

Ephesians 4:1-6: walking worthy by pursuing unity in the local church

OUTLINE

The call to unity
The grounds of unity

INTRODUCTION

Today is a baptismal service and we have the joy of hearing about the work of God's grace in the lives of these believers and see them added to the visible church through the sacrament of baptism. Baptism is a command of the Lord Jesus where every one who takes Him as Lord and Saviour outwardly marks themselves as belonging to Him and His people through baptism. Baptism marks you as intimately connected to Christ, but not only to Christ to His people as well. The text we will be considering this morning talks about the connection between baptism and Christ and His people. In Ephesians 4 Paul enters into a new section in the letter to the Ephesians. He has just spent 3 chapters talking about the glorious truths of the gospel in how God has saved us. But because all doctrine is practical Paul now enters into the application part of his letter. Because God's work of grace is not only about us getting saved and believing a number of truths, but must also translate into a changed life and good works to glorify God, Paul moves into talking about the Christian life. V1, 'I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.' Paul has been speaking under his authority as an apostle, here he doubles up by adding his experience as a prisoner for the sake of Christ. They say you should not ignore those who have suffered much for their faith because they have proven that they are not self-interested but seeking God's glory; Paul is calling for our attention to what he is about to say. The overarching idea for the rest of the practical part of this letter can be summarized as him urging us 'to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.' You have been called by God into a great salvation. This call is from eternity past; this call was at the cost of the blood of the God-man; this call was by the power of the Holy Spirit raising us with Christ; this call is from the deadness of our sin, from the guilt of our sin, and from the condemnation that would have spelled eternal suffering. It is a call from sin into holiness, from the degrading, self-destructive way we were being human to being renewed in His image, from slavery to freedom, from being controlled by hate and lust and selfishness to being driven by love, a self-control and servanthood. Walking worthy of this calling does not mean trying to earn it, we cannot it is a free gift, but by living up to it. It is a call to be the new person you can be by the power of God, to not contradict God's work by walking in your old ways, but by being the new person you can be with God's help.

Paul maps out what the new walk of a new humanity should look like. He begins with the topic of church unity. The ancient world was filled with divisions and tensions. Slave and free, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, educated or not, roman citizen or not, male and female, etc. all the usual things that divide us today—political, religious, ideological, generational, you name it. Paul reminds us of our salvation and our identity so that we would be what God is calling us to be, a new or rather, renewed humanity. Where we see the undoing of the divisions that sin causes. We will see that baptism does not only mark you as renewed but as also part of the body, this group of people, the church.

As you look down at chapter 4 you will see various parts, v1-6 deals with our unity; v7-10 deals with the diversity of our spiritual gifts; v11-16 deal with the purpose of the gifts, in particular the teaching gifts to bring about maturity, and v17 onwards deals with our purity personal, relational and with the world. Our focus today is on v1-6 where we see Paul doing two things, he calls us to be united, spelling out some of the essential things we need to do that; and then he motivates our unity reminding us of all the ways in which we are one. So our two points are the call to unity, the grounds of unity.

The call to unity

V2-3, 'with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.' The Holy Spirit creates our unity, we do not. No institutional oneness can create the spiritual oneness that Paul talks about here. We do not make our unity but we do maintain it, it can be healthy or sick, we can be consistent with it or deny it. Paul talks about 6 things that are necessary to maintaining our unity. Firstly, 'with all humility.' The lowliness that Paul calls for here was not held in high regard by Greek culture, it was understood to be a servile submissiveness. But for the Christian humility is defined by Christ who is King of the universe taking the form of a servant and serving unto death for His enemies because of His love and goodness not out of some insecurity or need. If the holy King thought that service to human beings was not too low a thing, how can we who are sinners not be willing to serve other sinners like ourselves. With a proper understanding of our sinfulness and the holiness of God the foundations for true humility are set. Without humility there can be no unity. If any of us think ourselves better or more important, and that others are not good enough to be a part of us, this destroys unity.

