

A theological reflection on unity and uniqueness



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CHAPTER TWO

A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON UNITY AND UNIQUENESS

Biblical and Theological Basis

Unity and uniqueness are integral and consistent to the composition of the universe. The world around and the skies above reveal the Creator's work, a tapestry of creation that abounds with harmony and diversity. The world He fashioned overflows with originality and there are distinct markings of diversity, yet all of the differences are held together in consistent unity. Christian theology accounts for both the coherence of the universe and the distinctiveness of its parts. This is the core of the Apostle Paul's confession; "all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through Him and for Him. He (Jesus Christ) is before all things, and in Him all things hold together" (Colossians 1: 16). The created order of things in the world is not static; it is utterly dynamic. The cosmos is loaded with dynamic diversity that is simultaneously being held together in unity, in Christ.

Both the Old and New Testaments support the theme of uniqueness and unity. In this theological reflection the researcher will examine the idea of unity and uniqueness as revealed in Scripture. The theological basis for this project is that the theme of unity and uniqueness is one of God's overarching principles conveyed in the revelation of the Godhead, the composition of the Canon, and in the design of the institutions of marriage and Church. In this paper, the researcher will give greater attention to the study of the Trinity because, "all the crucial elements in ecclesiology and entire theology are rooted in the doctrine of the Trinity."

Unity and Uniqueness in the Godhead

The theme of uniqueness and unity exists in creation is an echo of the presence of uniqueness and unity in God. One of the most basic Christian beliefs is that God is “one God in three persons.” This doctrine is recognized in the historic Christian faith as the doctrine of the Trinity. While the word “trinity” does not occur in the Bible, nor is the theological concept fully described in the Text, the idea is rooted in the scriptures. Since there is no overt reference to God as Triune in the Bible, Emil Brunner, the Swiss Protestant theologian gives an insightful perspective: “The ecclesiastical doctrine of the Trinity, established by the dogma of the ancient Church, is not Biblical kerygma, therefore it is not the kerygma of the Church, but is a theological doctrine which defends the central faith of the Bible and of the Church.”

Early church theologians developed the term Trinity as a way to communicate the three distinctive persons of God that constitute one divine being. They developed this doctrine in resistance against dangerous heresies, in which Christ with God was called into question, either on God’s behalf or on Christ’s. Jurgen Moltmann, an influential thinker on modern Trinitarian theology, writes, “It was only in these controversies that Trinitarian dogma grew up, and with the dogma grew its formulation, as philosophical terminology was given a new theological mould.” This new doctrine would be derived from the Latin word trinitas, meaning “threeness,” referring to the Tri-unity of God.

This doctrine conveys that the eternal Godhead exists as three distinct Persons. All three—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -are distinct yet

interconnected. The early church explored the revelation of God's three-in-oneness and the conclusions of these explorations were expressed in the Athanasian Creed, " We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the substance." This theme of Trinity can be summed up in this concise way: " The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God; yet, there are not three gods, but one God."

Man did not invent this doctrine of Trinity; this doctrinal position was established in creed to articulate the concept of a triune God based on the revelation through Scripture of three manifestations of the Godhead. In the first century church arguments were intense regarding what precisely was " three" about God, what was a divine person, what was " one" about God, what this meant for now, and how the nature and identity of Jesus should be understood. The early church discussions did not remove the mystery; rather the creed they established on the doctrine of the Trinity merely gives clarity within the mystery, providing reassurance by wrapping words around an imagination expanding reality.

The creeds are nothing more than a well-ordered arrangement of the facts of Scripture which concern the doctrine of the Trinity. Hodge writes that, " They assert the distinct personality of the Father, Son and Spirit; their mutual relation as expressed by those terms; their absolute unity as to substance or essence, and their consequent perfect equality; and the subordination of the Son to the Father, and of the Spirit to the Father and the Son, as the mode of subsistence and operation. These are Scriptural facts, to which the creeds in question add nothing; and it is in this sense they have been accepted by the Church universal."

