

Foundations of Christian Unity

A vision and framework for practical Christian unity in a divided world

Abstract: This work presents a theological vision and practical framework for Christian unity grounded in the shared life of Jesus Christ and the apostolic faith. Scripture teaches that the Church is one body united in Christ before she is perfected in understanding. Yet the Church also bears responsibility to guard the truth of the gospel and to grow toward maturity in love and holiness.

This document seeks to hold together these two biblical realities by distinguishing between the reality of unity given in Christ and the varying degrees of visible unity experienced among believers. Not all theological differences equally compromise the gospel, yet neither are doctrinal disagreements inconsequential for the life of the Church. Through humility, discernment, and charity, Christians may recognize one another as members of the same body while acknowledging real differences that affect cooperation in fellowship, teaching, and mission.

A fourfold framework is proposed to help Christians navigate unity and division responsibly, preserving love without surrendering truth and guarding truth without abandoning love. This framework aims to support faithful participation in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church across traditions while encouraging continued reform according to Scripture.

The goal of Christian unity is not institutional uniformity, but maturity in Christ, expressed in love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith.

Preface on Universalism, Ecumenism, and Truth

I once shared my belief that Christians need to read the perspectives of other Christians outside their branch of the Christian faith because this helps foster love and mutual respect between us. One of my friends, knowing that I reject universalism, but still being skeptical of universalism-disguised, then asked me to clarify the difference between universalism and the kind of unity that I think is needed in the Church. So I want address this distinction upfront because I think it's an important preface for this framework.

Universalism embraces all religions as valid paths to God (which I reject outright), while **ecumenism** embraces all Church-traditions as Christian (which I cautiously accept in principle). And within ecumenism, there are nuances pertaining to “*structural ecumenism*,” “*spiritual ecumenism*,” “*doctrinal ecumenism*,” and “*practical ecumenism*,” all of which have both strengths and limitations that require their own conversations. So, I consider myself **principally ecumenical** to the extent that I recognize all Church-traditions who embrace the essential Nicene expression of the Christian faith and accept the historic moral teachings of Scripture concerning holiness, repentance, and love as legitimate members of the one, universal, holy, and apostolic Church. But I critique ecumenical movements that attempt to erase the differences between Church-traditions or pretend like all our differences are equally valid.

Because the Church is not merely a collection of contemporary interpreters but a people formed across generations, this framework assumes the ongoing relevance of the historic witness of the Church. Creeds, confessions, liturgies, and theological traditions serve as instruments through which the Church has sought to preserve the apostolic faith. These witnesses do not replace Scripture as the final authority for Christian faith and practice, but they provide the accumulated wisdom of believers who have wrestled with many of the same questions across time. For this reason, this framework does not pursue unity through theological novelty, but through our shared participation in Christ in the faith once delivered to the saints.

True and meaningful unity cannot be established by refusing to acknowledge and deal with our differences. Yet, resolving the doctrine of our differences also cannot be the prerequisite for our unity.

Scripture doesn't ask us to ignore our differences. Instead, it calls us to love one another *while taking truth seriously*. As Paul writes, “Above all, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity” (Colossians 3:14). Love is the bond of unity, not a substitute for truth. Love is the way truth is lived, spoken, and preserved within the body of Christ.

So Christian unity must be established by the way that our truth is realized in love.

Truth and love are not competing principles within the Christian life but mutually interpreting realities. Truth gives love its direction, and love gives truth its proper expression. Truth without love becomes destructive, while love without truth becomes deceptive. Scripture does not permit us to choose between them, because both are revealed together in Jesus Christ, who is full of grace and truth. Therefore, Christian unity cannot be preserved either by minimizing doctrinal conviction or by disregarding the command to love one another in humility and patience.

