

PART ONE: OUR MOTHER

Chap. 3: Our ONE True Mother: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Unity in Christ's Church

My Own Search for My Mother

Let me begin this chapter with a short story of my own search for my "mother". My wife Margaret and I wanted me to go to Westminster Theological Seminary when I believed God had called me to be a minister of his Church after reading the extremely helpful and convicting book 'No Place for Truth; Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology' by David F. Wells. We sought the pastor-elders at the local PCA (Presbyterian Church in America) in my home town of Smyrna, Georgia, where our membership resided, to aid us in determining my call from God, and to send me formally to Westminster if they thought I was called.

After a couple years of teaching in the Church, and testing me to see if I was perhaps called by God, the elders at Smyrna PCA encouraged me to come under the care of the North Georgia Presbytery (PCA) in order to be discipled and nurtured in my faith while I was a seminarian.

When I arrived at Westminster Theological Seminary, I was glad to be part of a long tradition of biblical faithfulness to Christ and His Church. I obtained a job at the bookstore and late one night had an interesting, yet troubling conversation with a new friend who I will call Dave (that wasn't his name, although I know a lot of Daves!). Dave told me that although he had come to Westminster, he was now part of the Eastern Orthodox Church. When I asked him why, he said that it was part of a glorious history and heritage in the Church that could trace its roots back to the early church. He told me that he thought this communion of saints was unified before the whole world and anchored to the past in a way unique among churches today, and it seemed so by what he described.

This sounded appealing to me, but I had come to Westminster Theological Seminary to be a teacher or pastor in Evangelical, Bible-believing churches, how could I meet a person such as this in my first week of studies- - and be so interested and attracted in what he said about his communion? I realized he was right when he said: "Charles, look around you at all the splits and divisions even within just one Protestant or Evangelical communion, surely this reveals that this is not what God desires for His One Church!?" What Dave told and

described to me, and what I realized (very painfully as I listened to him), was that this is what I had desired for a long time in my Christian journey, especially as someone who was saved in an independent, Evangelical Bible Church that did not think of itself as connected to the larger Church.

I had experienced as new Christian, well-meaning pastors who had unintentionally deceived me and others in the congregation because they were not skilled in the word, formally trained in theology, and some were not even ordained as ministers and were not accountable to others ministers (cf. 2 Tim. 1:7-10; 2:15). Because I had experienced this, and because I read in the Bible that we were clearly supposed to be unified as a Church, I longed to be part of the unified Church of the past, that was more than invisible, but that had a visible aspect as well. This was what I confessed in the Apostle's Creed as being the "Catholic" Church (but I blushed when saying it too loud!). I desired the unity that the Bible commanded- -but how?

I never visited with Dave the Eastern Orthodox Church communion of which he was a part, though what he described to me was a rich tradition and the ability to trace my generation in the Church to the early church fathers! What did become of this conversation was the beginning of prayerfully thinking about this real concern of being part of the one true and visible Church. Surely, I wondered, I could be an Evangelical pastor and still be part of the visible Church. Surely, I thought, I could hold to evangelical doctrines, and yet still be part of the "Catholic" or universal Church, but "how"!? I knew that the Bible was clear on seeking unity and believing in one Church, and being one-minded.

During this time at seminary, I was thankful and grateful to take classes with Dr. William Barker, Dr. D. Clair Davis, and Dr. D. G. Hart in Church History at Westminster. All three of these men had a great impact on my thinking during my seminary education. They taught me that we were part of the "Catholic" Church if we hold to the apostolic teaching that had been passed down from the early Church. We didn't necessarily need the majestic buildings, bells and whistles of Roman Catholicism, to root oneself in the past, we needed the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the Word of God, with help in interpreting it with other faithful, gospel-believing Christians throughout the ages. This is where my thinking on the visible Church of Christ as our mother really began.

After graduating seminary, when I did a pastoral intern and study with a godly pastor and mentor, I was surprised by some of the individualistic mindsets of the people with regard to Christ's Church. I had the opportunity of serving in a loving congregation of saints, but I wasn't ready for the reaction I received when I began to speak of the importance of seeking unity in the visible Church, and my love for her. I saw that there was not a true love and affection for the visible Church, nor was the ordained ministry as respected as it should be, and to talk about creeds, confessions, and councils was to introduce something foreign into Evangelical conversations (more on this in part three). I realized through this experience and studying the issue, that Evangelical Christians live in a time of great individualism, and that many of us (including myself for several years after I became a Christian) are just simply ignorant of the past, and threatened by any kind of tradition, even if it is good ("Radical Romish-Reactionism" I reckon!).

Later, as I am now a pastor of God's sheep after my ordination, these things have become even more important for me, particularly as an evangelist and church planter in a local community. I believe that I am called and charged to establish a local church by God's grace, that is part of the "Catholic" Church and to teach Christians to think of themselves self-consciously as part of a greater communion of saints. As I have tried to establish a local congregation by God's grace and strength, there have many souls refreshed by the refocus on the visible Church, the emphasis on the ordained office of minister, and the creeds, confessions, and councils of the Church throughout history, but at the same time there has also been well-meaning and kind Evangelicals who think I have taken things a bit too far.

