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New Testament Considerations on Unity and “Amicable Separation” in the United Methodist Church

Abstract

This paper explores the proposal of “Amicable Separation” in The United Methodist Church through the lens of New Testament teaching on Church unity and schism. First, the concept of ecclesial oneness is examined closely in the Gospel of John, Ephesians, and other related passages. Second, every instance of schism or threat of schism is studied in Acts, I Corinthians, Galatians, Colossians, I Timothy, and I and II John to see how separation is understood and addressed. After a summary of the study is given, application is made finally to the “Amicable Separation” proposal.

Key Words: Ecclesiology, Schism, United Methodist Church, Amicable Separation

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Introduction

During the 2004 General Conference of The United Methodist Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania an informal proposal of “amicable separation” was offered as a solution to the seemingly intractable impasse between conservatives and liberals in their respective agendas for the denomination. While the proposal was never brought officially before the General Conference body, a firestorm of reactions was generated among the delegates and the larger church. In hasty response, a formal statement of unity was approved overwhelmingly on the last day of Conference. However, in spite of apparent solidarity by the delegates in their resolution, the issue of “amicable separation” persists, not only as a subject of discussion and debate in different quarters of the church, but as a possible option for United Methodists.

The events of the Pittsburgh Conference and their aftermath have brought to the fore the ecclesiastically related issues of unity and separation with greater urgency, forcing the church to grapple with and seek clearer understanding of them. Questions surrounding the true nature of Christian unity and the appropriate theological grounds for division in a denomination are central. The answers to these questions can help protect the church from two extremes: settling for a superficial unity, where unity is elevated to the point that essential doctrinal integrity is compromised, making the United Methodist Church no longer a part of the church universal, or minimizing the importance of unity, where the hard work of unity is surrendered too easily, bringing about disastrous and ungodly schisms in the church.

With these 2004 General Conference issues as a backdrop, our paper will seek to identify relevant New Testament teaching on the issues of unity and separation in the Christian church and begin to explore its implications for the present state of the United Methodist denomination. Specifically, we will focus our attention on the concept of ecclesial oneness as developed in the Gospel of John, Paul’s teaching on the church’s unity in his Letter to the Ephesians, and other related New Testament teaching. Next, we will examine specific episodes of group and individual schisms or threats of schism addressed in Acts, I Corinthians, Galatians, Colossians, I Timothy, and I and II John to see how separation is understood and addressed. Then, we will attempt to summarize the New Testament teaching on unity and separation. Finally, we will conclude by making application to our current state in The United Methodist Church.

1. New Testament Teaching on Church Unity

While the New Testament uses a number of expressions regarding Christian unity in its prayers, exhortations, commands, corrections, and instructions, the New Testament's recurring description of the church as "εἷς" ("one") is the most crucial for our study.¹ An examination of "εἷς" ("one") in reference to the church quickly reveals that the clearest teaching and highest expression of ecclesial "oneness" is found in John's Gospel, particularly in Christ's priestly prayer, and Paul's Letter to the Ephesians.² Significantly, as we will see, this ecclesial language, "εἷς," is used to describe the "oneness" of God (Rom. 3:30, I Cor. 8:4, Eph. 4:4, etc.).

A. The Teaching on Unity in Jesus' Prayer in John 17

The most pressing concern of Jesus' prayer in John 17 is unity for his present and future disciples. Because of what Jesus says, the historical context in which he says it, and the place where John presents it in the literary scheme of his Gospel, Christian unity is undoubtedly a central concern for Jesus and the Gospel writer. Specifically, Jesus' earthly ministry is drawing to an end. Recognizing the cross is before him, Jesus gathers his disciples together for one last meal, as a part of the Passover celebration, in which he shares with them his most intimate thoughts. At the end of their time together, in the context of this meal, Jesus shares with his disciples a prayer that forms the climax of his teaching in John 13-16.³ Afterward, Jesus will retreat to a garden for private prayer to the Father.

In his prayer Jesus asks the Father to protect his present and future disciples (vs. 11, 20). He does not request protection from physical danger, tribulation, false teaching, or apostasy for his followers, but rather protection from anything that would divide them, breaking their fellowship with one another. He prays, "Holy Father protect them...so that they may be one..." (v.11). Christ's earnest desire for unity is underscored further by the fact that Jesus petitions three more times, "that all of them may be one..." (v. 21), "that they may be one..." (v.22) and "that they may be brought to complete unity" (v. 23). Here, Jesus' greatest concern is for his disciples' oneness.

Jesus clarifies that the unity he is requesting is not an ordinary or superficial unity, but one that is only appropriately modeled by the oneness existing between Jesus and his Father. Jesus states, "I pray...that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (vs. 20-21). By placing the example of his oneness with the Father at every petition for

Christian unity (vs. 11, 21, 22, 23), Jesus leaves no room for doubt that the oneness existing in the Trinitarian relationships is the model of unity he desires in his followers. Jesus further clarifies that the defining mark of the unity between Father and Son is love, and by extension the disciples' unity with each other (vs. 23, 26).

Jesus' prayer also intimates that he has provided his followers with all of the resources they need to walk in unity with one another. Jesus states, "I have given them the glory that you gave me that they may be one as we are one" (v. 22). All that the Father gave to the Son to make unity possible for his followers has been made available to them. The oneness modeled by the Father and Son is possible for Christ's disciples.

