

The Unity of the Spirit

Introduction:

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

Eph 4:1

A. Overview of the Basic Structure of Ephesians:

1. The first three chapters of Ephesians emphasize what God has done for us by *seating* us in the heavenly realms.
 - % We have been chosen, adopted, and blessed.
 - % God has given us power and introduced us to the spiritual dimension.
 - % He has given us a role to play in the divine drama.In these first chapters, Paul asserts the Christian's *position*—saved by Christ, seated with God, empowered for ministry.
2. By contrast, the last three chapters emphasize how we are to *walk* as a result. (The word for “walk” or “live” occurs repeatedly in these last chapters—4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15.) There is a life-style that flows from what God has done for us.
 - 4:2 —Be completely humble and gentle.
 - 4:25 —Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully.
 - 4:29 —Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths.
 - 5:3 —But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality.
 - 5:21 —Submit to one another.
 - 6:5 —Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear.
3. Ephesians 4:1 thus marks an important turning point in Paul's focus:
 - ⇒ from who we are (position) to how we behave (life-style).
 - ⇒ from what God has done for us (blessings) to how we respond to him (ethics).
 - ⇒ from assurances about forgiveness and power to a rousing call to action.

B. Two Surprises About this Transition:

1. It surprises us that Paul takes so long to get to this point.
 - a. That Paul spent three chapters just setting up his teaching on practical Christian living is perplexing to us. Why not jump right in with the commands and exhortations? Why three chapters of “preface” before getting to the “crux?”
 - b. We would have been tempted to cut to the chase long before. Not Paul.
 - c. He knows that we will never “*walk worthy*” until we understand the “*calling*” we have “received.” Our ability to live elevated lives is directly related to our grasp of how much God loves us, how far He was willing to go in our behalf, and how great is the part we play in the divine drama.
 - d. We would do well to note the patience of the apostle in dealing with the grand themes of Chapters 1-3, how he repeats and massages and underscores these ideas before moving on to the “so what” section of Chapters 4-6.
 - e. We would do well to spend a little more time with these ideas ourselves. It might surprise us how much easier the latter chapters become when we have mastered the former.

2. We are surprised secondly, when Paul finally gets to the pragmatics of Christian behavior, as we notice how he begins.
 - a. Paul sees “walking worthy” as a matter of *holiness*.
 - i. He will talk about morality and the pursuit of purity in our lives (5:3-7).
 - ii. He’ll talk about acting as light rather than darkness, and advocate that we live wisely and flee folly (5:8-20).
 - iii. He’ll encourage holy relationships in the home and at work (5:21-6:9).
 - iv. And that is as it *should* be. No surprise here. In fact, this is just where Paul should have been headed all along. It’s about time he handed out some commands we can sink our teeth into!
 - b. But wait! Paul also sees “walking worthy” as a matter of *unity*.
 - i. He insists that we recognize the God-given, Christ-bought unity of the church.
 - ii. He asks us to understand that “worthy walking” is not just a matter of personal righteousness but harmony within the community of faith as well.
 - iii. Behaving toward each other in ways that protect the church’s unity is as important to the Christian life-style as sexual fidelity and sobriety.
 - c. In fact, Paul begins with the issue of unity rather than holiness!
 - i. The first thing he does in turning the corner in his book is describe how we ought to treat each other since God has made us one body.
 - ii. If it is legitimate to read anything into the *ordering* of Paul’s thoughts, he may be indicating that the development of *community* skills—living harmoniously, treating your brothers and sisters right, learning conduct that leads to peaceful living—is the first order of business.
 - iii. At the least, Paul is saying that you can be the most ethical and self-disciplined and honorable person around. But if you do not know how to treat people right, particularly people in the family of God, you are not walking worthily.
3. And this is surprising to us!
 - a. Most of us have cut our teeth on the notion that Christianity is principally a private matter involving our personal relationship with God and how we conduct ourselves individually.
 - b. The notion that godliness may begin with respect for the family of God and with conscious efforts to “keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” gives us pause.
 - c. Yet that is precisely where Paul begins. And as we make this transition in *Ephesians*, we had better begin there too.

Read Ephesians 4:1-6.

I. The Lifestyle of Unity (4:2-3).

A. Defining Terms (vs 2):

1. Paul's teaching on unity begins with a listing of four traits/attitudes/behaviors which each of us must bring to the table if we are to live in the community of God.
 - a. *Humility*—lowliness, counting others better than yourself, not thinking of yourself more highly than you ought, being eager to serve.
 - b. *Gentleness*—“involves the courtesy, considerateness, and willingness to waive one's rights that comes from seeking the common good without being concerned for personal reputation or gain” (Lincoln, p. 236).
 - c. *Patience*—“is literally ‘long temper’ . . . This ability to make allowance for other's shortcomings, this tolerance of others' exasperating behavior is a fruit of the Spirit and . . . a quality essential for communal living” (Lincoln, p. 236).
 - d. *Bearing with one another in love*—There are times when, in this community of faith, a brother or sister is a burden. Love, Christian love, requires that we be willing to put up with each other in weakness and failing and obstreperousness.
2. It is easy to give dictionary definitions of these terms. It is far harder to understand and practice them in the context of God's people.
 - a. Jesus was “completely humble.” Yet he still asserted his opinions and acted boldly. Indeed, he was accused of arrogance (e.g., John 8:53-54) in spite of his humility!
 - b. Jesus was also “completely gentle.” But he could still make a whip and clean a temple and hurl strong, accusatory words at hard-hearted Pharisees.
 - c. He was patient, but his patience wore thin at times (Mk 9:19) and seemed to desert him altogether on certain occasions (Mt 16:23).
 - d. No one can “bear with” like Jesus. But there are limits to what even he will stand.
3. Let's not make the mistake of caricaturing these qualities by failing to see how difficult it is to exhibit them in a Christ-like manner.
 - a. Paul's point here is not to nail down definitions so much as to remind us how long we have been steeped in the habits of pride, harshness, impatience, and division.
 - b. Some kind of corrective behaviors are necessary if we are to live in community.