One of my primary goals and prayers to God is that this study would be used by God to call Evangelical, Bible-believing Christians back to a biblical doctrine of the visible Church, that we would no longer forsake our mother, and that we would seek unity together with all the saints and neither deceive each other as to what we truly believe, nor be ignorant of the past theologically or historically. The reason I began writing this was because somewhere deep inside every Evangelical there is the question of how to seek unity in the one Church; I believe that is true. In one conversation I had recently, I began speaking of 'The Church' (emphasizing its one-ness), and one Evangelical friend of mine asked me: "Which one Church are you referring to?" I said: "How many Churches are there?" And he caught himself, and realized that he had been assuming disunity rather than unity.

I pray that we can ask God how to recognize the face of our mother in a local congregation, to make ourselves formally part of that congregation through membership, and then seek unity in the one holy catholic and apostolic church, as we seek one-minded-ness in our understanding of God and the Bible. This is what we will study in the chapter.

Am I saying that I have found perfect biblical unity? No! But I am striving as we are commanded to do. I am not saying that I am perfectly in line with the Christian Church. I am seeking to be, but we must be students of history and theology to avoid making the same mistakes of the past. I am seeking to be sanctified by the truth with other Christians (John 17:17), and when I am not fully lined up with Christ's Truth in Scripture as it has been understood and interpreted by Christians for the last 2000 years, I too in my aberration from the truth, am in need of reflection, or maybe even repentance. This is why it is important to discuss the issues together as we seek unity together with all the saints.

A thinking and wise Christian should think and interpret with the Church as it has articulated and formulated biblical teaching--not individualistically, because the thinking Christians knows that his mind and heart can deceive him. The thinking Christian knows and realizes his mind has been tainted by sin (as much as his will) and the way to seek truth is together with all the saints (Eph. 3:18).

"Our One Mother": Seeking Unity Together with All the Saints

Because the visible Church is truly a gift from Christ as an institution, family and school as we studied in chapter two, how are we to understand this one "mother", or Church of Christ as manifested in different congregations? The unity of the Church, the "oneness" of Christ's Church should be considered because Christ prays for His people that we be one as the Father is one, and the Apostle Paul commands the people of God to strive for unity.

Let's consider a few passages, and then think about how we can better seek unity by visibly being members of Christ's institution, family and school on earth, although made up of different congregations in differing parts of the world (cf. Rev. 2-3; 13:7). Let us begin with three passages, one from Ephesians 4, then we will look at Jesus' prayer for His Church in John 17, then finally we will look at Philippians 2:

^{ESV} **Ephesians 4:1-7:** 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.⁷ But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift [emphasis mine].

In the above passage, the Apostle Paul wants to stress the unity of God's people (Eph. 4:3-5). As he teaches in other places as well as Ephesians 4, the one Church is the one Body of Christ. There are not "bodies of Christ", or "brides of Christ", but one body and one bride. There is also one institution, family and school as well. We as the people of God are the visible Church, the household of God, and the school of disciples all at the same time. The Apostle Paul teaches the visible Church at Ephesus in chapter four of his letter that there is one Church and therefore all Christians at that local congregation should strive and be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Apostolicity: One Holy Catholic Apostolic Church

Although Christ's Church is one, we nevertheless seek unity at the congregational, local level first and primarily, but we do so with an eye toward the larger, greater One Church of Christ as an institution, family or school given by Christ to his people. How do we do this? Regardless of the name on the sign in front of the Church building, none of us should be separated historically or theologically from other congregations of Christ in the One Church. We are all commanded to strive toward greater unity. This can only be accomplished by appreciating the *apostolicity* of the One Church. What does "apostolicity" mean?

As we learn to confess (with the Church) the Nicene Creed, we confess one holy catholic apostolic Church. Apostolicity refers to the apostolic *teaching*. We will study further in part two the apostolic office of pastor-elder, but for now, we want to understand the apostolic teaching of the Bible. Apostolicity refers to the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, that was written down for God's people for all time, written or supervised by apostles called by Christ himself.

Seeking unity begins by having the correct teaching of the Bible. Understanding "apostolicity" means striving to understand the Word of

God and the interpretation of this word throughout church history. It is knowing that there is one truth of Scripture, that is passed on to every generation, and that one truth can be variously interpreted. So as the one Church we seek unity by understanding the one Word and seeking to interpret the one Word with the Church throughout the ages. This prevents Christians from falling into unintentional relativism, such as "I think it means this..." or "This Scripture means this to me..." or "I feel that God said this to me in this passage..." Well, did he? The teaching of apostolicity of the one Church is the biblical teaching and the interpretation of the Church and all her saints both dead and living.

In other words, in order to seek unity, we must start with our Bibles, but we must start with our Bibles while interpreting them with other saints who have interpreted our Bibles before us in history.

We should read and study the Bible with the one Church throughout the ages. Even though we are alive at this particular time, and have a certain sign in front of our church that makes us unique as a congregation of Christ's saints, we are still part of the one apostolic Church built on Christ and the prophets, who make up the cornerstone and solid foundation:

Ephesians 2:18-21: So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are **fellow citizens with the saints** and **members of the household of God**,²⁰ **built on the foundation** of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,²¹ in whom the **whole structure**, being joined together, **grows into a holy temple** in the Lord [emphasis mine].

