

EPHESIANS 4:1–6:20

THE NEW HUMANITY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

A pastor at heart, Paul's theology was regularly the basis for his ethical and moral exhortations. The Greek word rendered "then" (4:1) connects the first part of Ephesians (chs 1–3)—expounding on the theme of the church in God's eternal purpose—with the second part of the letter (chs 4–6)—in which Paul explains the practical implications of his theology. Like Paul, pastors today must constantly challenge their congregations to integrate their beliefs with their behavior.

4:1–16 UNITY IN DIVERSITY IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

Today's church, not least the church in Asia, is torn apart with divisions based on patterns of worship, church government, creeds, language, and so on. In view of Paul's categorical teaching on what the church is meant to be, several questions confront us: How long will we defend and perpetuate these divisions? Aren't such divisions unworthy of the Christian calling? Why do Christians and congregations repeatedly fail to "keep the unity of the Spirit" and, instead, allow differences to divide them?

Wherever the unity of the Spirit is missing, it is usually true that the attitudes Paul appeals for—humility, gentleness, patience, loving forbearance, and the desire for peace (4:2)—are absent, having been replaced by pride and arrogance, a domineering and bullying spirit, oversensitivity and defensiveness, and impatient intolerance of others and their views.

Paul is greatly concerned because disunity among Christians undermines our witness—not only to *our* unity, but even more, to the truth that God is one. As one of the three monotheistic faiths in a world of polytheistic faiths, we do well to take Paul's warning seriously.

The failure to balance truth and love (4:15) frequently results in disunity in a Christian community or congregation. Traditionalists—who characteristically defend what they understand to be the truth—tend to place all blame for disunity and division on those whom they view as dissidents because they are at variance with positions that have been traditionally adopted. But Paul warns that upholding truth at the expense of love may alienate those whom we should be seeking to persuade in a spirit of conciliation and mutual respect. "The disposition, whether in dissidents or traditionalists, which makes for unity in the Church is that which can hold in proper balance both truth and love."

In this section of the letter we have an extended exhortation, beginning with the words "I urge you." Paul's appeal for harmonious relationships and conduct (4:1–3) is based on the unity of Christians—the basic reality on which the church stands (4:4–6). "In view of his glorious purpose for us, we must strive to attain to a corresponding life, first recognizing in deepest humility our true relation towards Him." Thereafter, Paul considers the diverse gifts given to

God's people and describes how these must be exercised to build up and strengthen the church (4:7–16).

The words “but to each one of us” (4:7) which introduce this section (4:7–16), express the individual element within the context of Christian unity. Diversity contributes to unity, for the purpose of the diverse gifts is to build up the whole body, enabling it to attain unity and maturity; but the individual dimension is present throughout: “as each part does its work” (4:16).

In Ephesians 4:8–10, Paul's quotation and explanation of Psalm 68:18 is bookended by references to Christ (4:7, 11)—giving scriptural confirmation to the idea that the risen Christ has given gifts to his church. Paul then explains and elaborates on this quotation. In 4:9–10, he explains the first part of verse 8. Although the psalm refers only to an ascent, Paul explains that an ascent implies a corresponding descent. The second part of verse 8 is elaborated on in 4:11–16. Commenting on verse 12, Lincoln says: “Its three prepositional phrases most likely describe three aspects of the purpose of such gifts—the equipping of others, service, and the building up of the Church.”

The word “until” (4:13) introduces a time element that defines the last phrase—the building up of the church. In other words, the building up of the church will happen *until* all members attain a goal, which is described from three angles: the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son, maturity, and the measure of the fullness of the stature of Christ.

The purpose of the building up is elaborated negatively (4:14)—the need to move from a present immaturity in the readers' reception of teaching—as well as positively (4:15)—growing up into Christ who is the head. The purposes mentioned before—the growth and building up of the church while focusing on the source of this growth as being in Christ—are then summarized (4:16).

4:1–6 The Unity of the Spirit

Paul writes “as a prisoner for the Lord.” He has already said that he is a prisoner because of his loyalty to Christ and his commitment to take the gospel to the Gentiles (3:1). But perhaps the words “for the Lord” are intended to underline his apostolic authority.

The “I urge you” clause (4:1) introduces the major exhortatory section of the letter and the word “then” (4:1) implies that the rest of the letter (chs 4–6) flows logically from what has already been said (chs 1–3). A similar structure is found in Romans and Colossians (Rom 12:1; Col 3:5).