B. The Goal (vs 3):

1. “keep the unity of the Spirit”
 - a. Our first glimpse of a truth Paul will discuss in a moment.
 - b. We behave as Paul suggests *to protect something that already exists*.
 - i. We don't behave humbly, gently, and patiently to *create* unity.
 - ii. We behave like this precisely because we *are* unified.
 - c. There is a unity in the body of Christ *created* by the Spirit of God.
 - i. The unity we enjoy in the body is due to God's actions, not ours.
 - ii. We can destroy unity or we can protect unity, but we cannot create it.
2. “through the bond of peace”
 - a. It is our passion for peace which ensures that unity can be maintained.
 - b. Peace becomes the “bond” that protects our essential oneness.
3. Maintaining unity in the body of Christ merits making “every effort.” Frankly, we don't take Paul seriously here. We may make *many* efforts. We may even make every *reasonable* effort. But too many of us are not willing to make *every* effort to ensure that peace reigns so that unity can exist.

II. An Essential Unity (Read Eph 4:4-6).

A. “There is one body . . .”

1. We could easily lose ourselves in the grand truths that Paul expresses in these verses.
2. Suffice it to say that this passage is about *oneness, unity, singleness, union*.
The word “one” is used seven times in these three verses.
3. But more particularly, Paul is making a point about the *church*.
 - a. How many spirits live in us?
 - b. How many Lords do we bow before?
 - c. How many faiths do we profess?
 - d. How many gods do we worship?
 - e. Then how many bodies, how many churches are there?
4. “Oneness” is such a basic attribute of the Christian faith, how can we claim one Lord, faith and baptism only to turn around and countenance many churches?

B. Why is there One Body?

1. Because we believe everything the same, and always get along, and are so much alike? NO!!!
2. There is one body *because God made it that way*.
 - a. There is one body because God determined to bring us together “under one head, even Christ” (1:10).
 - b. There is one body because Christ came preaching *peace* and put to death our hostilities and made one new creation out of a divided humanity (2:14ff).
 - c. There is one body because God has called us into his family, and is building us together to become a holy temple, and has made us heirs together, members together, sharers together (3:6).
3. *The oneness and unity of the church of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with us and everything to do with the God whose church this is*.
 - a. Our God has made us one. He has *created* unity in his church.
 - b. We can (and do) get in the way of unity. But when we step back and let the church be the church God intended from the beginning—or, better yet, when we step forward and start “walking worthy of the calling we have received”—we will experience the unity which God intends to be the natural state of his church.

C. A Word of Caution

1. Be careful not to run off at this point and proclaim the evils of denominationalism.
 - a. It is tempting just now to bemoan the divisions that exist in the body of Christ throughout the world.
 - b. It would be an easy thing to mourn over the creeds and opinions and personalities that have split the church over the centuries.
2. But Paul has something more personal in mind, something more local, something he wants us to understand about *this church, this congregation of God’s people*.
 - a. Oneness is best demonstrated not by the eradication of denominationalism but by a unified and loving local fellowship. Paul isn’t talking about ecumenism in this passage—he’s talking about functioning and loving communities.
 - b. It is not a *discussion* of unity but a *demonstration* of it that is most needed, not peace *lovers* but peace *makers* living out unity through the bonds of peace.
 - c. That demonstration is best made in the test tube of a specific group of God’s people.

Conclusion: Recapturing Paul's Passion for Peace.

A. It is instructive that Paul begins this section with an exhortation to unity.

1. Where we expect him to talk about morality, he launches into ecclesiology.
2. But that expectation betrays much about our own thinking and about how little we have understood the mind of the apostle (or his Lord, for that matter).
3. Having announced his intention that we should “walk worthy” of our calling, Paul spends the next thirty-something verses stressing the importance of walking *together*.

B. Why does Paul do this?

1. Perhaps because he understands unity to be central to the heart of Jesus.
 - a. Because he knew that his Lord had prayed fervently that all his disciples be one.
 - b. Because he saw the mission of Jesus as one of barrier-destruction and peace-making and reconciliation.
2. Perhaps he begins this way because he knows that community must precede purity.
 - a. That there can be no call to ethical living without a functioning community to teach and encourage such living.
 - b. That truly righteous individuals are most effectively grown in the context of a unified family of believers.
3. Or perhaps he simply takes Christ seriously when the Lord states that Christians will be known by their love, that the mark of the true disciple will be in the way he or she treats others—especially in the context of the church.
4. Whatever Paul is thinking about, one thing is clear.
 - a. Paul values the unity created by the spirit within the community of faith.
 - b. He is passionate in urging us to protect that unity in the way we speak and act.
 - c. He believes that our unity is closely connected to our pursuit of worthy living.

C. Can we recapture Paul's passion for peace?

1. We can if we give it the priority Paul does.
 - a. Not fine-tuning morality and marriages and then working on unity if there is time.
 - b. Rather, beginning with the attitudes and behaviors that encourage peace, believing that such attitudes and behaviors will be foundational for building righteous character.
 - c. If we started with community and *then* moved to personal purity, we would stand a better chance of encouraging both healthy churches *and* upright Christians.
2. To people who have consistently favored morals over unity and rightness over relationship this comes as a difficult word. But it is a word we need to hear if we are to “walk worthy of our calling.”