While the creed gives clarity to the mystery, it in no way contains an explanation for the God who created the heavens and the earth. God's nature and essence cannot be completely understood by the human mind. Finite minds cannot comprehend an infinite God. The fullness of the nature of God remains outside of our experience and knowledge. God is transcendent and the uniqueness and unity within the Godhead is described in complex terms. The church did not invent the doctrine of the trinity; it just accepted it from what God revealed about Himself through the Bible.

The doctrine of the Trinity gives us a key to understanding unity in diversity. Inside this dogma is an implicit uniqueness within the distinctive persons of the Godhead that does not diminish the unified essence. Trinity reveals much about the nature of God and the values of the universe. The actual content of the doctrine of the Trinity may be summarized with four statements: " God is one, God is three, God is a diversity, and God is a unity." These four simple statements come together in a doctrine that is complex and paradox; it is a beautiful mystery that is biblically justified. Though we may never fully comprehend the mystery of the Trinity, we can reach for higher understanding while standing firm on the concrete form of biblical revelation. The researcher will point to passages that communicate and illustrate the reality of trinity. There is much to work with, according to the Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield, " the doctrine of the Trinity is rather everywhere presupposed in the Bible."

The Unity of God: There is Only One True God

The Bible does not teach tritheism or polytheism; Scripture teaches that there is only one true eternal God. The unity of God is rooted in the Jewish

faith anchored in the Torah. The Hebrew people were monotheistic, which in the ancient world positioned them in stark contrast with their surrounding nations who worshiped “ many gods.” Even to this day, as an act of worship the Jews regularly proclaim their blessing, or creed, called the Shema: “ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” (Deut. 6: 4-5). This statement clarifies their belief in the Oneness of God. The doctrine of the Trinity affirms the Hebrew understanding of God, but differs in that the LORD is understood to be one not in “ a solitary unity but a composite unity.”

As Christians we believe that the God of the Trinity is the one whom the Old Testament worshippers knew as Elohim or Yahweh. In their worship of Yahweh there was temptation to take up the many gods of their pluralistic neighbors. While other nations were embracing polytheism, the prophet Isaiah reminds Israel, “ This is what the LORD says, ‘ I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.” (Isaiah 44: 6). The Apostle Paul carries this teaching of the Oneness of God into the New Testament, three times he instructs the church, “ there is no God but one” (1 Cor. 8: 4, 1 Cor. 8: 6, 1 Timothy 2: 5).

The Uniqueness of God: Three Distinct Persons

Plurality through Pronouns and Names. There are traces of Trinity in the Old Testament, most of them are found in God’s revelation of himself through names and pronouns. The name Yahweh may be the first name God chooses to introduce himself with in a conversation, but the first name used for God is the Hebrew word Elohim. “ In the beginning God [Elohim] created...”

(Genesis 1: 1). After only four words into the Biblical story, God introduces himself as Elohim, which is a plural form, and though no clear statement of trinity is contained, a plurality of persons could be implied. Another early allusion to divine plurality is found later in the chapter, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness." (Gen 1: 26). He says again, "The man has now become like one of us..." (Gen 3: 22). And a third time he says, "Come, let us go down and confuse their language" (Gen. 11: 7). Contemplating these passages, a Roman Catholic theologian, Bertrand de Magerie asks: "Does this Divine "we" evoke a polytheistic age anterior to the Bible? Or a deliberation of God with his angelic court? Or does it not rather indicate the interior richness of the divinity? How does it happen that only in these four passages the plural form of the name Elohim used here has influenced the verb, which is plural only here? And what is more extraordinary is that these plural forms are introduced by formulas in the singular: 'Elohim says'."

These questions are presented in an attempt to help the reader engage with the plurality of God. They look to compel the reader from dismissing plurality in the Torah as a highly intriguing to realizing it's high importance as an insinuation for the Trinitarian idea.