Ephesians 4:1–6 divides into two parts: The appeal to maintain the unity of the Spirit (4:1–3) is followed by an elaboration of the basic dimensions of Christian unity (4:4–6).

For Paul, ethics are built upon doctrine. Theology must not remain a merely academic discipline—that systematizes doctrine and leaves it in the head—but must penetrate and address every area of life.

Paul starts with an appeal: “I urge you.” As those called to share in Christ's victory over death and evil, Christians must live lives “worthy of the calling [they] have received” (4:1). This is a basic ethical principle: We must constantly be sensitive to that which honors Christ in the way we conduct ourselves. “The unity, stability, growth, and maturity within the Church, for which 4:1–16 calls, will provide major resources for the Church's attempt to live distinctively within society, which is the concern of the ethical exhortations that follow.” Bruce comments,

As members of a reputable family will have the family's good name in mind as they order their public conduct, so members of the Christian society will have in mind not only the society's reputation in the world but the character of him who called it into being and the purpose for which he so called it.

It is likely that this verse contains traditional material. "To live a life worthy of the calling you have received" (4:1) is closely related to ideas and language found in Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians (2:11–12) and, in explaining what it means to live up to their calling, Paul draws heavily from the Letter to the Colossians (3:12–15).

"The calling you have received [from God]" emphasizes God's initiative in bringing humanity to the goal for which he intended it.

The thought here is that Christians are called to have a part in the fulfilling of God's vast design for the universe; in their unity the ultimate unity of all things created is prefigured—and not only prefigured, but given its inception. The life of the Christian, alike in its outward expression and in the zeal which moves it, must correspond to this end which it is meant to serve in relation to the final purpose of God: it must cultivate the qualities which make for harmony among men.

As he expounds on our calling as Christians, foremost in Paul's mind is our unity in Christ. Perhaps the apostle is recalling his emphasis in chapters 1–3 on the Christian calling to be members of a new humanity. Paul describes this unity as "the unity of the Spirit"—that is, the unity that the Spirit fosters in a Christian community. Our calling is not merely to a particular place, position, or profession; we are also called to be Christlike men and women within a united community. Stressing that Christians ought to make "every effort" to maintain this unity, Paul specifies four qualities that must be cultivated in order to do so (4:2). Fee notes a close similarity between this list and the list of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23) and observes that "the unity that is theirs by virtue of their common experience of the Spirit will be maintained only as the Spirit also produces the virtues necessary for it."

In secular, first-century society, humility or lowliness was not regarded as a virtue. But the Lord Jesus—who was "gentle and humble in heart" (Matt 11:29)—demonstrated how highly God valued humility. "The proud man only looks at that which is (or which he thinks to be) below him; and so he loses the elevating influence of that which is higher." Besides, "nothing is more destructive of group unity than that some should assert either themselves or their point of view."¹²

Asian cultures too shun humility or lowliness and encourage pride. *Brahmins* commonly take pride in their place in the Indian caste system and some Christians, even after conversion, take pride in the fact that they were *Brahmins*. Others may assume superior airs based on tribal or racial supremacy. Society seems to expect that a leader—political or social—is high-and-mighty rather than humble, while it is assumed that lowliness characterizes those at the bottom rungs of society. The Christian influence, however, has brought about noticeable changes in countries across Asia, as well as globally.

The term "humble" is paired with "gentle," as in Colossians 3:12. Gentleness is not synonymous with weakness. It is the opposite of the overbearing nature that asserts itself unpleasantly. Gentleness or meekness can exist only when there is the grace of self-control. "It

involves the courtesy, considerateness, and willingness to waive one's rights that come from seeking the common good without being concerned for personal reputation or gain." It is significant that whenever these virtues are advocated, the context is one of salvation, of calling (4:1), of election (Col 3:12), and of the working of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:23). Here, in Ephesians, the context is that of calling and unity.

Similarly, to "be patient, bearing with one another in love" are graces that reflect awareness that we are saved and sustained by God's grace—not by our own strength. "Here love is seen as the only means of Christian forbearance. Bearing with others means fully accepting them in their uniqueness, including their weaknesses and faults, and allowing them worth and space."