In short and practical terms, this means that different Church-traditions will maintain their key objections, advocating for reform in others, while recognizing each other as fellow members of Christ's body with whom they walk together in patience and love. We can recognize the serious differences between us, acknowledging

that someone is “right” and someone is “wrong”, while remaining committed to each other in the love of Christ. As Paul said, “*Who are you to judge another’s household servant? Before his own Lord he stands or falls. And he will stand, because the Lord is able to make him stand.*” (Romans 14:4).

Therefore, my framework attempts to establish the balance of unity in the tension between *truth* and *love*.

This framework does not attempt to resolve every theological disagreement within the Church, nor does it attempt to establish a minimal doctrinal standard that reduces the richness of Christian teaching. Our aim is more focused and practical: to clarify how Christians may recognize one another as belonging to Christ while still taking doctrinal differences seriously. The Church will always require theological clarity in order to preserve the gospel, yet she also requires humility concerning the limits of human understanding. This vision and framework attempts to help Christians see each other as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, and to give them the keys to navigating their differences without flattening the importance of those differences. In some cases, the reader may be frustrated that I do not settle *the differences* that make them struggle with unity in any given circumstance. But, if they take this vision and framework, they should be able to see their way through and navigate those differences *even if they are not resolved* because not all differences will be resolved before the Lord’s return.

A Vision For Christian Unity

John 17:6-26 (CSB) — 6 **"I have revealed your name to the people you gave me** from the world. They were yours, you gave them to me, **and they have kept your word.** 7 Now they know that everything you have given me is from you, 8 **because I have given them the words you gave me. They have received them** and have known for certain that I came from you. **They have believed that you sent me.** 9 **"I pray for them.** I am not praying for the world but for those you have given me, because they are yours. 10 Everything I have is yours, and everything you have is mine, and **I am glorified in them.** 11 I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. **Holy Father, protect them by your name that you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one.** 12 **While I was with them, I was protecting them** by your name that you have given me. I guarded them and not one of them is lost, except the son of destruction, so that the Scripture may be fulfilled. 13 Now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy completed in them. 14 **I have given them your word. The world hated them because they are not of the world,** just as I am not of the world. 15 **I am not praying that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.** 16 They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 17 **Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.** 18 As you sent me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. 19 **I sanctify myself for them, so that they also may be sanctified by the truth.** 20 **I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in me through their word.** 21 **May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me.** 22 **I have given them the glory you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one.** 23 **I am in them and you are in me, so that they may be made completely one, that the world may know you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me.** 24 **"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, so that they will see my glory,** which you have given me because you loved me before the world's foundation. 25 Righteous Father, the world has not known you. However, I have known you, and they have known that you sent me. 26 **I made your name known to them and will continue to make it known, so that the love you have loved me with may be in them and I may be in them."**

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In the very shadow of his cross, Jesus went before the throne of God in prayer and offered his high-priestly prayer for the Church. This was his vision of Christian unity. And it's a vision for Christian unity that I believe requires the very cross that he was soon to take up for our sakes.

First Jesus prays for the foundation of Christian unity.

Jesus revealed the Father's name to his people, the apostles and disciples, and gave them his word, which they received. And they believed that the Father sent his begotten Son. Therefore, the Son was glorified in them. And he prayed that the Holy Father would protect them by the name he gave to the Son so that they would all be one just as he and the Father were one. He gave them his word. He knew that the world would hate them, but did not ask to take them out of the world, but that the Father would protect them from the evil one. So he asked that they would be sanctified in the Truth, which is the Father's Word, and is why he sanctified himself, so that they too would be sanctified by the truth. Therefore, the foundation of Christian unity is the apostolic Church, who received his word and believed his witness, being sanctified by the truth and sent out into the world under the Father's protection.

Then Jesus prays for for those who would believe in him through their word.