Finally, Jesus makes clear in his prayer that the oneness of his followers will be the defining witness to the world of his truth. Jesus states that when his disciples live in unity with one another, "then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (vs.23). Jesus' prayer echoes statements made earlier in the evening. Previous to his prayer Jesus told his disciples, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (v. 13:34). The truth of Jesus and his teaching will be vindicated in the loving relationships Christians have for one another. In the absence of loving unity, the world will have little reason to believe the Gospel.⁴

B. The Teaching on Unity in Ephesians

The Letter to the Ephesians is unique among the Pauline corpus. The apostle Paul is not responding to or addressing a pastoral problem or a personal concern. He has no larger purpose for writing than to edify and encourage believers. Ephesians was written intentionally as a letter to be circulated among many churches. As such, Ephesians provides an accessible entrée into the driving issues of Paul's theology and life. A cursory examination of the letter quickly reveals that the unity of the church is a core value in Paul's thought and in his understanding of the larger purposes of God for humanity.⁵

The overarching theme of Ephesians is the "mystery" made known in the Gospel (1:9; 3:3-6, 9; 5:32; 6:19), revealing that through Christ's death and exaltation, "the dividing wall of hostility" between Jews and Gentiles has been broken down, bringing them together into one body, the church, making them into one humanity, experiencing the promises of

God in Christ Jesus (2:11-22; 3:3-6), to the end of reconciling humanity to God. Within this context, Paul sees the church as the instrument through which the end of Christ's death and exaltation are brought about in the world. The church is the context in which the union of humanity takes place and humanity is reconciled to God, becoming one holy temple (2:6, 11-18; 3:9-10). As a community where divisions in humanity are overcome in "reconciliation, love and unity," the church exists as a witness "in heaven and on earth," declaring "the manifold wisdom of God" to the "principalities and powers in the heavenly places" which seek to divide humanity and to the unredeemed world (2:11-21; 3:6, 10).

In Ephesians, Paul refers to the church as the "body" of Christ, with the "head" of the body being Jesus Christ. In previous epistles, particularly in Romans and I Corinthians, Paul uses the body metaphor to describe the local church (or fellowship of house churches), with the "head" being just another "member" of the total body. However, in Ephesians, as well as in Colossians, the "body" refers to the universal church with Christ as its "head." The new humanity brought together in the universal church is inextricably bound together in solidarity, ruled by Christ and filled with his presence (1:22-23).

According to Paul, the union existing among Christians, the unity manifested in the church, reflects and testifies to the oneness of God, from whom all the families of the earth are named (3:15; 4:1-6). In Christ Jesus and in the unity of the church, the glory of God is made manifest in the world (3:21). If the church is not unified then God's work of bringing together "all things on earth" in Christ will remain incomplete, and his plan to unite all of his creation in Christ will go without witness to the hostile "heavenly powers" and the world.

However, Paul recognizes that there are challenges to this unity and that at times oneness may not be realized fully in the church. Therefore, he exhorts, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (4:3) and he provides specific instructions (chapters 4-6) to assist the church in actualizing the unity they already have in Christ (2:13-16; 4:3-6). To begin, Paul teaches that in their relationship with one another Christians should be "completely humble and gentle...bearing one another in love" (4:2). Paul then teaches that Christ has given a diversity of gifts and ministries to be exercised by Christians in the church (4:7), including leadership gifts (4:11), to the end that "the body of Christ may be built up until" the church reaches "unity in the faith," becoming "mature, attaining

to the full measure of the fullness of Christ” (4:13). Next, he exhorts Christians to speak truthfully to one another and avoid letting their anger simmer, thereby allowing the “devil to get a foothold” in their lives (4: 25-27). Furthermore, he states that they should engage in productive work that will allow them to share with those in need (4:28), that they should abstain from any unwholesome speech and replace it with edifying and gracious words (4:29); that they should get rid of all “bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice” (4:31); and that they should be kind and compassionate to one another, “forgiving each other, just as in Christ God” has forgiven them (4:32). Paul culminates his practical advice on walking out oneness in the church by summarizing the defining aspect of Christian unity - love. He states, “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us...” (5:2).

Paul also teaches that since God has chosen Christians to be “holy and blameless in his sight” (1:4) and since Christ died “to make her holy” (5:26), the one church must guard her moral purity. He teaches that the church should distance themselves from the “Gentiles’ way of life” and they should be living a life consistent with the new creation God has been forming since the coming of Christ (4:22-24; 5:3, 8-18). Furthermore, the church working together as one is important, otherwise the church will fail to be a witness to God’s purposes for the universe (1:10; 3:10); but God’s goal will be equally frustrated if the church is “tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching” (4:14) and if the church does not speak the truth (5:6-7). Leaders have been given to the church not only to hold the church in unity, but also that by its unity it might guard against false teaching.⁶

C. A Summary of Other New Testament Teaching on Church Unity

Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians and John’s record of Jesus’ prayer on behalf of Christian disciples help us to see more clearly a New Testament understanding of Christian unity. They show that oneness among believers is not a peripheral or ancillary concern to the church, but a central concern to Christ in his earthly ministry and God’s eternal purposes. Unity is a priority and mandate for the church. This is substantiated in the rest of the New Testament by the recurring reminders by biblical writers for local churches to recognize their oneness in Christ and walk accordingly. In Acts, the earliest Christian community arising out of

Pentecost was marked by their devotion to the “teaching of the Apostles and to the fellowship” (2:42). Writing to the Christians in Rome, Paul argues that “in Christ” every believer forms “one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (12:5); to believers in Corinth in his First Letter, Paul shows a divided community that because they are all in communion with the same Christ, represented by the one loaf at the Lord’s Supper, they are one body, although many members (10:17); to the Galatians, who are guilty of legalistic and discriminating practices, Paul declares, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for ... all are one in Christ Jesus” (3:28); to the Philippians, he encourages them to be “firm in one Spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the Gospel” (1:27) and to the Colossians he writes to remind them that they are “members of one body” (3:15).

2. New Testament Examples of Separation or Threats of Separation

The New Testament word for separation *σχίσμα* (“schism”) or its verbal form *σχίζω* (“to split or tear”) is used twenty times in the New Testament. The verb *σχίζω* is used to describe the heavens being “torn open” and the Spirit descending upon Christ at his baptism (Mk 1:10), a patch being “torn” from a new garment to patch an old one (Lk. 5:36), the decision by the soldiers at the crucifixion not to “tear” Jesus’ garments (Jn. 19:24), the temple curtain being “torn” and the rocks “splitting” at Jesus’ death (Mt. 27:51, Mk. 15:38, Luke 23:45), the fishing nets of Peter not being “torn” after a miraculous catch (John 21:11), and people being divided in their responses to Paul’s speeches (Acts 14:4, 23:7). The noun is used to describe the “tear” caused by sewing an un-shrunk cloth on an old garment (Mt. 9:16, Mark 2:21), the “divisions” among people in response to Jesus, his teaching, and his act of healing on the Sabbath (Jn. 7:43, 9:16, 10:19), and most relevant to our paper, “divisions” in the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 1:10, 11:18, 12:25).

