

EPHESIANS | Unity of the Spirit

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Introduction

Chapter 4 of Paul's letter to the Ephesian church is one of my favorite passages in the Bible. In for the first three chapters, Paul has given us an enormous amount of theology and doctrine — *Orthodoxy* — what we believe and all the blessings and benefits that are ours in Christ. In chapter four he moves into *Orthopraxy* — how we should live in light of what we believe — what we ought to practice and live out as those who are followers of Jesus...

The book of Ephesians is about Doctrine and Duty.

Doctrine – Our riches in Christ. Duty – Our responsibilities in Christ.

Paul says, that in light of everything we've talked about thus far — let's talk about our responsibility, how we practically live out what we believe.

Ephesians 4:1-16

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— 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 grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸ Therefore it says,

“When He ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men.”

⁹ (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that He had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) ¹¹ And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

There's a lot of different themes in this passage: the challenge to and calling of the believer, the attributes that should be evident in genuine believers, spiritual gifts, the role of the clergy, a call toward maturity in Christ. Ultimately every one of these individual ideas these 16 verses are all pulling us the same direction — **they all build off one another, and when all these things are working in unison with one another, it produces an unstoppable power within the body of Christ.** *Every single thing Paul talks about here is all in alignment with and moving us toward.....*

Unity

Ephesians 4:3

...the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4:13

...until we all attain to the unity of the faith...

Then Paul uses the imagery of a body to describe what unity within the community of believers actually looks like. Here's a framework for this passage that will help us see the progression of what Paul is describing.

**THE CHARACTER
THE CAUSE
THE COMPETENCE
THE CONSEQUENCE**

The Character

Unity is not *Uniformity*. God isn't after uniformity... uniformity would mean the entire body would need to look the same. We'd all be a hand or a foot. Which means, we wouldn't be functioning in the ways that God has created us, wired us, gifted us.

Uniformity is unity achieved through dominance, threat, external pressure, force and intimidation. It's from the outside in and it can only last for so long.

Biblical unity is the byproduct, not of external pressure, but from inner character. It is the result of the people of God cooperating with the Spirit of God, as He sanctifies us, matures us, a grows us in godly character. *Unity and Uniformity are worlds apart. One is forced, the other is freely chosen.*

What Paul gives us, right at the beginning of this passage, are the characteristics that must be present in us, if we're going to do our part individually to move toward and maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4:1-16

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called,
² with all humility...

1. Humility

Humility is the ability to know yourself accurately. To view yourself the way God views you — without shame, and without pride, to know yourself while not being consumed with yourself.

In the book of Numbers Moses said this...

Numbers 12:3

(Now the man Moses *was* very humble, more than all men who *were* on the face of the earth.)

- Can you imagine writing that about yourself?
- Warren Weirsbe in his commentary on Ephesians wrote that humility is the *one trait that as soon as you realize you have it, you've lost it.*¹

But if you think about Jesus as the model of perfect humility, He openly acknowledged the truth of who He was. He wasn't boastful about it. He didn't question it. He knew Himself in perfect alignment with how the Father saw Him. That's humility.

Romans 12:3

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

- That phrase *sober judgment* means to have an honest and accurate evaluation, and in this context, it's how you think about yourself. That's humility. Unity is not possible without humility in the body.

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe. *The Wiersbe Bible Study Series: Ephesians* (David C Cook, Nov 12, 2010)

2. Gentleness

Ephesians 4:12

...with all humility and gentleness,

1. Humility
2. Gentleness

It also can be translated *meekness*. Many people mistake meekness with weakness. Jesus was described as meek (Matthew 11:29), and yet contained within Him is the power to create worlds with a word. When the moment required it, He flipped the tables of the money changers, and challenged the religious leaders of His day.

What this tells us is that *gentleness or meekness is power under control*. You have it when you need it, but you don't leverage power unnecessarily. Your default mode of operation is not dominance, but gentleness.

3. Patience

Ephesians 4:12

...with all humility and gentleness, with patience,

1. Humility
2. Gentleness
3. Patience

Patience is long-suffering, or "long-tempered." It's the ability to endure discomfort, annoyance, or hardship without lashing out or retaliating. I love how Eugene Peterson (*the author of the Bible paraphrase "The Message"*) paraphrases 1 Corinthians 13 on what love and patience looks like.²

1 Corinthians 13:3-7 (MSG)

Love... doesn't fly off the handle, puts up with anything, always looks for the best... keeps going to the end.

