

Foundation of a Unified Church

Ephesians 4:1-6

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

Introduction: This past week we participated in a conference that I’ve had the privilege of attending for over 20 years (with a couple missing years in between – it’s kind of like Disneyland for pastors: snacks, giveaways, long lines, and interesting characters without all the liberal underpinnings) About 14 men from this church attended the Shepherd’s Conference at Grace Community Church in Sun Valley and there were a few observations made this year.

- **Clarity in the Gospel is essential and helpful** – On Thursday night we sat under the preaching of Voddie Baucham who used Romans 1:16-17 to explain why we should never be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ because it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes (the last few minutes of which was worth the price of admission) Not everything is the gospel, though the gospel itself has many implications. When everything is the gospel (social justice, politics, etc) we can lose the taste of gospel ourselves. The gospel is what we cling to and proclaim the answer to the longing questions of a dying world, the power of God that brings sinners from judgment to sonship. The gospel is not something we needed at some point in the past but what we need everyday, since we continue to battle sin, cling to Christ, and walk by grace. The gospel is not something we talk about on the front end and never mention again. It is the marrow of worship, the energizer of our souls, and the righteousness of God. If we lose the gospel, we lose all. So, though we have many things to be involved in, the gospel is foremost in our life and ministry.
- **Preaching is foundational, not preferential** – A man named H.B. Charles preached and made this statement, *“Expository preaching is a view of Scripture, not a style of sermon...if you believe the Bible is the Word of God, why are you running all over the place to find something to say.”* I like that! We are committed to knowing, understanding, teaching, and living out the Word of God, and that should shape everything we do as a church. Almost every pastor I talked to that preaches God’s Word and seeks to shepherd the people God brings has grown over the years of the pandemic, and that is not a coincidence. What believers want is what everyone needs, to grow in our understanding of God in Christ through His Word. Our commitment to this is stronger than ever, and will only grow in the days to come.
- **Unity is powerful and possible** – One of the statements from one of our elders who experienced this conference for the first time was typical (of 1st timers) and hopeful. He said it was inspiring to see so many (3900) who were excited to hear good preaching and worship together. It’s fascinating to see the unity of thousands of pastors, from all size churches, from all around the world, each with unique backgrounds, experiences, circumstance, and cultural norms come together and sing, listen, and fellowship around the Word of God in one voice.

It is this last principle we will come back to this morning in terms of our text in Ephesians 4, the command and provision for unity in the church. A common question among pastors to each other is, *“how is your church doing?”*, but one of my friends asked if our church was **healthy**. I thought that was a fantastic question and one that should have an answer but is often hard to quantify. A healthy church is still going to have problems with sin, conflict, and struggle, since we are a banded group of redeemed sinners. But, a healthy church should be loving, effective, and unified so that we can move in the same direction, making disciples, worshipping, hoping, loving, and waking together. ***“The church is a society***

of pardoned rebels, a multiracial community in which Jews and Gentiles have been brought together in the unity of One Body.” (Peter T. O’Brien)

This morning we want to dive into the basis of that unity, how it’s possible that so many people from different walks of life can unite together for a common goal, through a common bond, with everything in common because of Christ.

A quick overview of Ephesians 4:1-16:

- 4:1-3 – The command given to be unified
- 4:4-6 – The basis or foundation for unity
- 4:7-14 – The gifts given by Christ to attain unity
- 4:15-16 – The goal of unity for the church

A Command to Be Distinctive (v. 1)

I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called....

Characteristics Necessary to Be Distinctive (2)

“With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love”

Paul then answers the question as to what is needed to walk worthy of our calling. **Four main characteristics** are imperative, each finding the strength and ability in “walking by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22-23) in which HE produces these in us and we act on them. Each of these is POSSIBLE because of new life in Christ, take CONSCIOUS EFFORT, and are NECESSARY for the maintenance of unity in the church.