Earlier in Ephesians, the Apostle Paul has stressed the oneness of the Church of Christ as institution, family and school by calling the saints "citizens" and "members" of the household of God. This is one household and to continue the construction language, it is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus being the cornerstone. It is a structure, Paul says, that is joined together as it grows into one holy temple in the Lord. Again, in this brief passage of Scripture, we see the Church of Christ as visible institution, family and school (the building structure, the household, and the growing together that happens in learning and discipleship).

Are You "NOBLE" like the Bereans?

Because of the Biblical teaching of the one Church, and one foundational teaching of Christ and his apostles, we are commanded in Scripture to stay in this visible institution, family and school as disciples, and seek unity together with saints both dead and living, those who have lived before us, those who live with us in our present generation, and those who will live after us, by learning the Scriptures, the Biblical foundation of Christ and his apostles, together with all the saints. This means that we read and interpret our Bibles together with those who have lived before us, those who live with us, and those who will live after us.

Let me illustrate. If you were part of a noble and respected family of doctors, would you begin your studies of medicine by yourself individualistically? Would you try to train to take care of bodies by using medicine of your own making and from your own mere creative powers? Or would you seek to understand the doctors in your family who lived before you, as well as those doctors still alive, and learn from their wisdom concerning medicine and the treatment of the human body?

It is similar in the one Church. We are not a long line of doctors (although some of you might be), but we are those who study "gospel medicine for the soul". We should study those faithful men and women who administered this gospel medicine before we were born, those who are alive today, and seek to pass on our prescriptions and formulas to the next generation. There has been much wicked poison in the history of Christ's Church, and we do not want to be guilty of being unaware of this doctrinal poison, and unintentionally administering it to the souls of Christ's people. The "Bereans" give us a biblical example of what I speaking about.

We should remember that this is what made the Bereans "noble" when the Apostle Paul came teaching about Jesus and his resurrection. When Paul came to teach the Bereans (Acts 17:9ff) what made them truly "noble" was that they were studying their Bibles "together with all the saints" (Eph. 3:18). They were checking Paul's teaching (even though he was a called and ordained apostle of Jesus, Gal. 1:1-11), with what the earlier saints as the visible people of God, had taught and established in the Old Covenant.

We are to be "noble" in the same way. The Church at Berea was not merely individuals seeking to prove from Scripture that Paul was correct as if they were to study issues alone and by themselves (remember they would not have had individual study bibles laid open

on their laps while Paul preached and taught). They were a visible Church who recognized that they were part of a greater family and founded on the teaching of the Old Covenant and they were checking the Scriptures of the Old Covenant to see if what the Church had always taught concerning salvation was what Paul was consistently teaching in light of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Don't miss this important point (We will look at this more completely in part three)!

The next Scripture we should consider as we learn the Biblical teaching of the one Church of Christ, and our need to seek unity, is found in Jesus' "High Priestly" prayer in John 17; Jesus prays:

ESV **John 17:1-11** When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you,² since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.³ And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.⁴ I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.⁵ And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.⁶ "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.⁷ Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you.⁸ For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.⁹ I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them.¹¹ And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. **Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one [emphasis mine].**

We should first remember that Jesus' prayers always get answered! As much as we know that God will present Jesus with one Church, one Bride who will be unspotted by sin and pure (Eph. 5:27-29), we are nevertheless called to strive and be eager to maintain unity. In the above prayer, Jesus prays that His people may be one, as the Father and Son are one. This is similar to the teaching in Ephesians 4:1-7, where the Apostle Paul says that because there is one Spirit, one body, one baptism, one God and Father of all, and we his people are united to him by faith, we should act like it! There are so many

differences and division within Christianity today, that we may sometimes feel overwhelmed by this command and feel like Jesus' prayer might never be answered.

With Whom Do You Study Your Bibles?

But by seeking unity in apostolicity, or the apostolic teaching of the Bible, that is in seeking unity through the one apostolic teaching of Christ found in Scripture, we can seek unity visibly and publicly before the world. However, we must repent of seeking unity *from the visible Church or individually apart from the Church*, and learn to be humble enough to join a local and faithful congregation of saints, and to seek unity within the Church with other brothers and sisters, both in life and in our theological thinking (life and doctrine). As we join a faithful local congregation of the Church, we then begin our pursuit of truth and unity with the one greater and larger Church throughout history, saints both dead and living. This is what the Apostle Paul tells Pastor Timothy (1 Tim. 4:12-16):

Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.¹³ Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.¹⁴ Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.¹⁵ Practice these things, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress.¹⁶ ***Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.*** (1 Tim. 4:12-16) [emphasis mine].

