

“Unity – A Reality and an Attitude”
(What about all those other churches?)
Ephesians 4:1-16
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Through the years we’ve all had Christian friends move away and while it was sad to see them go our friendship stayed intact.

Oh, maybe it wasn’t as close as before because of distance but it was good to see them every chance we got.

But I suspect that many of us have had Christian friends who didn’t leave town but they left us.

Something happened that disappointed or hurt them and in their anger they pulled away and it seemed that nothing we did could reconcile them.

I saw a man this summer who once was a close friend.
15 years ago I confronted him on something going on in his life and he broke off the friendship abruptly.

Not only did he refuse to be reconciled in spite of many attempts, when I saw him this summer after several years, he still acted as though the estrangement was as fresh as yesterday.

Not only have some of us had Christian friendships break apart but we’ve all probably heard of churches that have broken apart – split.

People who once were friends, colleagues in ministry;
People we worshipped with, studied the Bible with, ministered along side of, ate with, and laughed with now hardly seem to exist.

Is this what Jesus meant when he prayed to the Father in heaven in John 17 that his followers may be one as he and the father are one?

Quite obviously not!

And what about all the different churches in our community?

There are Baptists, Lutherans, Catholics, Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Baptists, Mennonites, Independents, Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals, Charismatics, Covenants, Evangelical Free, and dozens of others.

I pick on the Baptists because I grew up as one.

But I only illustrate with them what I could say of any of the denominations – not only do we have different names but even within one name we have differences.

You can drive to the corner of Hampden and Colorado Blvd or to the corner of C-470 and Bowles and see three or more churches within sight of, if not within shouting distance of, each other.

Is this what Jesus meant when he prayed to the Father in heaven in John 17 that his followers may be one as he and the father are one?

Maybe the answer to that question is not quite as obvious as to the previous question.

In the Apostle Paul's letter called Ephesians, in which we continue our study today, he calls the Christians to unity – to a relationship with each other that is characterized by grace and love.

This is not a naïve, idle, wish but a command from God himself.

This is not a pleasant afterthought as in “wouldn't it be nice if we could all get along with each other?”

According to the Bible this issue of unity is **fundamental** to what it means to be Christian.

I don't think it is too strong to say that **without unity we will not become what God has called us to be.**

Let me explain that.

We have already seen from the book of Ephesians that God's goal for his people is that they be “filled to the measure of the fullness of God.”

As we saw last week that is yet another way of saying that God's goal is that we individually and corporately be changed to be like Jesus himself.

Paul described it as Christ being formed in us – that is we are being changed by God so that we eventually think, speak and act as God himself would think, speak and act.

In the section of Ephesians we are looking at today Paul describes it this way:

Ephesians 4:13 “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.”

Is this important?

Yes, because this is what it means to be Christian – it’s what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ.

Anything less than progress in that direction in our lives is a denial of what it means to be Christian.

Becoming like Jesus is what Christianity is about.

Now if becoming like Jesus doesn’t interest you, you have very different issues that we cannot address this morning.

But if becoming more like Jesus is your heart’s desire, intermittent and weak at times to be sure but your basic desire none-the-less, then Paul’s instruction at the beginning of Ephesians 4 is very important for you to hear.

Ephesians 4:1-16

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope when you were called-- one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men." (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's

people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 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.

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 men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 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.”

The thrust of these verses is fairly straightforward.

Working backwards in the text, I would describe his teaching this way:

God’s desire is stated in verses 13-16 and is (13) that we become “mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” Or that we (v15) “Grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.”

And how does this happen?

- It’s explained in verses 7-12.
- V7 “But to each one of us grace (or spiritual gifts) has been given as Christ apportioned it.”
- And verses 11-12 “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up...”

Paul teaches here and elsewhere that when Jesus went back to heaven he sent his Spirit to empower his people with spiritual abilities to minister to each other.

I have spoken at length to this issue as recently as this past summer and so I won’t repeat it now except to say that the teaching here and in 1 Corinthians and Romans is that God has given to every Christian certain spiritual abilities (gifts).

And when each Christian uses those abilities, all other Christians in the church grow and when Christians don’t use those abilities to serve each other, everyone suffers.

