

# Unity and Maturity – Ephesians 4:1-16

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## Light to the World?

I remember meeting a politician who wanted me to help get the different churches and denominations to come together as one unified church. He spoke to me about how he had been involved in services in the past where people of all kinds of churches would come together and the leaders of those churches would light a massive candle which had many wicks. The idea was that all those different wicks represented the different churches but together they formed one candle, one light to the world. But were they really united as one light to the world? Those churches believed different things about Jesus, about the gospel, and about salvation. The reality was that they were no more unified after that kind of service than they were before they lit that candle because their core beliefs about Jesus, the gospel, and salvation were never reconciled.

## Recap

Over the last few weeks, we have been examining the first three chapters of Ephesians. In those chapters we have seen Paul speak about predestination, salvation by grace, and the bringing together of all things under the headship of Christ. But for the last one and half chapters, Paul has concentrated on the relationship between the Jews and Gentiles in the Christian church. He spoke about how Jesus had destroyed the dividing wall of hostility between the Jews and Gentiles by offering them the same gospel, the same salvation, the same way to enter into God's eternal Kingdom. You see, what God has shown to us through this letter is that there is only one way into his heaven and that is through Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus' death paid the penalty for sin, all sin. It doesn't matter if you come from a Jewish background, an Asian background, a Middle Eastern background, an Aboriginal background, or a European background, the only way to God is through Jesus' death and resurrection for your sins. This is what unites us, and we must hold firm to the truth of this central aspect of the gospel.

## Live a Worthy Life

Well, now that Paul has finished the first part of his letter, he goes onto explain how those teachings will affect a person's everyday life. But remember, whenever we read the Bible, we must always try to understand the original context of the passage before we start to think about how we apply it to ourselves today. Paul starts chapter 4 by saying...

***Ephesians 4:1*** *As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.*

Paul is speaking to the Jews and Gentiles of the Ephesian churches. The calling they had received was the calling to be Christians. Paul was not talking about being "called" to be a missionary, or "called" to be in ordained ministry. No, this was simply the call from God to be one of his followers in Christ. In other words, the call to be a Christian who happened to be in a church which had both Jews and Gentiles in it. This means that they would have had people from all kinds of different backgrounds in their church. People who looked different to one another, spoke differently, had different cultures, and ways of doing things. They may have eaten different things and even smelt differently. But despite all those differences, they were united in Christ. Christ had united them because they were now all part of the same Christian family, the same Kingdom of God, the same church. But the reality of life means that it takes effort to remain united as a church. That is why Paul went onto say...

***Ephesians 4:2-3*** *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. <sup>3</sup> Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*

Churches filled with different kinds of people need to demonstrate patience, humility, and gentleness as they love one another. It is not always easy for people to get along when they do things differently, when they speak differently, when they value different things. Plus, they had this ancient divide between the Jews and Gentiles which could easily rear its ugly head at any moment and cause divisions once again. It would take time, patience, gentleness, and love to maintain this unity they had in Christ and that is hard work. I think you could sum this idea up with the old-fashioned meaning of the word “tolerance”. Today, tolerance means that you must not only accept me for who I am, but you must endorse me as well. In other words, it is intolerant to have differences and remain in relationship. The old-fashioned understanding of tolerance is to recognise that there are differences, and we learn how to cope with those differences, even if we do not like or endorse those differences. To be tolerant means that we show love to one another even when people are completely different to each other. We may not always have the same culture or practices, so we need to be patient with each other. Being able to maintain unity in the gospel means that we will be gentle with each other when we don’t agree with things that are not central to the gospel and God’s way of living. It takes hard work to truly be tolerant, humble, patient, gentle, and loving, but that hard work helps to maintain our unity.

## One

**Ephesians 4:4-6** *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism; <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

There are lots of “ones” in this passage. That is because God is emphasising where we find our unity. Notice that they all point back to God and what he has done for us.

Verse 6 – there is one God and Father of all, over all, through all, and in all. The Gentiles could not return to their many different gods. As Christians, they had to remain true to the one God.

Verse 5 – there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. Jesus did not make two different sacrifices, two different ways to God, one for the Jews, one for the Gentiles. No, their baptism pointed back to what Jesus had done for them. There was only one person they were to put their faith in and that was Jesus.

Verse 4 – there is one body, one Spirit, one hope. The Holy Spirit worked in the lives of both the Jews and the Gentiles. The message he gave them was the same, salvation through Jesus’ death and resurrection. That was what gave them the hope of eternal life. That was what made them the one body of believers, the church.

Unity is not found in what we do, it is found in what God has done for us. The triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has worked in his people to make them one body of believers. We don’t have to look the same, speak the same, eat the same. We can be different in all kinds of ways, but we must remain true to the truth of God and his good news of salvation.

## Gracious Gifts

So, how do we keep this unity God has given us? How do we maintain it? We have already heard that Christians need to be humble, patient, gentle, and loving to one another, which is all about how we relate to one another in a tolerant way. But God has also given us something more concrete than relationship advice. It starts in verse 7...

**Ephesians 4:7** *But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.*

For Christians to be saved, for Christians to be united as a church, we rely on God’s grace. God had shown grace to the Jewish and Gentile Ephesian believers by bringing salvation to them. And how did God bring salvation to them? Paul begins to explain this with a couple of verses which can be difficult to understand.