As Pastor, Timothy was to set believers an example in his life of godliness and in his teaching of Scripture. He had learned from his mother and grandmother the Word of God, then learned specifically from the Apostle Paul (read 1 and 2 Timothy on Paul's specific instructions, cf. Acts 20:26-32). Notice that even though Timothy was under the authority of elders and in submission to them, he was to keep a close watch personally on his life and teaching (vv. 15-16). This teaches that we learn in submission to elders above us, and that we should constantly strive to learn about how to live the Christian life ("being Church"), as well as how to teach Christian doctrine ("doing church") together with all the saints both dead and living. I am repeating this because I do not believe this is as emphasized as it should be today in evangelical circles. Our call to unity is together with all the saints. Or, if I can say it in another way, seeking unity requires that we be holy or sanctified in the truth ourselves (John 17:17), while realizing we are "catholic", that is to say universal, or to

recognize the one greater Church, and we are apostolic, in that we strive to better understand the apostolic teaching and gospel deposited for the Church in God's Word.

Finally, we will look at Philippians 2:1-13, and notice again the Apostle Paul's emphasis on the one Christ, one Spirit, one Church, and one hope that should encourage us to strive toward unity:

ESV **Philippians 2:1-13** So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy,² complete my joy by being of the **same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.**³ Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.¹² Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,¹³ **for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.**

One-Minded-Ness in the Church

Paul says above in Philippians 2:2 that we are to literally have the same mind, or we should be on the same page, having the same love, and he repeats again the "same mind". How can we achieve this "same mind" not only in our local congregations, but in the larger visible Church of Christ? By not only seeking to know the truth with "one mind" in our own generation, but by doing and being church with those saints, particularly teachers within the Church, who have lived before us, outside our own context, and have taught the Christian faith, well, faithfully. We should seek to have one mind not merely in our local congregations, but by confessing our faith to the best of our ability, and by God's grace with all of the visible Church both dead and living.

We should understand the implications from these passages, that to separate individualistically from the visible institution, family and school of Christ on earth is not seeking unity with other Christians. Since it is quite clear from the Bible that we are commanded to seek unity, and it is the prayer of Christ for his people, and therefore we want to obediently seek to fulfill this with God's help, knowing that he can give the grace his people to need to become unified, let us speak of how more specifically we can strive for unity today in our local congregations.

Before we study what I think to be the biblical way of striving for unity and one-minded-ness, let me first tell a story that illustrates what is not striving for unity. Remember, all faithful churches talk about unity, but is it *biblical* unity? As a local pastor I was recently invited to be part of an "alliance" of churches in my area. I chose to decline the invitation graciously, even though the invitation said to me that it was in order to seek unity with other congregations of Christians. I believe that even though these well-intentioned, Evangelical pastors were talking about unity, I don't believe they were actually achieving a *biblical* unity because ultimately they were only discussing what they believed together, and avoiding the subjects where they disagreed. Be patient with me as I explain to you why I think this is unbiblical and no unity at all!

When I read the invitation, I noticed that in their literature for their "alliance of churches" that they wanted to provide accountability to preachers and pastors all over the county! I very much appreciated that, because of the sinful nature of man, there is a great need of accountability for all church leaders. Under shepherds who are pastor-elders in Christ's church cannot be without accountability, they must be under authority of Scripture and others submitted to Scripture (1 Peter 5).

I remember once in the past over 10 years ago, I asked the pastor of the congregation I attended when I became a new Christian who was his authority on earth and he said "no one". I asked him who held him accountable for his teaching and kept him on a straight course and who had the authority to discipline him if he was negligent in life and doctrine, yet he said "no one" to all of these. This is one of the reasons I still ask pastors today when I meet them to whom do you submit in formal accountability. So, accountability is important and it is one way of seeking unity. Many within this "alliance" need accountability and many of the pastors do not have it (some are

Congregationalists without other elders), so this can be very constructive as method of seeking unity.

But it is just with regards to unity of mind and thinking specifically, which was why I declined the invitation. As I stated in the second chapter, one of the reasons I am a confessional Christian is because I want others in Christ's visible Church, other congregations and pastors who may differ in their interpretation and understanding of Scripture to know exactly what I believe and why, concerning the teaching of the Bible. I hold to the historic expression of Biblical Christianity found in the Westminster Confession of Faith. I believe that the Westminster Confession contains the system of doctrine and truth found in Holy Scripture. Therefore, you or anyone else will always know where I stand and what I believe. I believe this is seeking unity within the visible Church. You know that I did not make up what I believe yesterday, and publicly you can read and study what I believe about what the Bible teaches. I believe this is being candid and honest before men as well.

The "alliance" invitation had a goal to pursue unity based on the Scriptural teaching in Ephesians 4:4-6 (the scripture we discussed above). I appreciated the use of this scripture, but I was struck by the fact that the scriptural teaching of unity in Ephesians 4 is preceded by chapters 1-3 that teach specific Christian doctrine. For instance, Ephesians 1 is clearly a Trinitarian passage about God the Father's election from the foundation of the world to be adopted as sons in Christ Jesus, and it teaches that the Holy Spirit has been given to us as a down payment of our full glorification that is to come (Eph. 1:1-14).

