewhere in the New Testament only in Rom.15:6. In Acts, the word denotes, “the inner unity of a group of people engaged in an externally similar action” (TDNT, 5:185).⁶ In Rom.15:6, Paul used the word to describe the need to be in a condition of unity to glorify God. Again, as in the above contrast, the word ὁμοθυμαδόν assumes an existing reality that makes a unity of action possible.

Other expressions in the New Testament employed to appeal for harmony among believers in a local context include “to think the same” in 2 Cor 13:11 (cf. Rom.12:16; 15:5; Phil.2:2; 4:2 twice; 1 Cor 1:10); “to speak the same thing” (1 Cor.1:10); “live at peace with one another” (εἰρηνεύετε) in 2 Cor 13:11 (cf. Rom.12:18 and 1 Thes 5:13); and “loving one another” in Heb.13:1 (cf., 1 Pet.3:8; 1 Jn.3:11; 4:7). There is also the use of the cardinal εἷς with juxtaposed noun to convey the idea of unity, e.g.s., ἐν ἐνὶ στόματι δοξάζετε τὸν θεὸν (Rom.15:6); ὅτι στήκετε ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι (Phil 1:27); and ἡν καρδία καὶ ψυχὴ μία (Acts 4:32). What is significant in the use of the cardinal-noun expression for this study is that the expressions do not describe the unity of the believers *per se*, but on their united action.

The word ἐνότης and the nuances of unity

The Greek word, ἐνότης, is formed from εἷς / ἐνός, and the English word, “unity” from the Latin word “*unus*.” Though the word occurs only in Eph.4:3 & 13 in the New Testament, Bauer notes that it is common

in the writings of Ignatius, denoting the unity of the church and even the unity of Christians with God and Christ. According to S. Hanson, there are three possible senses to the word: (a) The sense of the number, *one*, (b) the sense of approximating identity, as unity between God and Christ, and (c) the sense of unity in multiplicity, that is, the differences in the multitude are conquered or bridged by some connecting element, thus producing a totality (Hanson:1-2)⁸. It is the third sense which is meant when a declaration is made of the unity of a people or the world or the church. Using Hanson’s definition as basis, the discussion below unpacks the three nuances implicit in the use of the word ἐνότης; hence, contributing to the explanation of the expressions in Eph 4:3, & 13.

The first nuance is that ἐνότης denotes the fact of unity. Here the focus is on the existence or presence of the connective element in the various components. The existence of the connective element abolishes or bridges the differences and, thus, leads to the conclusion that the various components are in a state of unity. This is the most obvious implication of the word ἐνότης; for unless it can be proven or accepted that there is really something which connects the various components, there is no basis for speaking of them being in a state of unity. This was the primary emphasis of Greek rhetoric on unity of the pre-Socratic era up to the first century. For the Jews, the fact and the basis of unity was Yahweh (Deut. 6:4). Josephus wrote that in the acknowledgement of God as one, all Jews were united. However, the fact of unity does not necessarily mean that there exists a sense or a consciousness of unity. This means that it is one thing to persuade a group of people that there is a basis for unity and that they are a unity; but it is another that the people themselves are conscious of it, respond to it, and demonstrate it. This is the second

nuance in the word ἐνότης. Historically, the rise of Greek rhetoric on unity can be traced to the deterioration of the πόλις which in the Homeric age was the center of Greek life, and where a strong feeling of unity existed. For the Jews, there was always the sense of being one, not only because there is one God, one Law, and one Temple; but also because of the sense of separateness from the rest of the world. The consciousness that they could not be “the same” with the Gentiles, therefore, only made the individual Jews more aware of the unity of the race. Even with such a consciousness, the Jews, from time to time, needed to be roused up to take united action (e.g., Judges 20:8; 1 Sam 11:7).