**Ephesians 4:8-10** *This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people."<sup>9</sup> (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?<sup>10</sup> He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)*

Verses 9 and 10 are a little bit tricky but if you know your Bible, then they not all that hard to understand. Verses 9 and 10 are about how Jesus, the eternal second person of the Trinity, left heaven to become a human being who lived, died, rose again to life, and ascended into heaven so that people could be saved. Of course, there is a lot more to say about that. I could speak about God becoming a human being, about Jesus' life and ministry, about the sacrificial atonement of Jesus' crucifixion, about the resurrection demonstrating Jesus' power over sin and death, about the importance of the ascension, and how all this should focus our attention on God's generous goodness to those who believe and trust in Jesus. But ultimately, verse 9 and 10 point to Jesus being the place where God's gift of grace begins. Salvation is found in Jesus alone. He is the only one who descended from heaven to earth, and then ascended again above the heavens in power and authority over all things so that we could be saved. Now we turn to verse 8. This is where the bigger controversy lies, and I haven't got the time or space to explain all the issues. However, I will try to sum up what I think is a good explanation for this verse. In verse 8 Paul quoted Psalm 68:18 ...

**Ephesians 4:8** *This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people."*

Psalm 68 is about God entering the sanctuary of the Temple in Jerusalem, demonstrating that God was with his people. God ascended the holy mountain of Jerusalem to enter the temple. The language of captives being taken by God is not about the destruction of Israel's enemies, but about God taking his rebellious people. Some even say that Psalm 68 also looks back to Numbers chapters 8 and 18, which talk about God taking the Levites from among God's rebellious people to serve them in the tabernacle or temple.

**Numbers 18:6** *I myself [i.e. God] have selected your fellow Levites from among the Israelites as a gift to you, dedicated to the LORD to do the work at the tent of meeting.*

The Levites were God's gift to his people. They were the ones who worked as priests and ministered (or served) the people through the sacrificial system. Sacrifices for sin meant that you were saved from God's wrath, and you could know something about God's saving grace. In Ephesians chapter 4 we find that Christ is bringing his gift of salvation, which is found in his death, resurrection, and ascension. But Christ has also given other gifts. Just as God gave the Levites to the Israelites as priests to minister to God's Old Testament people, so too has Jesus given his gift of leaders to minister to the church.

## **Gift of People Who Serve**

**Ephesians 4:11-13** *So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers,<sup>12</sup> to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up<sup>13</sup> 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.*

How did the Ephesian Christians come to know about Jesus' saving works which tore down the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile believers? It was through the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. They were Christ's gift to the Ephesian church. Those people brought the message of salvation, those people taught and pastored the church. Those people equipped the Ephesian church for works of service, so that they could serve one another, and maintain the unity of the Ephesian church which could so easily fall apart given how culturally diverse they were. When you come to church are you thinking about how you may serve other people in the church or are you thinking about how they may serve you? Now, I'm not just talking about serving

one another cups of tea, I'm talking about how we love and care for one another. You see, I think Paul is still talking about living a life worthy of our calling, being completely humble, gentle, patient, and loving with each other. There may be issues of sin which we will need to deal with. There may be issues of doctrine which we will need to recognise and correct. But church is about serving one another, loving one another, maintaining unity and building each other up in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Notice in verses 12 and 13 that the body of Christ, or the church, was to be built up until it reaches unity in the faith. And what is that unity based on? It is based on the knowledge of the Son of God. God's gift of evangelists, pastors, and teachers are given to the church so that people will hear and learn about Jesus' offer of salvation, which not only brings salvation, but also breaks down the barriers of culture, colour, ethnicity, class, and gender. Unity is given to the church through Jesus. We don't have to create it, we just need to maintain it. We maintain it by always going back to the truth about Jesus. If we get Jesus and his gospel right, then we not only maintain unity, we start to become mature as a Christian church. Paul then begins to contrast the mature Christian church to an immature, childlike Christian church.

## **Infantile Churches**

***Ephesians 4:14-16** Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.<sup>15</sup> Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.<sup>16</sup> From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*

Christianity is all about a relationship between us and God. Jesus' death and resurrection is the way through which we can have that relationship. And the relationship we have with God will help us to be more like Jesus. We will be more patient, gentle, humble, and loving, but there is also a sense in which Christianity is intellectual. In order to know Christ, you not only need to engage your heart, you need to engage your mind. God gave us the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors, and teachers in the words of the Bible. Not only do we need to engage with the words of Jesus, we need to engage with the words of the apostles and prophets found in the Bible. Churches who are more worried about looking and sounding good, more worried about how many people are coming through their doors, or how much money comes in through donations, are more likely to move away from having the gospel at the centre of their teaching.

Right now, the Anglican church around the world is falling apart. There are factions which are so big that whole dioceses are being torn in two. Lots of people say it is about Same Sex Marriage and Same Sex Blessings, but it is more about the centrality of the gospel. Churches and denominations who move away from the basics of the Christian teaching, from the basics of the gospel, are always more likely to fall into false doctrines and teachings, which lead people away from God's saving grace. It is amazing how many of these false teachers began their church life in an evangelical church. They will talk about how Jesus worked in them when they heard the message of the cross, but now they have moved on from such primitive teachings. And what is the result? The Anglican Church is not united as a denomination because it was never the title of "Anglican" which united us, it was the truth about Jesus.

Unity in the church is not something we can create by lighting a candle, or by having the same name, or by doing the same thing. Unity in the church is created by the gospel of Jesus. By remaining true to this gospel, and telling that truth in love to one another, we will maintain that unity and grow in maturity. So, as a church, let us hold firm to the gospel of Jesus, and never move away from it.