

October 15, 2023

UNITY, DIVERSITY, AND WALKING WORTHY OF OUR CALLING

Ephesians 4:1-16

(7 of 16 in a series through Ephesians)

Everyone wants to belong to a community or family bigger than themselves. It's why we have things like fraternities and sororities or groups like the masons or shriners club or even gangs. People long to belong to a group, bigger than themselves, where they feel they belong and are valuable. But the great thing is that the Lord has already provided for this need in the church. We've spoken, as we looked at that first chapter of Ephesians, about what the Lord has done for us individually. He chose and predestined us to be his holy, blameless children. He forgave us of our trespasses, opened our eyes to see the glory of the gospel in the face of Christ. He gave us the Spirit as a guarantee that the Lord will one day take us as his eternal possession. But one other glorious reality that we shouldn't overlook is that when the Lord called us out of this world to himself, he then called us to belong to a community, a body, a family—the church. And it's the church that every other community grouping is trying to imitate. It's the church that God promises he will be glorified through in every generation (Eph 3:20-21). It is a glorious reality.

And what Paul does in Ephesians 4-6 is he tells us how to live and how to live together as the church. Many have noted that after the first half of Ephesians focuses on the theological realities of the blessings of who we are and what we have in Christ, the second half focuses on what we are to do. This doesn't mean that there are no longer any rich theological truths to see. We'll see that when we consider the nature of marriage, for example, in 5:22-33. But it is true that Paul makes an obvious shift in the letter. In the first three chapters of this book there is only one exhortation, and that is to remember (2:11). But in the second half of this letter, we'll find thirty-nine exhortations.¹ And all of them flow out of the first verse of chapter 4 as Paul urges his readers to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (v.1).

When Paul uses the word “called” in his letters, he means “saved.” So Paul is saying that as those who have been saved by God's grace, we have a responsibility to live (i.e. “walk”) in a manner that honors the Lord. He's going to flesh this out eventually in terms of how we live in our homes and in the world, but the first place he starts is by noting how we are to live in light of the nature of the church.

The text itself breaks down into two sections. In verses 1-6 there is a focus on our unity as a body of believers. Then, in verses 7-16 there is a focus on the diversity of gifts that the church is supplied with. So, as a unified and diverse body, what does Paul want us to see in these verses? I'll note two points. The first is that we have to take on a gracious posture to maintain our Spirit-given unity.

¹ Benjamin Merkle, *Ephesians-Philemon*, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 68.

We must take on a gracious posture to maintain our Spirit-given unity

I want to show how the text makes this argument by explaining it in the order that makes sense to me, and maybe this will help you as well. If you start by looking at verses 4-6, you'll see that Paul makes an argument that the church is one, unified people. He says, "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

If you weren't counting, that is seven times he uses the word "one" in those verses. He's using this word repeatedly because he wants to show that when the Lord called a people out of the world and to himself, he brought them together as one. So, he begins with the church, using the metaphor of a "body," saying, "There is one body." Then, he refers to each person of the Triune God. He notes that there is one Spirit at the end of verse 4, one God and Father of all in verse 6, and "one Lord" in verse 5 (which a reference to the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ).

Now, the reason this is important (that is, that there's one God) is because the church is the body of Christ. Remember when Paul was on the road to Damascus, persecuting the church, and the Lord appeared to him in the sky, saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Well, in that moment the Lord was communicating something very clearly to Paul that he never forgot. When Paul persecuted the church, he was persecuting the Lord Jesus Christ, because the church is Christ's body. So, Paul brings up that there is one God because just as Christ is one, so is his body.

And as believers, we are all gathered into the body of Christ, professing our faith in one and the same baptism. The faith that we confess—the truth of the gospel—is one and the same. No one is saved by believing another gospel. Finally, as those who confess the one faith together in one baptism, we then are called to look to our one eternal hope, which is (again) the same for all of us who are in Christ. So, in this way, Paul has made very clear that when the Lord Jesus Christ put his people together as the church, he made us one—a unified people.