Distinctive Plurality through Unique Activity. Evidence for the concept of plurality in the Godhead exists beyond pronouns and names; it is also found in the distinguishing activity of God in Genesis. Within the creation account there is an explosion of activity where each person acts uniquely with his own actions.

In Genesis 1: 1 God the Father is revealed existing as the originator of the created world. He is presented as the mastermind behind creation and the one who generates the universe ex nihilo. He

In Genesis 1: 2, the Bible introduces God as the Spirit who watches over the works of creation, hovering as the waters. He is the active agent in creation. He is the one who “ hovers” over creation, keeping things in tact, preserving, protecting, and unifying what the Father brings into being. The Spirit brings order out of chaos and confusion. As one theologian writes, “ it is because of Him that we have cosmos instead of chaos.”

In Genesis 1: 3 we are introduced to the “ Word” of God through whose work the will of God becomes initiated. God speaks and the Word brings it into reality. John writes in the fourth Gospel, “ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made” (John 1: 1-3).

While the doctrine of the Trinity was not clearly enunciated in the Old Testament , the theologian Gerald O’Collins, has stated, “ The vivid personification of Father (Wisdom), Son (Word), and Spirit, in as much as they were both identified with God and the divine activity and distinguished from God, opened up the way toward recognizing God to be tripersonal.”

Distinctive Plurality through Unique Personhood. These Old Testament account only gives an allusion of Trinity; the Trinitarian doctrine receives much fuller treatment in the rest of the Bible as God manifests himself and further reveals himself to humanity. The Trinitarian concept’s chief development is anchored in the New Testament, the Gospels present the

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revelation of Jesus Christ the Son, and in the book of Acts, describes the sending of the Holy Spirit on the Church.

In several New Testament passages Christ is clearly called God (Heb 1: 9-9, John 1: 1, John 20: 28) In The latter passage, John 20: 28, one of the apostles, Thomas, confronts the resurrected Jesus and proclaims, “ My Lord and my God.” From this verse, the Scholar D. Moody Smith, contends,

Thomas’ response is exactly appropriate, as he utters the confession of Jesus as Lord (kyrios) and God (theos). This confession is typical of early Christian theology and language as far as Lord (kyrios) is concerned, but uniquely Johannine in its ascription of the name of God (theos) to Jesus as well. In 1: 1 the preexistent word (logos) is called God (theos) and at the end of the prologue this most exalted title is repeated, after the incarnation of the Word in Jesus has been confessed. For the most part John withholds the designation theos from Jesus, but in the course of the narrative makes clear that this ascription of deity to Jesus is indeed correct and unavoidable (5: 18; cf. 5: 19-24; 10: 30; 14: 8-11). While Thomas may have once doubted, he has now made the confession that is essential and true. Jesus is Lord and God.

The description of Christ as God was an important explanation that integrated New Covenant theology with the monotheistic Hebraic covenant of the Old Testament. The confession of Thomas and the other passages in the New Testament help construct the Christian understanding of Christ as God.

The concept of the Spirit of God in the Old Testament is carried over into the New Testament. The same person of God that “ hovers” over his creation and the Holy Spirit fills Mary and descends on Jesus at his baptism. As Jesus was being baptized, the Trinity became expressive to human senses. John the Baptist and others who witnessed the baptism, audibly heard the voice of the Father affirm Jesus as his Son, and visibly saw the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus in the likeness of a dove. The Spirit is revealed in the likeness of tongues of fire when he empowers the disciples on the day of Pentecost. This is in fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to his disciples that “ the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14: 6).

Jesus words at the end of Matthew’s Gospel are known as the “ Great Commission,” but one mustn’t overlook the “ great expression” of Trinity. Jesus sends out his disciples to baptize with the “ Trinitarian formula”, “ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28: 19). Christ’s words reveal Trinity.

Later in the New Testament, in the Epistles, the Apostle Paul gives description of the Spirit’s nature and activity. To the church at Corinth he explains, “ We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us”(1 Cor. 2: 12). Paul gives other direct references to the Spirit that are unmistakable Trinitarian references. In another letter to the church at Corinth offers a benediction, “ May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor. 13: 14).

