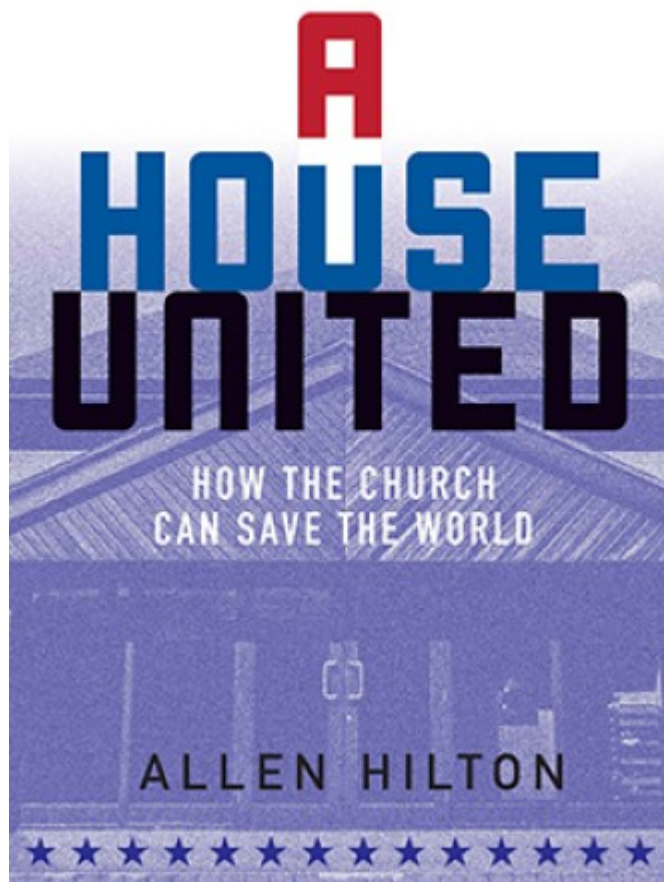


Baby steps toward Christian unity

Allen Hilton profiles churches that are uniting people across ideological differences.

by [Tim Brown](#) in the [March 13, 2019](#) issue

In Review



A House United

How the Church Can Save the World

By Allen Hilton

Fortress

If you attend church more than casually, one of two scenarios is likely true. The first is this: when you look around on a Sunday morning, you know that you and your fellow pew-sitters are, for the most part, ideologically homogeneous. Perhaps this brings you some sort of comfort. Perhaps it gnaws a bit at your spirit, as if something is missing. Or perhaps you don't think about it at all—because we've all found our camps in most areas of our lives these days.

The other scenario is this: when you look around on a Sunday morning, you know that you're in a mixed bag of ideologies, and that bag is a bit unsettled these days. Families are leaving the fold, or there are whispers alluding to their impending departure. You wait with anxiety as the sermon starts, wondering if the latest headlines will weave their way through the homily after the opening joke. You squirm a bit.

Allen Hilton challenges readers to consider the consequences of these two realities. Hilton, who comes from an evangelical background, knows the tension of living between ideologies. He has done so for much of his life. As the United States distills each "us" and "them" into the lowest common denominator, *A House United* calls Christians to take seriously Paul's claim that in Christ there is no "them." There is only "us."

Although the church in its unity may not exactly be unified in thought, there is something missing when a portion of the body is cut off from the rest of the body. Hilton believes that the pain that we feel in the pews, whether it's the gnawing sense that something is missing when there is little ideological diversity or the uncomfortable squirm because diverging ideologies are at war in the parking lot, is a call to action. He believes that the church can and should model for the world God's dream in which all people are united by Christ.

Moving back and forth between the politics of the state and the politics of denominational separation, Hilton makes the slow and steady case that differing ideologies need one another to be whole. It's tempting to separate along party or denominational lines. "But what if we need 'them,'" he writes. "What if there are things a liberal doesn't know that a conservative just gets? What if a progressive could bring just the right challenge to a theologically traditional assumption?"

This is, I have to admit, an attractive way of viewing differing viewpoints, and it is where the book succeeds most. Using multiple examples, the author provides case studies of churches on opposite sides of theological and ideological divides working together on a project for the common good or showing unexpected hospitality to the stranger in their midst. Hilton writes about a Southern Baptist church in Houston joining in mission with the gay-affirming Cathedral of Hope to build schools on the U.S.-Mexico border. He shares the testimony of Eric Elnes, a United Church of Christ pastor who leads a troupe of Christians from Scottsdale, Arizona, to Washington, D.C., to “bring visibility to progressive Christianity.” The group is welcomed by a theologically conservative church, where fundamentalists pray aloud for their progressive Christian guests.

Each of these examples mirrors the early church’s parting agreement, in which the factions of the apostles Peter and Paul agree to help the poor as a common goal and to disagree on all the rest (Gal. 2:10). (It’s no wonder that the church would eventually give Peter and Paul the same saint day: having begun the work of negotiating across ideological lines in life, they would now have all of eternity to continue to do so.)

I agree with Hilton. Churches that cannot bridge the ideological divide within their pews can certainly work together in the world. “Helping the poor” is not a lot to have in common, but in our era, it may have to be enough.

I wanted more from Hilton on the real danger that ideological differences pose to the livelihood of some. Stances on immigration, gay rights, and abortion all have theological roots. But they also have political and social consequences. It’s easy to build a house with someone who has a different view of the inerrancy of scripture. But what happens when the person you’re building a house with wants to deny you the right to marry? Hilton shies away from dealing with the shadow side of such ideological disagreements, other than to acknowledge that it’s not easy to do so, which is a massive understatement.

A House United is well written and is a worthwhile read, especially for people and churches that find themselves in ideologically diverse congregations. Hilton’s perspective may help congregations make the case for staying together despite ideological differences, and it can surely slow the great sifting of perspectives that is happening in every corner of society today. But if the church is going to save the world, we’re going to have to find more unity than just serving the poor.