Now I am not trying to be nit-picky, but there is a lot of theology in these verses that I know the men in this alliance disagree about what it *means*. That is, some within this alliance desire unity, but they do not discuss their disagreements, only their agreements, and they interpret the meaning of chapter one differently. Furthermore, many of the pastors (although they are pastors who teach Christ's people), are not aware of the varying interpretations of this one passage throughout the history of the Church. Why is that important? Well, more in part three, but for now let me say very simply that in our interpretation of the meaning of a passage of the Bible, we are either lining ourselves up close to truth, or further away from truth. I know this raises a lot of questions and I will try to address these more specifically in part three, but I must say that the recognition that we truly interpret correctly or incorrectly with the Church, or apart from

the Church, should at this point at least make us consider the importance of studying our bibles with the larger church throughout all of history.

With all respect, this is not seeking unity. One more example: In chapter two of Ephesians, Paul says we are "dead in trespasses and sins". How do we interpret the "deadness" in this passage? Even though Ephesians 4:4-6 is the banner of this alliance, nevertheless, I do not believe they are truly seeking unity in a *biblical manner* because with all humility, they are avoiding some of the interpretive issues that the people of God in the last 2000 years have thought were important to discuss and learn together with an eye toward real and true unity. Additionally, Ephesians 3:18 teaches us to come to know the love of Christ "together with all the saints". I understand this to be saints both living and dead. This is why I am confessional, and want to confess my faith with the Church today as well as in the past.

When we do not learn, or forget, or disregard the orthodox and sound teachings and interpretations of the past in the Christian Church today, we disrespect the work of the Living Holy Spirit of God who helped the Church to articulate these teachings against error and heresy!

It is not merely in this one "alliance of churches", but in many evangelical circles today, that they confess and hold to a watered down, lowest common denominator theology that has been formulated in the last 25-50 years (and sometimes less). As I stated in chapter one, all congregations today who hold to Protestant teachings and beliefs come from, in one way or another, the Reformation of the 16th Century. The teaching of the Reformation of the 16th Century were summarized in the Westminster Confession, and people today depart from the teaching, uphold it, or are ignorant of it. What is sad is that although many evangelicals might be truly seeking a confession of their own generation (from the last 25-50 years), and so they are seeking some unity with Christians within their own generation, they still fail to confess and seek unity and to be in line if you will with those congregations that make up the One Church, who came before them and lived during the last 2000 years.

In some ways, evangelicals today seem to try "to reinvent confessional wheel". They do not necessarily intend it, and I am not saying that their intentions are not good, but they write statements of faith that may or may not be faithful to and in agreement with historical Christianity (and I speak from experience as one saved in a

charismatic Bible church and who was a member of parachurch organizations who created a statement of faith theologically and historically independent of the one confessing Church throughout history).

It seems that some Evangelicals today seem to be involved in what C. S. Lewis called "chronological snobbery". What Lewis meant by this term was that the old was always bad, and the new was always good. So, if someone was confessional and traditional according to the truth of Scripture, this was bad because he was "living in the past". However, someone who was "fresh" and who was not rigid about understanding the past but was always seeking new ways to understand Scripture and new ways to fellowship with other Christians for the sake of unity (that was not always truly unified), was considered good.

For example, even though I am an Evangelical, Bible-believing Christian, most of the time when I have been asked to join Para church organizations, such as this "alliance", and I refuse it because of being a Confessional Christian, I am considered to be "old fashioned" at best, or "divisive" at worst. It is interesting that someone would think that I am being arrogant or divisive, no matter how nice and respectful I am about it, since I am attempting to confess with Christians in my own generation, as well as Christians who lived and learned Christ before me. Yet this example shows just how much "chronological snobbery" has influenced well-meaning evangelicals today.

Personally, I think those who are unaware of the past: historically, confessionally, and theologically, are not only doomed to repeat the bad theological mistakes and errors, but they are not truly pursuing an understanding of their great heritage as one family, one body of Christ, one unity! Why would anyone want to seek a so-called "unity" with those today who are divisive about the unity in history, confession, and theology that has already been unified (and has been long before they were ever born!). Why is unity only seeking those who are united today and not joining the unity that already exists in the past. Like I said, I think there is some chronological snobbery going on! We should humbly consider this together.

My suggestion for any "alliance of churches" is to consider becoming historically confessional. Then consider thinking historically and confessionally as you pursue unity together with all this saints. This is my humble suggestion. I think it is ultimately what you are seeking to

do in upholding the good teaching of the Bible. There would be no need of alliances (or any parachurch organizations) if the members of Christ's one visible Church would seek accountability together by submitting to one another in Lord as we learn together the Bible, what it teaches, and how it has been interpreted. If the one institution, family and school would seek unity in faithful confessions of the past that the Holy Spirit has allowed to be formulated and tested over time, and by God's grace this would lead to a more biblical unity and one-minded-ness!

We can all talk about accountability and unity, but if we do not have our roots in the past of the Christian church, I do think this can be easily achieved. I think we need to have our roots deep in the past and continue to pursue the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ "together with all the saints".

But the one church is imperfect, and as Philippians 2:13 says, we depend upon God's grace and Spirit to work in us to do that which is good and pleasing. I am not arguing for perfection, just that our pursuit of unity in the Church would be together with all the saints both dead and living. I believe unity begins by submitting to one another, and I believe firmly that this good work is initiated when we formally join a local congregation of Christ's people who teach the apostolic and Biblical teaching, while interpreting the Bible with the one Church in the past (in all of its different congregations, in all of its biblical truth, as well as the errors that were made, so we can teach the truth standing on the shoulders of those before us in the faith, and we can avoid the errors made as well).

