

ONE IN CHRIST

BIBLICAL CONCEPTS FOR A DOCTRINE OF CHURCH UNITY



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 **Pacific Press**[®]
Publishing Association

Nampa, Idaho | Oshawa, Ontario, Canada
www.pacificpress.com

1 CHAPTER

God's Original Plan

The biblical story of God's people begins with the creation of earth and humanity. At the end of the sixth day of Creation, Genesis declares that "God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). Complete harmony reigned between nature and humanity—as God had intended it. His original purpose in creation included the harmonious coexistence of all life-forms, and He made the beautiful world just for the human family. Everything was perfect. The original world was one of harmony, unity, and love.

Any attempt to understand the nature of unity in the church begins with an awareness of God's original plan at Creation, the unfortunate Fall, and the need for restoration. The first chapters of the Bible show that God desired for humanity to remain one family. Sadly, they also record the roots of disunity and division. Sin derailed God's ideal plan, and the plan of salvation seeks to restore it. This restoration and the unity of all God's people is the ultimate goal of God's love.

One family in God's image

The book of Genesis says God created humankind in His image. "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness. . . .' So God created man in His

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own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:26, 27). Although theologians have debated for centuries the exact nature of this image, and the nature of God, many passages of Scripture present God’s essential nature as loving and merciful (1 John 4:7, 8; Exodus 34:6), characteristics that can exist only in relationship with others. Our Creator is clearly a God of relationships.

During the week of Creation, God created two institutions that reveal the original desire for the unity of the human family, both centered on human relationships. When Adam and Eve were united to form the first human family, their union had a clear purpose: to become one flesh. The Hebrew word in this expression is used elsewhere to refer to God’s nature (see Deuteronomy 6:4) and underlines the intrinsic unity of this relationship.

God’s original purpose is also reflected in the institution of the Sabbath as a day of rest. From the beginning, the Sabbath was intended for all humanity (Mark 2:27, 28). Six hundred years before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah highlighted the universality of the Sabbath and its benefits for foreigners and eunuchs, people who were at that time excluded from Israel (see Isaiah 56:1–12). Yet Sabbath and its observance were intended for more than the people of Israel. It was a day of rest designed to remind the descendants of Adam and Eve of their common bond to God and one another. The family unit, also instituted in Eden, forever linked the Sabbath, family, and relationships. More than on any other day, Sabbath fellowship is a foretaste of the life God intended at Creation. It is a preview of the earth made new (see Isaiah 65:17, 21–25; 66:22, 23).

The consequences of the Fall

However, the beautiful world God created with such care and attention was marred by sin and the enormous consequences of the Fall. Adam and Eve’s disobedience fractured the harmonious interdependence between all life-forms and plunged humanity into disunity, discord, and division. On the first day of their transgression they blamed each other for what had

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happened and indirectly blamed God (Genesis 3:12, 13).

Over time, this disobedience spawned a tragic course of events that affected all of God's creation. The natural world began to suffer, and human relationships soon followed. Cain and Abel, two brothers who should have loved and cared for each other, came to blows because one wished to follow his own selfish inclinations instead of God's prescribed mode of worship. This estrangement resulted in violence and death. Cain's reaction, however, was primarily against God, not his brother. He felt angry toward God (Genesis 4:5), and this led to resentment toward Abel.

After a few generations, human life degenerated into conflict, violence, and disgrace. Things became so bad God repented of having created human life and wished to destroy it before it worsened. "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart" (Genesis 6:5, 6). The consequences of the Fall progressively degraded God's entire creation. In mercy and justice, He had no other choice but to destroy the antediluvians, saving a remnant so the plan of salvation could be realized for the entire human race.

After the Flood, God established Noah as a kind of second Adam and gave him and his family a promise. The rainbow in the sky would always be a reminder of His care and promises, His kindness and mercy (Genesis 9:12–17; Isaiah 54:7–10). He instituted a covenant with Noah and, in an act of re-creation, launched His plan to have a united and faithful human family.

After the Flood, the plan quickly went awry with the construction of the Tower of Babel. The descendants of Noah who settled in the land of Shinar (Genesis 11:2), today's southern Iraq, soon forgot the God of Noah and the promises He had made to never again destroy the world by a flood. Building the Tower of Babel was a monument to their superior wisdom and skills. Their desire to "make a name for ourselves" (verse 4),

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secure independence from God, and indulge self-sufficiency were their core motives for this building project. It was also an attempt at circumventing another possible flood and betrayed their supreme distrust of God's promise to never again destroy the earth by water (Genesis 9:8–17).