Therefore, outside of its usage in the Corinthian context, a New Testament word study of separation provides little information to assist us in our task. However, if we look at individual events where unity among churches or individual Christians occurs or is threatened, we find relevant material for our present discussion. Specifically, we will look at Acts, I Corinthians, Galatians, Colossians, I Timothy, and I John for particular examples of separation or threats of separation among groups, since this is

most relevant to our topic. Then we will address examples of separation or threats of division between individuals.

A. Division within the Corinthian Church

The only place the New Testament uses *σχίσμα* (“schism”) in relationship to the church is Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians.⁷ Paul received a report that the Corinthian church, which was comprised of a collection of small house churches that would meet together regularly as a whole (Romans 16:23), was plagued with “divisions” and “quarrels” (1:10-11). Primarily, the divisions arose as a result of individuals and groups in the church claiming superiority at the expense of other members. According to David DeSilva, the schismatics were bringing from their Corinthian culture “the norms and expectations of their social status” into the church (DeSilva 1999:566). They asserted their status by (a) claiming a special association with a Christian leader, Paul or Apollos, that they perceived to be superior to the other (1:12-13), (b) by taking fellow Christians to secular courts to win settlements, often without just cause (6:7-8), (c) by claiming greater spiritual knowledge, allowing them to eat meat sacrificed to idols (8:1-2), (d) by celebrating the Lord’s Supper in a manner that maintained social rank, reminding other members of their lowly status (11:17-34), and (e) by claiming greater spiritual gifts than others (12:1-14:40). Secondly, the Corinthian church was divided over serious moral and doctrinal issues, with some members sanctioning a man’s incestuous relationship with his stepmother (5:1-5), others indulging in sexual immorality (6:15-16), and some denying the bodily resurrection of Christ, thereby rejecting belief in the general resurrection of humanity in the eschaton (15:1-58).

Paul responds to the schisms caused by the Corinthian social-cultural expectations by teaching that divisiveness among the Corinthians must yield to cooperation and unity, social and spiritual discord must give way to the oneness of all believers united in Christ, and personal boasting must acquiesce to humble gratitude for God’s gifts of service. Paul argues that “conventional wisdom and notions of power and status crumble before the mystery of the cross. There, the nature of God’s wisdom and power makes itself known by commending as Lord of glory the One who died in disgrace and weakness for the sake of others (1:18-25). Such a revelation must overturn human ideas about what constitutes genuine honor and advantage,” leading to the abandonment of personal claims to honor and demands for privileges out of unity in and love of the whole

church (DeSilva 1999:567). Ultimately, in the one body of Christ, in which each member is incorporated through the Spirit, in which social divisions are overcome, “whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free,” each member plays an indispensable part of the whole body, with the parts that seem to be less “honorable,” having a place of “special honor,” and each part having equal concern for the others in love (12:12-26).

To the schisms caused by physical self-indulgence, Paul asserts that physical appetites must surrender to the sanctification of the whole person, soul and body. Specifically, Paul directs the Corinthian church to exercise discipline by expelling from their midst a man who is engaging in sexual relations with his father’s wife. The purpose of the discipline is ultimately so the man will repent, rejoin the church, and “be saved on the day of the Lord” (5:1-5). Paul also addresses another problem of sexual immorality: some Corinthian church members are engaging in sexual relations with prostitutes out of the mistaken idea that the body does not ultimately matter to God (6:12-13).⁸ While Paul corrects their misunderstanding by teaching that their bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit and that their bodies are redeemed, not just their souls, he does not proscribe any directions as to what to do with these people.⁹

Paul responds to the divisions over doctrinal issues by reminding the Corinthians of the basics of the Gospel. Paul states, “By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain” (15:2). An essential aspect of this gospel is the bodily resurrection of Christ. They must stand firm in the teaching they have received and let nothing move them (15:58). Most likely, differences in understanding about the bodily resurrection were related to the sexual struggles of the Corinthian church. If salvation was spiritual and not physical, then physical holiness was not necessary and indulging in sexual relations with prostitutes was permissible. However, the bodily resurrection of Christ and the general resurrection in the future support the fact that salvation is for the whole person, soul and body, and that the physical body is important to God.

Underlying Paul’s address to the Corinthian divisions is a concern for the “weaker” or “less noble” members of the church, as well as “inquirers” or unbelievers. For example, the division in the church over food sacrificed to idols threatened the spiritual life of some of their members, possibly placing their lives in the path of spiritual “destruction” (8:9-13). Therefore Paul states, “Be careful, however, that the exercise of

your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak” (8:9). Also, he admonished that the confusion in worship, with roots in the Corinthian divisions, may prohibit seekers from believing the Gospel (14:16-17, 20-25, 31). Ultimately, Paul’s teaching on this is summarized in his statement, “Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews or Greeks or the Church of God ... for I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved” (10:32-33).¹⁰

B. Schism in the Johannine Community

While the Corinthian schisms did not involve one group pulling out and separating themselves from the church, which is our natural understanding of separation or schism, what happened within the Johannine community did.¹¹ In the First Letter of John, the author addresses a Christian community where some members have denied that Jesus is the Messiah (I John 5:1), that Christ has come in the flesh (I John 4:2), and that Jesus is the Son of God (1:3, 7; 3:8, 23). Furthermore, they had asserted that they were without sin (I John 1:10), decided they could no longer remain in relationship with their fellow church members, left to form their own congregation (I John 2:18-19), and finally were competing for adherents in their former community (II John 10-11). In so doing, according to the author of I John they broke the bonds of love and unity.¹²

More specifically, from the author’s perspective the secessionists were guilty of two intimately related errors. The first is theological. In rejecting the incarnation of Christ, they rejected the salvific nature of Christ’s death and denied the cross as the supreme revelation of the character of God. The cross is the means by which redemption and forgiveness are brought about for humanity and ultimately the cross is the proof that God loves humanity (I John 3:16a, 4:9-10). The second is ethical. The love of God manifested on the cross is the standard for the love that defines the Christian community. The cross makes manifest a divine love that is real, sacrificial, and other-oriented, not self-focused (I John 4:11). The love expressed by Jesus on the cross is the love Christians are to express to one another. In gratitude and obedience to the God who loves, Christians are to love one another in the same way God loves. For example, John states, “If any of you has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need, but has not pity on them, how can the love of God be in you?” (I John 3:17). Love for fellow Christians is the sign that a person is truly Christian.

