

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Unity in the Church: Ephesians 4:1-6

Paul paints an amazing picture of the church in his letter to the Ephesians. He moves from his prayer for the church in 3:14-21 to a vision of what the church should look like in 4:1-16. There are two main thoughts which arise out of the first part of the passage. First of all, there is the encouragement to 'be one' (in 4:1-3), with the *characteristics* of unity. But then, secondly, that call is strengthened (in 4:4-6), where Paul talks about the *grounds* of unity.

1. The characteristics of unity (4:1-3)

The call to be one comes in verse 3. Notice that we are not asked to *create* the unity; we are asked to *keep* it. Somehow, the unity already exists, and we're called to maintain it, to *guard* it. We know from what Paul has said earlier in the letter that God's plan is to bring all things together under Christ (1:9-10). He goes on in chapter 2 to say that God has already begun his plan of unity in the church, in bringing people to himself, and in bringing alienated people, like Jews and Gentiles, together with each other (2:11-22). *God* is making us one. And yet, he calls *us* to guard this unity! God has brought his people together, made them into one new person, and yet *we need to work together* at preserving the oneness.

Paul says that we have to *make every effort* to keep the unity – which suggests that it's not always going to be easy. It's going to need hard work and effort. Fair enough, we might ask, but *how* are we to maintain this unity? In fact, Paul has already told us in verse 2, where he describes the qualities required for unity.

(a) Humility and gentleness (4:2)

First, Paul asks for humility and gentleness. The only way to keep the unity of the Spirit is by having humility and gentleness. If we're honest, we're sometimes tempted to

feel superior to others, for various reasons. 'Be humble', says Paul. Humility means a proper estimation of ourselves – not self-seeking or self-important, but a self that looks to others and for their best interests. If humility is the quality we need when others disagree with us, and when we may be wrong, then gentleness is the quality we need when we know that others are wrong and need correcting. 'Be gentle', says Paul. We know that in all relationships – whether in the workplace or in the home or in friendships – gentleness values and nurtures the other person.

(b) Patience and forbearance (4:2)

Then, says Paul, we also need patience and forbearance. Patience gives people room and time, to learn and develop. We need forbearance when other people are tiresome. It is important not to expect that I will ever join a group of Christians where I don't need to be patient with them and they don't need to be patient with me. Unless we get that clear, we will never be of any use to each other, and we will never be any use as a part of a body of believers. There is no way we can maintain unity without patience and forbearance.

Let's not take these things for granted. Let's make sure we hear what Paul says to the church at Ephesus and continue to apply it to ourselves. These, then, are the qualities Paul says we are to work at in our relationships with one another. These are the characteristics of unity: being loving, putting others first, being willing to play second fiddle, being gentle with others, not putting others down, being gracious. God help us all to be more humble and gentle, patient and forbearing. God help us cultivate these things with one another.

And, in case we still think it's too difficult, Paul gives us some *grounds* for unity.

2. The grounds of unity (4:4-6)

The passage reinforces the call to oneness by repeating the word 'one' seven times. All Christians have had experience of all these 'ones'. Our unity has a profound base: it's rooted in the work of God Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.

(a) We belong to the Spirit who indwells the body and gives us a hope (4:4)

1 Corinthians 12:13 reminds us that 'we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink'. By one Spirit we were all immersed into one body and made to drink of the Spirit. Notice the important word 'all': no Christian exists who has not been dunked into the body of Christ and who has not drunk of the Spirit. We all belong to the same one body. There is *one* body, *one* people of God – not two peoples of God; Jews and Gentiles have been brought together in the one body, and the one Spirit brings unity to the body by his indwelling. We are also called to one *hope*. Paul has already said in 1:13-14 that we have been 'marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit *guaranteeing our inheritance* until the redemption of those who are God's possession'. The Spirit, within my life as an individual, and within the church as a body of people, gives all of us a hope of heaven. That's true of the oldest believer in the church and the youngest believer in the church. We each have this hope.

(b) We confess Jesus as Lord in faith and baptism (4:5)

The one Lord has given us one faith and one baptism. We all have faith in the one Lord Jesus Christ. There isn't one faith for people of one skin colour or ethnic origin and another faith for people of another skin colour or ethnic origin; there isn't one faith for men and another for women. There's only one faith because there is only one Lord. There's only one baptism because there is only one Lord in whom believers

are united. We're all baptised into Christ. There's no exception for any who truly know the Lord God in Christ. There's no special way for missionaries or ministers or students or singles or middle-class people or clever people. We all meet at the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

(c) We worship the Father of all (4:6)

Paul ends by confessing the one God and Father over all creation. It's only on this one God that hope for harmony and unity can ever be built.

We need to take all these 'ones' on board, because they remind us that the things we possess in common, which unite us, are greater than the things which divide us. Of course, Paul goes on to say we're all *different*, that there are *different gifts*, all of which contribute to growth and harmony in the body of Christ (4:7-16). But the lesson of 4:1-6 has to be learned first.

Conclusion

What an amazing vision of the church Paul paints! A vision of oneness and harmony, a vision to challenge our individualism and our weak ideas of the church. Paul expects people to be able to look at us and see God's purpose to make everything one already begun in a united body of people. I wonder what people see when they look at us? What do *we* see when we look at us?! May we see more clearly a people together, a people who demonstrate humility and gentleness, patience and forbearance, a people who are aware of the amazing blessings we all have in Christ, and praising God that his plan for the universe has had its beginning in us, his people, the church.

Let's ask for God's love and mercy to enable us to be more patient and gentle with one another, and for forgiveness when we fail him and others. Let's praise him for the amazing things he has done for each one of us, those things which unite us, and let's be amazed and humbled that we're the first installment of his plan for the final unity of all things in Christ.