

The Unity of the Church : Love and Truth

By Martin Hoegger

As we approach 2033, the date which will mark the two thousandth anniversary of Christ's resurrection, many Christians from different traditions are seeking to walk together in faith and witness. This endeavour raises a fundamental question : what is the nature of the unity to which Christ calls his Church¹ ?

In his prayer in John 17, Jesus asks not only that his disciples be gathered together, but that they may be one, in the image of the unity that exists between the Father and the Son. This unity is both a gift and a calling. It is based neither on uniformity nor on the erasure of differences, but on a communion rooted in love and truth.

Through a selection of key biblical texts and the testimonies of several prominent figures in Christian history, we shall seek to understand how love and truth constitute the two inseparable dimensions of the Church's unity, and how this unity can be lived out in practice today.

1. 'May they ALL be ONE'

In this verse, the best-known on the subject of unity, what is the meaning of the word 'ALL'?

Jesus had eleven men before him – the apostles – Judas had already left the group. When he prays to the Father, is he thinking only of these eleven people?

Of course not: the word 'ALL' has a much broader meaning.

He had before him the whole of humanity until the end of time.

This word 'all' therefore has a missionary meaning.

The apostle Paul puts it another way: 'God desires all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim 2:4).

At JC2033, our dream is that by Easter 2033, everyone will hear the joyful greeting in their own language: 'Christ is risen. He is truly risen.'

What, too, is the meaning of the word 'ONE'?

'ONE' does not mean 'groupthink' or uniformity. The ecumenical movement has emphasised this strongly. This word has a relational meaning.

The rest of the verse states this explicitly: 'May they all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I am in you; may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.' It is a relational unity, modelled on the relationship between the Father and the Son.

In a word, it is a unity characterised by mutual love in Christ.

¹ Lecture delivered at the JC2033 gathering at Val de Paix, near Montreal (Quebec), on 11 June 2026.

Mutual love rejects the control of consciences, judgements, labels and peer pressure. It also resists activism that stifles inner life and the temptation to make people conform. It thus enables genuine fellowship whilst respecting differences.

It is this love that Christ put into practice and to which Paul calls us: 'Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus' (Phil 2:5).

2. 'Your Word is the truth'

Another key verse in this chapter is where Jesus speaks of the Word of God: 'Sanctify them by the truth: your word is the truth' (John 17:17). And he continues:

'As you sent me into the world, so I send them into the world. And for their sake I sanctify myself, so that they too may be sanctified by the truth' (vv. 18–19).

It is through the Word of God that we sanctify ourselves. Just as Jesus sanctified himself by living out the Word to the full, loving God and his own to the utmost, so our calling is also to allow ourselves to be guided in all things by the Word of God.

Three themes in John 17 are interlinked: the sending, unity and the Word. We can only be sent if we allow ourselves to be transformed by the Word of God and if we are united with one another in love.

In fact, the theme of John 17 is the sending forth of Christ's witnesses. To be sent forth, there are two conditions: sanctification through the Word and the unity of the disciples

To be united in mutual love, we must allow ourselves to be transformed by the Word of God. It is the Word that sanctifies us. This is what I have tried to convey in the book I recently published: 'The Word that Transforms and Unites'.

3. Love and truth

Unity is love and truth. It has a relational aspect ('love'), but it also has a doctrinal and theological aspect ('truth'). In short, it is both 'relational' and 'rational'.

Unity is in the image of God, who is both 'love and truth': 'The Lord, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and truth' (Ex 34:8).

Unity encompasses love and truth, as the Psalm also so beautifully expresses: 'Love and truth meet; justice and peace embrace' (85:11).

Relational unity is not to be set against doctrinal unity. Both are necessary. However, Scripture emphasises a priority, as the apostle Peter says: 'Above all, love one another deeply' (1 Peter 4:8).

This 'above all' is crucial. It invites us to examine the quality of our relationships before undertaking any joint initiative.

And the quality of our relational unity will be of great service in exploring the theological questions that remain open.

4. Love and Truth among Theologians

Here is how a few theologians have articulated 'love and truth'. I shall speak of Cyprian in the 4th century, John Calvin in the 16th century and Charles Henri Brent at the dawn of the ecumenical movement in the 20th century.

a. Cyprian

In his treatise « On the Unity of the Church », Cyprian shows that divisions arise within the Church when love and truth are separated, when the Gospel ceases to be the centre and to be lived out. For him, there is a profound link between the unity of the Church and the lived-out Gospel of the double commandment of love. To illustrate relational unity, he draws on the touching image of doves:

'They spend their lives in mutual intimacy; by pecking at one another, they demonstrate their harmony in peace; in all things they observe the law of perfect harmony. This is how, within the Church, we must set aside all malice and cultivate charity: by imitating the doves in brotherly love, and by emulating the lambs and ewes in their gentle docility².'

b. John Calvin

For John Calvin, the Reformer of Geneva, unity also comprises these two dimensions: love and truth. He emphasises 'the unity that is in truth'. This concise phrase demonstrates the great importance he attaches to the confession of faith³. Yet he also reminds us that the authentic reception of the Gospel must be reflected in a concrete life of brotherly love.

