

Unity and Diversity in the Body of Christ

Ephesians 4:1-16

Key Verse: 4:3

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

Chapter 4 marks a turning point in Ephesians from doctrine to application. In chapters 1-3, Apostle Paul explained that God created a new humanity, that is, the church, through Christ who is our peace. God has a vision for his church that all believers may become one in Christ and reveal his manifold wisdom. In chapters 4-6, Paul teaches us how to realize this vision practically. It is by living in unity in the church, and in the Christian household. It is worth noting that personal spiritual development, while important, is not the main point. Living in Christian unity is the focus. Our Western world has a tendency toward individualism. Individualism has its strong point: it fosters an independent spirit and diversity. Yet it also has a weak point of ignoring unity and tending toward isolation. In God’s church, unity and diversity go together. They cannot be separated; there is diversity within unity. Unity is essential and it expresses God’s vision and purpose for the church. We see this in Jesus’ prayer to the Father for all believers to be one, as he and the Father are one (Jn 17:21). This passage urges us to strive for unity and to appreciate diversity in the body of Christ. May we all learn to live our diversity in the unity of the Spirit.

First, “...keep the unity of the Spirit...” (1-6).

Verses 1-3 tell us how to live a life worthy of God's calling. Look at verse 1. **“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.”** In this verse the word “calling” is very important. The church is made up of people called out of the world to belong to God. The church is not merely a gathering of people who share the same interests. Rather, it is a community brought together by God for his purpose. God calls the church into being. Paul never imagined that he would be a prisoner for the Lord, but he was, because God called him. In the same way, each member of the Ephesian Church was called by God. So Paul urged them to live a life worthy of the calling they had received.

Paul explains how to do this in verses 2-3: **“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”** In the original Greek this is all one sentence, and the central idea is keeping the unity of the Spirit through the

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bond of peace. We did not create this unity. God created this unity through Jesus who became our peace. Through his death on the cross, Jesus destroys the dividing walls of hostility to make us one in him. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in us and among us to maintain this unity. So we should cooperate with the Spirit in keeping this unity. It requires effort, for we are naturally nonchalant and indifferent due to our sinful nature. We must make every effort, that is, do everything we can, to keep the unity of the Spirit. Unity must be a priority. Of course, we hope to do many things: raise disciples of Christ among college students, send missionaries, pioneer campuses, establish godly Christian homes, bring relief to suffering people, and so on. Yet even though these things are done, if we lose unity, the church cannot stand. We must keep the unity of the Spirit as a first priority.

The question is, how can we keep the unity of the Spirit practically? Verse 2 says by being completely humble and gentle, patient, and forbearing in love (2). Humility is mentioned first. A couple months ago, Neil Armstrong passed away. He was the first man to walk on the moon, and uttered the famous words, “One small step for man; one giant leap for mankind.” He was remembered for respecting the thousands of nameless coworkers who supported the moon landing. Two years after walking on the moon he retired, and did not once try to exploit his privilege for his own benefit. He was a humble man. Most of all, we learn humility from Jesus. In Luke 22:27 Jesus said, **“For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.”** The night Jesus was betrayed was very stressful. Satan attacked, yet his unaware disciples were competing to be number one. In their pride and indifference, they ignored the fact that their feet were all dirty. Then Jesus began to wash his disciples’ feet one by one, even the feet of Judas. And he told his disciples to follow his example (Jn 13:14-15). Humility is essential for unity. Behind division and conflict there is usually pride. Most arguments that divide churches are not merely about doctrine, but the result of pride. On the other hand, humility fosters unity. The words **“Be completely humble...”** mean to be humble through and through without any element of sinful pride. How can we be completely humble? It seems to be impossible. But when we simply acknowledge our sinful pride to Jesus and ask him to dwell in us, he comes in and imparts his humility to us. So Paul boldly told the Philippians: **“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death--even death on a cross!”** (Php 2:6-8)

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We should also be gentle. In Greek, gentleness was understood as taming an animal. Though strong and wild, the animal learned to restrain its behavior and become obedient. Gentleness is not weakness. The gentle are strong in their inner being, yet tender toward others, especially in the use of authority. Gentleness describes the character of Jesus, who said, **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls”** (Mt 11:28-29).

