

While the entire 4:1-6 section of Williamson's commentary is provided here for context, you are only required to read and respond to pages 112 and 113 (the sidebar titled "Overcoming Obstacles to Unity" and the "Reflection and Application" section)

Building Up the Church

Ephesians 4:1-16

Sometimes our need for growth, as individuals and as communities, is painfully obvious. How often do we hear fellow Catholics, or ourselves, express dissatisfaction with parish life, with our Church's witness in the world, or with some other aspect of the Church's life? And when we turn our gaze on our own discipleship, we notice many shortcomings.

Ephesians 4:1-16 explains how spiritual growth comes to the Church, to our local communities, and to ourselves. Paul teaches us that as each member strives for unity and fulfills his or her role of ministry, the body of Christ advances toward maturity. Paul begins his teaching about Christian conduct by talking about life in the Church rather than individual behavior because he understands that individual Christians are transformed through community life in the body of Christ.

The first part (4:1-6) of this teaching on growth addresses the subject of unity. The second part (4:7-12) discusses ministry in the Church. The third part (4:13-16) describes the outcome of effective ministry, namely, Christian maturity.

Unity—Attitudes That Preserve It, Facts That Establish It (4:1-6)

¹I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, ³striving to preserve the

unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: ⁴one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

NT: John 17:20-23; 1 Cor 12:4-6, 12-13; Gal 3:27-28; Phil 1:27-2:4; Col 3:12-15

Catechism: one faith, 172-75; the Church is one, 813-22; baptism as foundation of communion among Christians, 1271

Lectionary: 4:1-6: Christian Initiation apart from Easter Vigil, Confirmation, Blessings of Abbots and Abbesses, for the Laity, for the Unity of Christians

4:1 In Greek, the first word of the second half of this letter is *parakaleō*, meaning “I exhort.” Although chapters 4-6 contain teaching, their primary character is exhortation, an appeal to the will. Paul begins his summons to Christian conduct by reminding his readers that he is a **prisoner for the Lord** and appeals to them on that basis. The Greek literally says “a prisoner *in* the Lord” (JB, NJB, NRSV), a slightly different wording than 3:1 that emphasizes Paul’s union with Jesus in his imprisonment. He exhorts his readers **to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received**. The word translated “to ¹live” (*peripateō*) means “to walk.” In the Old Testament, the way a person “walks” refers to that person’s path in life, whether good or evil. The fact that Paul uses *peripateō* four more times in the next chapter and a half (4:17; 5:2, 8, 15) shows his attention to ethical behavior in this section.

In ordinary Greek the word translated “call”¹ means “invitation.” As in the Gospel story of the man who invited his neighbors to a banquet (Luke 14:16-24), so Christians have received an invitation to a celebration of the good things that God has for us. If you were invited to a banquet of the world’s most famous and important people, you would think carefully about what to wear and how to comport yourself. Paul is saying that since his readers have been invited into a relationship with God and his ¹holy people that begins now (2:19-22) and culminates in the age to come (2:7; 3:14-21), they should adopt a pattern of conduct that corresponds to such an exquisite invitation.

4:2 Then, paradoxically, Paul plunges into describing a type of conduct that might appear to have little in common with the exalted state of being filled with “the fullness of God” (3:19): **with all humility**.² The Greek word Paul uses for humility, *tapeinophrosyne*, comes from *phroneō* (“to think”) and *tapeinos* (“low,” “insignificant,” or “poor”). The verb form of this word, *tapeinoō* (“to make oneself low”) is used by Jesus in his teaching: “Everyone who exalts himself will

1. The JB and NJB say “vocation.”

2. The JB translates this as “selflessness.”

be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:11). Humility was an attitude that the pagan world despised; Christians were the first in the ancient world to regard it as a virtue.³ In Philippians as well, Paul urges humility for the sake of unity, expressed in his exhortation to "regard others as more important than yourselves" (Phil 2:3). He points to the attitude of Jesus, who was willing to become low through his incarnation and the cross, and whom God exalted "because of this" (Phil 2:9).

Paul next recommends **gentleness**, *prautēs*, sometimes translated "meekness" (RSV), which does not mean being soft or weak. Aristotle described this virtue as the desired middle ground "between being too angry and never being angry at all."⁴ It can have the character of kindness. When ascribed to someone in authority, it means a reasonable lenience. Gentleness is a virtue of peacemakers, namely, the inner strength not to retaliate when provoked. It enables a person to bring correction in a fraternal manner when it is needed (Gal 6:1; 2 Tim 2:25). Paul speaks of the "gentleness" of Christ (2 Cor 10:1) and includes gentleness among the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:23).

