

Johannine Oneness and Pauline Union

A Case for Conceptual Similarity

JONATHAN WRIGHT

In my dissertation I compare the theological themes of Johannine oneness with Pauline union for the purpose of a canonical reading of Christian Scripture. Because of the theological similarities found within John’s Gospel and Paul’s letters (sharing similar cultural and theological backgrounds, the use of the adjective “one” [εἷς, μίᾱ, ἓν], a grammatical “connective formula,” the role of sanctification, and discussions of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit), this study suggests that Johannine oneness refers to the same reality as Pauline union.

Considering scholars such as Wilhelm Bousset or Richard Bauckham wishing to keep these two bodies of work separate in their presentations of oneness/union, my dissertation proposes a reading that draws them together. Instead of explaining their textual similarities as incidental or unimportant, the unity demonstrated in their discussions of oneness/union points to a conceptual harmony—that John and Paul, in their own ways, spoke of the same reality of oneness/union with God.¹

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After I explain my rationale and method in Chapter 1, in Chapter 2 I overview the development of the theme of oneness/union in both John's Gospel and Paul's letters. I offer two conclusions from this survey: (1) no discussions of oneness/union have been directly tackled that compare John's Gospel with Paul's letters, and yet (2) many interpreters have read John and Paul for their theological formulations of oneness and union. In short, similar topics are recognized in both authors but they have yet to be compared. Enter my dissertation.

I go back in time in Chapter 3 to the possible textual and cultural influences that shaped the authors John and Paul. Since I sought to compare two individual authors on their own terms, in this chapter I questioned *in what ways* they were both influenced. Namely, the task was to uncover where the notion of oneness/union originated. To start, I examined the topic of human and divine oneness in the cultures of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Israel/Judah. From the archaeological evidence of the cults of these nation's religions, each one of them held to the belief that humans can partake in some level of divinity. Giving special attention to ancient Judaism, Jewish texts (Exod 32, 33:20; Deut 4:12; 1 Kgs 8:30; Isa 6:1–2; Ps 89:7; Job 1:6; Ps 86, 115, Jer 2:5, 1 En 99:8–9; *Targum Onqelos; The Life of Adam and Eve* 14:1–2) reveal that Yahweh could be one with humans in ancient Jewish belief—which shaped both Paul and John. Even outside Judaism (such as in Philo of Alexandria's writings or the deification and worship of Greco-Roman emperors) humans partaking in divinity was not a new reality. Understanding these cultural and religious backgrounds shows that the oneness/union language that made its way into the writings of John and Paul pointed to the true way humans could be connected to divinity.

In Chapter 4 I begin a textual comparative search through John's Gospel and Paul's letters for a oneness/union “grammar”—i.e., ways in which Paul and John describe oneness/union (as a spiritual relational reality) similarly. In the texts of John 10:16; 17:11b, 20–23; Eph 2:11–22; 1 Cor 12:11–14 the term “one” (the adjective ἓῖς, μία, ἓν) appears in the context of a relational oneness/union between God and humanity. I argue that both John and Paul use a type of oneness/union grammar similarly in the way that they wield the adjective

“one” (εἷς, μία, ἓν) to describe a spiritual relational unity. In each occurrence, the adjective “one” (εἷς, μία, ἓν) describes a spiritual relational reality that originates in the ontology of God Himself. Believers are one both with God and each other since they are indwelt with the same Spirit—the same God who is Himself a united Trinity. Even though John and Paul use different metaphors (sheep, a temple, and a body), they share a similar grammar of oneness/union, as seen in their use of the adjective “one” (εἷς, μία, ἓν).

I continue the search for more similarities in Chapter 5. Both authors at times describe the reality of the believer as being “in” (ἐν) God (e.g., “remain in [ἐν] me” [John 15:4] or “because of him you are in [ἐν] Christ Jesus” [1 Cor 1:30]). I term this grammatical phenomenon the “connective formula.” Three traits define this formula: (1) humans must be the stated or implied subject, (2) God serves as the object, and (3) ἐν connects the two referents. My thesis, then, is that both Paul and John use the “connective formula” in similar ways—namely to express the spiritual *sphere* in which believers exist. I suggest that John and Paul preferred to use ἐν with a locative nuance because in His earthly mission, Jesus unites the spaces of heaven and of earth. This unification is what believers are to see themselves as swept into—they are dually located—existing *in* both the world and *in* Christ.

I argue in Chapter 6 that both John and Paul refer to sanctification similarly—bringing together the concepts of Jewish ritual cultic purification and inward moral conformity to Jesus’ life. Only oneness/union with Jesus can bring about sanctification because a believer is both positionally made holy and spiritually empowered to grow in holiness. By demonstrating the overlapping vocabulary between John and Paul within the topic of holiness/sanctification (holy [ἁγίος/ἅγιος] and profane/common [ἕτερος/κοινός or βέβηλος], and pure/clean [ἁγνός/καθαρός] and impure [ἄκαθαρτος/ἀκάθαρτος]) and identifying similar conceptions of sanctification (indicative to imperative [John 13:35; 15:3–4; Rom 6; Col 3:1–5] and washing imagery [καθαρός]), I conclude that John and Paul conceive of sanctification similarly (particularly in bringing together ritual purity and moral transformation).

Finally, in Chapter 7 I investigate one final similarity. Both authors speak of the Holy Spirit as the indwelling presence who creates and sustains oneness/

union. The evidence of oneness/union between God and believers is accomplished and sustained by the Spirit to fulfil mission—a reality that is strongly attested to in John's Gospel and Paul's letters. I conclude with some suggestions for further research.

Therefore, through these textual and theological similarities in oneness/union grammar, sanctification, and the role of the Holy Spirit, Johannine oneness refers to the same reality as Pauline union.

Jonathan Wright is an associate pastor at First Baptist Church of Lake Butler in Lake Butler, Florida and a member of the Kenwood Network. His passion is helping people know God through His word. He is married to Connie, and they have two redheads, Byron and Hazel. Outside of pastoring, you can find him hanging with his family, reading, or pretending to be good at golf.