

What Kind of Church? – Part 4 – Eph. 4

Joe was apt to pray only when things weren't going well, which was pretty often. One day as he implored God for help with another mess he was in, to his surprise, he heard a wondrous voice: "All right, Joe, what do you need this time?" Amazed, Joe asked, "God, is that You?" "Yes, Joe. What do you ask of Me now?" Joe complained, "God, why does it always take so long for my prayers to be answered?" "God answered, "Time is not the same for Me. A thousand of your years is just a second for Me." "Wow! If that's what time is for you, what is money?" "All the treasure of the world is just a penny for Me." Joe, always one to take advantage of the situation, began to scheme. "God, You can do anything, right?" "Yes, anything I wish. Why do you ask?" "You are always so generous, and surely You wouldn't miss a penny. Will You give me just one of your pennies?" begged Joe. "Just a second," came the answer.

That's an old joke but appropriate, I thought. God's timing and His ways are often a mystery. Sometimes He gives when we don't ask and sometimes we ask and it seems like it is forever before we get any kind of answer. We as a church have been praying for wisdom and unity and for a new building as we go into this new year. I have to admit that sometimes lately I have wanted to ask God if He misunderstood us or something. I know, though, that the problem is not God's hearing, but the problem lies within us. We are born a long way from being wise or interested in being unified with anybody. Our natural-born selves are foolish and selfish. That's how God made us to be as infants and for good reason. That's how we survive as babies. As babies, that is the standard thing for us to do and sometimes it is hard to grow out of that standard. We usually get wisdom by making mistakes and that is a hard way to learn something but usually pretty effective. Unity is often achieved only after we give something up and nobody wants to do that, either. To be unified, we have to be willing to give up a lot of our own rights for the good of the whole. Ouch! That's difficult!

Our standard in the past has always been to stand up for what we want and what makes us happy and filled and content. But that standard needs to be just that, in the past. Because we as Christians have a new standard. We have a standard that is not always going to be easy. We see that right now. But it is a biblical standard, modeled by Jesus Himself and explained in detail by the apostle Paul in the book of Ephesians. Turn there now, if you would and let's look at **Ephesians chapter 4, verses 1-16** to see our new standard.

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. ⁷ But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ⁸ This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people."⁹ (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly region? ¹⁰ He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) ¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶From 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.

Paul starts out by saying who he is: a prisoner **for** the Lord. He is actually in chains as he writes this and yet he is also a willing prisoner **of** the Lord. The Romans put him in prison because of his belief but it was his belief that made him a prisoner of God. It kind of makes our circumstances a little more bearable to think of what Paul is going through here. But then Paul goes on to describe what this new standard of unity looks like and we should all take note of this as individuals but especially as a new church. He tells us four things about this unity. It depends on our character, it comes from the unity of God, it is enriched by diversity and it demands maturity

Look at **verse 2** to see how our new standard of unity depends on our character. *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.* Oh, ok, that's easy enough. What's next? Right? Some of you will read that and think to yourself that you really do need to work on being more humble and gentle. And others of you will read it and think that, yes, **other people** need to be more humble and gentle. I have an idea that the latter person is the one to whom this is written.

I have said before that I believe that if God could only teach us one thing about Himself that it would be that He is a God of grace. And that if He could teach us only one thing about ourselves it would be that we are a people of pride. I believe pride is the biggest barrier we have to unity today. In **Proverbs 8:13**, God says He **hates** pride. **Psalms 10:4** explains that the proud are so consumed with themselves that their thoughts are far from God.

Ben Franklin once said, *"There is perhaps no one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride. Beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive. Even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility."*

My Dad told me one time about a deacon in his church who told him that he felt his job as a deacon was to keep the pastor under control. That made me mad because, having been a deacon, I know that the job of a deacon is to be a servant. And now as a pastor I know that my job is to be the head servant. And... sometimes I forget about that. People expect me to be some certain kind of leader and it is sometimes difficult to remember what kind of leader I am supposed to be. When I have failed in that, I would like to ask for your forgiveness and encourage you to look at the next phrase: *be patient, bearing with one another in love.* Know that we are all going to make mistakes. We get wisdom by making mistakes. It takes real character to be patient and bear with one another in love.

So, unity not only **depends on our character**, it also comes from **the unity of God** as we see in **verses 3-6**. That's a whole lot of "ones" in there. But it is important to see what Paul is telling us here. It's kind of wordy but it is important so everybody take a deep breath, stand up and sit down, whatever you need to do because this is important to understand.

He says there is one body. Do you know what that body is? Is it Christ Fellowship? Well, we are part of it. That body is the church, the global church made up of all believers from past to future. It includes First Baptist Chico, U-Turn Church, the Methodists and the Pentecostals and every other Bible-believing, God-loving, Jesus-following, Spirit-led body of believers from the smallest house church to the largest mega church. That is who Paul is saying needs to be unified and we need to be unified with each other and with the one Spirit which is the Holy Spirit.

And because we are united with each other and the Holy Spirit we have that one object of hope, one object of faith and one object of baptism and that one object is Jesus. It is Jesus Christ in whom we have believed, Jesus Christ in

whom we have been baptized and Jesus Christ for whose coming we wait with expectant hope! We are united because God is united in perfect unity. There is no disunity in the Trinity. **Deuteronomy 6:1** says, "*Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!*" The Father, Son and Spirit all point us in the same direction. There is no competition and there should be no competition between houses of worship. We are all in the same lifeboat.

