

## VIII. ONE BODY (4:1–16)

<sup>1</sup> Therefore I, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, <sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup> making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope at your calling—<sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. <sup>7</sup> Now grace is given<sup>1</sup> to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. <sup>8</sup> For it says:

When he ascended on high,  
he took the captives captive;  
he gave gifts to people.

<sup>9</sup> But what does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower parts of the earth? <sup>10</sup> The one who descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens, to fill all things. <sup>11</sup> And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup> until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness. <sup>14</sup> Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit. <sup>15</sup> But speaking the truth in love, we will<sup>2</sup> grow in every way into him who is the head—Christ. <sup>16</sup> From him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building itself up in love by the proper working of each individual part.

Chapter 4 begins the second half of the letter, which draws out significant implications from the argument of the first three chapters. After teaching that salvation is by grace through faith (2:1–10), Paul highlights the joining together of Jew and gentile in Christ (2:11–22), and his own role in making Christ known to the gentiles (3:1–20). Having established the unity of all in Christ, Paul now focuses on the organic nature of that unity. The body of Christ must grow into maturity through the proper working of all its parts. The diversity of the body is essential for its ongoing unity and growth.

**4:1** In the Greek, the first words of the second half of the letter are “I urge you, therefore.”<sup>3</sup> Nothing could be a more fitting indication of how the second half of the letter relates to the first. In light of the profound theological, christological, ethnological, and doxological content of chapters 1–3, chapters 4–6 will—*therefore*—explore believers’ conduct in response to what God has done in Christ.

Before Paul gets to the exhortation toward which he will urge his readers, he interrupts the thought by calling himself a prisoner for the second time—this time “the prisoner in the Lord” rather than “the prisoner of Christ Jesus” (3:1).<sup>4</sup> Being a prisoner “in the Lord” could be understood to refer to the cause for his imprisonment—it is on account of the Lord. But “in the Lord” could also indicate sphere or realm; “since for Paul the whole sphere of Christian living was ‘in the Lord,’ his imprisonment was to be seen as no exception.”<sup>5</sup> However, it is not clear how this reading would enhance the remainder of the verse, in which Paul urges his readers to walk worthy of their calling. To take “in the Lord” as indicating cause, on the other hand, relates well to this exhortation: “Paul is imprisoned because of the Lord, which underscores his credibility as one who may issue such an encouragement.”<sup>6</sup> In keeping with his assertion that his afflictions are for the glory of his readers (3:13), Paul’s following exhortation is issued from his authority as prisoner in the Lord and is intended for their benefit.

Paul, the prisoner in the Lord, urges his readers “to walk worthy of the calling you have received.” The language of walking recalls 2:2 and especially 2:10,<sup>7</sup> which sees believers walking in the good works that God has prepared for them (in contrast to walking according to the ways of this world; 2:20). Now we see that such walking does not involve good deeds only, but also character, as 4:2–3 demonstrates—it involves humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another, and keeping the unity of the Spirit. As Cohick notes, Paul “sees these virtues as conforming to Christ’s own character and, thus, as summing up the perfection and

full flourishing of a human, made in the image of the Creator God. To look like Christ is to radiate patience, gentleness, and humility.”<sup>8</sup>

Such walking is to be “worthy of the calling you have received,” which introduces the element of “calling” alongside the walking language. The language of calling occurs in the letter at 1:18, here (4:1), and a few verses later in 4:4.<sup>9</sup> In 1:18, Paul prays that believers would know “the hope of his calling,” the wealth of his inheritance in the saints. The connection of hope with calling is also seen in 4:4—“you were called to one hope at your calling”—thus demonstrating that believers are called to share in the one hope of Christ. Calling is not to be understood in a vocational sense, as it is often misinterpreted in some Christian subcultures. According to Ephesians, all believers are called, and they are called to share in their common hope in Christ, which is described in 1:18 as the wealth of his inheritance to be shared among the saints. Such a calling happens *to* those who would become believers; indeed it is a necessary step in the sequence of blessings bestowed upon them leading to glorification, according to Rom 8:30, “those he predestines, he also calls; and those he calls, he also justifies; and those he justifies, he also glorifies.” While believers are not responsible for having been called, they are to live in a manner worthy of it. The gift that has been bestowed on them ought to impel believers to conduct themselves in light of it. A similar notion is seen in Eph 2:8–10, where it is clear that believers are saved by faith, not by their works, and yet—as a consequence—they are to walk in the good deeds that God has prepared in advance for them. Thus, according to 2:10 and 4:1, God’s gift comes with responsibilities.