Secondly, 'and gentleness.' Paul may be tapping into the Aristotelian understanding of this. Gentleness/meekness was viewed not as weakness but strength under control, like a domesticated animal whose strength was turned to pulling the plow. The church is not a collection of weaklings but those who use their strength to serve not to subjugate. Christ was meek/gentle and lowly/humble, and these are the first two essentials to maintaining unity. to treat with each other as Christ treated with us. In this way we welcome one another as Christ welcomes us.

Thirdly, 'with patience.' Longsuffering is the key here. After being inconvenienced and in pain for a long period of time you still have not reached the end of your rope but continue steadfast in fellowship and loving service. Some will put up with one slight but not more than one. Any long term relationship with another sinner who will inevitably hurt you must involve patience, without it the relationship could not survive. I love how Paul describes love in 1 Cor. 13:4, 'Love is patient and kind.' The 'and kind' part reminds us that after suffering long we are not a grouch but still being kind. As with humility and gentleness we are able to do these things because God has done them for us, and empowers us to follow His example towards others.

Fourthly, 'bearing with one another.' In the body of Christ it is not only the leaders who are patient with the congregation or the strong with the weak, it is a two way relationship and a two way tolerance. We all have to put up with each other. We are all weak, we are all sinners, we are all different and we are all going to rub one another up the wrong way. Church does not exist for one

personality type or one race or one set of preferences. Whether it is the style of the worship, the colour of the paint, the way people dress, the type of coffee that is served, the church should be known as a place where we tolerate each other not where we complain and seek our own personal preferences in all things.

Fifthly, 'in love.' Love which covers a multitude of sins, that goes the extra mile and turns the other cheek, love that is patient and kind, that does not envy or boast, that is not arrogant or rude, that does not insist on its own way, which is not irritable or resentful, which does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth, which bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things. This is the love Paul has in mind, it is the love that God has had toward us and should characterize all our dealings with one another. Love is fitting to our identity as being children of God, love is fitting for those who have been saved from sin into selfless service, love is fitting for those who are now family to one another. This is why Paul calls us to eagerly maintain the unity we have by the Spirit, love which sums up all of what Paul has just said is the most fitting way.

Sixthly, we are to be 'eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit.' Some are eager to express their own opinion, to have their preferences satisfied, counting selfishly what is theirs above the unity and peace of the church. We should have a passion as Christ does, as Paul does, to be one with the church and to see our oneness healthy, flourishing and the witness by which the world knows we are the disciples of Christ. Every Christian should have not only a love for Christ but for His body as well.

Are you humble, gentle, patient, bearing with one another, loving and eager to maintain church unity? Are you being part of the solution or the problem?

The grounds of unity

V4-6, 'There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.' Why should Jew and Gentile see one another as a Christian before their nationality? Why should black folk and white folk see one another as brothers and sisters in Christ before any identification by the color of their skin? How can rich and poor, slave and free, male and female, see each other as equals and family? Paul puts forward the theological realities that explain our unity. ⁷ times Paul repeats the word 'one' which describe 8 gospel realities that unite us. The best way to understand this list is from a Trinitarian perspective. The first three, being one body, having one Spirit, having been called by the Spirit to one hope all describe a common Spirit wrought experience. The second three, one Lord, one faith, one baptism all center on the Son; and being saved to have one God and one Father of course focuses us upon the Father. All of the things on this list have to do with what happens when you get saved. You will notice that Paul does not talk about 'one table' referring to the Lord's table, or our 'one mission' because he is emphasizing what happens when we get saved rather than the common Christian life and experience after salvation. Paul goes on then to describe what every Christian has in common, what makes them one and why they should pursue unity.