However, we know that the enemy hates the unity of any local church, and he is always working to undermine it and bring division. Therefore, in verses 1-3 Paul exhorts us to be eager to maintain the unity that the Spirit has created when he brought us together, united with Jesus Christ, who is our peace. And he tells us that we need to walk together, "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love" (v. 2). Or, as I've stated it, we need have a gracious posture toward one another.

Paul knows that putting a people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, classes, etc. together in the church, the Lord has done a beautiful thing. However, this also means that if we give in to our fleshly desires, we can create harmful division. We can be selfish and sinful. And even if we're not being selfish and sinful, we can simply be grating on each other. Someone with the best of intentions can rub you the wrong way, say something that arouses a painful memory, or lack the ability to read social clues. After all, the church isn't an institution where we say you have to have it all together and be really impressive before you join. We happily receive anyone

and everyone—even the outcasts of society—if they’re trusting in Christ. They are our brothers and sisters.

But we do also sin. We can intentionally be selfish, hurt one another, neglect one another, speak ill of one another. If you bring together into one body people from all kinds of places with different personalities, etc., it can feel like you’re (in the words of Bonnie Tyler), living in a powder keg and giving off sparks. It might even feel like we’re just waiting for the moment this whole thing blows up.

So Paul tells us how we need to conduct ourselves. First, he says with all humility and gentleness. Humility is the opposite of pride. It requires esteeming others above yourself and not thinking you’re entitled to something more than others. You can see why this attitude of humility breeds unity instead of division. Similarly, we walk in gentleness as opposed to being harsh with one another. Harshness drives another away while gentleness welcomes another. Then he adds “with patience.”

We noted last week that we’re all praying to be further conformed to the image of Christ. We want to be all that Christ wants us to be. But this side of the resurrection we’re not there. And sometimes we can be a bit slow in this growth, and so we’re required to have patience with one another. We recognize that it’ll take time for one another to reach maturity.

And, finally, we bear with one another in love. Again, as we’ve noted, we’ll sin against one another. This certainly should be followed by repentance and asking for forgiveness. After all, that’s what humility and gentleness demands. But we don’t then write one another off after such failures. But we bear with one another in love.

In short, we take a posture of grace toward one another. We are toward one another as Christ is toward us. Think of how he humbled himself to the point of death on a cross for us. Think of how he said that he was gentle and lowly with us and does not break us when we are bruised reeds. Think of how patient he’s been as we’ve struggled and grown. Consider how much he’s borne with us in love. He’s been gracious toward us, and we must take on that posture toward one another with an eagerness to maintain the unity that the Spirit has produced in uniting us together in Christ into one body. Imagine how much division in churches could have been avoided if those members chose to take on a posture of grace toward one another because they were eager to maintain Spirit-given unity.

But our mission as the people of God isn’t simply to stay united, as important and necessary as that is. Paul also notes that we must serve one another with our gifts so that we grow into Christlikeness.

We must serve one another with our gifts so that we grow into Christlikeness

As we noted earlier, verse 7 starts with a contrast, as Paul begins with the conjunction, “But.” However, he’s not backpedaling on the unity of the church or our need to live in a way to maintain that unity. Rather, he’s making clear that unity doesn’t mean uniformity.

I remember the first time I ever preached this section of Scripture, back in 2001 or 2002. I was sitting in Davis-Kidd Booksellers in their café, with my Bible open to this text, getting ready for Sunday, when I thought, “How can I illustrate what Paul is saying here?” And suddenly a group of middle schoolers walked in, all carrying cases with instruments in them, as over the loud speaker someone announced, “Welcome, a local middle school tuba band.” Needless to say, I left shortly after they began, but I had my illustration. Paul is saying, “Our unity doesn’t mean we all play the same instrument. The Lord has given us a diversity of gifts.”