**4:2** It is immediately clear that walking worthily of the calling believers have received (4:1) involves their character and the ways in which they interact with others. They are to exhibit “all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.” Each of these descriptions involve an element of self-denial and self-restraint: humility involves considering others ahead of ourselves;<sup>10</sup> gentleness is a disposition that resists self-importance and proffers courtesy toward others;<sup>11</sup> patience resists immediate self-gratification and provocation;<sup>12</sup> and bearing with one another in love involves care for the interests of others even if they may bother or upset us.<sup>13</sup>

The Roman world did not view humility as a positive value. It was viewed as “low” or “base” and could even become fatal.<sup>14</sup> Epictetus included humility in a vice-list—indeed, it was regarded preeminent among ignoble qualities (*Dissertationes* 3.24.56; see also Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.9.2 §494).<sup>15</sup> The positive view of humility evident in Christianity came from the Jewish Scriptures, where it is seen as the opposite of self-exaltation (Ps 131:1–2), and expresses dependence on God (Isa 11:4; 14:32; 49:13; cf. Luke 1:52).<sup>16</sup> Paul opposes it to selfish ambition and conceit, as believers consider others ahead of themselves (Phil 2:3–4). Jesus of course is the example *par excellence* of humility, as Paul understands it (Phil 2:5–8). With humility placed first in Paul’s list of desirable characteristics here, it’s possible that he regards it the prerequisite for the other qualities. In true humility that emulates Christ, believers are able to treat others with gentleness, patience, and forbearance.

The following verse (4:3) reveals why these particular characteristics are in view: They are necessary for believers to “keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” Here we see the central interest of the entirety of 4:1–16, with its focus on the unity of the body of Christ. Keeping the unity of the Spirit is an essential element for the mature life of the body. Humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love are all ultimately relational characteristics, determining how we will treat others. Without humility, self-interest and hubris will threaten peaceful relationships; without gentleness, others may be roughly treated and harmed; without patience, we may cause others stress; and without bearing with others in love, they may feel rejected, unloved, or unworthy of our affection. Thus, unity of the Spirit is lived out by believers’ embracing Christ-like characteristics that facilitate healthy relationships in love.

**4:3** Another way in which believers are to walk worthily of their calling (4:1) is by “making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” Peace between Jew and gentile has been achieved through the blood of Christ on the cross (2:15)—he is “our peace,” making the two groups one (2:14; cf. 2:17). And this new unity is filled by the Spirit, who dwells within the newly unified people (2:18, 22).<sup>17</sup> In

line with the contextual interest in oneness (4:4–6), believers are to “do one’s best”<sup>18</sup> to keep their oneness in the Spirit. The Spirit is one of the marks of the unity of believers (4:4–6), and he is of central significance as he manifests the presence of God among them (2:22). Oneness in the Spirit is, therefore, an indicative reality uniting believers, but it also constitutes an imperatival expectation, as they are to make effort to keep this unity.<sup>19</sup> In other words, believers ought to conduct themselves in light of the spiritual reality already established among them.