The word translated **patience** literally means "long-tempered." Many times in the [†]Septuagint (e.g., Exod 34:6; Ps 103:8 [102:8 LXX]) this word is used to depict God as "slow to anger," that is, someone who has a long fuse. Paul uses this word in describing Christ's attitude toward him: "I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost [of sinners], Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience" (1 Tim 1:16 NRSV). The book of Proverbs teaches that patience marks a person who is wise (14:29; 16:32; 19:11) and that "those who are slow to anger calm contention" (15:18 NRSV). This peacemaking potential of patience is probably what Paul has in mind, since he links it with **bearing with one another through love**. This means kindly putting up with people's faults and idiosyncrasies rather than reacting the way we instinctively feel like reacting. Paul is well aware that relationships even among Christians can be trying and sometimes require extraordinary charity and self-restraint.

Now Paul explains the reason for prioritizing these virtues: **striving to preserve the unity of the spirit**. It would be more accurate to capitalize "Spirit" as most translations do, since Paul refers to the profound unity that already exists because Christians share the same Holy Spirit: "In one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . and we were all given to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor 12:13). The discussion of unity and the Spirit builds on chapter 2, where

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3. Jews also, to some degree. This precise Greek word is not found in the LXX, but the concept is present (2 Sam 22:28; Ps 25:9; Isa 66:2).

4. William Barclay, *Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 158.



Fig. 7. Lacking church buildings, the early Christians met in the homes of wealthy members with large rooms, like this one, that could accommodate a small congregation.

Paul speaks of Jews and Gentiles being re-created as “one new person” and sharing “access in one Spirit to the Father” (2:15, 18). This unity is defended **through the bond of peace**, that is, by an active effort to preserve peaceable relationships among the members of the church. We know how easy it is for conflicts to arise and divisions to appear in family and church life. Paul exhorts us to adopt the Christ-like attitudes that protect peace and unity: humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance in love. Jesus the †Messiah “is our peace,” established peace, and “preached peace” (2:14, 15, 17); let us remain at peace with one another.

In the next three verses Paul expands on his affirmation that Christians are already one by naming seven points of unity that we share:

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1. We form **one body**, the body of Christ. The Church is not merely a human association but the continuing visible expression of the Messiah on earth (1:23). Being united to Christ in one body implies a profound mutual belonging and responsibility: “God has so constructed the body . . . that the parts may have the same concern for one another. If [one] part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy” (1 Cor 12:24–26).

2. We share **one Spirit** that is the source of life for every Christian. *Pneuma*, the Greek word for “Spirit,” also means “breath,” an essential for our biological life. According to Gen 2:7 (NRSV), when God created the first man he “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” The gift of God’s Spirit, breathed into us by Christ (John 20:22), gives us divine life.
3. We have been **called to the one hope of our call**. God has invited all Christians (see 4:1) to the same banquet; we are not going to different celebrations. In the New Testament, “[†]hope” (here as in 1:18; 2:12) often refers not to a feeling or attitude but to the objective future blessing we await—the second coming of Christ and life with God forever.
4. We have **one Lord**, namely, Jesus. In the Septuagint, *kyrios*, “the [†]Lord,” was used in place of God’s name, [†]YHWH, which Jews then and now refrain from pronouncing out of reverence. In secular Greek, the title “lord,” *kyrios*, was used for the emperor and by slaves for their masters. In the early Church, the affirmation “Jesus is Lord” was a way of acknowledging Jesus as the supreme ruler and God and of confessing allegiance to him over every other power (Phil 2:11; Rom 10:9; see 1 Cor 12:3). 4:5
5. We share **one faith**. This refers to the content of faith, the apostolic doctrine that has been handed on and received by the Church. Here Paul speaks of the “one faith” as something already shared; later in the chapter he will indicate that the “unity of faith” is something that still remains to be fully achieved (4:13).
6. We share **one baptism**, that is, we have all been “baptized into Christ” (Rom 6:3–8; Gal 3:27–28; Col 2:12–13). By means of this baptism, we died and rose with Jesus and were joined to his body, the Church. Just as Christians are headed toward the same destination, the same “hope,” so we share the same point of origin, baptism.
7. Finally, Paul concludes, Christians share **one God and Father of all, who is over all**. Although some commentators take this “all” to refer to the universe and others to the whole human race—and God is certainly over both—the context emphasizes the unity of Christians. At the climax of his list of seven unities Paul affirms that Jewish and [†]Gentile believers are under the care and protection of the same Father God. This one God and Father works **through all**—this probably refers to God’s presence and activity in the gifts Paul is about to describe (as in 1 Cor 12:11). Finally, the “one God and Father” is **in all**, referring to the fact that we are already a “dwelling place of God” (2:21–22; 3:19). 4:6