How can we more precisely seek and strive for unity and one-mindedness as we are commanded to do? I believe it starts with formal Church membership and joining a faithful congregation of saints (we will end this chapter with how to find and determine a faithful congregation).

Humility or Pride Revealed in Our Honoring Our Mother

The Church visible is imperfect until Christ returns, and we will never find a perfect Church here on this earth (Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 25), but this gives us no right to sinfully separate as if we were wiser than the Lord Jesus Christ who established his Church as a gift to His people (in the next chapter we will study how to find a faithful local congregation)! Although we will consider the biblical teaching of pastor-elders more fully in part two, for now let me state firmly as I have tried to establish in our last chapter that the

institution, family and school that Christ has given to us is made up of pastor-elders-shepherds to watch over and teach the flock of Christ. I do not think this is disputed, but at this point, I ask you to bear with me as you consider. Use my principle from earlier. If you can give me one clear passage where there are no elders teaching and watching over Christ's visible people, then you should follow me at least at this point.

I believe that the Bible teaches that in order to be One Church, one institution, one family, one school, and to strive toward real unity in the Church, we must have external pastor-elders over us, and we must learn to submit to those God has called to be our overseers and pastors. Not only does this initiate our obedience with regard to unity, I think this is the will of God as to how to show submission to Christ, and how to display to the world our humility wrought in us by the Holy Spirit.

As Christians, a sign of true humility and Christian love is to submit ourselves to elders/pastors/teachers "in the LORD". The way we submit to God's ordained leadership shows forth the way we truly submit to Christ's Lordship in our hearts.

Notice two passages with regard to elders/pastors/teachers and how true biblical humility is expressed (1 Peter 5; Hebrews 13):

1 Peter 5:1-11: So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. ⁵ Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." ⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. ⁸ Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. ¹⁰ And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself

restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.¹¹ To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Peter, an elder submitted to other elders in the visible Church (even though he is also in the office of Apostle, and we should remember that pastor-elders come from the apostles because they build on their foundation and teaching, Eph. 2:20), teaches other elders what their responsibility to God is, and teaches those who submit to these elders that this is a sign of true humility (v. 6: "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God..."). We should note for our Roman Catholic friends that what Peter clearly writes here undermines any position of supremacy by the Pope. If Peter had had the right of primacy and was superior to other apostles, pastor-elders, he would have claimed it here, but Peter joins with the rest in the participation of the same office of elder/presbyter (*presbyter* is the Greek word used here, meaning "elder"). Peter instructs everyone to obey the counsels of the elders (including the other elders) [Note: one reason I am a Presbyterian, is that I believe because of the sinful tendencies of man, especially in leadership and authority roles, that they need to be submitted one to another. Peter as a "presbyter" reminds all pastor-elders, even though he was a great apostle of Christ, that we should be submissive in our teaching to one another. This is not only submitting ourselves to elders who are alive, but also to other pastor-elders who have faithfully taught before we were born, called or ordained].

Peter begins by instructing the elders themselves (vv.1-2), then implied is the shepherding of the congregation, being examples of Christ and teaching them as Christ has commanded (vv.3-4), then finally and specifically he speaks to the younger in the congregation who needs to understand the importance of submitting to these God-given pastor-elders from a very early age.

Notice if you will, that if you think of the families in the congregation, Peter was instructing the elder-shepherds over the fathers and mothers in the individual families to teach and set them an example, then he was teaching the young not only to be obedient to father and mother, but also to the elders who are given to watch of the souls of the people. This teaches us that from a very early age, in each congregation, we are taught to submit to Christ, by ultimately submitting to one another in love for Christ (cf. Eph. 5:21ff).

It is important for us to realize that the text of 1 Peter is not merely saying that the young only should obey the elders (those in office of

elder, and apparently also older in age), but that the disposition to the office, as well as to person of age, is one of teachability and humility.

In other words, in the same way those who are younger in age respect their “elders” or those older than them, in the same way should we submit to the elders in office respectfully. In doing so, we show true humility in the Church, and external humility to Christ himself, because we are rightly honoring those Christ has called and placed in the ministry to teach and instruct us with the Words of Christ.

Also notice in two important passages from Hebrews 13, the importance of submitting to elders:

Hebrews 13:7 Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

The Author to the Hebrews commands all Christians to obey their leaders and submit to them, for they are called by God to keep watch over the precious souls in the visible Church. Now some have thought that this just means leaders, perhaps leaders in the civil sphere of society, and not necessarily pastor-elders, but what other leaders are there in Christ’s visible Church (context should determine; all civil leaders are to be obeyed if not opposed to God’s word (Rom. 13:1-7), but here the context is about the visible people of God, and more particularly those who “spoke the word of God to you”? Who else specially speaks the Word of God to God’s people? Who else is commanded to keep watch over the souls of the people of God? Who else will have to give an account, but pastor-elders and teachers? There will be great advantage to following God’s wisdom and will in this manner.