The unity of the Spirit is kept “through the bond of peace,” or, literally, “*in the bond of peace.*”<sup>20</sup> The word translated “bond” was used metaphorically to refer to the unity of the city (Plato, *Republic* 7.520a) or to the bonds that hold the universe together.<sup>21</sup> It is used by Paul only twice elsewhere, both times in Colossians (2:19; 3:14). In Col 2:19, it is employed in a more literal sense as a joint or fastener, holding parts of the body together like tendons.<sup>22</sup> But in Col 3:14, we see a use similar to that here in Eph 4:3, where it “brings various entities into a unified relationship”<sup>23</sup>—“above all, put on love, which is the perfect *bond* of unity” (literally, the bond of perfection, or completeness).<sup>24</sup> Both contexts focus on unity, while one speaks of the bond of unity (or completeness) and the other the bond of peace. Peace is a prerequisite for unity and completeness, and thus both instances drive in the same direction. But Col 3:14 reveals what this bond of unity is—it is *love*. While unspecified in Eph 4:3, love has already been raised in 4:2, and sits comfortably in the wider context. Thus, believers are to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace, which is *love*. Love protects peace, just as peace enables unity.

**4:4** The theme of oneness and unity comes into sharp focus now, with a “oneness list,” comprising one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God (4:4–6). The list does not concern exhortation, but establishes the basis for it (cf. 4:1–2).<sup>25</sup> Since Paul has already addressed the importance of keeping the unity of the Spirit (4:3), it is unsurprising that the first two items in his “oneness list” are “one body” and “one Spirit.” The body metaphor is Paul’s primary image in this letter for depicting the unified people of Christ, and it is a key motif in this section (4:1–16). It is a brilliant metaphor that underscores the essential importance of unity, while also demanding diversity—a body must be unified to function properly, and it depends on its diversity of parts (cf. 1 Cor 12:12–31). Immediately after the “oneness list,” Paul turns his attention to the vital importance of diversity for building and strengthening the unity of the body (4:7–16).

The importance of the Spirit for the oneness of the body has already been raised in 4:3—he manifests the presence of God among all believers, dwelling among them as God’s holy temple (2:18, 22).<sup>26</sup> As the third person of the Godhead, the presence of the Spirit naturally seals all believers as one (1:13–14; 4:30), since he is one person dwelling within the many.

The third item in the list is “one hope,” to which believers have been called (cf. 4:1; 1:18), after having had no hope (2:12).<sup>27</sup> Though Paul does not here specify the content of this hope, the letter itself contains many grounds for hope, including the blessings of God in Christ (1:3–14), the supremacy of Christ over his enemies and his headship for the church (1:20–23), salvation by grace through faith (2:8–9), and the revelation of the mystery of Christ to the gentiles (3:1–13). God has been working his purposes out through history, and the ultimate reconciliation of all things in Christ (1:10) is an enduring hope that binds all believers.

**4:5** The fourth, fifth, and sixth items on the oneness list are offered in quick succession—“one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”<sup>28</sup> In keeping with virtually all of Paul’s uses of the term—even when citing Old Testament texts in which “Lord” refers to the God of Israel—the “Lord” refers to Christ Jesus.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, as Arnold points out, the confession of “one Lord” would echo the daily confession of the Jewish Shema, in which Yahweh is acknowledged as the one Lord.<sup>30</sup> Jesus is thus identified with the God of Israel. The only other option for understanding “Lord” would be to read it as referring to God the Father, but he is included as the last-mentioned item on the oneness list in 4:6, “one God and Father of all.” Thus, the Spirit (4:3), the Lord Christ (4:5), and God the Father (4:6) are each included in Paul’s oneness list, demonstrating the unifying power of each person of the Godhead. The inclusive power of Christ is obvious in the letter, since he

is the head of the body, the church (1:22–23), all believers are blessed “in Christ” (1:3–14), salvation comes from being made alive with, raised, and seated with Christ (2:5–6), and he brings peace between Jew and gentile (2:14–16). Every person who knows Christ as Lord is united to each other person in Christ as members of his body.