The author brings the theological and the ethical together. If the incarnation did not take place, if God's son was not crucified on the cross, then there can be no confidence that God loves humanity and there can be no basis for or example of love among believers. The writer states, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (I John 3:16). Developing this idea more fully he writes, "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we may live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we ought also to love one another" (I John 4:9-11). From the perspective of the writer of I John, the secessionists' greatest sin is the ethical - lack of love for their fellow members.¹³ However, their sin is rooted in the theological – a denial of the love of God made manifest in the cross of Christ. Ultimately, while orthodoxy does not insure the practice of discipleship, it does serve the promotion of selfless love for sisters and brothers in Christ (DeSilva 1999:460).¹⁴

C. The Threat of Separation between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the Church

One of the earliest and greatest threats to ecclesial unity in the New Testament is the controversy surrounding the incorporation of Gentiles into the church. Specifically, did the Gentiles need to be circumcised and keep the Jewish law in order to be Christians? The significance of the problem is seen in Paul's Epistle to the Galatians and the subsequent Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15.¹⁵ The first Christians were Jews (Acts 2:22; 4:10; 5:21) who continued to observe the law of Moses, particularly circumcision, the offering of sacrifices, and dietary regulations (Acts 21:20-26). As Gentiles became believers, this presented a number of practical problems for Jewish Christians. To eat together in a common meal in which the Lord's Supper was celebrated, meant that Jewish Christians would be expected to eat with unclean, uncircumcised Gentiles, as well as eat the food that would not have met Jewish regulations. In response some Jewish Christians avoided eating with Gentile Christians altogether. This appears to be the root behind Paul's problems with Peter as described in Galatians 2:11-13. Another response was to require the Gentile Christians to become circumcised and to follow the requirements of the law, not just to have fellowship with Jewish Christians, but to be truly Christian (Gal. 1:6-9; 3:1-6; 5:2-6; 6:12-16) (Marshall 2004:211-212).

Paul writes Galatians in response to these attempts to make Jews of Gentile Christians. He sees that by faith in Christ Jesus, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). The divisions that have existed historically are overcome through Christ. Faith in Christ is what constitutes all believers, whether Jew or Gentile into the one people of God. To believe that salvation is brought through circumcision and obedience to the law and that disunity is overcome in the same way calls into question the very essence of the gospel (Gal. 2:6-9).

The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 arrived at a similar answer to Paul’s. The council recognized that Gentiles had received the gift of the Spirit without being circumcised, that keeping the law was “a yoke” that Jews in the past and present had been unable to bear, that the law was unable to bring about justification, and that salvation is “through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” (15:10-11). Therefore, keeping the law and circumcision were unnecessary to being a Christian. However, the council decided that Gentile Christians were required to abstain from sexual immorality and out of respect for Jewish Christians they were to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from “blood” and “from the meat of strangled animals” (15:29).¹⁶

D. Threat of Division over the Distribution of Food among Widows

Another threat to the unity of the Church recorded in Acts is the turmoil surrounding the feeding of Christian widows. Hellenistic Jewish Christians, most likely Greek-speaking, complained against the Hebraic Jewish Christians, most likely Aramaic-speaking, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food (6:1-2). This was the first serious threat the early Christian community faced to its “fellowship” (2:42), to its being “together” (2:44), and to its distribution of resources as “anyone might have need” (2:45). Furthermore, the complaints threatened to divert the apostles’ attention from their primary call to prayer and to preach the “word of God” (6:2, 4). To address this practical problem, rooted in cultural and linguistic differences, the Apostles instructed the church to select seven men, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, to take responsibility and address the problem. So seven men among the Hellenists were chosen with the result that this early threat to Christian unity was averted (6:3-6), the church continued to increase, and many priests became believers (6:7) (Bruce 1988:120-122).¹⁷

E. Threat of Christians Being Separated from the Church through False Teaching at Colossae

In the church at Colossae, Paul addresses a community characterized by discipline, firm faith in Christ, and love for all Christians (1:3; 2:5). However, some in the church had begun to entertain a “philosophy” which had caused some Colossians to lose “connection from the head (Christ)” of the Church (2:19) and risked causing others to be “disqualified” (2:18). Because of false teaching, a group in the church risked being separated from Christ and the church. While Paul does not give complete details about this “philosophy,” he indicates that it involved “elemental spiritual forces” (2:8-10, 15, 20), regulations concerning food and drink, adherence to certain religious observances (2:16), false humility, worship of angels, claims to superior spiritual experiences (2:18), restrictions on touching or handling certain items (2:21), ascetic exercises (2:23), and sensual indulgences of the body (2:23).¹⁸

Paul’s response to the challenge of this “philosophy” was to articulate the supremacy of Christ. Christ is Lord over everything in heaven and on earth. He exercises authority over any “powers and authorities” (2:10), “having disarmed them ... he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (2:15). Because Christ is the head of the “body,” the church, Christians are directly linked to the exalted Christ (1:18, 3:1, 2:19) and are free from any elemental power or authority. The church’s exaltation with Christ leads Paul to exhort the Colossians to “put to death” whatever belongs to their “earthly nature,” to “put on love, which binds” all virtues (“bearing with each other,” “forgiving one another”) together in “perfect unity,” and “let the peace of Christ rule” since as “members of one body” they are called to peace (3:12-15).¹⁹