Conclusion

In this section, the researcher has presented key passages that reference the triune God, demonstrating that the Bible reveals God existing as three unique persons yet in unity as One, which is the doctrine of the Trinity. There is complexity within the specific functions of the Godhead yet a unity in their purpose and three Persons. Each of the three Persons performs specific functions and are involved in everything together. This doctrine is fundamental to understanding the theme of unity and uniqueness in the universe, because whenever we see it in our world it exists as an expression or echo of it's source in the Godhead.

The Trinity holds a central place in this project going forward because all crucial elements in theology, ecclesiology, and sociology, are rooted in the doctrine of the Trinity. This section has demonstrated that the doctrine of the Trinity has roots in Scripture. But when looking at the themes of unity and uniqueness we see that even the Bible itself, it bears the mark of unity and uniqueness in its composition. The work is a reflection Trinitarian essence of the divine author.

Uniqueness and Unity in the Cannon

Though ' Bible' is a singular term, the Bible is not one book, but a library of diverse writings concerning God and his relationship with the world. While the theme of uniqueness and unity is present in the revelation of God's Word, it is also evident in the composition of the Bible. The Bible is a diverse collection of books that present one over arching unified theme. " Neo-Orthodox" theologians in the past century worked to revive an emphasis of study in the unity of the Bible. Professor C. H. Dodd called for greater study

in this area; “ Biblical scholars have long worked on separate sections in what might be called the centrifugal movement, but now the centripetal movement is needed; a study of the unity of the parts, an attempt to find the deeper meanings of the dominant theme present within the diversity of writings. This section will examine the uniqueness in the composition and the unifying theme of the text.

The Uniqueness of the Books within the Cannon.

The Bible is a diverse collection of books that were written over a period of 1,500 years by many authors from a wide range of experiences and walks of life. These 66 unique books were written in a variety of historical and cultural contexts. The 40 authors wrote in a wide array of literary forms. The diversity of the writings may be described as the humanity of the Bible, since it extends over a vast range of human experiences and perspectives. This diversity is expressed well by author Terry Hall: “ It had to be one of the strangest publishing projects of all time: no editor or publishing house was responsible to oversee 40 independent authors representing 20 occupations, living in 10 countries, during a 1,500 year span, working in 3 languages, with a cast of 2,930 characters in 1,551 places, together they produced 66 books, containing 1,189 chapters, over 31,000 verses, 7 hundred 74 thousand words and over 3.5 million letters. This massive volume covers every conceivable subject expressed in literary forms poetry, prose, romance, biography, science, and history, to tell one story with internal consistency.”

To appreciate the difficulties the unity of the Scriptures, we only need imagine the complexity in turning this diverse collection into a unified work.

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The complex reality of the unity in composition despite broad sweeping diversity reveals evidence for divine authorship. The evidence is from the reality that despite the many differences there is one overarching meta-narrative. The internal consistency could be described as the divinity of the Bible. God chose to use distinctive, unique personalities to reveal his unified infallible, inerrant word. God weaves together the diversity and uniqueness to form one story, the story of redemption.

The Unity of the Cannon.

God's Word is always united to this theme of redemption and tied in with history. G. Ernest Wright regards this unity as "the confessional recital of God's saving and redemptive acts." If one follows the meta-narrative, the story line leads from creation, to the fall of man, to the need for redemption, to the sacrificial system, to the person of Jesus who fulfills prophecy and brings redemption through his sacrifice, from the garden to the great city of God, the consistent unifying theme within the Book is Jesus and the work of redemption.

A tradition in the British Navy illustrates this unifying theme; there was a practice in the Royal Navy that every rope they used would have a scarlet cord woven into it. The cord would run from end to end, that way whether lost at sea or stolen in the harbor, no matter where the rope was cut, every inch was marked and it was evidenced that it was possession of the crown. And so it is with the Bible, in the united message within the diversity of the Text. The Scriptures are comprised of 66 books and regardless where one cuts in on the story, there is one unified theme, the redemption of mankind through the work Jesus the Messiah.