The third nuance in ἐνότης follows from the second, and that is, the visible expression and the form of unity. Obviously, every united action is a visible expression of unity among the people, whether it be together singing the glory of God or together rushing as “one man” towards an enemy. Or the unity of a group may take the shape of an organized order where everyone knows how and where they fit in the structure—a picture of harmonious working and cooperation. It is necessary to include this third nuance in the discussion of the ἐνότης of all Christians; for the question naturally arises as to the form of the ἐνότης that the Apostle may imply in the Ephesian passage. It is not possible to say that no visible form or shape is necessary; as it denies that both the fact and the sense of unity exist at all. For the Jews, before the exile and dispersion, the land and nationhood were significant evidences of their unity; the question for the Christians is, what visible form of unity does Paul expect the believers to pursue in the expressions, “keep the unity of the spirit” and “reach the unity of the faith”?

(C) The Two Expressions on Unity in 4:3 & 13

The word ἐνότης as employed by Paul in Eph 4.3 & 13 thus concerns the indicative of unity; and that unity is somehow due to “spirit” (πνεῦμα) and “faith” (πίστις). The discussion will first focus on the expression τὴν ἐνότητα τοῦ πνεύματος and τὴν ἐνότητα τῆς πίστεως.

τὴν ἐνότητα τοῦ πνεύματος

The two questions raised by this expression are: (1) Is the πνεῦμα that of a human person or God? and (2) Should πνεῦμα be taken as a descriptive genitive? Those who argue for πνεῦμα as referring to the human spirit do so because they see the expressions τὴν ἐνότητα τοῦ πνεύματος and τὴν ἐνότητα τῆς πίστεως as paralleling one another. Since πίστις in the phrase issues from the human person, likewise is πνεῦμα. When πνεῦμα is taken as a descriptive genitive, the phrase thus means “spiritual unity”; and Hanson cites 2:18 (ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι) as supporting such an interpretation (Hanson: 147).

The word πνεῦμα and related forms are employed fourteen times in Ephesians (1:13,17; 2:2, 18, 22; 3:5,16; 4:3,4,23,30; 5:18; 6:17,18). There is general agreement that πνεῦμα in 2:2 refers the “evil” spirit; in 4:23 to the state or attitude of the mind, and in 1:13; 3:5,16; 4:30; and 6:17,18 to the Spirit of God. For the remaining six occurrences of πνεῦμα, there is no consensus as to its interpretation. However, this author’s position is that in five of the six occurrences (1:17; 2:18, 22; 4:4-6; 5:18-20), the word πνεῦμα appears in proximity to the other two members of the Godhead; hence, providing an important criterion for

interpreting πνεῦμα as the Spirit of God. Thus, there is strong support that eleven of the fourteen instances of πνεῦμα in Ephesians definitely refer to the Holy Spirit. When πνεῦμα in 4:3 is included, the frequency of occurrences is proportionately higher in Ephesians than any other epistle in the Pauline corpus with the possible exception of Romans (Kirby: 139)⁹. Furthermore, a study of the Spirit of God in Ephesians will reveal that the Spirit has a prominent place and vital role in Ephesians, which R. Schnackenburg has complained that it tends to be overlooked because of the concentration on Christ and the church in the epistle (Schnackenburg: 295).¹⁰

In conclusion, the Holy Spirit's role in making effective the unity of all believers is the preferred meaning of the expression τὴν ἐνότητα τοῦ πνεύματος in 4:3. The Spirit brings into factual reality the unity that Christ has achieved by joining the believers into the one universal church; the Spirit enables the believers to sense their oneness in being part of the one universal church; and the Spirit directs the believers to express ἐνότης in some visible forms or some visible actions. The believers' role is to respond to the Spirit's leading in working out the gift of unity.

τὴν ἐνότητα τῆς πίστεως.

The expression in 4:13 is part of the construction that begins with μέχρῃ; and this implies a time period to which the building up activity described in the previous verse (v.12) is expected to continue. That period will come to an end when "the full measure of perfection found in Christ" (NIV) is reached (cf., the verb καταντάω). Clearly, 4:13 is completely eschatological in content, and the expression τὴν ἐνότητα τῆς πίστεως

is an aspect of the eschatological goal for the church. But what is the meaning of τὴν ἐνότητα τῆς πίστεως?