F. Separation and Threats of Separation between Individuals

In the New Testament there are examples of separations or threats of separation on a smaller scale. Perhaps the most famous is the “separation” of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:36-41. At some point after the Jerusalem Council, Paul and Barnabas planned to revisit believers in towns in which they had ministered. Barnabas proposed that they take John Mark with them. Because John Mark had deserted Paul and Barnabas earlier in Perga without justification, Paul thought it unwise to take John Mark with them again. A sharp disagreement arose and they decided to “part company,” with Paul taking Silas and Barnabas taking John Mark in

their respective missionary journeys. The fact that Barnabas had earlier behaved in a way contrary to Paul's thought in Antioch, being led astray by the "circumcision" group (Gal. 2:12-13), may have exacerbated the problem. In Luke's description of the argument, there is no designation of blame. However, other New Testament materials point to reconciliation between the parties as Paul's positive comments about John Mark (Col. 4:10, Philemon 24) and Paul's ministry (II Tim. 4:11) with John Mark attest.²⁰

A similar division between two Christians is dealt with in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Typical to Paul's writings, he exhorts the Christian community to practice unity in attitude, in purpose, and in commitment to each other (1:27, 2:1-5, 3:15). In his conclusion, Paul directs this instruction to two women, Euodia and Syntyche (4:2-3), who had labored with Paul in Philippi. Apparently, there was some difference in understanding that was dividing them. Paul urged them to have the same mind in the Lord. He also instructs his "true companion," a possible reference to a leader in the church, to help bring about reconciliation among the women (4:3).

Earlier, we examined one example at Corinth of a person being intentionally separated from the Christian community as an act of discipline by the apostle Paul. Another example of similar action takes place in Paul's first letter to Timothy. Specifically, Paul charges Timothy to exercise his authority in the church by not permitting teachers to propagate false doctrine in the Christian community (1:3-5). Paul gives Timothy an example of exercising authority against false doctrine, by mentioning Hymenaeus and Alexander, both of whom Paul "handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme" (1:19-20). As in Corinth, the purpose of Paul's discipline is not only to keep those entrusted into Paul's care from "shipwrecking" their faith, but also in order for there to be redemptive discipline applied to Hymenaeus' and Alexander's lives. This is the type of authority and discipline Timothy is to exercise in his ministry.

A final example of disciplinary separation, intimated earlier in the discussion of schism in the Johannine community, is found in II John. Here the "Elder" instructs a house church to not allow any representative from the schismatic group to have entrée into their fellowship. He states that when a secessionist "comes to you, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds" (II John 10-11). Specifically, the "Elder" does not want the house church to be used by the secessionists as an opportunity to

propagate their false teaching and further divide the Johannine community. The general practice of hospitality is suspended in such an instance. Authority is exercised by the “Elder” and the house church is instructed to keep separate from the schismatics.

While in the other cases of disciplinary separation in the New Testament there is a redemptive purpose in mind, this particular episode in II John does not give us any hint of redemptive discipline. However, this case is unique in that the secessionists have deliberately broken fellowship with the Johannine community. They have left. In every other case we have seen, discipline exercised toward immorality, false teaching, or a combination of the two is directed toward individuals or groups that have not broken fellowship with the local church. They have not left the church. The explicit purpose in such discipline is to protect the larger Christian community and to restore the church member(s) to the community. In contrast, in the Johannine church, the unity of the church at the foundational level has been broken. As such we should not be surprised to see discipline used in a different way. Nevertheless, silence by the “Elder” in his letter on the possibility of reconciliation as a basis for refusing hospitality as an act of discipline, does not mean it is without consideration in his mind.

3. A Summary of New Testament Teaching on Unity and Separation in the Church

In our examination of New Testament teaching on unity and separation, we see that these ecclesial ideas are intimately related. New Testament teaching on unity is almost always set within the larger context of the possibility of separation. Jesus’ greatest concern for his disciples is their possible division or separation. Paul sees separation in the body as the greatest threat to the church’s call to be the place where fractured humanity is made into one and reconciled to God. Likewise, in every episode of group schism or threat of separation in the New Testament, the theme of unity becomes the guiding framework and goal by which they are addressed. The social, moral, relational, and doctrinal questions that divide the New Testament church are addressed in order to strengthen, protect, and restore church unity.

From our study a number of observations can be made. First, the Trinitarian nature of God is the foundation for the unity of the church. Just as God is one being in a plurality of three divine persons, the church is constituted as one community from many human persons. Unity in the

church is an analogue to the oneness in the Trinity. God's nature as Triune is revealed most notably in Jesus Christ, but the unity of the church also serves as revelation of this nature as well. Specifically, Jesus prayed that the church would have the same unity as he and the Father have. The apostle Paul taught that Christian unity, the oneness manifested in the church, is a reflection of and a testimony to the oneness of God. As such the church manifests the glory of God.²¹

Furthermore, while New Testament writers establish the Christian imperative to "love one another" in the self-giving love of God, manifested in the incarnation, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ, Jesus makes clear that the love existing between him and the Father, the love defining the relationships of the Godhead, is the ultimate foundation for the love Christians are to have for one another. Jesus states, "I have made you known to them ... in order that the love you have for me may be in them" (John 17:26). This love, above all else, is the distinguishing mark of unity in Christian relationships with each other, individually and collectively.

Second, in every example of separation or threat of division among groups in the New Testament, whether an internal division within a collective body as in Corinth or a physical separation of one group from another as in the Johannine community, division is seen fundamentally as a violation of the law of love and love's corollary - unity. There is no example in the New Testament where one Christian community is authorized to separate itself from another Christian community. Even the willful separation of a heretical community from the "orthodox" community is seen as breaking the command of Christ to love and work for unity.

On an individual level, we see a similar attitude at work. In the context of addressing unity and love in the church at Philippi, Paul instructs two sisters in Christ, Euodia and Syntyche, to resolve their differences and he enlists the aide of the larger community to mediate their reconciliation. While a contrary argument might be made from Paul and Barnabas' schism in Acts, even in this case, evidence points to an eventual reconciliation between the two of them. Also in the exercise of church discipline, when the church separates a member from the larger body, as in the case of the Corinthian man having sex with his father's wife or in the case of Hymenaeus and Alexander, the expressed purpose is to facilitate an eventual reunion with the larger Christian community.