Karl Barth called this the “ Christological concentration.” He stated this central emphasis on Christ this way; “ in the Bible only one central figure as such has begun to occupy me - or each and everything else only in the light and under the sing of this central figure.” Jesus Christ is the scarlet thread that runs throughout the Bible. Bible contains unique books with unity in their composition and theme.

Conclusion

The diversity and unity of the Bible is supernatural, the evidence supports its claim to be the revealed Word of God. There is a striking a unity out of diversity, a harmonious and continuous message from beginning to end, a self-consistent whole, where the main theme is the person and work of Jesus Christ. God intended for the diverse books of scripture to fit together as a unified whole, the various books coming together as a beautiful and cohesive whole is just another revelation of this universal theme of unity among unique parts. The divine author has designed this into the created order of the Cannon and integrated unity and uniqueness in the created order of humanity and the architecture of the institution of marriage.

Unity and Uniqueness in Marriage

God is Trinity, which means that in God there is a unity, a perfect consistency of essence. Since this is within his being, God finds delight in uniqueness within unity. God makes his pleasure known by weaving this theme into the cosmos, into the cannon, and into the crown or apex of his creation, humanity. The essential unity of God finds expression in the creation of mankind and the institution of marriage. Humans have been

stamped with unity and uniqueness, since God created man in “[His] image, in [His] likeness” (Genesis 1: 26).

The process of being created in God’s image has important implications for human relationships, as Stanley Grenz explains: “ The image of God is primarily a relational concept. Ultimately we reflect God’s image in relationship. Thus the imago Dei is not primarily an individual possession but a corporate or social reality, present among humans-in-relationship.” When God created humans, “ He constructed into creatures and relationships a unity-in-diversity that characterize the eternal divine reality.” This creative act of unity and uniqueness is evident in the creativity of the male and female design: “ God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1: 27). The male and female distinction within humanity mysteriously reflects the image of God. This is revealed in the marriage mandate and the divine institution of marriage.

The Marriage Mandate

The marriage relationship has been deigned and instituted by God. In fact, marriage is the very first institution that God creates. In the created order, marriage is formed before civil government and the local church. Marriage is the primary institution and is the preeminent building block of societal vitality.

God sets forth his design for marriage in the marriage mandate, “ For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Genesis 2: 24). The Hebrew word for one in one

flesh, is the same Hebrew word used in the Shema, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is One" (Deut. 6: 4-5). This word one references the unity of the Godhead made up by three unique persons with three distinct roles. In the case of marriage, it is not tri-unity as with God, rather it is unity of two persons, male and female - one flesh. This oneness, or unity, is the marking reflection of God's essence on the marriage covenant.

Uniqueness in Marriage

The oneness of marriage does not mean that the marriage mandate reduces or eliminates individuality. Just as the distinct persons and different roles in the Trinity are unified in purpose and mission as one, male and female in the marriage covenant come together as one. Both persons bring their distinctive personalities and giftedness, unique passions and abilities together, not to exist merely as two individuals but to become united together. The Bible teaches that marriage is the complimentary functioning of two unique persons in their roles to reflect the image of God.

It is important to note that distinct persons and different roles does not indicate different value. Just as the three persons of the Trinity are equal in their value and in their personhood, also women and men have been created equal in their worth. Neither male nor female are "better" or "worse" than the other. In God's economy, both male and female are equal before him. As the apostle Paul writes in the letter to the Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3: 28). Scripture affirms absolute equality of personhood. But equality of value and importance is different than equality of role and responsibility. Males and females have been assigned unique roles according

to the created order. Pastor and Theologian John Piper writes: “ In the Bible, differentiated roles for men and women are never traced back to the fall of man and woman into sin. Rather, the foundation of this differentiation is traced back to the way things were in Eden before sin warped our relationships. Differentiated roles were corrupted, not created, by the fall. They were created by God.”