Overcoming Obstacles to Unity

Father Raniero Cantalamessa, the preacher to the papal household under John Paul II and Benedict XVI, suggests how we may overcome obstacles to unity, which he compares to embolisms in the body of Christ:

Embolisms pose a mortal danger to the human body. Abnormal particles called emboli obstruct veins and arteries and, if not cleared in time, hinder the free circulation of blood. This can cause great damage, leading to paralysis or even death. The church, which is the body of Christ, faces its own kind of embolisms. These obstacles to communion include the refusal to forgive, lasting hostility and the bitterness, wrath, anger, slander and malice [Eph 4:31]. . . .

If we want to “maintain a unity of the spirit in the bond of peace,” it is necessary to periodically take an x-ray—that is, a thorough examination of conscience—to be sure that there are no blockages for which we are responsible. At the level of ecumenism we must work patiently to remove the enormous barriers that have been built between the churches. This work has to take place at the capillary level: between communities and denominations; within each church—for example, between clergy and lay people—and finally between individuals.⁵

a. Raniero Cantalamessa, *Loving the Church* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger, 2005), 32–33.



As Jesus says in John 14:23, “Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him.”

Reflection and Application (4:1–6)

As much as any text in the Bible, this text describes what unites Christians. This unity encompasses believers of different races and different cultures, rich and poor, educated and uneducated. We have been baptized and worship in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We confess the Apostles’ Creed, a baseline of Christian doctrine, and accept the Bible as the word of God.⁵ We look forward to Christ’s coming in glory and his establishment of the kingdom of God in fullness, a hope all Christians share. As Pope John XXIII said, “What unites us is much greater than what divides us.”⁶

5. Some churches differ from the Catholic Church regarding which books of the Old Testament they accept as canonical, although virtually all accept the same twenty-seven books of the New Testament.

6. As quoted by John Paul II in *Ut Unum Sint* (*On Commitment to Ecumenism*) 20.

This unity in Christ is deeper than the unity we have with the rest of the human race. It is more important than the unity we share with others who are citizens of our country or who share the same language or culture. I am a middle-class, middle-aged professor teaching Scripture at a Catholic seminary in the United States. Yet spiritually I am more deeply united with an Orthodox believer in a factory in Russia and with a Pentecostal tribesman on an obscure island in the South Pacific than I am with American professors who share my ethnic background and political views but are not Christians.

Nevertheless, the unity that exists among Christians of different churches is incomplete. Although for the most part we agree on the Apostles' Creed, significant doctrinal differences divide us. Although we have all been baptized into the one body of Christ, we are not united in a visible communion as the apostolic Church was⁷ due to disagreements regarding doctrine and church authority. Visible unity is something Christ intended, something the Church experienced to a considerable degree before the break between the Catholic Church and the Eastern Church in 1054, and something we pray God will bring to pass again. The Second Vatican Council teaches that "men of both sides were to blame" for the separation of large communities from the Catholic Church.⁸ A longing for unity among Christians in response to Christ's prayer (John 17:20–23) is the basis of the ecumenical movement, a movement the Catholic Church supports. "At the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church committed herself *irrevocably* to following the path of the ecumenical venture, thus heeding the Spirit of the Lord."⁹ Thus Pope John Paul II urged Catholics to seek unity in the truth, to overcome the roots of division in human sinfulness, and to pray and work to make the spiritual communion that exists among Christians effective and visible.

Although we do enjoy visible unity in the Catholic Church, we also realize that this unity is imperfect and requires our constant attention. The task of preserving unity begins at home—in our families, parishes, and places of ministry. It is no easy thing to stay united to the people who are closest to us. It is here that we need to embrace the qualities of humility, patience, gentleness, and forbearance in love.

7. Although the Church was spread in local communities around the Mediterranean, these communities recognized one another and the leadership of Christ's apostles, among whom Peter exercised a particular role. Paul worked to strengthen the unity of this visible worldwide communion by collecting alms from the predominantly Gentile churches in Greece and Asia Minor for the Jewish church in Jerusalem (Rom 15:31; 1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8–9).

8. Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (Decree on Ecumenism) 3.

9. *Ut Unum Sint* 3; emphasis original.