

THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT

Ephesians 4:1–6

Key Verse: 4:3

“...eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

What are you eager for? Sometimes we're eager to take a break. Sometimes we're eager to eat. Sometimes we're eager for a little entertainment. But frankly, it's not so common to be eager to maintain unity in our church. Sadly, we often have to be forced to do it, and even then we do just the bare minimum. Yet Apostle Paul exhorts us today to be eager to maintain this unity. What is church unity? What is its nature, and where does it come from? What does it mean to be eager to maintain it? Why should we? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

In Ephesians, Paul's main theme is the unity of the church (2:14–16,18; 4:3–6,13). In the first half of the letter he shares the gospel truths behind this unity. Knowing that in Christ we have every spiritual blessing unites us (1:1–14). Knowing God better through the Spirit unites us (1:15–23). Being made alive by the grace of Christ unites us (2:1–10). Coming near the cross of Christ unites us (2:11–22). Knowing that the mystery of Christ is the will of God unites us (3:1–13). Comprehending the greatness of Christ's love unites us (3:14–21). Now in the second half of the letter Paul challenges us to live out this unity, repeating the word “walk” (4:1,17; 5:2,8,15). To walk in unity we need to be growing in the character of Christ and focus on what unites us (4:1–6). To walk in unity we need to be using our God-given gifts to build each other up (4:7–16). To walk in unity we need to put off our old self and put on our new self (4:17–32). To walk in unity we need to be walking in Christ's love and in his light (5:1–20). To walk in unity we need to be submitting to each other as to the Lord (5:21–6:9). To walk in unity we need to be putting on the full armor of God (6:10–20).

In 4:1 Paul says it all begins with our calling. Look at verse 1. Paul again mentions here that he's a prisoner for the Lord (cf. 3:1). Why? It's to remind us of his own commitment to this unity—he even went to prison for it! He's *that* obedient to Jesus. From such a place he says, “I urge you.” But he's not begging; the Greek word literally means, “I charge you.” Then he says, “...walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” What *is* this calling? The Bible teaches us that we're all “called” to belong not only to Christ but also to a local church (1Co1:2,9; Col3:15). In Ephesians, Paul calls the church Christ's “body” (1:22–23). In Christ's body in a local church we're reconciled to God and to each other (2:16). We're all “members of the same body,” Christ's body (3:6), and there's only “one body,” meaning not that we're the only church, but that we

need to be united (4:4). We need to do our best to build up this body (4:12,16) and recognize each other as a member of his body (5:30).

Since we're called to belong to a local church, a particular body of Christ, we need to be walking in a manner worthy of this calling. It's not just about having personal integrity; it also includes being aware of the body to which we've been called. For those of us who have an individualistic mindset, it's hard to grasp. But it's like being a member of a great team or family; we've got to represent them well by living in a worthy way. Living a life worthy of being called to Christ's body is not optional; it's essential.

Look at verse 2. Here Paul goes on to explain that the "worthy walk" has these core character traits: humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, love. But there are always people who won't take these words very seriously. Honestly, they think such behavior is weak. They'd rather confront, rebuke and train because it seems more powerful. But the traits Paul mentions in verse 2 are not just for those who have a certain personality. They are required behavior for anyone who has a genuine Christian calling. These core character traits point us to Jesus our Lord. He invites us: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Mt11:28–29). He's calling each of us to learn his gentle and lowly heart. 1 John 2:6 warns us: "...whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked." In Colossians, Apostle Paul says: "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, bearing with one another..." (Col3:12–13).

But to be honest, it's hard. Why? It's obvious. We're weak and sinful, and our brothers and sisters in Christ are also weak and sinful. It's easier to withdraw and keep a safe distance. It's easier to put up barriers that keep us from getting hurt or revealing our true selves. So Paul says the worthy walk starts with "all humility." This sounds intense, but basically it means not to walk around with a giant ego. It means to see ourselves as just "little ones," who need to repent and are unworthy of his grace. To have "all humility and gentleness" we need to repent of being harsh, cruel or indifferent. Paul adds that we need to be patient and bear with one another. Sometimes we might do these things with a self-righteous duty. So Paul says to do it "in love." It's unselfish love that seeks the best interests of others.