Now we move to the primary thrust of the entire passage which I think is found in verses 1-6: **If we don't live out or practice the unity that is ours in Christ**, then we won't minister to each other (7-12) and we won't mature in our faith and become like Christ (13-16).

Now, maybe you can see why I said earlier that I don't think it is too strong to say that **without unity we will not become what God has called us to be.**

So that brings us back where we started.

In contrast to what we too often experience: **What is true Christian unity based on** and **what does it look like?**

I want you to again see verses 1-6:

Ephesians 4:1-6

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope when you were called--one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Again I reverse the order of the verses to explain what Paul is calling us to.

In verses 4-6 Paul states a reality that ought to motivate us greatly.

He says we ARE one.

We are IN FACT united to each other.

And he describes that unity by citing the basis of our oneness.

If I were going to cite the evidence of **your oneness with your biological family** I could show you your birth certificate, I could show you pictures that illustrate how much you look like other members of your family, I could have you listen to both the sound of your voice in comparison to other members of your family and the way you say things, I could show you video footage of the way you walk, the way you move your hands, etc.

Just within the last two weeks I was talking with some men about how much like our fathers we are.

One of the men said, that recently, when a secretary in his office heard him coming up the stairs she remarked that he climbed the stairs just like his father.

We can't help it, we are connected – we are one with our family.

Paul cites the evidence that we **Christians** are in fact one.

He declares that there is only:

One Body,
 One Spirit,
 One Hope,
 One Lord,
 One Faith,
 One Baptism,
 One God and Father.

To understand what he means by there **being only one body**,” we read in

Ephesians 1:22-23: “And God placed all things under (Jesus’) feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body...”

It becomes clear that Paul uses the metaphor of a body to describe the church.

And because the church exists because of Christ and in Christ and Christ is its head, the church is said to be “his body”.

Christ is one, has only one body and therefore his church is one.

In this sense there are not many churches but only one church made up of all those who are Christians – sometimes referred to as the church invisible or the church universal.

And the Scripture is clear that each congregation is a manifestation of that one church.

Now the practical application of that is that if you are a Christian, if you are trusting in Jesus Christ as your saving-Lord, you are in the body of Christ, the church and you are one with the rest of us.

You may not particularly like every member of our family, but we are family.

And Paul says there is **only one Spirit**.

What do you have in common with **all** other Christians?

- To the Romans Paul wrote, Romans 8:9 “And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.”
- And to the Corinthians he wrote, 1 Corinthians 12:13 “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body.”

If you are a Christian you have been brought into the body of Christ, the church, by the same Spirit and the same Spirit lives in you as in me.

And he writes there is only **one Hope**.

We share the same destiny. And what a destiny it is!

- When Jesus comes again, we will be with him.
- We will be included in the great transformation that God will finish at that time.

1 Thessalonians 4:17 “After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.”

But don't miss the rest of the truth – we will be with each other forever.

Somewhat tongue-in-cheek I have heard it said that we should think about that Christian that we can hardly stand and remember that God might arrange eternity in such a way that we will live next door to that person for 100,000 years.

But Paul doesn't have punishment in mind here – he has destiny in mind here.

We share a common destiny.

And our oneness is not just for a season it is for eternity.

We have only **one Lord.**

And he is the same Lord for you as for me.

- When we came to his cross for salvation, we were shoulder to shoulder on the same ground having the same need.
- And when we hear his commands, we share those commands.

We have only **one Faith.**

This is **not our faith** in Jesus but THE faith as in what it is that we believe.

There is only one truth about who Jesus is, what he did and what he offers us by grace through faith.

And all who are trusting in Jesus' grace alone by faith alone are Christians and are one.

We have only **one Baptism.**

This is not about sprinkling versus immersion or whether we are baptized forward or backward.

This is about the FACT that the Spirit of God brings all of us into the family of God in the same way – by connecting us with Jesus – called “union with Christ”.

And lastly we have only **one God and Father.**

There are not many Gods but only one true God.

And if that God is your Father and he is my Father than we are brothers and sisters in Jesus – we are connected, we are one family.

What is Paul's point?

As Christians we are bound to each other with cords of reality that are stronger than any other realities.

- Is it stronger than biology and natural family?
- Is it stronger than race or ethnicity?

