

“Church Unity”
Ephesians 4:1-6
March 8, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

Ephesians follows the pattern that appears in several of Paul’s letters, a pattern in which he begins with a theological section and then concludes with a practical section of ethics. He starts with instruction about the salvation God has brought, and then concludes with the behaviors and attitudes that ought to be true of Christians in light of that salvation. The passage before us today is the beginning of Paul’s practical section. The connection between theology and ethics can be seen in the wording of verse 1, where he urges the Ephesians **“to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”** He begins with identity and then moves to behavior. He wants us to remember who we are in Christ as we live our lives in this world.

There is an old story from the days before the Civil War about a group of visitors from the northern part of the country watching a group of slaves in New Orleans as they were walking to their work. The slaves were shuffling along in a spiritless, indifferent manner, obviously beaten down by the cruelty and hardness of their lives. But one of them was different, holding his head erect and walking in a dignified manner. These observers thought maybe he was the boss. When they asked about him, they were told that he was a slave just like the others. “But,” they were told, “he just can’t get it out of his head that he is the son of a king.” When he had been dragged into slavery as a child in Africa, he was indeed the son of a king. He was taught from birth that he must always behave in a manner in keeping with his royal identity, no matter what happened.

That is exactly what Paul is saying to us, and the next three chapters are going to describe exactly what this worthy behavior should be. The first topic Paul deals with, and the one we are going to consider this morning, is church unity. I believe it was Ray Stedman who said, “To dwell above with saints we love, oh that will be glory; but to dwell below with saints we know, well, that’s another story.” Let’s consider now both the prominence of church unity and its preservation.

I. The Prominence of Church Unity

The unity of the Church is a matter of great importance to God. The main command of this passage is found in verse 3, where Paul tells us to be **“eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit.”** Note that verb. He doesn’t say that we are to create or establish the unity of the Spirit, but maintain it. God himself

creates the unity of the Church, and our job is to maintain what he has created. Unity is important because it is God's creation.

Let's take a step back and look at the big picture of the unity God has created in the Church. Disunity comes from sin. As soon as Adam and Eve sinned, disunity was introduced. Adam began blameshifting, putting Eve in the place of blame for his own sin. Cain killed Abel. Lamech became infamous for his murderous revenge. Divisions were amplified through the ages. God's purpose in Christ was stated by Paul back in chapter 1, **"to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth"** (1:10). Sin divides what should be united, and Christ reunites these divided things. So Paul spent half of chapter 2 talking about the unification of Jew and Gentile under Christ. The Church is designed by God to be a demonstration of the coming kingdom of heaven. We are to show by our unity that salvation is more than pious-sounding platitudes. When God reconciles us to himself through Christ, he reconciles us to one another. The church's unity reverses two of the devastating effects of sinful disunity: hostility and isolation. Disunity leads some to fight and others to withdraw and isolate. Both are dehumanizing and destructive. The Church is designed by God as a beacon of hope for the better way of peace.

Hostility and isolation continue to be big problems in our world. Think about the natural divisions that exist in the world and the hostility created by those. Walk onto most high school campuses and observe things with a sociologist's eye. You will see that there are clearly-defined groups with rules for their members. There are the popular kids, the smart kids, the counter-cultural kids, the athletes, and several others. And there are those who feel excluded from all groups and tend to remain isolated. Things don't change much after high school either. People may not be as crude about it when they become adults, but the divisions persist into adulthood. There is a type of caste system in every society of the world. The Church is to stand against this evil. No caste system is allowed. The only division allowed in the Church is between those who humbly follow Christ and those who proudly refuse to bow the knee to him. Even those who are proud are welcome to join us, as long as they are willing to leave behind their pride and submit to Jesus. Paul said it famously like this. **"For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith... There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"** (Gal. 3:26, 28). Think about it. Where else in this world would people as diverse as those right here in this room be together? We are not even that diverse as a church. But we are diverse enough that outside of our unity in Christ, we would likely not find ourselves together. And our togetherness is deep, not superficial. I don't believe I exaggerate to say that there are people here who would die for me, and I for them. This is God's creation. He creates the unity of the Church through Christ, and we are told to maintain it.

We can see how important this was to Paul in a couple of ways in this text. He urges us to maintain unity as **“a prisoner for the Lord.”** Paul was in prison because of his willingness to stand for the full acceptance of Gentiles in the Church. This was no casual opinion of his, but something for which he was willing to stand for at any cost. And we see its importance as well in the eagerness he commands for this pursuit of unity. There is a big difference between doing something reluctantly and doing it eagerly. We are not to have the reluctance of the bored student to write an essay she doesn't want to write. Rather, there is to be the eagerness of my uncle's cattle herding dog awaiting his command to rein in the cows. Every muscle of that dog would be quivering as he awaited the command. We are to have such eagerness for unity because we know that the Church is this outpost of the coming kingdom of heaven, the place where hostility and isolation is reversed.