Paul says that our standard of unity **depends on our character**, comes **from the unity of God**, our model. And in **verses 7-12** he tells us that it is **enriched by diversity**. Aren't you glad that we don't all have the same gifts? That would make worship boring, wouldn't it? If Ben or Victoria had the same gift of music that I have it just wouldn't be as good.

Paul says here that we are each given gifts according to God's grace. Now, really quickly, there are 2 types of grace, at least for our understanding of this passage. There is saving grace and then there is the grace that is mentioned here and it is the grace that is given God's people to serve in different ways. It is the original Greek word *charismata* from which we get "charismatic". So, if you are ever asked if your church is charismatic, you can say, "*Absolutely, yes.*" On second thought, maybe don't do that. Anyway, in **verse 8** he refers to **Psalms 68** that would bring to mind a conquering king who would return home with the spoils of war and give gifts of those spoils to all the people.

He is saying that Jesus gives out gifts lavishly and with great grace as He sees fit. To some he gives the gift of teaching or preaching and to some the gift of serving, leading, ministry, mercy, knowledge or any number of others. These are all included in Paul's short list here.

But the most interesting aspect of this is the sentence in **verse 12** that says the reason He gives these gifts is to **prepare God's people for works of service**. The gifts are meant to be used and meant to be used **to serve Him and the church**. If they are being used for any other reason then you will see disruption in the unity because God says our unity is **enhanced** by the diversity of the gifts. Thank you, Lord, for that diversity.

Imagine if we all went to a church where God had given all of us the same gift. If God had given us all the gift of music, who's going to preach? Who's going to do the audio / visual? Who's going to clean or teach the kids or plan parties? Who's going to pray or support or give comfort or do the bookkeeping? Everybody would be saying, "*Well, that's not my gift. You need to do it.*" "*But that's not my gift either. You should do it.*" There's no unity there. The problem is, if you don't show up, your gift isn't here either and that messes up the unity because somebody is going to have to do a job that is not their gift or the job just doesn't get done. And the church suffers because of it.

Lastly, God shows us through Paul that we serve each other in a new standard of unity that **demands maturity**. Look at **verses 13-16**. He is talking to the whole church body here when he says "*until we all reach unity*" but ultimately it has to start with us as individuals. Unity is only going to happen when we as individuals are mature. Then we can be a mature church.

Rudyard Kipling once offered the following tests for maturity. "*If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you, if you can trust yourself when all men doubt you, but make allowance for their doubting too, if you can wait and not be tired of waiting, or, being lied about don't deal in lies, or, being hated, don't give way to hating.*"

Wise words. You see, your example is contagious, whatever it is. If you have to have your way then others will respond the same way. But when others have to have their way and you show patience, humility and gentleness, you show maturity. And that maturity is contagious as well. When others see you being mature and not having to

have your way or they see you using your gift to the service of the body and the glory of the Lord then they, too, will start to do the same.

All of this cultivated is shown as a picture in **verse 16** of what our new church should look like. It is a church with a new life, a new standard of unity with **good character, by the unity of God, enriched by the diversity of our gifts as a mature church** joined and held together by every supporting ligament, growing and building itself up in love, as each part is doing its work.

In a Peanuts cartoon Lucy demanded that Linus change TV channels, threatening him with her fist if he didn't. "What makes you think you can walk right in here and take over?" asks Linus.

"These five fingers," says Lucy. "Individually they're nothing but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold." "Which channel do you want?" asks Linus. Turning away, he looks at his fingers and says, "Why can't you guys get organized like that?" Charles Schultz.

Let me close with this. **John 17** is one of the most powerful passages in the Bible. It is Jesus praying. And first He prays for Himself. Then He prays for His disciples and then He prays for all the other believers including us. And He says, *"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you."*

It is God's will that Christ Fellowship be a unified church. And we should be unified with all the other Christian churches around. So, does that mean we should all just go to one church? I hear people say sometimes that there are too many denominations. We are all supposed to be one together as Christians so why can't we all just be one big church? The one thing that trumps unity...is truth. Never sacrifice truth for unity. All the denominations have slightly different beliefs about what is truth. Our church believes some things that the Methodist church down the street might not believe. Who is right and who is wrong? Well, obviously we are. Right? 😊 No, not necessarily. I think when we get to Heaven, we are going to get to take a long walk with Jesus and He will say, *"Your doctrine was correct in most areas but let me explain where you got it wrong in a few places."* And everybody is going to get a speech like that. We are all correct about the core issues but some of the side issues we may or may not get right. But some of those side issues are very important.

Another church may believe differently than we do about the Lord's Supper or baptism or even the purpose of the church. Well, I'm not going to be able to worship in unity with people like that for very long although I know I'll see them in Heaven. In **John 17, verse 17** Jesus prays to the Father, *"Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth."* Spurgeon said, *"Only those sanctified through the Word can be one in Christ. To teach otherwise is to betray the Gospel."* (Charles H. Spurgeon, The Essence of Separation)

So, as we do our due diligence to be as absolutely correct as we can be about what scripture says and means, we know not everybody is going to believe like we do about all of it. And that's okay. Christ Fellowship can still be unified and holy. That's the kind of church God wants us to be. But it starts with us as individuals.

Let's bow our heads and close our eyes as a sign of submission to God right now. Ask Him as you pray what He wants you to do as an individual to maintain the unity of our church. It starts with you being holy. Does that describe you? Are you different and set apart from the world? Or do you look and act like they do? Do you have a relationship with God through His Son Jesus? You can. All you have to do is believe that Jesus, who is God, came from Heaven to die on the cross to pay the price Father God said was due for your sins. Accept His gift of salvation today. Ask Him to forgive you of all your sins and to make you more like Him every day. Do it right now as the music plays.