I love the story that Bishop John Reed tells of driving a school bus in Australia which carried white and aborigine children.

The black and white children were continually fighting until one day Reed stopped the bus and said to the white children, “What

color are you?" When they said "white" he said, "No, you are green. Anyone who rides my bus is green. Now what color are you?" The white boys responded, "Green".

He turned to the black children and said what color are you. They said, "Black". "No, you are green. Anyone who rides my bus is green. Now what color are you?" The black boys responded, "Green."

With that he set off down the road again.

He thought he had accomplished his purpose when he overheard one boy announce, "All right, light green on this side of the bus and dark green on that side." (in Hughes, 92)

Paul says that our oneness in Christ is stronger than race.

- Is it stronger than culture?
- Is it stronger than preferences in music, or preachers, or missionaries or building projects?

Yes, stronger than any of those and all of those combined.

How strong is it?

Look again at what we have already seen in this letter.

Early in chapter 2 Paul talked about the hostility that existed between Jew and Gentile.

And then he wrote in Ephesians 2:13-22 "But now in Christ Jesus you (Gentiles) who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility... Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but **fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household**... And in (Jesus) you too are being built **together** to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

And in chapter 3 speaking to the same issue he writes, Ephesians 3:3-6 this "is, the mystery made known to me by revelation... This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."

Today we hear much about trying to make peace between Jews and Arabs.

The differences are so great and so ingrained that many assume the gulf between them can never be bridged.

So alike is Jew to Jew and Arab to Arab that to even imagine Jew and Arab together seems impossible.

Yet God says that is exactly the barriers he breaks down and the gulf that he bridges in Christ.

If God can bring such culturally, historically, linguistically, politically, geographically, racially different people together he can bring any two people together.

And the way that he does it is that he gives us a new identity that is stronger than all other identities together.

We are one in Christ.

We have the same Spirit, Hope, Lord, Faith, Baptism, and God and Father.

We are one body, one church.

How important is this to God?

Because it is in the context of our relationship with each other in the church that we grow to become more like Christ this issue of oneness and unity is crucial.

But see also that God's reputation is on the line!

There is a very interesting passage we have looked at in weeks past but now we can understand better.

Listen to Paul in Ephesians 3:9-10, I was commissioned "to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery (the mystery now revealed, that God intends to bring such diverse people as Jews and Gentiles together into one new society), which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through **the church**, the manifold wisdom of God should be **made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms...**"

Based on how else Paul and the NT writers use these words, "rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" he is referring to the unseen beings in the universe – angels good and evil.

Psalm 19 and Romans 1 tell us that the present creation declares the glory of God so that it is through the old creation (the universe) that God reveals his glory to humans so that God's eternal power and divine nature are clearly see so that people are without excuse.

(Stott, 124)

And here we are told that the new creation, the Church, is the means by which God will declare to the angelic beings the perfection of his plan to bring an end to the chaos caused by sin and bring perfect unity to it all.

Back in Ephesians 1:9-10 Paul wrote something that we now understand better, "And (God) made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment--to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ."

And the church is how God plans to do it.

Peter O'Brien put it this way, "The unity of the church is the means by which the manifold wisdom of God is being displayed to the universe. The church is the eschatological outpost, the pilot project of God's purposes, and his people are the expression of this unity that displays to the universe his final goal." (O'Brien, 286)

Is our oneness important to our God?

Yes, his reputation is on the line and he won't fail.

In these verse Paul has shown us the basis of our unity and the importance of our unity AND NOW as we move back to verses 1-3 we see how that unity is maintained.

Ephesians 4:1-3 "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

Here we have a couple of the first commands in the letter.

Up until now Paul has been telling us what is true – how greatly loved we are, how God in Christ has made our relationship with him possible, how we have become God’s new society of people – the church.

Now, he says, since this is all true, you have an obligation.

He commands us as loved children of the Father to obey: “I urge you...” “Make every effort.”

These are not suggestions, these are commands.

It is not right that we would call ourselves Christians and take these commands lightly.

God is asking us to give full attention and effort to making this true of us. It is now our move, do it!

(Marcus Barth, 428)

And what are we commanded to do?

“Live a life worthy of the calling you have received.”

Act in a manner consistent with your high calling.