Jesus asked that we would all be one, even as the Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father. So he asked that we would be one in the Father and the Son so that the world might believe that the Father sent the Son. He then gave us the glory that the Father gave the Son, so that we may be one even as they are one. And he promised that he would be in us, even as the Father is in him, so that we would be made completely one so that the world might know that the Father sent the Son and has loved the Church even as he loved the Son. Therefore, the one, universal, holy, and apostolic Church that is built upon the word and faith of the apostles who were sanctified by the truth also receives the glory that the Father gave to the Son, so that we would be made completely one, and in this glory, that the world might know that the Father sent the Son and has truly loved the Church even as he loved the Son!

This vision is so great that it is rarely even given in the body today. We are so comfortable with our division, and the unity of the cross that holds together in the tension between *truth* and *love* is so difficult, that we often settle for far less. But, in so doing, we are not receiving the glory that the Son has given us.

When we look at how Jesus protected his disciples while he was with them, he did not protect them from human disputes; over and over again they fought over interpretation and position. But he kept them together because they believed him and received his word. He was the source of their unity.

Today we also argue over interpretation and position, but we believe in the Son through their apostolic witness. So, just as the Lord Jesus kept them together, we must receive their word and be made completely one.

We have already received the basis for this unity. Now we must be *made* completely one. And I believe we will be made completely one in the balance between *truth* and *love* that comes when we take up the cross and follow Jesus.

This means that in our disputes our submission to the Lord and our commitment to one another in love must be greater than our pride and our tempers. This means that we have to learn how to see one another as *fellow servants* of Christ, rather than as thinking of ourselves as *superior* to others. Yes, we must continue to live up to the measure of truth that we have attained (Philippians 3:16), but we must do so with humility (Philippians 2:3). We don't have to abandon truth to act with love towards those we believe are in error.

We should, however, also recognize that Christian unity is not an end in itself, but serves the mission of God in the world. Jesus teaches that the visible unity of his people bears witness to the truth of the gospel so that the world may believe that the Father sent the Son. When the Church lives in reconciled love despite real differences, she demonstrates the reconciling power of the cross. Conversely, when division is treated lightly or pursued carelessly, the Church's witness becomes obscured. Therefore, the pursuit of unity is inseparable from the Church's calling to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and to embody his life before the world.

The Mustard Tree: Unity as a Living Reality

Mark 4:30–32 (CSB) — **30** And he said, “**With what can we compare the kingdom of God**, or what parable can we use to describe it? **31 It’s like a mustard seed that**, when sown upon the soil, is the smallest of all the seeds on the ground. **32** And when sown, it **comes up and grows taller than all the garden plants, and produces large branches**, so that the birds of the sky can nest in its shade.”

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Jesus’ parable of the mustard seed offers a striking image for understanding the nature and unity of the Christian Church. The kingdom of God begins as something small, but it takes root, and grows into a tree that shelters all life.

Any reading of this parable that could be useful for Jesus’ stated aim of understanding the Kingdom of God must make four essential observations:

First, there is one root, which is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the root that sustains the tree (*cf* Rom. 11:18b).

Second, the branches are not imaginary but real. From the Church’s beginnings, different members of the body have always struggled to understand and accept each other precisely because they are different (*cf* Rom. 11:17-18a; 1 Cor. 12:12-20). The differences between branches are not superficial. Our history matters. Our doctrine matters. Just like any living tree, the Church has many kinds of branches. Trees have *vegetative branches*, *reproductive branches*, *scaffolding branches*, *lateral branches*, and even *twigs*. Each has a real function, a real form, and a real place, but none can imagine itself to be the whole tree. The Church in her nature is like this, with many different branches.

Third, branches can be healthy or unhealthy without ceasing to be branches. A branch can grow crooked. A branch can overgrow. Or a branch might be diseased or might not produce as much fruit as it should. Yet, so long as it remains connected to the tree, and until it’s removed by the Gardener (*cf* John 15:6), it remains a branch connected to the life of the whole tree. And, just as each branch of a tree must maintain its own structural integrity because its life is endangered if that structural integrity is compromised, so our great ecclesial institutions must have real and practical internal unity for them to live and bear fruit. Their traditions and structures are beneficial. But they mustn’t think that these make them the whole tree in themselves.

