

12.5 A Unified Theology of the Eucharist

Paul posed a thought-provoking question to the Corinthian community: “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Corinthians 1:13). From a sociological perspective, division refers to the ways in which societies are categorized and stratified based on factors such as class, ethnicity, race, religion, and gender. While these divisions can create disparities in power, resources, and access to opportunities, they also present opportunities for growth, reconciliation, and understanding within a society.



Mahone Bay Three Churches-Photo by Shawn M. Kent

Looking at the history of Christianity, the East-West Schism of 1054 marked a significant turning point, splitting the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church due to ecclesiastical and theological differences. While the factors contributing to the division—such as the Filioque controversy, disagreements over Eucharistic bread, iconoclasm, Charlemagne's coronation, Pope's authority, and the position of the See of Constantinople—were complex, they also sparked deep theological reflection and dialogue.

Today, Christianity continues to thrive, with an estimated 2.18 billion followers worldwide, comprising nearly a third of the global population. While Christianity's historical roots were primarily in Europe, the Church now embraces a global community, with only 26% of Christians residing in Europe, highlighting the broad reach of the faith.

We see denominations have had divisions as we study the history of denominations.

The Roman Catholic Church historically emphasized that salvation is found within the Church, asserting the idea of one universal Church of the faithful, as articulated by Pope Innocent III in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 (Catholicism). During the Reformation period, Martin Luther's writings, though not accepted by the Catholic Church, sparked a transformative movement. His excommunication in 1521 and the subsequent denouncement by Pope Leo X and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V led to significant theological developments that shaped the Christian landscape (Papal Encyclicals). In North America, Baptist missions faced opposition, such as in 1651 when Dr. John Clarke, Obadiah Holmes, and John Crandall were imprisoned for conducting a service. Despite being fined and facing harsh punishments, including lashes, they remained steadfast in their commitment to their faith. The governor, rejecting infant baptism, viewed their actions as a threat, but their perseverance reflected the courage of the early Baptist movement (Harry A Renfree, *The Heritage Horizons: The Baptist Story in Canada*). The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, famously associated with Charles Spurgeon, stated, "neither can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof, but is that Antichrist, that Man of sin, and Son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the Church against Christ, and all that is called God." (<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/a/anonymous/bcf/cache/bcf.pdf> CHAP. XXVI. Of the Church). In 1739, Wesley and the Methodists faced persecution for their lack of formal ordination and perceived social threat, yet their movement brought significant change to the religious landscape of their time (Tooley,

Mark (2014). "John Wesley and Religious Freedom"). Dr. Todd M. Johnson, a professor at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, highlights the growing diversity within Christianity, noting the rise of denominations with an estimated 45,000 worldwide, expected to increase to 49,000 by 2025. He stresses the importance of a shared global Christian identity, which unites believers across denominational lines.

Given these historical contexts and divisions, how do different denominations understand the meaning of the Mass, the Lord's Supper, Communion, and the Eucharist? Can we conclude that they have celebrated these sacraments in the manner that Jesus intended?

As we reflect on our shared journey of faith, how have we treated those who differ from us in understanding these practices and many other aspects of Christian life, ministry, and mission—yet still confess Jesus as Lord?

Jesus prayed for the unity of His followers in His High Priestly prayer, saying:

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:20-22)

The Apostle Paul also addressed divisions in the Corinthian Church, asking, ***“Is Christ divided?”*** (1 Corinthians 1:13) and recognizing the presence of divisions, particularly in matters of spiritual gifts,

worship practices, beliefs, and leadership preferences (1 Corinthians 11:18). The Book of Revelation provides a powerful vision of ultimate unity in heaven, where people from every tribe, language, people, and nation will be united in worship before God: ***“And they sang a new song, saying: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.’”*** (Revelation 5:9)

This passage speaks of:

- 1. A New Worship: Focused on the victory of the Lamb.***
- 2. A New Theology: Jesus has defeated death and sin, purchasing redemption with His blood.***
- 3. A New Life: All belong to God, acknowledging Jesus as Lord.***
- 4. A New People: United by a common identity as redeemed people from every tribe, language, people, and nation.***

In this vision of heaven, the divisions that separate us on earth lose their power, as sin, flesh, and Satan have been defeated. The Eucharist, therefore, serves as an expression of this heavenly reality on earth. Jesus calls us to participate in this reality by faith, recognizing that through Him, the middle wall of hostility has been broken down, uniting all who believe in Him as one people (*Ephesians 2:17-19*).