ALL HUMILITY – In every commentary covering this verse, each had the same statement, that in the Graeco-Roman world, the prospect of humility was NOT a virtue to be sought after since it seemed to entail WEAKNESS. In our culture, it may not have such a negative connotation, but it seems like humility is something we like to see in someone ELSE, and we tend to reward the proud and the ones who are full of themselves (i.e. see anyone in Hollywood, entertainment, sports, etc).

Here humility truly means “lowliness”, and encapsulates a mindset and set of actions. *Humility is not thinking less of oneself but thinking of oneself less.* It is the lowliness of mind that our own Savior demonstrated, ***“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.”*** (Matt. 11:29). It is what every follower of Jesus takes on in their thinking and mentality, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves...***Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied Himself...***”(Phil. 2:3, 5-7). Pride kills unity since pride puts self at the top of the food chart and considers self the most important. Humility intentionally moves self to its proper place, where others are deemed more important with more value.

Humility is not weakness in how most deem weakness. When King David learned that God would establish his Kingdom and throne forever (2 Sam. 7:1-17), his response was, ***“Who am I, O LORD God, and what is my house that you have brought me thus far?”*** (2 Sam. 7:18). David was a mighty warrior, wise king, one whom people loved and followed, wise, and successful, yet he knew he was truly only worthy because God deemed it so. But, David did not grovel or get so introspective that he did not act. Instead, he acted and pointed everything BACK TO GOD, the person who truly deserved praise, ***“Therefore you are great, O LORD GOD. For there is none like you, and there is no God besides you,***

according to all that we have heard with our ears” (2 Sam. 7:22). The mindset of humility sees the greatness of God, the value of others, and thus works for the glory and best of both.

Gentleness – This is not a word that gets thrown around a lot, mostly because it is misunderstood. But, gentleness is produced by the Spirit Himself, so is inherently valuable and important. It is the opposite of roughness, and embodies *meekness*, which is power under control. Again, this is NOT weakness, but a willingness to waive our rights for the sake of others. William Barclay explained it this way, **“Gentleness is always angry at the right time and never angry at the wrong time.”** It is a conscious exercise of self-control, a choice NOT to exercise power for the purpose of retaliation against those that you can overcome. Moses is a great illustration of the balance of power and meekness, as he was known as the most meek man in the world (Num. 12:3) yet demonstrated wrath at the sight of ugly sin (Exodus 32).

To walk worthy means we walk gently together, treating each other like we should our own mothers, sisters, and daughters. It means that *how* we communicate and treat each other is important, not seeking to “win” arguments but demonstrating a willingness to listen, ask questions, and take genuine interest in others. It means not overreacting to misunderstandings, little slights, or the unintentional wrongs against us.

Patience – This is the idea of long-suffering, playing the long game with each other. It means that we tolerate and overlook difference and seek to prefer one another in love (Rom. 12:7). It is quick to be kind and tender hearted, always looking to **forgive one another as God in Christ forgave us** (Eph. 4:32). **1 Thessalonians 5:14** sums it up well, reminding that we must treat each other appropriately as fits the moment and situation, *“And we urge (parakaleo) you, brothers, admonish the idle (unruly), encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, but BE PATIENT WITH THEM ALL”*. In the church, we will deal with all kinds of people and situations, from outright sin, to the discouraged, and those simply weak in faith. There are good responses to each, since the discouraged don’t need a heavy hand and the unruly don’t need help, they need a strong hand! But, everyone needs patience. We are all in process, often learn slowly, and resist change at times. That is why we must have realistic expectations for all, and commit to walking with each other in the long term. It is also why we must bear with one another.