The word πίστις may either be interpreted absolutely or with the genitive τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ. In line with the usage of πίστις in 1:15; 2:8; 3:12, 17; 6:16,18, it is best to understand πίστις in 4:13 as having the sense of trust and confidence in Christ and not as referring to the content of the Christian faith. There is also the question of the relationship between πίστις and ἐπίγνωσις. According to Robinson, the word ἐπίγνωσις does not mean a fuller or further knowledge of the object, but rather as knowledge directed towards a particular object (Robinson: 248-245). So in this case, the genitive τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ is to be taken as the object of the knowledge. Since in the New Testament, knowledge of Christ is never merely intellectual comprehension, the expressions τῆς πίστεως and τῆς ἐπιγνώσεως should be taken as complimentary.

In conclusion, the expression τὴν ἐνότητα τῆς πίστεως is best interpreted as the unity which is the result of the common knowledge in the Son of God and not as a unity which is dependent on a “fuller” or “more complete” knowledge of Christ. The former view is consistent with the idea that ἐνότης is the indicative of unity while the latter view would make unity tentative. The Apostle in the expression is speaking of a unity that is inherent in one’s faith in Christ. In coming to know Christ, believers enter into the unity which is the present reality (cf., 2:11-22) and which is also the future goal (1:10). Thus, within the expression τὴν ἐνότητα τῆς πίστεως, is also the demand placed upon those who claim faith in Christ to demonstrate Christian unity.

(D) Conclusion: Christian Unity & Christian Growth in Eph. 4:1-16.

The unity of Christians (that is, the church universal) is affirmed and celebrated in the Epistle to the Ephesians. The deep divisions among humankind, symbolized by the alienation between Jews and Gentiles, have been dealt with at the cross. The church universal is the sign of reconciliation, and represents the critical stage in the unification process of the whole universe. Therefore, it is the duty of each believer and each local congregation to maintain the reality of oneness of the *baptized* community.¹¹

Paul spells out this duty in Eph 4:1-16. This passage begins the paraenetic section of the epistle (chapters 4-6). The appeal in 4:1 is based on all that preceded, that is, since believers have been blessed “with every spiritual blessing” in and through Jesus Christ (1:3), they are to “live a life worthy of the calling” (4:1). One vital way of living is to “spare no effort” (NEB v.3a, σπουδάζοντες) in maintaining unity. There seems to be digressions in the Apostle’s flow of thought in 4:1-16 even as he started on the practical and ethical implications of chapters 1-3 and as the word ἐνότης comes to mind. The exhortation to “keep the unity” causes him to again return to a theological discussion on ἐνότης, and the upshot is a linking between the two realities, ἐνότης and Christian growth. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze the text in detail and discuss the disjointedness of vv.4-16; it suffices to note the three identifiable units of thoughts in the passage: (a) vv.4-6, (b) vv. 7-13, and (c) vv.14-16.

The first unit, vv.4-6, with its εἰς-formula, is a summary on the collective unity of Christians which is an indicative of unity. The believers’ baptism

is a visible testimony to the universal oneness. The theme of “growth” dominates the next two units. The unit of 4:7-13 states that each member of the church is the recipient of grace by the risen Christ (vv.7-10) so that collective growth takes place (vv.11-13). The emphasis on vv.11-12 is on the present building-up (οἰκοδομή) activity of the church without any reference to the completion time or to the purpose of the building-up activity. Only in v.13 is reference made to the end of growth process and the purpose of growth. The thought of the last unit (vv.14-16) clearly belongs to v.12, that is, the ἵνα of v.14 logically should follow v.12 rather than v.13. For it does not seem logical to say that we are to arrive at the goal of v.13 in order to grow. Also, the metaphors of “building” and “body” which Paul employs to describe the process of growth are found in vv.11-12 and vv.14-16. Hence, M. Barth concludes that v.13 is “the core and the climax” of vv.7-16 (Barth, 2:484)