Fourth, no one branch is the whole tree (*cf* Mark 4:32). Some branches are older than others. Some branches have been growing from the beginning. Some branches are load-bearing branches that can bear the weight of storms and support the structural integrity of the tree. And some branches remain throughout the whole life of the tree. But all of these are still *branches* of the *tree*. No branch should look down on another and say “*I have no need of you.*”

Christian unity is meant to be understood like this parable. Trees grow unevenly. They develop strong branches, weaker branches, fruit-bearing branches, and peripheral growth. Though the growth of the tree’s branches is not uniform, all the tree’s branches draw their life from, and are established by, the same root. We all share in the whole life of the tree.

Therefore, our unity is grounded in the shared life of Christ, who *forms, shapes, and establishes* our beliefs. What we believe and teach about that life matters. Our theology clarifies, guards, and directs Christian life, which our doctrinal disagreements matter precisely because doctrine is formative for Christian life. But, while

these errors can signal weaknesses, disease, and even barrenness in a branch, they do not sever the branch from the tree. And no one branch can cut off another. Only the gardener can remove a branch. And he does, indeed, prune the tree. But so long as a branch remains connected to the tree, it shares in the whole life of the tree!

The image of the tree must also be understood alongside the Lord's teaching that branches which do not abide in him may be removed (John 15:6). The presence of diversity within the visible Church does not imply that all teaching is equally faithful, nor that all developments within the Church are healthy. Scripture consistently teaches that God purifies his people through correction, repentance, reform, and even judgment. Therefore, recognizing that many branches share life in Christ does not eliminate the responsibility to test teachings, to correct error, or to guard the gospel from distortion. Unity does not eliminate discernment, instead, it requires it. So we recognize that branches can be removed from the tree. But that is a sacred work of God alone!

What my framework attempts to accomplish is show how Christians can retain their commitment to love one another in the midst of real error. By humility. By mercy. By gentle correction. And by patient persistence in prayer for one another, we must learn both how to recognize each other in Christ and how to grow together as branches of one tree.

Paul on Unity: The Root and the Building

1 Corinthians 1:10–13 (CSB) — **10** Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, **in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction.** **11** For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers and sisters, by members of Chloe's people, that there is rivalry among you. **12** What I am saying is this: One of you says, **"I belong to Paul,"** or **"I belong to Apollos,"** or **"I belong to Cephas,"** or **"I belong to Christ."** **13** Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in Paul's name?

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Paul's discourse on unity and division in 1st Corinthians chapters 1–3 is very instructive. The Corinthians weren't dividing over trivial matters. Their differences were substantive. Their differences were reinforced by the traditions that were developing out of influential and authoritative leaders in the Christian community. Using the controlling metaphor of the parable tree, these were the tender shoots that would one day grow into the major branches of the tree.

Yet Paul urges Christians in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ towards unity. Just as Jesus gave them his name, so his name unifies those who believe in him through apostolic witness. He refused to accept division as normative for Christian life. So we too, if we are going to carry forward the apostolic faith, cannot accept division as *normal*.

What Paul wrote raises two questions: **first**, what kind of unity is meant, and **second**, what kind of division is forbidden?

Paul defines unity as being *"united with the same understanding and conviction"*, which further begs the question of what *kind* of understanding should we have? We might assume he's referencing *"dogmatic understanding"*, but there's no hint of that throughout his arguments in chapters 1–3. Instead Paul explains that *"we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who comes from God, so that we may understand what has been freely given to us by God"* (1 Corinthians 2:12, CSB). He then concludes, saying **"let no one boast in human leaders, for everything is yours—whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come—everything is yours, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God"** (1 Corinthians 3:21–23, CSB).