The word Paul uses to refer to the gifts we’ve been given is “grace,” as he writes, “But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (v. 7). That is, each of us has been gifted with grace, according to the measure that Jesus sees fit. Then, in order to show this reality, Paul quotes from Psalm 68:18 and gives some commentary on it as he writes, “Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” (In saying, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean but that he’d had also descend into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things)” (vv. 8-10).

Let’s consider this for a moment. Paul first quotes Psalm 68:18 in verse 8 about the Lord ascending on high, leading a host of captives, and giving gifts to men. So, in order to understand this reference, let’s go over the nature of the Psalm. Psalm 68 was written most likely around the time that the ark of God was placed in the inner sanctuary in the tabernacle in Jerusalem.² The idea is that God is being enthroned in Jerusalem (which was on a mountain). His presence was there, and God was pictured as reigning, being enthroned after being victorious in war.

Now, what Paul wants to make clear is that he sees this imagery as being fulfilled in Christ. This is the point of the parenthetical note in verses 9-10. He’s simply saying that the verse refers to the Lord ascending, and it says that because it’s referring to the one who first descended to the earth.³ That is, it’s referring to God the Son who came to earth, took on flesh, lived, died, and was raised for us and for our salvation. Paul also points out that after he descended to the earth,

² Gary Smith suggests that it’s when the ark was placed in Solomon’s temple, but the superscription of the psalm tells us it was written by David, so the tabernacle fits better. See Gary V. Smith, “Paul’s Use of Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8,” *JETS* 18 (1975), 181-89.

³ This verse could be taken a few ways. You could interpret it as the ESV does, meaning that the Son descended into the lower parts of the universe, which is the earth (i.e. below the heavens). Or, you could take it that Jesus descended into the lower parts under the earth, meaning hades. The idea would then be that after his death but before his ascension, Jesus went to hades to proclaim his victory over those rebellious demons so that they would know their judgment is sure. It isn’t crucial that we know which is correct, and I’m going with the ESV translation here.

he ascended far above all the heavens in order that he might exercise his Lordship over all (i.e. “fill all things”).

But as much as that seems to fit, there is one problem. Paul has changed a pretty important word in his quotation of Psalm 68:18. In Psalm 68:18 David writes that the Lord “*received* gifts from men,” but in Paul’s quotation, he writes, “He *gave* gifts to men.” So, what do we do with that?

Some have simply said that we should recognize that Paul just changed a word to make it fit his point, and that’s enough. But I don’t think we can go that way because Paul doesn’t play fast-and-loose with the OT Scripture, and also he’s referencing this OT text in order to ground his argument. If you have to change the text to make it fit your argument, then you’d be better off not referencing it at all. So what then is Paul seeing here in order to think that by changing this word he’s being true to the text?

There are two options that I think are best, so I’ll mention both. One is that Paul understands that Psalm 68 is about God being a victorious warrior, and if the picture is of God conquering his enemies and then ascending to reign on Mount Zion, then it would have been pretty typical for a conquering king to take the spoil from his defeated enemies. That’s why the psalm says, “He received gifts from men.” However, Paul knows that the conquering king would then take the spoil of his enemies and give it as gifts to his people, and so Paul is simply completing the idea that would have been understood by those who knew this practice. To receive gifts from among those conquered would inevitably lead to giving gifts to your people, which is why Paul can write that here. The attractiveness of this proposal is that it’s simple and clear and works.