Bear with one another in love – This means conscious endurance that does not abandon hope, an endurance often of grief. It entails dealing with someone else’s sin, which is messy, and necessitates that deal with our own. **“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should RESTORE him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”** (Gal. 6:1-2). This is intertwined with patience, as we view others the way a good farmer looks at his crop. The farmer does not flip out when the plant hasn’t yet produced the full crop, but is willing to patiently tend, wait, and know that in time fruitfulness will come. It is viewing others through the lens of a mother and father (1 Thess. 2:7, 12). We don’t expect a 3 year old to act like an 18 year old (although sometimes a 15 year old will act like a 6 year old). As a parent, we are willing to put up with failure, disappointment, and slow development because we see the greater fruitfulness coming. All of these are covered, showered, and lavished with **love, love that is selfless, sacrificial, and points others to Christ.**

What does walking a worthy, distinctive life look like and take? It takes us denying self and following Christ with all we are. It means yielding to the Holy Spirit and the Word, so that we can live in counter-cultural ways. This is why discipleship, investing in purposeful relationships, is so essential to our growth and worship. Each of these characteristics involves deep and meaningful relationship with those that we love but are so different from us. We point each other to Christ, to live up to who we are, to endure,

to press on, and to fulfill our mission. And all of this results in something far greater than any one of us individually.

Consequence of Being Distinctive (3)

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

We were never called to be individuals alone, to live lives of solitude or isolation. We were called to fit perfectly in one Body called the church, each part fulfilling its purpose and role, moving together in harmony that creates a glorious song of praise to God. The church is at her best when we are committed to Christ and each other, loving Him with all our heart, mind, and soul and loving each other, so that we can make disciples of all nations. God takes all of these seeming disparate pieces and places them together so that we all ARE different but seek to accomplish the same thing, reaching a diverse range of people that make up the nations.

So, Paul builds on the characteristics of distinctiveness, and now calls the church to “eagerly, hastily, or urgently” maintaining unity among themselves, **making every effort to do so**. This means that this unity must be maintained VISIBLY, not pursuing a false unity that just keeps away from people or stays in cloisters. Unity is maintained when we pursue each other as we pursue Christ, humbly, gently, patiently, and lovingly working through our differences and hard interactions. Unity will not simply be automatic or easy, but it will take proactively, from a **passive observation to active and obedient interaction**. The bond that keep us together is PEACE, which is given to us by God in Christ. Christ purchased our freedom from sin and peace with God on the cross, so our unity already exists, and though we cannot create it, we surely can destroy it by seeking our own agendas, by focusing on what we want, and pursuing our own comfort.

*But what do we unify around? What is the peace that binds us together? How in the world can we be unified with every believer around the world and in this local church in particular? We are given **7 realities that are true of every believer, 7 unifying truths that not only clarify belief but allow us to be knit together, 7 bedrock teachings that some believe were a hymn or creed of the early church**. These are global realities that play out locally. Notice that these 7 are sourced in the Trinity, with the first grouping from the Spirit, then the Son, and finally the Father. The Godhead desires us to be united, and has created a pathway in our calling and salvation to make it happen. This morning, these are TRUE OF YOU if you have faith in Jesus Christ, have believed to repent, and have been forgiven, and followed Christ. Because these are realities, unity is not only possible, but necessary. And a lack of unity would signal a lack of these 7, not just something or someone we do not like in the church.*

Unity in the Holy Spirit (4:4)

“There is one body and one Spirit —just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your calling.”

ONE BODY – This is a favorite metaphor that Paul uses for the church. We saw that Jews and Gentiles were reconciled into **one body** (2:16), fellow heirs and members of the same body (3:6, 5:30), that the church is Christ’s body (1:23; 5:23), and it is created to be built up (4:12, 16). A body is made up of many disparate parts that function together perfectly so that it can move and grow. There are no insignificant parts (even though we’ve been told you can live without an appendix or gallbladder), since even the seemingly insignificant play huge rolls (try to speak without a tongue, but look at a tongue too long and you won’t want lunch). **Romans 12:4-5 says, “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually**

members one of another.” Each person, each believer in Christ comes together in a church to form a high functioning and growing entity. The church is not a room full of prosthetic limbs, but often people can function that way, like we are disembodied legs and arms hanging out in a room by ourselves.