The same-understanding that Paul is calling for is the understanding that we all belong to Christ, and therefore, the leaders God appoints in the Church must not become the basis of division. This same principle appears in Romans: *"who are you to judge another's household servant? Before his own Lord he stands or falls. And he will stand, because the Lord is able to make him stand"* (Romans 14:4, CSB). The principle that we learn here is that unity begins with belonging. When we frame one another primarily as those who belong to the Lord, we then have the foundation necessary for unity in diversity. This is what Jesus did when he was with the disciples. He kept them together by accepting them.

After defining unity in view of our belonging to the Lord, Paul then defines division as "rivalry," crystallized in statements like "I belong to Paul" or "I belong to Apollos", and strikingly, even "I belong to Christ." The division Paul condemns is the inverse of the unity he commends; we are not meant to belong to Christ *against* one

another, nor to treat our particular leaders or traditions as rival trees rather than as branches serving the same root.

The details of Paul's discourse are important. He acknowledges that Christians may build poorly on that foundation. Some teaching will endure; some will not. Some theology is wood, hay, or straw – real error – but not foundation-destroying error. The fire will test it and some loss will be suffered. Yet the builder may still be saved.

Any framework for Christian unity that cannot recognize or cope with the potential for theological error does not hold the full weight of apostolic doctrine. The result will be deficiency in realized unity throughout the body. But the distinctions being made here in this framework create space for unity amid theological error without denying the seriousness of error itself. Paul does not flatten truth, but neither does he fragment the body at every point of disagreement.

Likewise, Christian unity does not eliminate the need for discernment; it demands it. The Church is not a collection of isolated interpreters but a living body that learns, judges, and corrects itself over time. This means that theological judgments are ordinarily communal, patient, and made with humility, not rushed, individual, or absolutized beyond the clear warrants of Scripture. The New Testament assumes disagreement within the body and provides processes for addressing it through teaching, humility, correction, and appeal to a shared confession. But because our knowledge is partial and our sanctification uneven, many of our judgments about doctrine must remain provisional: held seriously, taught responsibly, but always open to further light, correction, and reform. This posture guards the Church from both doctrinal relativism and doctrinal arrogance, preserving unity without suspending truth.

Therefore, the sum of Christian unity is firmly located in Jesus and him crucified as our **non-negotiable root**: *“No one can lay any foundation other than what has been laid down. That foundation is Jesus Christ”* (1 Corinthians 3:11).

Unity That Precedes Maturity

Ephesians 4:1–6 (CSB) — 1 Therefore I, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, 2 **with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.** 4 **There is one body and one Spirit**—just as you were called to **one hope** at your calling—5 **one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all**, who is **above all** and **through all** and **in all**.

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One of the essential observations of this framework is that *unity necessarily precedes maturity*.

Here Paul deepens this vision, speaking of “*one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all*”, which is a kind of unity that is not achieved through human agreement, but is **given** in Christ! Therefore, we must note that Christians aren’t called to invent unity, but to “*maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*”

We must also observe how diversity follows unity: Christian diversity is necessarily part of God’s Kingdom precisely because he is redeeming people from “*every tongue, tribe, and nation*” on earth. Therefore Scripture says “*there are many parts, but one body*” (1 Corinthians 12:20) and again “*we who are many are one body in Christ and individually members of one another*” (Romans 12:5). Our diversity is given to us for the sake of our growth, maturity, and protection. Unity is not the end of growth, but rather, it’s the environment in which growth occurs and flourishes.

Unfortunately, it’s possible that one branch might not recognize the unity that it has been given in Christ with the other branches of the tree. And, in not recognizing this truth, the lived experience of that branch may suffer in its experience of Christian unity, resulting in various deficiencies because it isn’t receiving the grace that has been distributed through other branches. But even that branch remains part of the tree by virtue of its connection to the root.

This was one of the most difficult lessons for me to learn as a Christian when I began to fellowship and work with Christians from other branches. I quickly discovered that not everyone was as ready to accept me as I was to accept them.