Third, the New Testament makes clear that the church has been given every necessary resource to experience unity among believers. In his

prayer for the disciples Jesus declares that he has given his disciples all that they need to walk in unity with one another. Through Christ's life, death, resurrection, and exaltation the unity of the church has been objectively accomplished – one, new and undivided humanity has been brought into being - and through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit unity can be subjectively experienced in the church. Paul teaches that the Spirit enables Christians to walk in sacrificial love in relation to one another and the Spirit bestows particular gifts to each believer for the edification and unity of the body.

However, while the New Testament writers have an “already” in their understanding of the present experience of the unity in the church, they also recognize there are times of “not yet” as well. While oneness has been brought about through Christ, and the church has the resources to bring about unity, that unity is continually challenged. As a result, the church may fall short of her God given oneness and experience division. In his prayer for the disciples’ protection from disunity, Jesus recognizes that this is his disciples’ greatest threat. Paul makes clear that unity in the church is one that is not easy and requires great work and sacrifice on the part of believers. Social, cultural, moral, relational, and doctrinal issues will arise in the church; issues that will seek to undermine the unity of the church and thwart love between believers. In the midst of these challenges, “every effort” must be made “to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

One of the most important gifts the Spirit gives to the church to face the rigorous challenges to unity is leadership. Paul teaches that the Spirit gives leadership gifts to certain Christians expressly for the purpose of bringing the church “to the unity of the faith.” This gift and accompanying authority are seen in almost every occurrence of division or threat of separation in the New Testament. For example, in Corinth Paul works to make sure the “weak” are treated appropriately and disciplines redemptively a sexually immoral member; in the growing tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians over circumcision and adherence to the law, the apostles and leaders of the early church gather together in Jerusalem to reach a common mind and decisively settle the issue; in order to protect the unity of the Johannine community, the “Elder” instructs the community to not allow secessionists into their house churches to instruct their members. The most notable exercises of authority in these cases are acts of discipline. However, this discipline is marked by its redemptive character. While

exercised in different ways, the end of discipline is to redeem, protect, nurture, and bring about reconciliation, which are essential for ecclesial unity.

Finally, in the New Testament, Christian unity, manifested in loving, sacrificial relationships between members, embodying analogically the unity in the Godhead, is the ultimate witness to the world of the truth of Christianity. Jesus states in the Gospel of John that the unbelieving world will recognize his disciples through their love for one another. Paul teaches that ecclesial unity boldly declares to the hostile “powers and principalities,” the forces which seek to divide humanity and thwart the eternal purposes of God, that the work of Christ in life, death, and exaltation is not in vain. The ultimate purpose of God, the formation of a united humanity in Christ through the Church, is happening. Ultimately, for John and Paul the task of evangelism and Christian testimony in “heaven and on earth” are radically compromised by disunity in the church and give the “powers and principalities” an opportunity to boast.

4. Application to Issues of Unity and Amicable Separation in the United Methodist Church

As we begin to think about how we might apply New Testament teaching to issues of unity and amicable separation in The United Methodist Church, a qualifying comment must be made. Unfortunately, our task is not as simple as it might seem initially. While there is significant attention given to the issues of unity and separation in the New Testament, it is couched in particular historical and cultural contexts that often do not correlate directly with our present situation, thus being subject to multiple ways of application. For example, and perhaps the most problematic for evangelicals seeking “amicable separation,” there is no place in the New Testament where an orthodox community separates itself voluntarily or involuntarily from the larger Christian community, or where the orthodox party advocates separation from another Christian community. This is not to say that such an action is without any biblical warrant or foundation, but to recognize there is no direct correlation in the New Testament with the present proposal of amicable separation. As a result, application of New Testament teaching to our present situation involves interpretation and translation into our present situation, which can be fraught with difficulty.

With this caveat in mind, let us turn to “New Testament considerations on unity and amicable separation in The United Methodist

Church.” First, in the midst of heated debate and disagreements in The United Methodist Church, we must remember the priority and mandate of unity in the church as expressed in Jesus’ prayer and Paul’s teaching in Ephesians. New Testament writers recognize that unity will be continually challenged, difficult to maintain, and at times never achieved. However, there can be no settlement for anything less in the church. Weariness of debate and internal division, increased bitterness from persistent personal attacks, toxic anger toward “enemies” in the church, despair over specific actions of those in authority, distaste for church politics, and the existence of false doctrine and moral turpitude are not sufficient reasons for separation. The New Testament recognizes in one way or another that these exist in the church as threats to unity, but they must be overcome through love, humility, forgiveness, perseverance, redemptive discipline, and reconciliation, not separation.

If these are not acceptable grounds for an “amicable separation,” what would be? As stated earlier, there is no New Testament warrant for “amicable separation” between believers in a Christian community. Any division of this sort is unacceptable. Here, the operative word is “among believers.” A case can be made from the New Testament that if the church ceases to be the church, if a community as a whole ceases to be a Christian community, then separation is expected by believers within this community.²² However, the purpose of separation is disciplinary in nature – the believing community either withdraws from or exorcises the apostate community for the ultimate purpose of bringing the group back into fellowship with the true church. The New Testament principle here is the example of disciplinary separation on the part of the Christian community, where the church exercises authority to discipline a person for gross moral failure or propagating serious heresy, for ceasing to be Christian, then redemptive discipline is applied by removing the person from the community with the goal that the person will repent, be reunited to the church, and “be saved on the day of the Lord.” As we can see, again, the driving principle of New Testament unity is the priority and mandate. Therefore, from a New Testament perspective, the United Methodist Church has no warrant for any type of separation as long as the church as a whole is Christian. However, if the denomination ceases to be Christian, then disciplinary, redemptive separation must become the guiding principle of direction for Christians in the United Methodist ranks.

Similarly, the New Testament indicates that one of the keys to addressing internal divisions and threats to the overall unity of the church, the key to addressing issues that could lead to a church ceasing to be a part of the church universal is the exercise of discipline. While our contemporary cultural climate within The United Methodist Church eschews the use of power and authority, New Testament teaching shows that it is necessary to protect and promote the unity of the church. Again, the purpose of discipline is to act redemptively. The discipline is done as an act of love. Therefore, individuals and groups in The United Methodist Church who are concerned about the unity of the church and threats to unity must be willing and able to exercise power redemptively in the Church.

