



In This Issue:

- The definition of Christian Unity.
- The definition of Christian association.
- The differences and relationship between the two.

The Differences Between Association and Unity and How They are Related

The two terms “association” and “unity” are extremely important to Christ Jesus and most Christians would maintain the same position. Yet there continues to be division amongst congregations on the meaning of these two terms. This article is devoted to the scriptural meaning and values of “association” and “unity” in hopes of bringing the followers of Christ together in a powerful way to better impact the Kingdom of God.

Beginning with unity, there is no better scriptural reference toward the importance of Christian unity than John 17, where Jesus prays that we, His followers, would be one just as He and the Father are one. Jesus went on to say, “I in them and You in Me.” Within this declaration of Christ in us, we learn that the binding value that all Christians’ should have and maintain is thinking and acting like Christ Jesus, making ourselves nothing and taking on the very nature of a servant, as stated in Philippians 2: 5-7. When Christians fulfill this instruction, our core and ultimate commitment is to imitate the life and values of one common God! Such a core value trumps most all of the diversities amongst Christians that often become man made barriers toward unity. As one pastor once advised, “We need to climb down from the throne of self and kneel before the throne of God!”

Unity is an interesting subject by definition. Wisdom International defines Christian unity as a state of love, harmony, and oneness among Christians. Biblically, Christian unity is one body with many members all working together, as indicated in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. Again, we see the need for the body of members to appreciate and equally value the unique nature of every part of the body and, as I have come to believe, there are as many members of Christ’s body as there are people who claim Him as their savior.

So, what does scripture tell us about becoming qualified members of the united body of Christ? 1 Corinthians 12:13 provides this answer: Believers hold one fulfilled necessity in common—faith in Christ Jesus. All believers are baptized by one Holy Spirit into one body of believers, the church. Here are the words of such faith that all believers proclaim: “That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For its with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved (Romans 10: 9-10).” The Reverend Billy Graham, during one of his many crusades, explained to his audience that church denominations don’t matter because one’s salvation is a matter of the heart. He went on to use the example of the man crucified next to Christ who was a murderer and thief. The thief’s heart was broken for Christ, asking that Jesus remember him when He came into His Kingdom. Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise (Luke 23:43).” From these scriptures and stories, being steadfast in our common acceptance of this biblical qualification, adding nothing more and accepting nothing less, unity can be achieved and maintained. Isn’t it interesting to learn that in 2014 an international study was conducted by the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and it was determined that 45,000 Christian denominations existed, resulting from the differing and divisive ideologies and doctrine that made sense only to their originators and their flock, while meaning very little to Christ Jesus.

Having made a strong case for Christian unity and how it’s to be accomplished. We move to the subject of “association.”

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Unity through Jesus is an ultimate step of responsibility to be completed by Christians. The process to reach unity is through “association.” Much of the problem that our world faces in arriving at unity is our lack of interest to associate with those people who are outside the realm of salvation by not knowing Christ’s saving grace. The elephant in the room is that many Christians are led to believe that no association with such people is warranted based upon scripture when nothing could be further from the truth. The best example of truth in why we must associate with non-believers comes through the story of Christ going to Levi’s house for a meal, where many sinners and tax collectors attended, along with the disciples (Mark 2: 13-17). The Pharisees who witnessed this event asked, “Why does He eat with tax collectors and sinners.” Jesus, hearing them said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.” From this story, we learn the need to associate with the lost for the sake of demonstrating the love of Christ, and by no means does any such association threaten our devotion to our Lord and Savior? I once was lost, and thank God for Mrs. Mead who invited me to attend her Wednesday Bible study for grade schoolers. Her association with me, as well as other children, never threatened her faith in Jesus, nor caused Jesus any dissatisfaction. It was by her love for the children of her neighborhood that attracted me to come to her home and learn effective Bible stories that created my interest to be saved into eternal life!

Let’s be biblically clear on whom we are to not associate: Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 5:9-13, “I have written to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolators. In that case you would have to leave this world. I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolator or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.” Paul’s writing pertains to the Lord’s instruction for dealing with open sin in the church; with anyone who claims to be a Christian and yet who sins without remorse. In such cases the church is to confront and discipline such a person in love. In summary, the Lord’s approved disassociation with people applies to those who are unrepentant within the church, who know better and yet claim to be Christians. To another summary from Paul’s instruction, we are of no value to the Kingdom if we fail to associate with the lost who are of the world and not of the church of Christ.

In our current era and time, who might be those categories of people that might qualify as “tax collectors” and “sinners” whom Jesus was associating with during His ministry? How about religions, cultures, and nations that don’t recognize Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of the world? The Great Commission of making disciples of all nations certainly is our Lord’s endorsement of associating with non-believers, which, hopefully will lead them not only to having an eternal relationship with Christ, but to unity with all other believers throughout the world.

Now you know the difference and relationship between the unity of the body of Christ and our association with those yet to find Christ as their Savior.



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