Although man and woman are equal, Scriptures teach that there are proper roles within the marriage mandate. The Apostle Paul defines these roles in this letter to the Ephesians. He writes, “ Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5: 22-26).

The husband is called to serve and sacrifice for his wife as an expression of his love for her. Likewise, the wife is called to submit and respect her husband as an expression of her love for him. In this way they complement each other. God has given the husband the role of loving servant-leadership, with a responsibility to lead, protect, and provide for the wife. In the same way, a woman’s responsibility is to affirm and support his leadership, as a helpmate. The complementing distinctions create a mutually supportive home that affirms each others calling in Christ. These two complementary halves unite - physically, spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physiologically and the unity of the uniqueness reveals the image of God in marriage.

Unity in Marriage

The Bible uses the phrase “one flesh” to describe the mysterious and miraculous unity that is present in marriage. This description distinguishes the union of marriage from any other human connection, differentiating the marriage relationship from any other social institution. Marriage is not the product of social evolution or a cultural invention; rather it is a pre-fall created relationship that began with the primal event in the Garden of Eden. Within marriage there is this sacred mystery of unity and uniqueness held together in one entity.

In the New Testament, Jesus affirms the marriage mandate and profound significance thereof: “Have you not read, that he who created them from the beginning, made them male and female. And said for this reason a man shall leave his Father and Mother and shall cleave to his wife and they shall become one flesh? Consequently they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together let no man separate” (Matthew 19: 4-6) Christ presents the profound significance of the ordained demarcation, as the man and woman leave their father and mother, and unite as they cleave to one another in the sight of God and become “one flesh.”

Cleaving together and becoming “one flesh” as husband and wife is symbolized and sealed by sexual union, but the “one flesh” relationship entails more than sex. It is the mysterious fusion of two lives into one, where life is shared together, by the mutual consent and covenant of marriage in a mysterious union. By God’s architecture in humanity, male and female are made anatomically, emotionally and spiritually for one another, for oneness. Through divine intention, by joining together, the husband and wife

represent the full spectrum of the God's image. As God's unity is everlasting, the marriage unity is designed to be reflective of his everlasting nature, by two people giving themselves over into a permanent circle of shared companionship.

In the context of the letter to the Ephesians it appears that marriage is set within the meta-narrative of God's restoration of all things under the headship of Christ. This includes all of humanity who believes, Jews and Gentiles, the body of Christ, the church. Paul sets forth God's purpose of humanity "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head even Christ" (Eph. 1: 10). The authority of Christ is supreme, he is the head of all things, and all things are subjected to him. This overarching sovereign work of God becomes the central purpose for a unified marriage. Unity in marriage is developed from sharing this God-given mission and purpose.

Conclusion

The longest statement in the New Testament on the unity of marriage and the relationship between husbands and wives is found in Ephesians 5: 21-33. In this passage Paul conveys the distinctive roles for wives and husbands and at the same time reveals the way it corresponds to the relationship between Christ and his church. In this way, marriage serves as a metaphor of deeper spiritual realities. The truth marriage mirrors is that the unity of husbands loving their wives to become one flesh/body is a dimension of the great mystery of the unity of all believers into the one "body" of the church through the self-sacrificial love of its head, Christ (Eph 5: 2, 23-30, 32).

Marital unity in love adds to the great cosmic mystery of unity causing the growth of all things to Christ, so that all might be united under him.

This theme of unity among uniqueness is present all throughout the cosmos and creation. Flowing from the Trinity, the theological underpinning of the essence of unity and uniqueness has wide-ranging implications for the study of Scripture, the function of marriage, and ecclesiology. Basically, this doctrine is the foundation of practical Christian reflection of the diversity and unity within the Godhead. The human family is not the only way God has ordained to reflect his unity to the world. Within the church we have “ many members” and yet “ one body” that display his glory (1 Cor. 12: 12).

Unity and Uniqueness in the Church

The unity of the Church is a theme that carries throughout the New Testament. There is not a clear, concise, summarizing definition of the church put forth