And then Paul describes how patience applies in the context of community.

4. Forbearance

Ephesians 4:12

...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,

1. Humility
2. Gentleness
3. Patience
4. Forbearance

Forbearance is patience applied to relationships. It's a combination of self-control and mercy in the context of community.

1 Corinthians 13:3-7 (MSG)

Love... doesn't force itself on others, doesn't keep score of the sins of others, doesn't revel when others grovel... trusts God always... never looks back.

5. Diligence

Ephesians 4:3

...eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

² Eugene Peterson. *Practise Resurrection* (John Murray Press, Oct 27, 2011)

1. Humility
2. Gentleness
3. Patience
4. Forbearance
5. Diligence

In other words, you make every effort. You do all that is in your power. And Paul wouldn't tell us to eagerly maintain unity if unity was easy. God wouldn't call us to work toward it if there wasn't something or someone working against it.

6. Peace

Ephesians 4:3

...eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of **peace**.

1. Humility
2. Gentleness
3. Patience
4. Forbearance
5. Diligence
6. Peace

James 3:14-18

...if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. (*In other words, there is no peace.*) ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then **peaceable**, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown **in peace** by those who **make peace**.

Ultimately, a person that is not at peace with God is incapable of being at peace with others. James goes on to say that the war, division, and outrage we see on the outside is the result of being without peace on the inside.

The cause

I've asked you this question before: *"How many churches are there in Williamson county? The state of TN? The US? The World?"*

According to Ephesians 4... how many are there? ONE.

Ephesians 4:4-6

⁴ There is **one body** and **one Spirit**—just as you were called to the **one hope** that belongs to your call— ⁵ **one Lord, one faith, one baptism**, ⁶ **one God and Father** of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Paul is giving us the doctrinal foundation for unity. There are not two bodies, or two thousand... there is one. One spirit. One Lord. One Faith... and there are far more reasons for the body of Christ to work together than there are to divide.

It's easy to look for reasons to divide. But unity begins with what you believe about God, and what you believe influences how you behave.

The competence (or gifts)

How many of you enjoy personality tests? How many of you despise them?

In Ephesians 4 is possibly the oldest personality test...

Ephesians 4:11-12

And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry,

Let's break these down...

1. APOSTLE

Some of you have an apostolic wiring... or gifting. It doesn't mean you get to walk around and call yourself an apostle or put it on a business card. There were only 12 of those and you're not one of them. *But you may have an apostolic bent.*

The word *Apostle* means "sent one." It's someone who plows new ground for the Kingdom of God. A missionary, a church planter... *one who brings the gospel into unreached areas of the culture* — a pioneering and establishing work.

- **Example:** We see this in the book of Acts with Andronicus, Junia, Timothy, Titus, Barnabas, Paul, and a host of others that were used to bring the gospel to unreached cities and people groups.

2. PROPHETS

This isn't about predicting the future, this is about speaking the will and word of God for today. Someone with prophetic gifting will *bring the truth of God to people to encourage, to strengthen, and to comfort those within the body.*

1 Corinthians 14:3

...the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation...

- Ultimately, they have a sensitivity to what God is saying to a given person or people at a given time.

3. EVANGELISTS

Evangelists have a burden to see those who are far from God to come to Him. They're focused on those who don't yet know the Lord, and they're extremely motivated to reach the lost in new and creative ways. Sometimes, that will be through preaching or teaching... and for others it's simply through a loving relationship over a long period of time. But their primary motivation is to reach those far from God.

4. SHEPHERDS

Shepherds nurture and protect. They are the caretakers of the flock and want to see believers grow to health and maturity in Christ. They bring an enormous amount of stability to a community of believers through their care for their people, and the guarding against threats to those God has asked them to shepherd.

5. TEACHERS

Teachers ground people in the word of God. They can make complex things simple. They help others discern the will of God through Scripture. They have an ability to take God's truth and deliver it in a way that is clear, understandable, and applicable to daily life.

Your gifts

Maybe you see these in you — maybe one or two of these resonate with you.

