

S T U D Y G U I D E



The Bride of Christ

by R.C. Sproul



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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

Renew your Mind.

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Introduction

For almost two thousand years, believers have confessed, “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.” Yet many within the visible church are divided, involved in all manner of sinful behavior, parochial in their attitude, and tossed about by every wind of doctrine. How do we as believers maintain our belief in the church described by the Christian creed in the face of such realities?

If we pay attention to what the Scripture teaches us, we can begin to find answers to these questions, for the Scripture, as God’s holy and inerrant Word, describes reality as it is, not as we would like it to be. In the Bible, God informs us that He is calling a people out of the world for Himself. He informs us that there will be tares growing alongside the wheat. He informs us that those who are called out of the world to be His people are being gradually sanctified in order that they may be presented to Christ as a spotless bride.

May this series enable you to understand better what it means to be a member of the Church, the bride of Christ.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "R.C. Sproul". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "R.C." written in a more compact, stylized manner than the last name "Sproul".

R.C. Sproul

The Church is One

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

In the Nicene Creed, Christians confess their belief in “one holy catholic and apostolic church.” Jesus Himself prayed that the church would be one even as He and the Father are one. But what does this “oneness” mean? When we see thousands of Christian denominations, must we believe that Christ’s prayer has not been answered? Must we change our creed? In this lecture, Dr. Sproul examines what it means to confess that the church is one.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To be able to explain what Christians mean when they confess that the church is one
2. To be able to explain how the Christian belief in the oneness of the church is reconciled with the fact of division in the visible church

QUOTATIONS

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

— John 17:20–23

The church that is to be one in the Spirit, united to Jesus Christ, and one in the faith, holding to the purity of the apostolic gospel, must also be God’s holy people on earth, growing in likeness to Christ, and transcending worldly divisions as the beginning of a new humanity in Christ.

— Edmund Clowney

LECTURE OUTLINE

A. Introduction

1. In the seventeenth chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus gives the most extensive prayer that is recorded for us in the New Testament.
2. This prayer is usually referred to as Jesus's "High Priestly Prayer."
3. One of the central themes of that prayer was Christ's desire for Christian unity.
4. According to Jesus, the unity of the church is to reflect and mirror the same kind of unity that exists between the Father and Son.
5. We know that Christ's prayers are efficacious, yet in the twentieth century the church in its visible manifestation is probably more fragmented and fractured than at any other time in history.

B. One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church

1. The formation of the Apostles' Creed occurred very early in the history of the church.
2. This Creed, which is confessed by many Christians as a regular part of their worship liturgy, contains the words, "I believe in . . . the holy catholic church."
3. This confession was extended in the fourth century in the Nicene Creed, which defined the church using four adjectives.
4. In the Nicene Creed, Christians confess their belief in "one holy catholic and apostolic" church.

C. The Church is One

1. One recent survey indicated that in the United States alone, there are more than 2000 distinct Protestant denominations.
2. The numerous divisions and schisms are a scandal not only in America but around the world as well.
3. The schism that occurred during the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation was greater in its ramifications than the so-called Great Schism that had divided the Eastern and Western parts of the church five hundred years earlier.
4. After the Protestant Reformation, there was a proliferation of different denominations.
5. The Roman Catholic church had been concerned that Luther's teaching would inspire this kind of fragmentation, and it turns out that Rome's concerns were well founded.
6. Luther had insisted on the right of private interpretation of Scripture.
7. Some scholars, such as Erasmus, had challenged him, arguing that such a move would open a floodgate of iniquity.
8. Luther indicated that he shared those concerns, but he also believed that getting the clear message of the gospel into the hands of the masses was worth it.
9. The fragmentation did occur, and even the Reformers themselves were unable to maintain a united front.
10. As a result, we have seen all kinds of different churches developing, each claiming to be faithful to the witness of the New Testament.

11. Obviously, all of these churches cannot be equally faithful to the witness of the New Testament because they sharply disagree on important issues.

D. The Ecumenical Movement

1. There have been many different approaches to understanding Christ's prayer for the unity of the church.
2. In the twentieth century we have witnessed the rise of the ecumenical movement, which was an attempt to move toward regathering splintered denominations into one centralized ecclesiastical body.
3. The primary goal of the ecumenical movement has been to restore unity to the visible church.
4. One problem with ecclesiastical mergers is that the result is usually three new churches rather than one.
5. The group within each merging denomination who opposes the merger tends to form a new denomination from what is left of the old one that merged with another.