The natural reaction, of course, is to find some justification (at least, in my own mind) for cutting them off from the tree. The language of the tradition in which I was raised would do this by saying something like “*the Bible plainly teaches X, which they don’t accept, so they have rejected the faith once handed down for all.*” But in so doing I made whatever doctrine was in question out to be the determiner for what it means to be Christian. And this naturally balloons to eventually include every dogmatic interpretation of my own tradition. However, Jesus said “*the one who believes in the Son has eternal life, but the one who rejects the Son will not see life; instead, the wrath of God remains on him*” (John 3:36). Although I could certainly contort things enough to make it out like my particular interpretation of eldership-pluralities was directly connected to “*believing in the Son*”, the multiplicity of places where Jesus talked about this do not call into view things like the particulars of our ecclesial interpretations.

Once again, Jesus is the basis for our unity. So that meant that I would have to learn how to be rejected by the ones I’m meant to love if I’m to learn how to love them as Christ has loved me (See John 13:34). And this meant taking up my cross.

This lesson was once again very challenging for me when I began to feel led to begin a home church. I resisted this calling, being stubbornly deaf to it for some time, because I was pursuing unity and wanted to stay connected to the broader Church. So it was very difficult for me to accept that, just as the Father wants us to preserve our love for one another in the midst of our differences, he also sometimes calls us to cultivate the truth that other branches are erring in.

Therefore, it's necessary for Christians to learn how to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace by putting on love, which is the perfect bond of peace. Put simply, I must keep peace with those who reject me by retaining my commitment to loving them. And I must always be sanctified in the truth as I follow the Lord. Perhaps nothing in the Christian faith is harder than this because nothing gets to the cross of Christ more than loving the ones who reject you the most without compromising the sanctification of truth.

Likewise, the unity of the Church is not merely an agreement of opinion, but a participation in the life of the Father that proceeds from the Holy Spirit in the name of the Son. Scripture teaches that believers are joined together into one body through the Spirit, who distributes gifts for the building up of the Church and produces the fruit of love, patience, gentleness, and self-control. Because unity is the work of the Spirit, it cannot be manufactured through institutional alignment alone, nor can it be preserved through human effort apart from humility and repentance. Therefore, the Church seeks not only doctrinal clarity but spiritual maturity, trusting that the Spirit who unites the body also leads the body into truth.

There is no way around the reality that if we want to “walk worthy of the calling that we have received”, we must bear with one another in love, with all humility, gentleness, and patience, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. **This is how we keep the unity that we have been given in Christ.**

So error affects the *quality* of Christian unity before it affects the *reality* of Christian unity.

This vision of unity that holds together in the balance between truth and love is what my framework hopes to navigate.

However, because this framework distinguishes between varying degrees of unity and division, it is necessary to briefly identify the kinds of doctrines that historically have been understood as essential to Christian faith. Across the centuries, the Church has recognized certain teachings as foundational because they concern the identity of God, the person and work of Christ, the nature of salvation, and the authority of the apostolic gospel. Denial of the Triune nature of God, the incarnation of the Son, the saving significance of Christ's death and resurrection, the reality of sin, or the hope of redemption fundamentally alters the gospel itself. Where such teachings are rejected, Christian unity cannot be preserved because the shared confession that constitutes Christian identity has been abandoned. These boundaries are not determined by preference or tradition alone, but by the witness of Scripture as received and confessed throughout the historic Church.

Christ Brings the Division

Luke 12:49–53 (CSB) — **49** “I came to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already set ablaze! **50** But I have a baptism to undergo, and how it consumes me until it is finished! **51** Do you think that I came here to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. **52** From now on, five in one household will be divided: three against two, and two against three. **53** They will be divided, father against son, son against father, mother against daughter, daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

Matthew 10:32–39 (CSB) — **32** “Therefore, everyone who will acknowledge me before others, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. **33** But whoever denies me before others, I will also deny him before my Father in heaven. **34** Don’t assume that I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. **35** For I came to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; **36** and a man’s enemies will be the members of his household. **37** The one who loves a father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; the one who loves a son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. **38** And whoever doesn’t take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. **39** Anyone who finds his life will lose it, and anyone who loses his life because of me will find it.