ONE SPIRIT – Not only are we a part of something OUTSIDE of us, we are unified by something IN us. **Romans 8:9** says, “*You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Him.*” **1 Cor. 3:16** says “*Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?*” Every believer has been BAPTIZED into the body by the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). There is much confusion about the work of the Holy Spirit in our life, but most explanations seem like the Spirit creates confusion. If the Spirit gives each person different messages, or creates different types of worship, or only gives SOME a second blessing, this would create DISUNITY. But the Spirit convicts of sin (John 16:8), so is the greatest source of accountability for every believer. He is the guide in the truth (John 16:13), meaning He guides us all through the Word of God, not a separate source. Though He can be quenched (1 Thess. 5:19), He is given to move us toward unity together, in purity and truth.

ONE HOPE – The world longs for hope, and everyone has a different definition and object of hope: things will get better, retirement with enough money, health or long life, travel, checked off bucket list, etc. But we have a unified hope, which flows out of or is produced by our CALLING. Our hope is singularly focused on Christ, in this life and the next. “To live, Christ. To die, Gain” If Christ is who causes us to live, then death would be anticipated and hoped for because we gain Him! When facing death of a loved one or their own impending, this truth either feels token, like a grating platitude that brings frustration, or will be life giving. I just heard about dear friends in another church who are facing the last stage of life and they are talking about ending well since they have secure hope of the future. When we can face the future with confidence, together as a church, we can be courageous in the present no matter what we face.

Unity in Jesus the Son (4:5)

“One Lord, one faith, one baptism...”

ONE LORD – We exist because of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 8:6) and are saved through our confession that He is Lord: “*Because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.*” (Rom. 10:9). The Spirit is who gives us the ability to see clearly that He is Lord (1 Cor. 12:3), since we do not MAKE Jesus Lord, but must come to a point where we recognize Him as Lord. Jesus was always God of the universe, and the whole of the world was created by, through, and for Him. But when He faithfully entered the world through the incarnation, fulfilled the Law, died obediently on the cross, and was raised again, Jesus was given the name “Lord” by the Father (Phil. 2:9-11; Rom. 14:8-9), meaning He fills the entire world with His sovereign rule. So we are all saved by Christ alone (Acts 4:12), but we also SUBMIT to Christ’s Lordship, each yielding our agendas, pride, and very lives to Him so that we can properly serve each other.

ONE FAITH – This faith is either about the body of faith, the actual information of faith in the gospel (objective), or our active trust in Christ (subjective), or a combination of both. The reality is that we all must have faith in the same object, a holy God, and recognize our personal sin and rebellion, and cry out for forgiveness to Christ who substituted Himself for us, repenting our sin and believing in His death for ours. This faith is unifying since we are all sinners saved by grace, and none of us can claim being “good” or “better” than anyone else. We are leveled at the foot of the cross.

ONE BAPTISM – Much like Romans 6:1-4, this is not referring to *water baptism*, the outward symbol of an inward reality, but actually speaks to the inward reality! **Galatians 3:27** reminds us that our oneness or unity in Christ comes from baptism: “*For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.*” We are baptized into His life and death, and we are UNITED with Him in baptism. This is why we have a practice, a physical symbol that displays and declares what has transformed in us.

Where does unity come from? We are united IN Christ, in His Lordship through faith by our baptism into His life and death. Do we need more? Probably not, but there is more that brings unity.

Unity in God the Father (4:6)

“One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

Finally, we have unity because of God’s absolute, glorious, and sovereign rule over all things. He is the ultimate and final authority over everything and everyone. He works all things for His glory and our good, which means that everything that happens, from the good to hard, from comfortable to painful all come from His hand. But He is doing all things to grow us, to mature us, to make us more like Christ, and He is orchestrating all things. So unity is sourced in not only our VIEW of God’s sovereignty but in the fact that He is at work IN us individually and corporately, preparing us for the future and making us effective and fruitful in the present.

Unity is not easy, but its clearly important. It was the lead issue that Paul dealt with in the first section of practical application. This foundation is deeply theological, which will enliven us to use the gifts of the church to grow the way God intended. These truths set us up to be clear on what we all should be doing, what our purpose and goal is as a church, and frees us to move forward as a healthy church that gathers to worship and scatters to witness.