Believers are also united by “one faith,” which here most likely refers to the set of commitments shared by believers rather than their subjective experiences of faith (cf. 4:13).<sup>31</sup> Just as the “one hope” of their calling refers to a shared objective hope (4:4), rather than the subjective experience of hope, so too the one faith refers to an objective set of beliefs. This use of “faith,” then, finds a parallel in Jude 3, in which Jude’s readers are “to contend for the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all” (see also Rom 1:5; 10:8; Gal 1:23; 1 Tim 3:9; 4:1, 6). The common set of beliefs and commitments are, then, yet another factor that establishes the oneness of the body of Christ.

The sixth item on the oneness list is “one baptism.” Parallel to “one faith,” this baptism does not likely refer to individual experiences of the act of water baptism—though water baptism was the common practice of the early church (e.g., Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12; 10:47–48).<sup>32</sup> It more likely refers, rather, to believers’ common participation in the death of Christ (Rom 6:3).<sup>33</sup> Each individual’s experience of water baptism is, therefore, a personal expression of their participation in Christ—the one baptism into his death. Since all believers participate in the death of Christ, this common sharing further establishes their oneness in Christ.

**4:6** The final item on the oneness list is “one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” Being the last item on the list, with its own relative clause adding weight, God the Father is presented as the dramatic conclusion to the list of major factors that create the oneness of believers. It is not accidental that God is also the seventh item on the list—seven being “God’s number,” the symbol of divine fullness.

Thus, the ultimate cause of the oneness of the body of Christ is God the Father—whose own oneness undergirds the oneness of the body (cf. Deut 6:4). Charles Talbert draws attention to the Jewish notion of the oneness of God underscoring the oneness of the Jewish people. Philo, for instance, says, “the highest and greatest source of this unanimity is their creed of a single God, through which, as from a fountain, they feel a love for each other, uniting them in an indissoluble bond” (*On the Virtues* 7.35 [Colson]). Likewise, 2 Baruch says, “we are all one people of the Name; we who received one law from the One” (48.23–24).<sup>34</sup> In Ephesians, the one God has blessed believers with every spiritual blessing in Christ (1:3). He raised Christ from the dead, seating him above all other authorities and appointing him head over everything for the church (1:20–23). God has made believers alive with Christ, raising them with him, and seating them with Christ in the heavens (2:5–6). And it was God who appointed Paul apostle to the gentiles to reveal to them the mystery of Christ, thus granting them the opportunity to become partners in the promise in Christ Jesus (3:1–6). Through all these acts and more, the one God is the ultimate agent for the oneness of the body of Christ.

God is described as the “Father of all,” thus affirming his ultimate agency in the existence of all creation. Though only those in Christ are privileged—by sharing in his sonship—to know God as their Heavenly Father (cf. Gal 3:26), he is in this wider sense the father of all (cf. Eph 3:14–15). God is therefore appropriately esteemed “above all and through all and in all.” He is the supreme figure over all creation and his presence permeates its every aspect. But this should not be mistaken as an expression of pantheism or panentheism; God is not *part* of his creation, but remains distinctly its creator—in keeping with Paul’s firmly Jewish monotheism.<sup>35</sup> While retaining that vital distinction between creator and creation, Paul nevertheless affirms God’s intimate involvement in every aspect of the creation’s being and working. He is not the disinterested watchmaker of deism that sets the watch he created and lets it run itself without intervention. God is, rather, the omnipresent operator and sustainer of his beloved creation. He is involved within its every movement, every reaction, and every change that takes place. Moreover, Arnold demonstrates how Paul’s confession of God’s absolute sovereignty over, and presence through his creation would have directly challenged the local Ephesians’ worship of Artemis, Serapis, and Isis, who were regarded as cosmic deities with power over heaven and earth.<sup>36</sup> In contradistinction, the one true God is the loving creator and sustainer of the cosmos, who ensures the oneness of the body of Christ that he has brought forth into existence, according to his wisdom and glory.