E. Pluralistic Theology

1. Another problem that has arisen from the drive toward visible unity is the development of an approach to doctrine that is often called pluralism.
2. As a philosophy, pluralism desires that a wide diversity of viewpoints and doctrines be able to coexist within a single body.
3. The more that pluralism enters the church, the greater the level of toleration and the possibility for visible unity.
4. The price tag for this kind of visible unity, however, has always been the confessional purity of the churches involved.
5. Historically, the different denominations have produced confessions of faith that explain their distinctive beliefs.
6. The ecumenical movement has tended to relativize these older confessions.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In what chapter of the Bible does Jesus give the most extensive prayer that is recorded for us in the New Testament?
 - a. Matthew 17
 - b. Mark 17
 - c. Luke 17
 - d. John 17
2. Jesus's lengthiest and most extensive recorded prayer is known as _____.
 - a. The Lord's Prayer
 - b. The High Priestly Prayer
 - c. The Sinner's Prayer
 - d. The Sermon on the Mount

3. The Apostles' Creed contains the words, "I believe in _____."
 - a. One holy catholic and apostolic church
 - b. The holy catholic church
 - c. The holy Roman Catholic church
 - d. One holy catholic and orthodox church
4. In the history of the church, what schism has had the most far-reaching ramifications, according to Dr. Sproul?
 - a. The Great Schism
 - b. The Great Western Schism
 - c. The Protestant Reformation
 - d. The split between Lutherans and the Reformed
5. What humanist scholar challenged Luther's insistence on the individual right of private interpretation?
 - a. Erasmus
 - b. Voltaire
 - c. Calvin
 - d. Melancthon
6. What is the name of the twentieth century movement that has sought to regather splintered denominations into one centralized ecclesiastical body?
 - a. Neo-orthodoxy
 - b. The Jesus Seminar
 - c. Modernism
 - d. The ecumenical movement
7. What philosophy is defined by its desire that a wide diversity of viewpoints and doctrines be able to coexist within a single body?
 - a. Fundamentalism
 - b. Pelagianism
 - c. Pluralism
 - d. Humanism

BIBLE STUDY

1. Read John 17:20–23. What is Christ's prayer for His disciples and those who will believe in Christ through their word? How are Christ and the Father one? How does your answer to that question impact your understanding of how the church is to be one?
2. Outline the basic points that Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 1:10–13 and 3:1–4. Do Paul's words here have any relevance for modern denominationalism? If so, what?

3. Read Ephesians 4:1–6. What are some of the attributes that Christians need to manifest in order to maintain unity? What does Paul mean when he speaks of “one Lord”? What does Paul mean by “one faith”? What does he mean by “one baptism”? What does this passage as a whole tell us about the importance of Christian unity in the mind of Paul?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In John 17, Christ prays that the church will be one as He and the Father are one. The unity of Christ and the Father is a tri-unity that includes the Holy Spirit. How does an understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity affect our understanding of the unity of the church?
2. In John 17, Christ prays that the church may be one for a stated reason — “that the world may believe.” How do these words prove that the unity of which Christ speaks is more than a purely invisible spiritual unity? How does a lack of Christian unity hinder the church’s efforts to reach the world with the gospel of Christ?
3. In Ephesians 4:5, Paul indicates that there is “one faith.” In 4:13, he indicates that “the unity of the faith” is something to which we will come at some point in the future. In some sense, then, the unity of the faith is both “already” and “not yet.” Is there any sense in which other aspects of the church’s unity are both “already” and “not yet”?
4. Considering the importance that Christ Himself placed on Christian unity, attempts at reconciliation do not appear to be optional. Yet are there any ways to seek more visible unity among the divided churches of the world without compromising the importance of doctrinal integrity?

APPLICATION

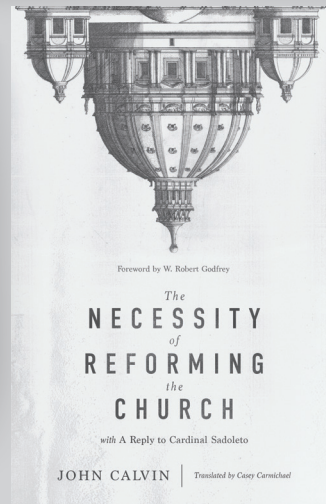
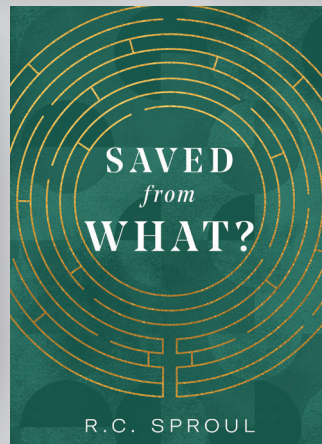
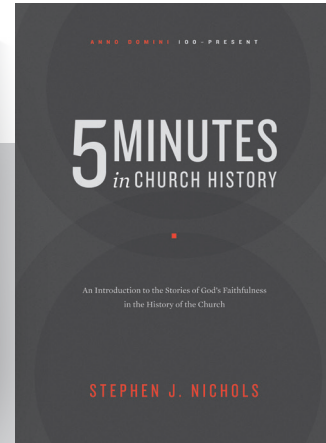
1. Read and meditate on Christ’s High Priestly Prayer in John 17. How important is the oneness of the church to Christ? How important is it to you? Ask God to renew your mind in order that your thoughts and desires may be brought more and more into conformity with those of Christ.
2. Take the time to read and study some good general books on the history of the church. Try to discern the major reasons for the different splits that have occurred.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Berkouwer, G. C. *The Church*, pp. 29–104

Turretin, Francis. *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Vol. 3, pp. 27–29

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