It is not enough for the Gospel to be preached for the Church to truly be what it ought to be. Fraternal life is essential. Agreement in truth and in fraternal love is the criterion of a true Church, Calvin asserts: 'This union consists of two bonds: that there be agreement in sound doctrine, and that there be fraternal love⁴.'

For Calvin, therefore, unity is both doctrinal and fraternal, effective and affective.

c. Charles Henri Brent

Did you know that one of the pioneers of the modern ecumenical movement was Canadian? He was the Anglican bishop Charles Henri Brent, who chaired the first World Conference on Faith and Order in Lausanne in 1927. He described this dual aspect of unity as follows:

² Cyprian of Carthage, *The Unity of the Church*, 9.4–9,

³ Commentary on Romans 16:17. (1539).

⁴ *Christian Institution*, IV,2,5.

‘Christian unity, which is a work of the Spirit and is founded on Christ’s double law of love, comes first and precedes ecclesial unity, in which unity of worship is a necessary culmination⁵.’

For Brent, theological unity (truth) and spiritual unity (love) must always go hand in hand.

d. The 1927 Lausanne Conference

Here in Lausanne, where I live, we are currently preparing for the centenary of that first conference, which marked a decisive milestone on the ecumenical journey.

Here is an extract from its impressive ‘Call to Unity’, full of vigour and vitality:

‘God desires unity. Our presence at this Conference bears witness to our desire to submit our will to His. Whatever reasons we may invoke to justify the beginnings of disunity, we deplore its persistence and must henceforth work, in repentance and faith, to rebuild our broken walls⁶.’

This conference identified these six theological themes, which continue to be explored in depth to this day: the mission and nature of the Church, the confession of faith, ministry, the sacraments and the nature of unity.

Of course, JC2033 is not the forum in which we are to discuss these issues. But let us not forget that they form the backdrop. I am also convinced that our journey of faith towards 2033, in love and truth, will also shed new light on these fundamental questions.

e. The Creed and the Journey towards 2033

In JC2033, we recognise the importance of the Confession of Faith, as we affirm the following: ‘Together with all Christians who confess the Trinitarian nature of God and the salvation offered in Jesus Christ, true God and true man, we acknowledge the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.’

In Iznik, the ancient city of Nicaea, church leaders recited this Creed together in October 2025. Present were Pope Leo, Bartholomew, Patriarch of Constantinople, other Orthodox patriarchs, as well as the general secretaries of the World Council of Churches and the World Evangelical Alliance. The following day, in Istanbul, Pope Leo invited them to embark on a “spiritual journey towards 2033” and to meet again that year in Jerusalem, “at the roots of our faith”. Two weeks ago, I had the opportunity to thank Pope Leo for this initiative during an audience at the Vatican.

⁵ *Things that matter*, New York, Harper & Row, 1949, p. 41. Elsewhere he writes: ‘Ecclesiastical unity does not necessarily produce unity of life. However, the latter must, in a certain sense, include the former. Christian unity has a twofold foundation: love of God and love of neighbour’. *With God in the World*, New York, Longmans, 1902, p. 63. Cf. Martin Hoegger, *Pratique de l’unité chez Charles Henry Brent. A l’aube d’une spiritualité œcuménique. Hokhma* 2011/1.

⁶ See *Reports of the World Conference on Faith and Order, Lausanne, Switzerland, 3–21 August 1927*, Boston, 1928.

5. How can we foster relational unity?

What attitudes foster a spiritual climate that leads to the experience of relational unity? Charles Henri Brent reflected on this question. In his 'call to unity', preached in Lausanne Cathedral, and in the Proceedings of the Conference (1927), we find several points relating to ecumenical spirituality. Here are a few of them⁷ :

- Consciously placing oneself before God during dialogue.
- To regard everyone in a spirit of filial and fraternal love
- To live by the 'golden rule' given by Christ: 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you'.
- Be prepared to change one's mind.

Here is what Brent says on this point: 'On many subjects I have convictions as strong as any you may have, but I wish to rid myself of my prejudices and my ignorance... I shall not be ashamed to admit that an opinion I currently hold is false if God tells me it is false'.

- Welcome opposing views with kindness.
- Learning to lose in order to gain unity:

'Rather than continuing along the path of conventional Christianity, I will take the risk of losing some of our distinctive characteristics in an attempt to achieve the unity that our Lord intended for his Church'.