A second proposal is that Psalm 68 is reflecting on Israel’s history after God conquered the Egyptians, led his people into the promised land, and then set his presence among them as he dwelt with them in the tabernacle. But one important note in that story is God’s taking of the Levites. Here’s what I mean. Do you remember when the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt and spared their firstborn? The firstborn of the Egyptians all died, but the firstborn of the Israelites were spared. And so after God had conquered his enemies and delivered his people, he told the Israelites that their firstborn belonged to him. He’d bought them. However, he then told them that instead of taking their firstborn, he would take the Levites. Here’s what the Lord says in Numbers 8:14-19: “Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the sons of Israel, and the Levites shall be mine. Then after that the Levites may go in to serve the tent of meeting. But you shall cleanse them and present them as a wave offering; for they are wholly given to me from among the sons of Israel [i.e. God receives them as gifts from men]. I have taken them for myself instead of every first-born of all the sons of Israel [i.e. a host of captives]. For every first-born among the sons of Israel is mine. . . . But I have taken the Levites instead of every first-born among the sons of Israel. And I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and to his sons from among the sons of Israel, to perform the service of the sons of Israel at the tent of meeting, and to make atonement on behalf of the sons of Israel, that there may be no plague among the sons of Israel by their coming near the sanctuary [i.e. “gives gifts to men].”

Do you see that in back-to-back statements the Lord says, “I have taken the Levites . . . and . . . I have given the Levites”? So he took them for himself. He received them as gifts. But then he poured out his grace on them and gave them back to Israel to serve among the tabernacle so that the Lord might dwell in their midst. They were taken captive, graced, and given back to God’s people. Paul knows this background, and that’s why he mentions that those who were captives, who were received as gifts from among men, were given as gifts to men.

And as those given in Numbers 8 (and Psalm 68:18) were actual people, so that’s what Paul pictures for us in verse 11, saying, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.” Just as God gave Levites to minister at the tabernacle so that the people of God might be blessed, so Christ has taken individuals whom he graced and gave back to the church to serve—including apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers.

We mentioned the apostles and prophets a few weeks back, whose words were preserved for us as the New Testament. Evangelists seemed to be those who took the gospel to those who hadn’t heard, as Phillip is called “the evangelist” in Acts 21:8. And pastors is synonymous with elders, men who must be able to teach, so that all elders must be able to teach, but we also have teachers who aren’t elders.

And the purpose of these leaders is given in verse 12 as he tells us that they are given “to equip the saints for the work of ministry.” In other words, Paul doesn’t envision us setting aside a few to do ministry. Rather, pastors are charged to equip the saints for the work of ministry so that the saints might build up the body of Christ until the church is mature, conformed to Christ, not tossed around by every wind of doctrine, and taken in by deceitful schemes.

But I want us to see something here. Though Paul mentions these leaders, they’re not the only one who have been taken by Christ, graced, and given to the church. Remember Paul said in verse 7 that “grace was given to each one of us.” And he’ll tell us in verses 15-16 that the way that the body grows is only when “every joint with which the body is equipped, when each part is working properly,” it “makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

Paul is describing every member of the church. You’ve been captured by Christ and taken to himself. But then he’s lavished grace on you, according to the measure of his gift, and he’s given you as a gift to this church so that we may grow and be built up and become mature, everything Christ intended us to be. Each person has been given and placed strategically by Christ as exactly the gift we need to grow up into conformity to Christ. Therefore, each of us is crucial.

Imagine a picture of ten believers, each gifted perfectly as Christ intends, and given to each other. One is gifted in teaching, another in encouragement, another in service, and so on. And each is laboring and the other nine are gaining and benefitting and growing from the labor of the one. The one teaching begins teaching better because of the prayers and encouragement and service of the other. The one who prays starts praying better because she’s instructed how to pray better and encouraged in it, etc. Now, imagine how those ten will grow together as each

faithfully labors. And now imagine that's nearly 400 people laboring together. That's what Jesus has done here.

So, I want to make sure to do my part to pray and preach and teach and make sure that each member of this church is equipped for ministry. And then let's all faithfully serve one another, understanding that it's only when every joint with which this body is equipped is working properly that the whole will grow up in love. And as we do this, let's also take on a posture of grace toward one another, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit that has been given to us. And let's thank Christ for this beautiful gift of the church he's given as we come to the table. Amen.