God's response to this defiant act was to confuse their communication. Up to this point, humankind had spoken one language and shared one culture, but the rebellious tower caused God to confuse the languages of the people and set off a dispersion. The Hebrew play on words in this narrative is instructive—God confuses (*balal*) their language as they construct their Tower of Babel (*babel*) (Genesis 11:9). The fall of Adam and Eve began the sad saga of human disunity, and post-Flood events further eroded the unity of the human race and God's original plan. The Tower of Babel and the subsequent confusion of languages resulted in many people groups who have been at odds, if not at war, ever since.

Thankfully, God's plan of salvation was not foiled because He found someone among these confused people who had kept the true faith, with whom He could restore His covenant and prepare the way for the Messiah and the reunification of the human family. The transition from the confusion in Babel (Babylon) to the calling of Abraham is important: Abraham is called out of Ur, a prominent city in the land of Shinar. God directly disavows the culture from which Abraham came and chooses to begin again in the land of Canaan (Genesis 11:28–12:6).

Abraham, father of God's people

The three great monotheistic world religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, look to Abraham as their father. He stands in the unique position of being the father of all believers in these three traditions. For Christians, this association is a spiritual relationship. When called to leave his country in Mesopotamia, Abraham was told that in him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3; see also Genesis 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). While God initially chooses one man and

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his family, His final objective is to reach all humanity with His grace and blessings. Thus, Abraham is the father of God's people, and his trust in God is at the core of biblical unity. The success of God's covenant with humanity hinges on this faith relationship. God works through people to restore unity and to make His will known to lost humankind.

Hebrews 11:8–19 gives three important elements of Abraham's faith, elements that are central to unity among God's people. The first element is obedience to God's will. "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going" (verse 8). A second element is hope in the promises of God. "By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (verses 9, 10).

The third element is trust in God's plan of salvation. The greatest test to Abraham's faith came when God asked him to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:1–19; Hebrews 11:17–19). In spite of conflicted feelings and perhaps even against his better judgment, Abraham complied with the request to sacrifice his son, trusting in God's promises. This is why the Old Testament describes Abraham as a friend of God (2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8) and the New Testament says that his faith justified him (Romans 4:1–3). Such faith and trust also built an amazing relationship between God and Abraham. "The pain and agony felt by Abraham at the prospect of sacrificing Isaac in some small way helps us understand the suffering of the Father when he offered up his Son for us all."¹ His life of faith, his unwavering obedience, and his confidence in God's promises serve as an example for the church of today. As modern Christians live these same elements of Abraham's life, they create a common bond of unity. Christian unity rests on the twin realities of a faithful God and a faithful life.

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God's chosen people

In calling Abraham to be His servant and father a vast nation, God chose his descendants to represent Him to the world. It was an election and calling born of God's love and grace. In his review of God's blessings to Israel, at the end of their sojourn in the wilderness, Moses reminded Israel of this call: "For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD had brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 7:6–8).

God's love for humankind stands at the center of Israel's election as His people. He made a covenant with Abraham and his posterity to preserve the knowledge of God and bring about the redemption of humanity (Psalm 67:2). Yet, it was a supreme act of love that caused Him to choose Abraham and the children of Israel. The heirs of this calling, both literal and spiritual, have nothing to boast about save God's unmerited love.

In a strange reversal of values, God rejects conventional human wisdom when He selects His people. While humans value wisdom, power, and self-confidence when choosing leaders, God passes over the strong and mighty, choosing those who sense their weakness, folly, and nothingness—making it clear there is no room for boasting in God's presence (1 Corinthians 1:26–31).

In Hebrews 11, the faithful from Abel to Abraham met with God's approval. They are shining examples of the principle that faith in God is the decisive factor in godly living. By faith, they saw the promise of a new earth from afar. They lived for the fulfillment of that promise and focused their lives on their eternal inheritance. Though in the world and subject to temptation and deception, their hope was steadfast, their

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pilgrimage undaunted by the transient nature of the present life. From afar, they saw the new inheritance, and lived in the hope of a better life and a more permanent home.

The lives of these faith heroes are examples for modern Christians. "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:1, 2).

God's original plan at Creation called for a harmonious and unified human family. The disobedience of Adam and Eve interrupted this plan, but in Abraham He established a people through whom He could keep the promise of restoration alive. Today, no less than long ago, unity remains an essential element of God's plan of salvation in Christ.

1. H. M. Wolf, "Abraham," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 7.