Second, in any discussion of “amicable separation” in The United Methodist Church, we must take into account the incredible spiritual cost involved with such a possible disruption in the life of the church. There will be negative consequences for individuals, churches, and annual conferences in any act of schism. If an “amicable separation” is sought for any other reason than as an act of redemptive discipline, New Testament teaching helps us to see that believers in the community will be harmed, the Methodist witness to the world will be compromised, and the “principalities and powers” that seek to divide humanity and the church will have triumphed. Even an act of redemptive separation will have spiritual cost as well. However, in redemptive separation the need for the church to remain the church of Jesus Christ is the only justification for the price that will inevitably be paid by a division.

If a separation in The United Methodist Church takes place, other Christians in the denomination, particularly the weak and those not established well in their faith, will be adversely impacted. For example, if the orthodox wing of United Methodism separates from the denomination, there will be Christians left behind for various reasons (because of connections to particular local churches, personal relationships, conference ties etc.), who will no longer be able to benefit from the evangelical presence. Also, there will be some Christians, who, out of thorough disgust for the whole affair, will leave the church altogether and risk being separated from Christ as well. John Wesley in his sermon “On Schism” describes well the dangers associated with the separation of one group from another, particularly as it relates to individual believers. He states,

A plentiful harvest of all the works of darkness may be expected to spring from this source; whereby, in the end, thousands of souls, and not a few of those who once walked in the light of God's countenance, may be turned from the way of peace, and finally drowned in everlasting perdition... The hunger and thirst after righteousness, after either the favor or the full image of God, together with the longing desires wherewith so many were filled of promoting the work of God in the souls of their brethren, will grow languid, and as offenses increase, they will gradually die away. And as the "fruit of the Spirit" withers away, "the works of the flesh" will again prevail, to the utter destruction, first of the power, and then of the very form, of religion. These consequences are not imaginary, are not built on mere conjectures, but on plain matter of fact ... These have been the fruits which we have seen, over and over, to be consequent on such a separation. ("On Schism," VI: 402-403).

If "amicable separation" in The United Methodist Church occurs, the church's witness in the world will be minimized. Christian testimony in "heaven and on earth" are radically compromised by disunity in the church and give the "powers and principalities" an opportunity to boast, enabling their work to go unchallenged in the very place that is to witness to their defeat. If Christian unity and love for one another is a witness to the world of the truth of Christianity, as Jesus, John and Paul clearly teach, what does it say to the world when Christians are divided? The very truth of the Gospel is undermined. The wall of hostility that divides the world is played out in the church and not overcome in the church. The very heart of the Gospel is called into question. An increasingly skeptical world will have their doubts and suspicions about Christianity strengthened. As such, a separation should only take place if The United Methodist Church ceases to be a part of the church universal.

Third and finally, in any discussion of unity and "amicable separation" in The United Methodist Church, we must remember grace is available to heal disunity and bring oneness to the church. New Testament teaching makes clear that the objective work of unity has already been brought about and that Christ makes available to the church every resource necessary to walk in loving unity with each other. True Christian unity can be brought about in The United Methodist Church. Every threat to disunity that presently faces The United Methodist Church has been faced by the New Testament church and has been faced in the church universal throughout her history. Jesus knew the challenges the church would face

and equipped the church to face those challenges. The task of renewing The United Methodist Church and keeping the church accountable to be the church of Jesus Christ is possible. Grace flows through the church from Christ who is the head making unity possible. As long as The United Methodist Church is a part of the church universal, then the church has access to grace that can overcome any present division in the church.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 2004 General Conference of The United Methodist Church brought to the fore the issues of Christian unity and “amicable separation” in the denomination. Because of the gravity of both ideas, they must not be treated superficially by their respective advocates. From a New Testament perspective, the unity of the church is a biblical priority and must be understood as a divine mandate. Therefore, any discussion of “separation” must be seen in the light of New Testament teaching on ecclesial oneness as seen in Jesus’ prayer in John 17, in Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 2 and 4, and John’s teaching in his first letter. As we have examined these passages, we have seen there are no New Testament grounds for separation between Christians. There is never a justifiable reason for one group of Christians to divorce themselves from another group of believers.

However, any appeal to Christian solidarity or resolution on “unity” must be seen in the light of sound ecclesiology. The mandate for ecclesial oneness holds true only as long as the parties involved are Christians. If the United Methodist denomination as a whole ceases being the church, departs from the church universal, then grounds for redemptive separation are established. In such a case, any act of separation must be undertaken in a way that seeks to redeem the community that has departed from Christ and seeks to be reconciled to that community, if they repent and return to the universal church.

Because The United Methodist Church’s status as a member of the church universal is threatened, orthodox evangelicals must seek to exercise appropriately redemptive power and discipline to protect the denomination’s fidelity to Christ. However, redemptive discipline is not enough. Evangelicals also must seek to access the riches of God’s grace, the abundant resources made available through the life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ, as well as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, to bring spiritual renewal to the church. Only when United Methodists are able to

bring both together can a full and robust ecclesial unity as described in the New Testament be possible. Then The United Methodist Church will be an even greater witness “in heaven and on earth” to the truth of Jesus Christ.²³

End Notes

¹ Examples of these expressions include: in Acts Christians “devoted themselves to ... fellowship” (2:42), in Corinth the church is asked to be “perfectly united in mind and thought” (I Cor. 1:10), in Ephesus the church is called the “body” of Christ (1:22-23), in Philippi the church is described as “striving together in one accord” (1:27), in Hebrews the church is called “God’s house” (3:6; 10:21), in First Peter Christians are exhorted to love one another “deeply” (4:8), and John calls the collective church the “bride” of Christ (Rev. 19:7). Unless otherwise specified, all New Testament quotations are taken from *Today’s New International Version of the Holy Bible* (Zondervan and the International Bible Society, 2005).

² Specifically, John 10:16; 11:52, 17:11-23; Romans 12:4-5; I Corinthians 10:17; 12:11-26; Ephesians 2:11-22; 4:2-15; Philippians 1:27, 2:1-2; Colossians 3:12-15; and I Thessalonians 5:11 address the oneness of the church.