Paul challenges his readers to "keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (4:3). "Although this unity is already given and is not therefore the readers' own achievement, it must be preserved and protected." The expression "through the bond of peace," presents a picture of peace "as if it were a rope which can hold together within one secure bundle separate elements which are not naturally cohesive."¹⁶ Lincoln observes that the force of the participle rendered "make every effort" suggests that the maintenance of the unity is to be a matter of the utmost importance and urgency: "Spare no effort; make it a priority for your corporate life to maintain the unity of the Spirit." Patzia notes that Ephesians is the only epistle that uses the word "unity." Elsewhere, unity is described by such concepts as "fellowship," "communion," "one man," and "one body."¹⁸

Paul then refers to the sevenfold unity that Christians already enjoy (4:4–6). First, there is "one body." This has been referred to previously (1:23; 2:14)—it is the body of Christ, consisting of Jews and Gentiles.

Second, there is "one Spirit." Just as the body is one, so there is only one Spirit, though his gifts are many. Paul has already described how those who believe in Christ are sealed with the Spirit (1:14) and prayed that his readers will be strengthened inwardly through the Spirit (3:15).

Third, there is "one hope"—the hope that all things will be gathered up in Christ in the fullness of time. Not only is this hope set before all Christian believers, but the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the church is already a foretaste of the final summing up in Christ. Earlier, the Spirit was described as the guarantee that the hope that is set before believers will be fulfilled (1:14).

Fourth, Paul refers to "one Lord." Paul made a similar point when writing to the Corinthians: People may bow to many "lords" but, in truth, there is just one God, one Lord—Jesus Christ (1 Cor 8:5–6). "Jesus is Lord," one of the earliest faith confessions of the Christian community, had particular significance in the context of the Gentile mission since the context was one of religious plurality.

The fifth aspect of Christian unity is the "one faith." There are two senses in which Christians have one faith: (a) faith in Christ as Lord and Savior and (b) the faith or body of truth that was "once for all entrusted to God's holy people" (Jude 3). Although it is possible for the term to be understood in both senses here, this is disputed, with some scholars opting for the first meaning, and others just as stoutly defending the second.²⁰

Sixth, there is "one baptism." Since Paul is writing to Gentile converts he is obviously referring to the Christian practice of water baptism. Water baptism was the outward and visible sign by which individuals who believed in the gospel, repented of their sins, and acknowledged Jesus as Lord were incorporated into the fellowship of Christians. Lincoln rightly observes, "This baptism is one, not because it has a single form or is administered on only one occasion, but because it is

the initiation into Christ, into the one body, which all have undergone and as such is a unifying factor.”

Finally, there is “one God and Father of all.” In 1 Corinthians 8:6 Paul refers to “one God, the Father.” He is the one God; and his fatherhood was most clearly seen through the Lord Jesus. Lincoln says, “The climactic acclamation of the one God in his universality is meant to provide the most profound ground for the Church’s unity.” He adds that “when the Church fails to maintain and express unity, it radically undermines the credibility of its belief in the one God.”²³ Paul adds a qualifying clause, “who is over all and through all and in all,” referring to God’s transcendence as well as to his pervasive immanence. The word “all” can be a masculine or neuter noun in Greek. If it is masculine, the reference is to “all people”; if neuter, the reference is to “all things.” Since it is through Christ that God is revealed supremely as Father, most commentators take the term as masculine and understand the reference as being to those who are “in Christ.” In the context of the letter as a whole, however, it makes good sense to regard the term “all” as neuter and hence signifying “all things.” In that case, “his universal rule is being exercised to fulfill his ultimate purpose of unifying all things in Christ. 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.”²⁵

This passage may reflect an ancient confession of faith. The acknowledgment of “one Spirit ... one Lord ... one God and Father” is notable. Moreover, some of the later creeds, especially of the Eastern Church, are based on this passage. “The confession of the one universal God means that, despite its distinctiveness from the world which will be stressed later in the parenthesis, the Church continues to exist for the world.”²⁷

Patzia notes that Paul moves from the church to the Godhead, whereas one would have expected him to move the other way. Further, there is an obvious emphasis on all the members of the Trinity and the believer’s relationship to each one of them. The unity of the Godhead is the foundation of the church’s unity.¹

¹ Brian Wintle and Ken Gnanakan, *Ephesians*, ed. Andrew B. Spurgeon, Steve Chang, and Brian Wintle, Asia Bible Commentary Series (Carlisle, Cumbria; Manila, Philippines: Langham Global Library; Asia Theological Association, 2020), 83–90.