The unity of the Church is a gift of God that Christians are commanded to preserve. Yet Scripture also teaches that there are circumstances in which division becomes necessary. Christian unity is not an absolute good detached from truth, holiness, or loyalty to Christ. The same Lord who prayed that his people would be one also warned that his coming would bring division, even within households.

In both Luke and Matthew, Jesus teaches that following him creates a crisis of allegiance. His kingdom confronts every rival loyalty and demands ultimate devotion. Family ties, religious traditions, political identities, cultural loyalties, and personal ambitions must all yield to the lordship of Christ. Therefore, division is not always evidence of unfaithfulness. Sometimes it is the unavoidable consequence of fidelity.

This principle must be carefully understood. Christians are never commanded to seek division for its own sake. The New Testament consistently urges patience, gentleness, humility, forgiveness, and peace. Division becomes necessary only when preserving visible unity would require compromise of truth, participation in sin, abandonment of covenant faithfulness, or disloyalty to Christ himself.

For this reason, Christians must evaluate division not by the intensity of disagreement but by the nature of the issue at stake. Many disagreements concern matters where faithful believers may remain united despite real differences. Other disputes involve questions of sin, idolatry, apostasy, or corruption of the gospel. In such cases, separation may become an act of obedience rather than hostility.

The guiding principle is simple: Christians should preserve unity wherever faithfulness permits and accept division wherever faithfulness requires. Unity is the default posture of the Church. Division is the tragic but sometimes necessary consequence of unwavering allegiance to Jesus Christ.

A Framework For Christian Unity & Division

We have taken the time to present a vision for Christian unity, but a framework is necessary to prevent that vision from devolving into mere rhetoric. What needs to be done here is to bring this vision into reality by showing that it can cope with the demands that it must face. So it's for this reason that we are now going to talk about Christian unity *and* division.

A Fourfold Framework for Christian Unity & Division

From this vision emerges a fourfold framework that preserves truth without abandoning love by recognizing the full spectrum of Christian unity and division.

1. Full Unity in Fellowship and Mission

This degree of unity exists where Christians share the full range of convictions in the apostolic faith necessary to establish full unity in both fellowship and mission without meaningful restriction. While differences in individual thinking may exist within any given community, those differences don't restrict the life and purpose of the local community.

This is the ideal that all Christians should strive to maintain.

2. Partial Unity in Fellowship and Mission

Partial degrees of unity exist where Christians recognize one another as fellow Christians while acknowledging that real differences in core convictions exist which impose limits on shared fellowship and mission. This is where some degree of shared fellowship and collaboration in mission may be visible even where deeper theological collaboration and sacramental life are limited.

This is how Christians strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit when real differences occur.

3. Selective Unity & Division in Fellowship and Mission

This degree of unity exists where Christians recognize one another as fellow Christians while acknowledging that they see real theological error in one another. Love and recognition remain, but cooperation is selective and situational. Some shared social ministry or broad gospel proclamation may be possible while large scale mission or deeper sacramental life is not.

This is how Christians strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit when significant theological error exists.

4. Full Division Over Heresy, Sin, or Covenant Compromise

This degree of division exists where Christians cannot recognize someone as Christian. These are cases where separation is necessary because the person, work, and good news of Christ, or moral fidelity, or covenantal allegiance to God are fundamentally denied or corrupted. In such cases, neither fellowship nor mission can be shared because Christian identity itself is not mutually recognized.

Separation here is not hostility; it is honesty.