But if you zoom out and look at how all of these work together — how each one is needed in the body — it's pretty incredible.

You have those who pioneer new initiatives and the establish them. You have those encourage and edify others with God's word. You have those who desire to see lost people saved and brought into the body of

Christ. You have those who care for and protect the flock. And those who bring clarity and understanding of God's will through the scriptures.

That's pretty comprehensive, and we all have a role to play in that. And as a part of the body, if you're not functioning in the role that God has designed you and gifted you for, the rest of the body suffers. We need you functioning and operating in your gifts... that's why Paul says that God gave all these gifts...

Ephesians 4:12

...to equip the saints for the work of ministry,

The consequence

Ephesians 4:13-16

...until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

What is the consequence, the outcome, the byproduct of unity in the church? Of the whole body working together doing their part?

Maturity. We're to grow up. No longer be children.

**All the ministry that happens within this family...
is to help all of us grow to maturity.**

SIDENOTE: One of the enormous benefits of the advancements in technology is that right now there are people all over the country, and around the world that are and have the ability to tune in to church services and engage with us online.

There are those that for health or medical reasons that can't be present with us on Sunday mornings or gather with us throughout the week. And we're able to serve those individuals as best we can because of the technology.

If you're traveling, especially during the summer, you're able to track with us while you're traveling. It's pretty incredible, and I know there are many who are grateful for the team that works so hard to provide that service to people.

*But based on what Paul is telling us here... for those that are able to be present within a church body, and instead consistently choose to simply observe services, or participate only occasionally... the biggest danger is you're not really a part of the body. You're observing one little aspect of what it means to be a part of the body. And if that's you... **you will not grow to maturity**, because you're not functioning in unison with the rest of the body.*

*And I would encourage you, and I think if Paul were speaking to you today he would encourage you... be a part of a local body. If you live in another part of the country, and love what God is doing here... allow what we do to be supplemental to your **participation in a local church body**. There is no replacement for it. Because if you're simply an observer, or consumer, you will not grow up into Christ who is the head.*

Ephesians 4:14

¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children,

The result of unity in the body is the maturity of the saints. And as long as we're isolating, we will remain spiritual *children*.

Spiritual children can't discern what is pleasing to God. Spiritual children are incredibly self-centered, they're not thinking about how their actions impact those around them... they're entitled and demand to be served... and they are unsteady. When a child begins to walk... the parent is right there walking with them to make sure they don't injure themselves... or they childproof their house out of care and concern for the child because they know that the child is a danger to themselves.

But when you're a part of the body, when we're all functioning together in our gifts, in unity under Christ who is the head of the church... you're surrounded by people that are growing toward maturity... it's a family... you have parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles... *and there's a whole lot of spiritual babies*.

If you think you've arrived, it's a sure sign that you're a spiritual child.

When we're a functioning part of the body, all of a sudden we find ourselves becoming more steady, more discerning, not tossed to a fro by every wind of doctrine or deceitful schemes.

Now some of us are infants, some of us are spiritual teenagers, others of us are adults, spiritual parents.

And we all need one another. Because we all have blind spots. We all need the wisdom of others who are further along the journey than we are.

Ephesians 4:15-16

¹⁵ Rather, speaking the **truth in love**, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

When the body of Christ is functioning in unity under Christ who is the head — we become a beautiful picture of Christ's love to one another, and His love for the world.

The church, when it is functioning the way God intending, becomes an unstoppable force in the world. Because we're all growing in the Character of Christ. We recognize that the reason for our unity is Christ Himself, we are gifted BY CHRIST. And as a result, we become of picture of Christ's love to one another and the world.

If you're isolated, and you're able, get plugged into a local body. You need it. The church needs it. And the world needs it.

Discussion Questions

1. When you think about growing in Christlikeness, are you humbler, gentler, more patient, less offendable, than you were this time last year?
2. Do you have the courage to ask somebody close to you (friend, spouse, children) whether this is the case or not?
3. Which of these characteristics do you especially need to work on: humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, diligence, peace?
4. Discuss: How many churches are there in Williamson County, the state of Tennessee, the USA, the world?
5. Which of these gifts do you believe you have to equip the saints: apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, teacher? Are you active in operating in those gifts?
6. Discuss: If you are not actively participating in a local church, you will not grow to maturity.

NOTES