Finally, a great virtue of ecumenism is patience. But will we have to wait centuries, as Brent writes in one of his books?

Putting these various aspects of the 'Lausanne spirit' into practice fosters friendship. For Brent, 'spiritual friendship' (fellowship) is a key factor in fostering Christian unity.

Finally, Brent sees the Incarnation of Christ as the linchpin of his spiritual life and his commitment to unity: 'It signifies closeness ... the Churches must therefore commit themselves unequivocally and irrevocably to the principle of the Incarnation.' It is the God who is close to us through the Incarnation who calls the Churches to be close to one another. (Philippians 2:2-5)

Today, almost 100 years after the Lausanne Conference, the ecumenical movement has given rise to initiatives that promote relational unity. I would like to mention three of these, which we will be exploring during this gathering

Sharing our journeys of faith: recounting how Christ has come to meet us and how we walk with him. This highly effective method, proposed by the World Christian Forum, is particularly effective in fostering communion between members of 'historic' churches and members of newer churches (Pentecostals, Charismatics and Evangelicals). We will take part in such a sharing session tomorrow

⁷ See my article 'The Art of Dialogue According to Charles Henry Brent'.
<https://www.hoegger.org/article/l-art-du-dialogue-selon-charles-henri-brent/>.

Participatory **lectio divina**, where we allow the Word of God to resonate as we listen to it together, with times of silence, sharing and prayer. This is an existential and spiritual approach to the Scriptures that fosters communion. We will take part in a lectio divina on Saturday.

Focusing on the crucified and risen Christ. This is the final point of my talk.

6. Looking to the crucified and risen Christ: The tearing down of the dividing wall

On the journey towards 2033, the JC2033 movement invites us to fix our gaze on Jesus Christ, who died and rose again. In doing so, we enjoy a wonderful experience of communion with Christians from (almost) all Churches and, currently, in over 60 countries. We are so grateful for the progress made, particularly in Quebec.

Another key text on unity, after John 17, is the second chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians. Through the cross, Christ has brought about unity between Jews and non-Jews. We must always return to this fundamental text.

‘But now, in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made the two one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility.’ (Eph 2:13–14)

There was great hostility between Jews and Gentiles. The dividing wall of the temple symbolised this.

Jesus has broken down this hostility: he reconciles us to God and to one another. He breaks down the dividing wall, alienation and hatred. He creates a new, reconciled society.



He creates a ‘new man’ who represents the Christian community. This new humanity, characterised by fellowship between Jews and Gentiles, is realised and developed through personal union with Christ. In him, Jews and Gentiles form ‘one new man’.

But this new unity in Christ is not limited to bridging the gap between Jews and Gentiles. Elsewhere, Paul applies it to all other social divisions. (Col 3:11; Gal 3:28)

This painting by the Japanese artist Soichi Watanabe captures this well. I had met him in Korea in 2013 and we became friends. He sent me a photograph of it after receiving various reports of my participation in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in Jerusalem in January 2016.

Drawing on a meditation on this passage from the Letter to the Ephesians, he depicted Jesus, the cornerstone who, through his cross, reconciles Jews and non-Jews, but also all those who are divided in our world.

To live together in unity, we must constantly look to Christ crucified, the cornerstone.

But the Crucified One is also risen: the colour yellow expresses the light of his resurrection.

It is in him that the Church, represented by the stones, is built. The blue surrounding the building symbolises the Holy Spirit who sustains the Church, the dwelling place of God, the body of Christ, the home of the Spirit.

The Crucified and Risen One is the 'cornerstone' (2.20). Reference to Jesus is therefore essential to the unity and growth of the Church.

Unless it is constantly and firmly attached to Jesus Christ, the unity of the Church will cease to grow, or will develop in a disorderly manner, or even disintegrate.

Conclusion

The Scriptures show us that unity rests on two inseparable pillars: love and truth. Love creates the space for encounter, listening and trust. Truth anchors us in the Word of God and in the confession of the apostolic faith.

When these two dimensions remain united, the Church can offer the world a credible witness to the Gospel.

On the journey towards 2033, we are invited to deepen this dual commitment. As we look together towards the crucified and risen Christ, we discover that even today he continues to break down the walls that separate us and to make us one people.

Unity is not primarily the result of our efforts, but the work of the Lord, who calls us to walk together in the communion of his Spirit.

Questions for group discussion.

1. In my personal or church experience, what most fosters unity amongst Christians of different traditions: fraternal relationships, common prayer, theological dialogue or other experiences? Why?
2. What 'walls of separation' is Christ calling us today to overcome, within our Churches, our communities or our society, in order to bear a more credible witness to the Gospel?