Framework Keys

The second and third tiers of unity are focused primarily on theological differences because they assume agreement on covenant fidelity and matters of sin. The differences in view are primarily theological, ecclesial, sacramental, or practical rather. Therefore, it's unequivocally vital that restraint be exercised to prevent an ever expansive conception of what "covenant betrayal" means, which would every theological, ecclesial, sacramental, or practical difference downward into the fourth tier of full division. Should "covenantal betrayal" be permitted unrestrained expansion, then every tradition will use it against every other tradition, causing this framework to become unstable.

The fourth tier of full division addresses functional apostasy from heresy concerning the person, work, and good news of Christ, sin, or covenantal betrayal. Israel frequently retained correct forms, priesthood, sacrifices, temple worship, and covenant language while becoming spiritually adulterous. Since this framework presupposes unity that is superior to formal and institutional attributes, it's necessary that full division also operate at a deeper level. Therefore, it's necessary that full division cope with the appearance of formal or institutional fidelity while dealing with essential unfaithfulness, which requires that we understand full division in view of the realities that define the Christian faith itself.

In all of this we have to recognize that while the Church must sometimes draw firm boundaries around teaching offices, sacramental fellowship, and formal partnerships for the sake of doctrinal integrity, these limits don't necessarily excuse the withdrawal of love, patience, or relational faithfulness to the individuals for whom Christ still died. So the New Testament distinguishes between guarding the Church's teaching and abandoning those who are in error. Institutional unity may require restraint, but personal love doesn't. Confusing these two categories has led Christians either to compromise truth for the sake of harmony or to justify lovelessness in the name of orthodoxy. Scripture permits neither.

Distinguishing between institutional cooperation and personal love is essential for maintaining both truth and charity. Churches may find that differences in doctrine prevent shared leadership, shared sacramental practice, or shared teaching responsibilities. Yet such limitations do not remove the obligation to love one another, to pray for one another, and to seek one another's good. The New Testament frequently distinguishes between guarding the teaching entrusted to the Church and maintaining patience and gentleness toward fellow believers. Institutional boundaries protect the integrity of teaching, but they do not nullify the command to love those for whom Christ died.

Answering the Objections

"If doctrine shapes life, then theological error must break unity."

A reasonable objection here is that if doctrine is formative for Christian life, then error must necessarily break unity. But, this objection fails to recognize that not all errors equally or fatally deform life. Paul explicitly allows for serious error so long as the core faith is built on the true foundation of Christ. Unity is broken only to the extent that cooperation requires shared participation in the error.

"This is just soft ecumenism with better language."

I also anticipate that one might reasonably be concerned that this merely rebrands modern ecumenism. But modern ecumenism collapses distinctions. This framework multiplies them and insists on boundaries,

graduated cooperation, and real separation where necessary. Ecumenism avoids judgment, but this framework practices pastoral discernment that is ordered by love.

“You’re privileging love over truth.”

Another reasonable concern might be that this framework privileges love over truth. But neither truth nor love must enjoy special privilege. Instead, love is the *mode* by which truth is enacted. Truth without love wounds and divides while love without truth deceives and destabilizes. Scripture refuses to separate what God has joined.

“This makes unity subjective and situational.”

Lastly, another objection might be that this flattens unity into subjectivity. But this framework recognizes the objective basis for unity as being in Christ and his good news without losing the complexity of the Christian life. The reason for the graduated expression of Christian unity is because Christian life is complex. Paul himself models cooperation, confrontation, and separation depending on the issue at hand.

Studying Other Traditions in Love

This framework explains how one can study other Christian traditions with seriousness and charity. One can recognize real grace, learn from lived theology, and still name real error without contempt. Love does not require false affirmation. Truth does not require severing the body.

Christian unity is not fragile if it is alive. It does not fear disagreement. It does not pretend differences do not matter. It trusts that the same life that unites the body will, in time, mature it.

The Church grows best when heresy is rejected, error is engaged, and love refuses to fail.