We should be reminded that we are not to blindly obey our pastors and elders, but only those who teach us from God’s Word. If they faithfully teach us God’s word, then the above passages in Hebrews teach us that the people of God should honor and respect their pastors as Christ’s gift to them *only if they teach what Christ has said in His Word* (cf. Eph. 4:11-16; 2 Tim. 2:15-16; 2 Tim. 4:4-5).

John Calvin in his commentary on Hebrews wrote: "...the Apostle [Peter] speaks only of those [pastors/elders] who faithfully performed their office; for they who have nothing but the title, nay, who use the title of pastors for the purpose of destroying the Church, deserve but little reverence and still less confidence. And this also is what the Apostle plainly sets forth when he says, that they *watched* for their souls, - - a duty which is not performed but by those who are faithful rulers, and are really what they are called." (Comm. Hebrews 13:17).

I want to remind you the larger context of these two verses in Hebrews 13 and the implications for our seeking unity through submission to elders both dead and living. If you recall, Hebrews 11, commonly known as the "Hall of Faith" teaches us to remember the faith of our fathers who are long dead, but have kept their eyes on Christ, the Author and Perfecter of Our common Faith, and who are now for us a "great cloud of witnesses" to God's faithfulness (Heb. 12:1-4).

Hebrews chapter 12 is followed by chapter 13 teaching us to obey our leaders who speak the word of God, who are called to keep a watch over our soul, and those who will give an account of their ministry. Notice how the present leaders of the congregation, along with the present saints who are a part of the local congregation, are to learn from the faith, practice, and theological teaching of the "great cloud of witnesses" who came before them, but who are now dead.

This teaches us that each local congregation should be submitted in life and doctrine one to another, and especially under the leadership of their pastor-elders so that it will be a joy to them as they are shepherding them (Heb. 13:17). But the implication for these pastor-elders and teachers is that they are speaking the word of God, and watching over the souls of the people, submitted in faith, practice, and theological teaching to those who went before them as shepherds and faithful saints, who have long been dead.

In other words, for a pastor-elder and teacher of a local congregation to seek unity, and be truly faithful in his call, he must seek to understand his faith, practice and theological teaching together with all the saints both dead and living. This is the doctrine of "apostolicity" that we looked at earlier. There is truly is a great need for better understanding the faith of our fathers who taught the word of God before us if we are to seek together *biblical unity*.

We sing in the hymn: "Faith of our fathers, living still." Is it really *living still*? How do you know? This is a melodic illustration of the doctrine or biblical teaching of apostolicity. In the one Church, both present generation as well as all previous generations, we seek to understand the apostolic, Biblical teaching together. We are taught in Scripture to learn together and to be in submission to each other as we seek one-minded-ness, and unity in the one Church!

We should remember as the people of God, that to disobey our elders (including the elders of pastors and elders over them) and to make their work for Christ difficult for them when they are faithfully preaching Christ's Word and watching over the souls of Christ's people, is to sin against our Lord Jesus. Those who are faithful in upholding and fulfilling their call from Christ by proclaiming the Word of God as pastor/elder should be obeyed, honored and respected.

If disobedience to these commands in 1 Peter 5 and Hebrews 13 is clearly sins against ministers in the ordained office, how much more is it a sin to disregard the visible Church altogether and her teaching and ordained ministry altogether by not even making oneself a part of a congregation of saints. To separate from a faithful visible Church is very dangerous. Let us consider now church membership and the need for it in our time.

"When the Roll is Called Up Yonder": Church Membership and Humility

When people ask me as a pastor whether church membership is biblical, I try to show them many places in Scripture including the genealogies where being on the roll of God's people is an understood reality as we see in the Book of Nehemiah and the Chronicles with the lists of families. The fact that the question is even raised, is indicative of our individualistic culture, that sadly has little understanding of what it means to be part of the covenant community of God throughout history.

Was not membership implied in the Old Covenant visible Church, or people of God in Ezekiel 13:8-9? The prophet Ezekiel is prophesying against the leaders of Israel who have lied to those who are in the visible congregation of saints, and who are not "enrolled in the register of the house of Israel". This implies a visible roll of the people of God that is just as important as the "roll that will be called up yonder":

Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: "Because you have uttered falsehood and seen lying visions, therefore behold, I am

against you, declares the Lord GOD. ⁹ My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and who give lying divinations. They shall not be in the council of my people, nor be enrolled in the register of the house of Israel, nor shall they enter the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord GOD.

Another response I sometimes use when people ask if membership in the church is biblical, I remind them that we learn also from general revelation in societies how membership in organizations and institutions is important. When you are born, you are given a certificate of birth to show your birth, but also to reveal your citizenship or "membership" in the country of your origin. When you are married, you are given a certificate of marriage. When you join an organization of cyclists, gun club, or Harley dudes, you are given a membership (well, maybe not Harley dudes!). When you become a member of a club, you are given formal membership in that club. Imagine if I said, I am a member of Evangelicalism, just a member of the "invisible" church. Where is would my membership come from? Where would my name be written down for the world to see? Where is the headquarters for the "invisible" church? How do I resign my membership if I so desire? In the institution, family and school of the visible Church, there should also be formal membership to show forth to the world that the rolls in heaven are concretely and tangibly sealed in black ink here on the rolls of earth as well.