'one body and one Spirit'. These are likely intended to be taken together. You have a body and one spirit, so does Jesus. This is a common description by Paul

of the church. Where the picture of a bride puts front and center the idea of the church's purity; the picture of sheep stresses the Lord's care for us as our Shepherd. The picture of the church as a body is specifically used to emphasize unity. Many parts but one whole. Jews and Gentiles are saved to make one new man, one body, Eph. 2:16. And of course we become one body by the One Spirit. There is not a Holy Spirit for Greeks and a different one for Romans, there is only one Spirit who works in all. Now here we have an important connection. Who is part of the body of Christ? Only those who have been added by the one Spirit to the one body. Paul says as much in 1 Cor. 12:13, 'For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.' Salvation is described as being baptized in the Spirit into the church of Christ. Water baptism which is the outward sign of this inward reality is the visible sign that adds you to the visible church. There are many who do not have the Spirit who have been baptized as infants who are considered part of the church. We are added to the body of Christ by the Spirit this is why water baptism as the outward sign of this inward reality should only be applied to those who are truly one with Christ.

'just as you were called to one hope that belongs to your call.' Paul here, as in Rom. 8:30 links the elects effectual calling with their glorification, their hope. All true believers are effectually called by the Spirit into one body; and all true believers share a common hope, the new heavens and the new earth. Some older forms of dispensationalism taught that Jews and Gentiles will be separate forever they are wrong. The JW's who teach that the 144000 have a different destiny to the rest of the believers are wrong. All unworthy sinners saved by God's free grace in Christ through faith all receive the inheritance of the NHNE. It is only those who are one with Christ by the Spirit who have heard His voice and answered with faith who have this hope.

'One Lord, one faith, one baptism.' Many commentators take these 3 statements as making up a whole which had to do with a common experience of becoming a Christian and a common belief. Becoming a Christian in the first century consisted of calling upon the name of Christ as Lord, subscribing to the faith of Christians and openly identifying with Christ in baptism. All Christians follow the single King Christ, all citizens in His kingdom, following His rule, under His protection. The word faith here refers to the creed/the faith that we believe. In other words, something like the Apostle's Creed would make up every believer's faith: 'I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic* church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

And we are all added to the church by one baptism. Please note that Paul assumes all believers to be baptized as well as part of the church. Unchurched believers and unbaptized believers were not the norm in the early church as they are today. When Paul says there is one baptism he is not entering into the debates about whether someone can be rebaptized. Paul's comment is not remarking on the frequency of baptism but the inclusiveness. There is one baptism for Gentiles and one for Jews, there are not two different baptisms. As credo Baptists we do not see someone being baptized as an infant as a legitimate baptism and do not think that we are re-baptising, plus, this verse cannot be used against us as if we were violating a clear command of scripture. Paul's comments are about inclusiveness not frequency. If Jesus is your Lord, and you confess the Christian faith, then you should also be baptized.

'one God and father of all who is over all, and through, and in all.' All believers, even if they are in different denominations all worship the one God, and all have God as their Father. Once again we must stress that it is only those who are born again, who have received the Holy Spirit, who have confessed faith in Christ who have the right to call God Father.

Today as we baptize these candidates we are saying of them what Paul says about all true believers. You are one with Jesus and His body by the Spirit. You have been called by the mighty power of God out of darkness into His marvelous light. You have an inheritance kept undefiled for you. You have God as your Father and He is over all things for you, works by His Spirit in the gifts He has given, through you; and abides by His Spirit in you, making a temple of you. Today you show outwardly what is true inwardly that you have confessed Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, you are confessing your faith, and you are being baptized by water into the local church, just as you were baptized by the Spirit into the universal church. The act of being baptized is a visible word to us. It speaks to us of our union with Christ in His death and resurrection. This watery grave speaks about the fact that He has taken our judgement and been raised to new life for us. It speaks of our incorporation into the visible church as the Spirit has already incorporated us when we believed into the invisible church. It speaks of the washing away of our sins, the death of our old lives, a new beginning, and a future resurrection from the dead. Allow the truth that God intends to minister to your hearts as you watch and participate in these baptisms.