³ Again this underscores the importance of unity to Christ and to John’s concerns in his Gospel.

⁴ For an excellent study of the primary biblical teachings in the Old and New Testaments on ecclesial oneness, written with laity in mind, see Gilbert Bilezekian’s *Community 101: Reclaiming the Local Church as Community of Oneness* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1997). His comments on John 17, pp. 35-37, are particularly insightful and have informed our discussion here.

⁵ In some manuscripts the word “Ephesus” does not appear in the body of the letter, leading some scholars to believe even more that this is a letter meant for general circulation and is not a response to a specific problem or specific personal concern in the church. See Bruce Metzger, *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1971), 601.

⁶ For a more detailed examination of the unity of the church in Ephesians as outlined in our paper, see David A. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament Contexts, Methods, and Ministry Formation* (Intervarsity Press, 1999), 716-731; Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church: An Exploration in New Testament Theology* (Intervarsity Press, 1995) 132-146; and Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* (Zondervan, 2005), 393-407.

⁷ While this epistle to the church at Corinth is called First Corinthians, Paul makes clear that this is not his first letter to the church (I Cor. 5:9).

⁸ Misunderstandings in the Corinthian church about the significance of the body in Christian salvation appear to be the basis for questions and divisions

about the bodily resurrection of Christ, as well as the general resurrection in the eschaton (15:1-58). Most likely ignorance by some in the Corinthian community of the significance of bodily union with prostitutes and questions about bodily resurrection are related issues.

⁹ While not explicit, if Paul's teaching does not correct the problem, a similar act of discipline as given to the man practicing incest might be expected. Again the end of discipline would be the salvation of those being disciplined.

¹⁰ For a more detailed examination of the schisms in the church at Corinth and Paul's response as outlined in our paper, see David Barton, "I Corinthians," *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, eds. James G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 1314-1351; David A. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament Contexts, Methods, and Ministry Formation*, 555-574; I. H. Marshall, *New Testament Theology* (Intervarsity Press, 2004) 267-280; Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 276-306; Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth* (Eerdmans, 1995), 5-35.

¹¹ John Wesley in his sermon "On Schism" recognizes that the Corinthian schism is not an example of what is traditionally associated with schism. He states, "Let us begin with the first verse, wherein St. Paul makes use of the word. It is the tenth verse of the first chapter of his First Epistle to the Corinthians. The Words are, 'I beseech you, brethren, by the name of the Lord Jesus, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no schisms' (the original word is scismata) 'among you.' Can anything be plainer than that the schisms here spoken of were not separations *from*, but divisions *in*, the Church of Corinth? Accordingly, it follows, 'But that ye be perfectly united together, in the same mind and in the same judgment.' You see here, that a union in mind and judgment was the direct opposite to the Corinthian schism. This, consequently, was not a separation from the Church or Christian society at Corinth but a separation in the Church; a disunion in mind and judgment, (perhaps also affection,) among those who, notwithstanding this, continued outwardly united as before." John Wesley, "On Schism," *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872; Reprint by Baker Book House, 1978), VI: 402-403.

¹² Some scholars have asserted the secessionists were a group who suffered from a docetic heresy, a teaching that so emphasizes the deity of Jesus Christ that Christ's humanity is denied or neglected. See Raymond Brown, *Epistles of John*, 47-103; David A. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament Contexts, Methods, and Ministry Formation*, 449-450, and "John, Epistles of," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 3:905.

¹³ While there are multiple problems with the secessionists, the issue of love appears to be preeminent. This can be seen in the fact that love is the driving theme of I John. As a noun ἀγάπη is used 18 times and as a verb αγαπάω is used 28 times. See I. Howard Marshall's comment on this issue in his *New Testament Theology*, 539.

¹⁴ For a more detailed examination of the schism in the Johannine community and the response of the writer of I John as outlined in our paper, see Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John* (Doubleday, 1982) 47-103; David A. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament Contexts, Methods, and Ministry Formation*, 449-473; I. H. Marshall, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles of*

John (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978) 32-57; Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 536-568.

¹⁵ While many scholars would date Galatians after the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, there are good reasons to believe that the problem of “Judaizers” takes place before the Jerusalem Council. For a more detailed discussion of this, see Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 13-20.

¹⁶ The reference to “blood” most likely refers to meat that has not been slaughtered in the Jewish manner. See I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, 164.

¹⁷ See also John T. Squires, “Acts,” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, 1227-1228.

¹⁸ By Paul’s repeated mention of the mystery of the gospel (1:26, 27, 2:2, 4:3) his insistence that they have all knowledge necessary for salvation (1:9; 2:2), entering the divine realm, and experiencing the divine fullness (1:9, 19, 2:2, 9-10), some New Testament scholars have seen this philosophy as a Gnostic or proto-Gnostic sect.

¹⁹ For a more detailed examination of the theological problems and threats to the church at Colossae as outlined in our paper, see Morna D. Hooker, “Colossians,” *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, 1404-1411; David A. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament Contexts, Methods, and Ministry Formation*, 694-703; Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church?*, 126-132; I. H. Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, 366-378; Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 378-386.

²⁰ In II Timothy 4:11 Paul instructs Timothy to “Get John Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in ministry.” Whatever problems existed between Paul and John Mark were addressed so that they did ministry together and John Mark became a valuable resource in Paul’s ministry.

²¹ From this perspective, internal division or external separation among Christians, where there are human persons, but no real unity among them, does a disservice to God by pointing to a tri-theistic, polytheistic God, rather than a biblical Trinitarianism, which has its analog in a unity of persons.

²² The importance of this point cannot be made emphatically enough. Although it is beyond the scope of our paper, the ontological understanding of the church or a sound definition of the church is crucial here. Central questions include: What makes a local church or denomination a part of the church of Jesus Christ, the church universal? What are the marks of the true church? When does a church cease being a part of the church universal? Only a theologically sound understanding of the nature of the church can inform discernment on whether a denomination has ceased being a part of the church universal.

²³ My paper is indebted to Dr. David Smith, Professor of New Testament at Kingswood University in Sussex, New Brunswick, Canada for his constructive comments and critical insights into the New Testament texts and issues examined in our paper.

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