From Scripture, general revelation and from the good and necessary deduction from the Bible, membership in the visible church shows to the world our unity, humility, and our willingness to be formally accountable and disciplined if found out of line with the orthodox truths of Scripture and a holy life. Membership in a local congregation initiates one formally into the visible Church, and allows for you to formally begin being discipled and striving toward unity and one-minded-ness. It shows humility because you are willing to have one correct you if you are out of line in life and doctrine, not merely with the one congregation, but the one Church as it has taught and interpreted scripture long before you were ever born!

The truth of the matter that we should remember today is that no matter how many abuses we find in the visible Church, no matter how many times we have been unintentionally or intentionally confused by elders and teachers who were supposed to be preaching and teaching the Word of God, we are to seek to find a true visible

Church. We should not take it upon ourselves to start anew, individualistically, by separating from the visible Church, because in many ways, we are implicitly saying to the world that our "mother" is confused and wrong at best, and at worst that our "mother" has been overthrown and defeated by the gates of hell!

A Man Named Nevin

Is our time unique? Is this the only time in American Evangelical Christianity where the striving for unity has been misunderstood? No! As an example of the ongoing need for reforming and repentance in the Church, let us end this chapter with a plea from another teacher, from another century in America, who was calling Christians back to a better understanding and greater appreciation for Christ's Church. John Williamson Nevin was a confessional Christian in the 19th century, who wanted to truly believe (as I do) that there is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church visible in the world. He knew that in order to be obedient to Christ, and strive to greater unity, we must put an emphasis back on our mother, to return to her loving embrace, and to be instructed by her.

In a sermon from Ephesians 4:4-16, Professor Nevin wrote entitled '**Catholic Unity**', he addressed the Reformed churches in this way:

"Of all themes, the most momentous at this time is the true idea of the Church....The unity of the Church...is a cardinal truth, in the Christian system. It is involved in the conception of the Christian salvation itself. To renounce it, or lose sight of it, is to make shipwreck of the gospel, to the same extent. There is no room for individualism or particularism....An individual dissociated entirely from his race, would cease to be a man. And just so the conception of individual or particular Christianity, as something independent of the organic whole, which we denominate the Church, is a moral solecism [error] that necessarily destroys itself. Christ cannot be divided..."

In this sermon, Nevin calls all particular Churches or congregations of faithful saints back to reforming Christ's Church from within. He declares that the reformation of our churches is not over, and we must seek unity together in doctrine and life in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. He says that because of rationalism, religious radicalism, and licentiousness of private judgment, the one Church is divided into sects that profane the name of God in the world.

Men separate from the Church committing sin against Christ himself, and so he calls the Christian world back to seeking unity through what

the Church has always taught in submission to the Word of God. He closes with a sober and solemn call to all the churches then, as well as today. It should be noted that this was written and preached over 150 years ago, and the problem is still a clear and present danger to our mother, and I believe only a reformation from within, by the Spirit of God, can call our attention once again to the visible Church of Christ, the covenant household of God.

Nevin wrote in conclusion: "The glory of God and the honor of his truth...require that [all congregations] should stand out to the world, not as many but as one, *the Church* (not churches), of the Reformation, the body of Christ, the "pillar and ground of the truth," one body and one Spirit, even as they are called in one hope of their calling. May the great Head of the Church himself interpose in ways that to his own wisdom shall seem best, to conduct the hearts and counsels of his people to this result; and in the meantime bestow richly upon us who are here present the glorious power of his grace, that we may be enabled to be faithful to this high interest especially in the exercise of the trust now committed to our hands, maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace." (1844, quoted from Schaff's *The Principle of Protestantism*, pages 194-215)

We are commanded to seek unity, and I believe that if we are to find true and biblical unity, we will need to begin thinking about how to understand ourselves today, at the beginning of the Third Millennium as being part of a confessing Church throughout history. We must seek to do the interpreting of our Bibles together with all the saints, humbly to repent of our individualism and our narrow-mindedness and focus on our own generation. I will constantly repent with you as we prayerfully seek God's help as his One Church, and with an eye toward truly honoring our mother. As Christians, we are commanded in 1 Peter 5:6-7 to humble ourselves, and Paul says that we ought to "honor others above ourselves" (Rom. 12), and "to submit to one another in love" (Eph. 5:21-32), and to seek to be one-minded (Phil. 2:2), but how can we better understand ourselves as part of one church today in an effort to strive for unity?

The visible Church of Christ, our mother, is made up of individuals, but the focus is on the community throughout history, not merely on the individuals within the community.

But the question might be asked now: "How do I find a true and faithful congregation of saints who want to seek unity with Christians both living and dead, and how do I find those who want to seek unity

and one-minded-ness not only with their own generation, but with generations of Christians before them?" Good question! In the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century, there were "three marks of the church" that can be helpful to us today. We live in a very similar time period I believe. In our next chapter we will study what it means to have a "reformational" understanding of our mother.

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Next Chapter:

Chap. 4: A "Reformational" Understanding of Our Mother