Patience is to endure others’ bad behavior in the hope that they will improve. God is patient with us, enduring our wrongdoing without punishing us as we deserve. God does so in the hope that we will repent (Ro 2:4). In the same way we should be patient with others. If we become impatient and angry we can hurt others and destroy the unity of the church. In explaining love, Paul first said, “Love is patient” (1 Cor 13:4). We need to be patient without limit though it means we die to ourselves. To bear with others is to endure their weak points without judging or condemning them. We cannot practice Christ’s virtues in our own strength. But when we acknowledge our need simply, Christ comes into our hearts and enables us to imitate him.

In verses 4-6, Paul explains the basis of our unity in relation to the Triune God. In these verses, the word “one” appears seven times. Three times it refers to the Triune God himself; four times it refers to our experience of God. Verse 4a says, **“There is one body and one Spirit...”** This one body is the church (1 Cor 12:13). Verse 4b-5 say, **“...just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism....”** One hope, one faith and one baptism relate us to the one Lord, Jesus Christ. Our one hope is living hope in the kingdom of God (1 Pe 1:3). Our one faith is in Jesus Christ our Lord who saves us and reigns over us. Our one baptism is the confession of this faith. When we listen to the testimonies of believers, although there is diversity of experience, we can usually find the same faith and hope. Verse 6 says, **“...one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”** God is the Father of all Christians. He is the Sovereign Ruler of all. He is almighty, everywhere present, and all knowing. He is working in us and among us and through us. So we can say the one Father creates the one family, the one Lord creates the one faith, hope and baptism, and the one Spirit creates the one body. The church was instituted by the Triune God, and it is governed by the Triune God. As the Triune God cannot be divided, so the church must not be divided.

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In speaking of unity and diversity within the Trinity, C.S. Lewis said, “In Christianity God is not an impersonal thing nor a static thing--not even just one person--but a dynamic pulsating activity, a life, a kind of drama, almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance...[The] pattern of this three-personal life is...the great fountain of energy and beauty spurting up at the very center of reality.” In commenting on this, Tim Keller further adds, “The inner life of the Triune God...is characterized...by mutually self-giving love...That creates a dance, particularly if there are three persons, each of whom moves around the other two...Each voluntarily circles the other two, pouring love, delight and adoration into them. Each person of the Trinity loves, adores, defers to, and rejoices in the others. That creates a dynamic, pulsating dance of joy and love.” Here we can see that the unity within the Trinity is a dynamic and active unity of love. This kind of unity in love should characterize the church. As we live in relation to the Triune God, both personally and in community, let’s pray that we may be united in love.

II. Diversity and Maturity (7-16)

When we hear the word “unity,” we can easily imagine a uniformity in which each person seems just like others in terms of appearance, speech, and manner. We may think of Christian discipleship as mass production, as in a factory. However, verse 7 says, **“But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.”** With this verse, Paul introduces the diversity within the body of Christ. The church is an interesting place. It is because people are so different in regards to culture, character, and especially the gifts of grace given by Christ. Not even one person among us is just like another. Each one of us is unique, and each one of us has at least one gift. Someone might think, “I don't have any gift from God.” But verse 7 says that to each one of us grace has been given. We each have gifts from God. We must find our gifts, develop them and use them for the glory of God to build up the body of Christ. We should not sit back waiting to be appointed, but use our gifts voluntarily. The gifts of grace are given freely by Christ to each one of us. We have nothing to boast about and should not compare our gifts with those of others. Dr. Billy Graham was once asked if his reward from God would be greater than others’ in light of his achievements as an evangelist. He replied that a janitor friend who faithfully did his duty would receive the same reward as he. He understands that his gift from God is pure grace.