II. The Preservation of Church Unity

Paul doesn't limit himself to the general command to maintain unity, but speaks more specifically about the kind of attitude and conduct conducive to unity. He encourages the embrace of four qualities: humility, gentleness, patience and bearing with one another in love. What he doesn't recommend is some kind of structural unity. In our day, it would be a mistake to seek denominational unity without any emphasis on these qualities. Structural unity without a heart of unity actually harms unity. Our own church is an illustration of that. This church began as a Cumberland Presbyterian Church in 1854. In 1906, there was a merger between that denomination and the northern Presbyterian Church. The national gatherings of both denominations voted in favor of this union, but many in the local congregations were opposed to it. Our congregation was split on the issue, to the point that the pro-unionists and anti-unionists decided not to worship together any longer. One group worshiped in the morning and the other in the afternoon. From an entry in the Session minutes of that time, it seems that the two groups did not get along very well. The minutes read, “We ask the “anti's” not to turn the pews around for their worship service.” The two groups had such disunity that they not only had separate worship services, but they couldn't even face the same direction when they worshiped. It is no surprise that this couldn't continue, with the result that the pro-unionist group moved to this current location in 1912, with the result that this was a northern Presbyterian Church until it joined the PCA in 1979.

So Paul commands the kind of qualities that promote unity instead of recommending structural unity. The first one is humility. In Paul's day, this quality was widely despised outside Judaism. It means literally “lowliness of mind,” and means not to think highly of yourself. Proud people, the opposite of the humble, want to be first. They want to be the most important. They want to feel that their church is the best, and so they speak ill of other churches. They

want to feel like they are the best, so they speak ill of other people. Pride corrodes unity. Kent Hughes tells the following story about a church's failure to have the kind of community Paul speaks of here.

A church split ... was so serious [that] each side filed a lawsuit to dispossess the others from the church, completely disregarding the Biblical injunction not to go to court against fellow believers. The civil courts threw it out, but eventually it came to a church court, where it belonged. The higher judiciary of the church made its decision and awarded the church property to one of the two factions. The losers withdrew and formed another church in the area. In the course of the proceedings the church courts found that the conflict had begun at a church dinner when an elder received a smaller slice of ham than a child seated next to him.

Gentleness is the next quality Paul mentions, a word the older versions translate as meekness. A meek or gentle person is not a weak person, but rather one who refuses to resort to force. The most powerful man who ever lived, Jesus, was known for his meekness. From the cross, he pointed out that he could have called upon his Father, and 12 legions of angels would have been sent at once to deliver Jesus. A Roman legion consisted of 6000 soldiers, so Jesus was laying claim to 72,000 angels, only one of which would have been necessary to defeat the entire Roman army. But Jesus refused to use the power available to him, and that's what gentle people do. How does that apply to unity? The exertion of power almost always leads to disunity. One of the big reasons marriages and churches experience hostility is the attempt by someone to control things. Just because you're right doesn't mean that you should press your case. Meek people don't insist on using their power, even when they're right. They are far more concerned with love than being right. I experienced a failure of this myself just this past week. I left my cell phone on top of my dresser one night, instead of in its charger on the floor, and the blinking light on the phone woke Wendy up. When she mentioned it the following morning, she did so with a slight exaggeration about how frequently I do so. Instead of speaking gently and having sympathy for my wife, I defended myself by pointing out the exaggeration. I took refuge in being right about one small detail instead of gently loving. That is not meekness.

Let's consider these last two qualities together. People who maintain unity are those who are patient and bear with one another in love. The verb that is translated as "bearing with" means to put up with something annoying. We tend to think that the path that leads to unity is for other people to be nice and to behave themselves. But we live in a fallen world, and in such a world even the nicest people are sometimes going to be selfish and unkind. So Paul puts the burden not on people to act nicely, but on those who are around the unkind to bear with them in love.

There are two alternatives to bearing with someone in love. The first is to bear with them in a condescending way. This is the smug attitude of self-righteousness that bears with others in a way that makes it clear that I am vastly superior to the annoying person. But because of my magnanimous spirit, I will put up with you. Such condescension is full of selfishness, the opposite of love. The other alternative to bearing with someone in love is to write them off and separate from them. This path leads away from unity and straight to isolation. Irritations with others are inevitable in this life, and the inability to bear with them will lead to a world that gradually shrinks to the point that it contains only one person. That is one of the biblical pictures of hell, so often depicted in the Bible as a place of darkness. Among other things, darkness speaks of isolation and loneliness. If you find yourself having the kind of relationships where you are annoyed and irritated with others, then you are on the right path. All you need to do is to bear up in love with those irritations. If the irritations have led you to withdraw, you are on the wrong path. To say this differently, the way to church unity is not to have such superficial relationships that no conflict ever arises.

CONCLUSION:

How do we come to possess these qualities of humility, gentleness and bearing with others? Do we just decide to be that way? The last phrase of verse 3 gives an answer. We are to “maintain the unity of the Spirit *in the bond of peace.*” What does that mean? A bond is a fastener, like a belt. If you need to carry a bundle of differently-sized sticks, a strap that ties them all together is a very useful thing. If you want different people to stay together, a fastener that holds them together is needed. What is that fastener? Paul says it is peace. What does he mean by this? I believe he means what he spoke of back in chapter 2 where he said, referring to Jesus, **“he himself is our peace”** (2:14). We can only extend peace to others after experiencing the peace of Jesus in our own lives. We have been more than annoying to God, and he responds with meekness, love and humility. He welcomes us into the community of the Trinity itself. It is only as we receive this that we learn humility, gentleness and patience.

Two missionaries I know in Uganda told how they were traveling together once and experiencing a pretty significant conflict with one another. In the car with them was a Ugandan man who was not a believer in Jesus. During a trip that took several hours, he listened to these two missionaries work through a conflict they were having. There were occasional raised voices, but eventually a resolution to the conflict. The Ugandan man later became a Christian, and said that it was witnessing these two missionaries work through their hard feelings and come to a place of peace with one another that was the primary factor God used to bring him to faith. May God help us to maintain unity that we might show his power and goodness to our divided world!