What insight may be obtained on the growth process in 4:1-16? The language in v.13, ἄνδρα τέλειον and μέτρον ἡλικίας τοῦ πληρώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ are clearly meant to be contrasted with the condition of immaturity and instability of v.14. The choice of the νήπιος as representing the immature and unstable state believers must grow out of, and the reference to “cunning...crafty...scheming...deceitful” men as the main contributing factor to the lack of growth (v.14) point to a concept of Christian unity that does not depend on having a formal organization or a structure to be evident. Rather, it is how the individual believers live: they are to live according to certain “standard” way (as implied by the word ἀξίως in 4:1). The growth process which makes Christian unity evident in Ephesians has to do with the way believers are formed in the churches they belong. At the local church level, the

believers learn and practice, and so become characterized by the virtues mentioned in 4:2 (ταπεινοφροσύνη, πραύτης, μακροθυμία, άνέχομα, and άνεχόμενοι άλλήλων) which are so indispensable in communal and interpersonal relationships. The local congregation provides the content, the methodology and the environment for the truth of Christian unity to be encountered and acquired.

In summary, a quest for the wider Christian unity as taught in the Epistle to the Ephesians starts at the local church. A commitment to Christian unity demands the development of a curriculum for discipleship through which everyone in the local church is taught and formed to become persons who “watch over the unity”¹² and are in possession of skills to discern the Holy Spirit’s leading in making the Christian unity achieved at the cross increasingly visible in the world and increasingly like the description given in Eph 4:16.

End Notes

- 1 Synge, F.C. St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians. London: S.P.C.K., 1941
- 2 Houldern, J.L. Paul’s Letters from Prison. Pelican New Testament Commentaries. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970
- 3 Patzia, Arthur G. Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians. Good News Commentary, New York: Harper & Row, 1984

- 4 Robinson, J.A. *Commentary on Ephesians*. London: Macmillan. Repr. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishing, 1979
- 5 Campbell, T.Y. "Koinwnia and Its Cognates in the New Testament, *JBL* 51 (1932): 352-380
- 6 Heidland, H.W. "ὁμοθυμαδόν," *TDNT*, Vol5, pp.185-186. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967.
- 7 Bauer, Walter. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 2nd rev. ed. Chicago: University Press, 1979
- 8 Hanson, S. *The Unity of the Church in the New Testament: COlossains and Ephesians*. Uppsala, 1946
- 9 Kirby, J.C. *Ephesians, Baptism and Pentecost*. Montreal: McGill University Press, 1968
- 10 Schnackenburg, R. "Christus, Geist und Geneinde (Eph,4:1-16)." In *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*. Cambridge: University Press, 1973.
- 11 Some scholars (e.g., Kirby) have pointed out to the numerous occurrences of baptismal imagery in Ephesians. The noun βάπτισμα, which occurs only in 4:5 is a technical word for Christian baptism; and the two words, λουτρόν (5:26) and σφραγίζω (1:13 and 4:13),

may not be technical terms but are associated with the rite of baptism. Though the baptismal rite may not be mentioned, there is a constant allusion to a past event, the beginning of the believers' present state; and this is done by the frequent use of the aorist indicative and the use of words normally associated with conversion and baptism. For example, in 1:3-13, the finite verbs in the aorist indicative ἐξελέξατο (v.4), ἐχαρίτωσεν (v.6), ἐπερυσσευσεν (v.8), ἐκληρώθημεν (v.11), ἐσφραγίσθητε (v.13) invite the question: When did all these become effective in the believers? There is also the quotation in 5:14 which must have come from a fragment of a baptismal hymn; for as A.M. Hunter observes, "the atmosphere of the verse is baptism." (299). Thus, it may be concluded that the Apostle uses baptismal imagery to remind the Gentile believers of the time and the event of their incorporation into the one church and their participation in its intrinsic unity. (Hunter, A.M. *Paul and His Predecessors*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981. Rev ed).

- 12 H. Riesenfeld points out that the verb τηρέω in secular Greek basically means "to watch over" and therefore presupposes something already in possession, something already received and now to be carefully watched over. (in TDNT. Vol 8, p.140)