In Matthew, Jesus teaches us, ***“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.”*** (Matthew 5:23-24).

Worship and the Eucharist present an incredible opportunity for reconciliation. Jesus places great importance on reconciliation, even above our worship and sacrifice. It is through reconciliation that we are prepared and liberated for true worship.

In worship, God gathers all who have confessed Jesus as Lord. Through the Eucharist, we proclaim the Gospel—first reconciling us to God, then to one another.

In 1 Corinthians, we are reminded that only through the Holy Spirit can we truly proclaim, *“Jesus is Lord.”* (1 Corinthians 12:3). This common confession of faith is central to our Christian identity. Paul emphasizes this unity in the epistle of Ephesians, where he writes: *“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”* (Ephesians 4:4-6). Jesus, as the cornerstone of our Eucharistic faith, is the Head of the Body and the source of the promised Spirit. In Him, we find our hope and are invited to partake in the mystery of His body and blood, given for the forgiveness of sins, guiding us to the Father. Paul further emphasizes this in 1 Corinthians 10:16, where he asks, *“Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?”* Eucharistic faith reminds us of our divine calling to reign with Christ eternally, even as we live our earthly lives.

The *Prayer of Humble Access* beautifully captures our understanding of this grace:

*“We do not presume to come to this Thy Table,
O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness,
but in Thy manifold and great mercies.*

We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under Thy Table.

But Thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy:

Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of Thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink His blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by His body, and our souls washed through His most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in Him, and He in us. Amen.”

Eucharist helps us understand the beauty of diversity within the Body of Christ, bringing us closer together. Just as the human body is one yet made up of many parts, so too is the Body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, Paul writes, *“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts forms one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.”* This passage reminds us of the beauty in our shared identity in Christ, where unity and diversity coexist. In the Eucharist, we come together as one, united in Him.

Our diversity, shaped by earthly and human differences, is an integral part of our identity. These differences—such as ethnicity, gender, nationality, language, and the cultural values we hold—are part of what makes us unique. At the same time, we are called to understand how to engage with the world around us, especially in light of our faith.

In Asia, the influence of Hinduism and Buddhism promotes non-violence, which can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization that flourished from 3300 BCE to 1300 BCE. The Vedas, particularly the Rig Veda, introduced early concepts of non-violence, which were further developed in the Upanishads. Mahatma Gandhi championed the idea that a nation’s moral progress is measured by its treatment of animals, linking non-violence to love. In this context, the Church in Asia has worked to connect the Gospel message with Hindu and Buddhist thought. Christian pacifism, a theological perspective, teaches that violence is incompatible with Christianity, with figures like Martin Luther King Jr. advocating for peace. However, it is important to view these teachings within their historical Mediterranean context to ensure that the biblical message is communicated meaningfully to contemporary Asian audiences.

In our secular society, religious groups face the challenge of conveying biblical messages in ways that are relevant today. For example, the

United Methodist Church (UMC) reaffirmed its position against LGBTQ clergy and same-sex marriage in 2019, resulting in over 20% of its congregations separating. Similarly, the Episcopal Church experienced a backlash following the ordination of an openly gay minister in 2003, leading to the formation of the Anglican Church in North America in 2009. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America faced similar divisions after permitting gay pastors in 2009, and over 600 congregations left to form the North American Lutheran Church. The Presbyterian Church experienced a significant split in 2012 due to the acceptance of gay clergy, while Transformation Ministries separated from the American Baptist Churches USA in 2006 over theological disagreements regarding homosexuality.



Despite these differences, the church, as a community that continues the narrative of the Abrahamic faith, faces the challenge of both understanding the world around us and interpreting the scriptures handed down to us. Only by doing so can we authentically relate our faith to the world.

In times of conflict, the Eucharist becomes a powerful unifying force. It invites believers to come together as they are, emphasizing that unity in the Church is not about uniformity of thought but about shared experience. By partaking in the Eucharist, Christians acknowledge Christ's sacrifice—His broken body and shed blood—which transforms enmity into humility. This transformation fosters communion with God, with each other, and with creation, as we seek to understand the mystery of God's love.

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