Look at verse 3. Here Paul states the goal in having all humility, gentleness, patience and forbearing—it's to live out this unity among us. In Greek the word for "eager" is actually "diligent" or "quick." "Maintain" is literally "guard." So "eager to maintain" can be translated as "quick to guard." Usually we're quick to guard ourselves. But here we're

told to be quick to guard “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” What does this mean? First of all, we need to realize that we don’t create this unity; it’s already given. Paul writes in 2:18: “For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.” Through faith in Jesus we’ve all been given access in the one Holy Spirit to our Father God. The core of our spiritual unity is the Spirit. In 2:22 Paul writes: “In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” It’s Jesus who builds us together as a place where God dwells by the Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 12:13 Paul writes: “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.” Though we can be so different from each other, we’re brought into real spiritual unity through the one Spirit. So unity is the Spirit’s work. We need to be quick to guard it. We need to deeply acknowledge and respect the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in each one of us. Our Lord Jesus warned us never to blaspheme against the work of the Holy Spirit (Mk3:29).

At the end of verse 3 Paul adds, “...in the bond of peace.” This is the other element of our unity: peace. Where did this peace come from? Paul describes it in chapter 2. We sinful human beings create various dividing walls of hostility among us. But Jesus himself is our peace. When he died on the cross, he broke down all these walls in his own body. He reconciled us all in his one body through the cross; when he died, he killed the hostility between us. He preached peace to those who were far off and peace to those who were near (2:14–17). Again, we don’t create this peace; Jesus gives it to us. But we have to take care of it diligently. The word “bond” is also important. Paul uses this same word in Colossians to describe the ligaments that hold our bones together (Col2:19). Ligaments in our bodies are very important; if they get damaged, they’re not easy to restore. Likewise, Christ’s peace binds us. It’s a bond of peace between Christians that’s even stronger and deeper than human family ties. We may be quick to guard our human family members, but we need to be even quicker to guard the bond of peace we have with fellow believers.

The reality is, however, that in church we experience various conflicts. Usually they’re a mixture of both good and bad, so they’re hard to deal with. We speak passionately about what we think is important, and others do the same. As we listen, we can become afraid or misunderstand. Mixed in, we’re unaware of elements of our own pride, ambition, jealousy, or even racism. With these, we hurt each other. With all this going on, how can we be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace? We really need God’s help.

So Paul helps us focus on what unites us. Read verse 4. We’ve already talked about the one body and the one Spirit. But Paul says more here. What is it? In Greek he literally says, “...just as you were called to one hope that belongs to your call.” He’s talking

about the hope laid up for us in heaven (Col1:5; Ro8:24). No matter our differences, we're all called to this same hope. This beautiful truth helps us stop thinking of each other as enemies.

Paul goes on to something even more fundamental that unites us. Read verse 5. Our one Lord is our Lord Jesus Christ. He saved us from our sins through his death and gave us this living hope through his resurrection. Now we all belong to him; we all seek to obey and serve him as Lord. Paul adds that we all have "one faith," meaning we all share the same faith in his grace that saves us, not our works (2:8–9). And we all have "one baptism." It's the baptism into our Lord's death and resurrection. As Christians, we're all baptized into his death and resurrection, and this is the real source of our new life. It's our common experience.

Read verse 6. This seems to be the climax of our unity. We all share the same God and Father. Because he's our Father, we're all his children, and dear brothers and sisters to one another. He's the one who's sovereign over all of us. He's the one who's working through all of us. He's the one who's living in all of us. The one Spirit, the one Lord and the one Father are united as the Trinity, and this Triune God unites us as well.

Still, it can be so hard to be genuinely united with fellow believers in our local church. We may try to avoid resolving conflicts by getting together with people outside our church. Some emphasize being united with other Christians, but avoid relationships in their own fellowship or church ministry. Some enjoy being contradictory or contrary and opposing others on every point. Some create conflict as a kind of recreation. Some become apathetic.

What should we do? Read verse 3 again. May God help us see the beautiful unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace that he's given us in our local church, the body of Lord Jesus Christ. May he make us eager to maintain this unity, and quick to guard it. May God help each one of us grow in all humility and gentleness, in patience and forbearance in love, so that we can walk worthy of our calling to this body.