The church, which includes us in this place at this time in history, we have been called to be the pattern of what God will eventually do in the entire universe.

We have been called to demonstrate in our lives and attitudes the power of the Gospel to break down barriers between people and create a new people whose bond is stronger than race, ethnicity, gender, politics, culture, or any other thing. (O’Brien, 279)

And how do we do that?

Paul writes it is as difficult and as simple as our attitude:

Ephesians 4:2 “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.”

To be humble is to recognize the God-given worth of others.

It is considering the welfare of others as more important than our own.

To be gentle is to put our strength under control.

It is forsake our personal rights for the sake of others.

To be patient is to believe God's timetable is good no matter how long it takes.

Patience is being longsuffering toward aggravating people.

To bear with one another in love is to put up with each other.

It is to tolerantly seek the welfare of the other.

Isn't it just like God to bring it right down to a heart issue?

Unity can be maintained in the church if we simply let that attitude be in us that was in Christ Jesus, who although he was God, didn't push his rights, but humbled himself even to death for us.

We so easily get irritated about something and then we begin rehearsing the past and analyzing the present to find any shred of evidence to support our current thesis that so and so is a jerk.

We so easily separate ourselves from each other, write each other off, have nothing to do with each other.

Don't such actions indicate the absence of the very virtues that Paul says we must have (humble, gentle, patient, forbearing and love)?

Oh how easily we think thoughts and say words that indicate difference and separation rather than similarity and unity.

"Us versus them" words come from our mouths and usually because our pride is offended in some way.

We seldom separate from each other over true fundamental doctrinal issues but almost invariably over personal preferences and pique – wounded pride.

Oh, Paul writes, don't you realize who you are – you are the new community, the new people of God.

You are the model for what God is doing for all eternity.

True unity is built on the foundation of truth – What God has done in you.

It is lived out in your attitudes toward each other – humility, gentleness, patience, and tolerant love.

But what of the plethora of churches in our own community.
 What of the churches we drive by on our way to Southern
 Gables.

Is it wrong for Centennial Community Church and
 Foothills Bible Church to exist on opposite corners of the
 same intersection?

Should Southern Gables and Bear Creek
 Presbyterian merge to express the unity of
 Ephesians 4?

I think most of you know that for the first couple of centuries there
 were no church buildings in which congregations could meet.
 They met in homes.

Was it wrong for one house church to exist on one side of Ephesus
 and another on the other side of town? No.

For that matter, when they outgrew one house, was it wrong to
 have two house churches within walking distance from each
 other? Certainly not.

Furthermore is Paul stating that all churches with geographical affinity
 must be one organization?

It seems quite clear that organization is not the issue.

Church by-laws, property ownership, and taxes are all
 issues tangential to the main issue and should have little
 or no bearing on the main issues, which are attitude and
 relationship.

Is God saying that no differences can exist between congregations?

Again it seems quite obvious that great differences do exist but
 the differences that exist should be insignificant compared to
 the "one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one
 hope when you were called-- one Lord, one faith, one baptism;
 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in
 all."

This is not unity or peace at any price.

I don't have time today to explore that with you but suffice it to say that **unity can only exist when the basis of unity exists** – one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God and Father of all.

And there are congregations that call themselves Christian where we could not say we are in union with them.

There is a maxim that has served Jesus' church for centuries: "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

So what of our relationship with Centennial Community, Foothills Fellowship Baptist, Foothills Bible, Bear Valley Baptist, St James Presbyterian, Mosaic Southwest, Deer Creek Evangelical Presbyterian, Bear Creek Presbyterian, Dakota Ridge Assembly of God, and others I know well enough to name?

If the only congregation available next Sunday and thereafter was any one of these churches, I believe we ought to be able to join with them and worship with them without hesitation.

When it comes to our relationship with each other and with other churches, where the essentials are believed and taught we are in unity;

Where there are differences in nonessentials we must allow liberty;

And whether there is unity on the essentials or not, differences or not we express charity – humility, gentleness, patience and tolerant love.

We are the church – the bride of Jesus Christ – We are commanded by our Lord to walk worthy of the calling with which we have been called.

What will it mean in your attitude toward other churches.
What will it mean in your relationships with others in your church and home?

"Humility, gentleness, patience and tolerant love"