In verses 8-10 Paul explains how Christ gained the right to give gifts to his people. Paul quotes Psalm 68:18 calling to mind God’s descent to Mount Sinai. It was a celebration of God’s victory over his enemies and the redemption of his people. In ancient times, victors received spoils of war from the vanquished foes

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and distributed them to their friends and allies. Christ, who descended to the lowest place, was exalted to the highest place. Through his death and resurrection he destroyed all of God's enemies and reigns supreme. He pours out the Holy Spirit upon the church. Acts 2:33 says, **“Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.”**

The victorious Christ is the source of all spiritual gifts to his church. Verse 11 says, **“So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers....”** This description is unique compared to other passages that deal with spiritual gifts (Ro 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:7-11; 1 Pe 4:10-11). Instead of an inventory of gifts, Paul describes them in terms of the ones who received them. Apostles and prophets witnessed the Risen Jesus in history. Evangelists preach the gospel to the ends of the earth. Pastors and teachers feed God's people with the words of God. Paul's focus is not so much on the gift, but on the purpose of the Giver. Let's read verses 12-13. **“...to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”** The purpose of Christ's gifts is to serve God's people and build up the body of Christ. Those who use their gifts to show off, or gain personal benefit, are misusing them and will have to give an account to God at the last day. Those who never use their gifts, due to fear or laziness, will also have to give an account, like the servant who hid his talent in the ground (Mt 25:14-30). On the other hand, those who use their gifts to build up the body of Christ will be rewarded by God. The goal of exercising spiritual gifts is that we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature. In other words, we should all become like Jesus, and attain the unity that comes from knowing, trusting and growing in him.

In verses 14-16 Paul contrasts spiritual infants with the mature in order to encourage us to grow in Christ. Spiritual infants do not let the truth take deep root in their hearts and they lack spiritual discernment (14). So they are easily led astray after human ideas and false teachings. They are vulnerable to deceivers who want to use them for their own benefit. On the other hand, the mature are characterized by speaking the truth in love (15a). They are deeply rooted in the truth and in love. So when they open their mouths, words of truth come out with love. If we speak the truth without love we can hurt others and cause division. If we love without the truth we can spoil others. But when we speak the truth with love we can all grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ (15b). In verse 16 Paul tells us how the body of Christ grows. Christ is the source

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of all things the body needs and each member is related both to Christ and to the body of Christ. When each member does its work, the whole body grows and builds itself up in love. In this way the church becomes healthy and strong.

In today's passage we learned the importance of unity in the body of Christ. This unity comes from God and we are urged to keep this unity. We have learned that humility and love are essential virtues for us to practice in order to keep this unity. In regard to humility, Paul said in Romans 12:3, **"...Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you."** With sober judgment, each of us should find and use our gift, whether small or great, to build up the body of Christ. We can learn one thing from ants. Ants form colonies with divisions of labor. They can communicate with each other and have the ability to solve complex problems. Without any strong central organization, they form castes of workers, soldiers, and other specialists. Up close, they may look foolish. Two ants may pull a twig in opposite directions for hours, neither one yielding or knowing what they are doing. Yet when we step back and see the whole picture, we find them operating as a unit, collectively working together to support the colony. Like the ants, when each of us is humble and diligent in exercising our gifts properly, God can build up great work through us.

The greatest virtue for us to practice is love. The words "in love" are repeated three times in this passage (2,15-16). The love of Christ is crucial in binding the body together to work well. That is why Paul said in Colossians 3:14, **"And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."** We can find an example in history from the Moravians. In 1722, a small group of Bohemian Brethren, who had been persecuted for their faith, settled on the estate of Count Zinzendorf. They all came from different backgrounds and after a few years disagreements arose until they were divided into warring factions. Count Zinzendorf worked to bring about unity. Then, on August 13, 1727 an amazing thing happened. As they came together to celebrate communion, repenting their sins, the Holy Spirit came upon them. They began to love one another genuinely. They began to pray earnestly for the salvation of the lost. They sent out more than 3,000 lay missionaries to the nations of the world. It was the beginning of the lay mission movement in history. When they loved one another they could be united and were used greatly by God, beyond what they could have imagined. Let's humble ourselves, love one another and pray for unity in the body of Christ so that God may use us greatly.