

Maintaining The Unity

Ephesians 4:1-6

IT was finally Saturday, and Dad was looking forward to relaxing for a few minutes in his favorite chair with a cup of coffee. The kids were upstairs quietly playing, his wife had gone shopping, and everything was peaceful. He had enjoyed about a half cup of coffee before a loud argument erupted upstairs between the children. He could hear their voices getting louder and louder, and when it appeared that they were not going to resolve it on their own, he got up from his chair, walked to the bottom of the staircase, and called upstairs, “What’s going on up there? Are you fighting?”

One of his little girls came running to the top of the stairs, and said, “We’re not fighting, Daddy—we’re just playing church!”

Ooops. We might chuckle a little bit when we hear a story like that, but ultimately that’s very sad that children might think that playing church is similar to having a fight. Honestly, there are many churches where that might be true. Thankfully, there are many where that is *not* true, churches where there is love and unity, where the people work together to accomplish great and lasting things for the Kingdom of God. These are the churches where they have learned how to work together not only in unity, but with something known as “synergy.”

What is that? “Synergy” is defined as “two or more things working together in order to create something that is bigger or greater than the sum of their individual efforts” (www.yourdictionary.com). One very good example of synergy is when people come together to sing in a choir. The combination of their voices is stronger and many times more beautiful than if only one person was singing. They may sing different parts, and at times even different words, but the song is stronger because they work together. There is synergy when they join their voices like that.

Synergy doesn’t mean that all the parts are the same. In fact, they most likely are different, each of them contributing something from their uniqueness to make the unity stronger. We can look at our own bodies for a wonderful example of that. Someone pointed out once that we could have a hundred hands, but with no arms, the hands are of no good to us. Our eyes, our ears, our noses, even our skin, work in synergy with our brains to inform us of what is going on around us. Focus on the fingers of your hand for a moment. They are each different, yet they work together to do things that none of them could do alone.

There was an old *Peanuts* cartoon in which Lucy demanded that Linus change TV channels. Linus says, “What makes you think you can walk right in here and take over?” She showed him her hand and said, “These five fingers. Individually they’re nothing but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold.” Linus replies, “Which channel do you want?” Then he looks at his own fingers and says, “Why can’t you guys get organized like that?”

When fingers or body parts work together even though they are different, the result is much greater than if they tried to work alone. That whole idea of unity and synergy was what Paul was talking about. He had already effectively showed that God brought Jews and Gentiles together to make of them one new man, and there are some pretty sharp applications for us today. But now he turns to talking about how, since the Gentiles are part of the Body of Christ, they should learn to work together in peace.

He describes what that peace looks like by referring to the Trinity, in vv. 4-6. There are seven “one’s”—“*There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*” All this is because the one God and Father of all has created the one Body. The One Lord has brought about the one faith and the one baptism. All of this points to the unity that is to exist in the Body of Christ.

When we understand it that way, we understand that unity in the Church is much more than just a group of people who never argue. The Church operating in the truth of the early verses of Ephesians 4 is the Church which is made up of people who are different in so many ways, yet who work together to build the Kingdom.

We should compare two verses. Find Ephesians 2:15, and pick up with me about halfway: “*His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace.*” Put that verse alongside Ephesians 4:3—“*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*” Basically what Paul is saying here is that since Christ died to give you that peace in His Body, do whatever it takes to maintain that peace. He is saying, “Take this seriously, people! Christ died to give this peace to us, so we should treat it well.” And the words “Make every effort” are in present tense, meaning that there is *never* a time when we should not be applying ourselves to maintaining unity and peace in the Body of Christ.

Then there is the word “keep”—“*Make every effort to keep...*” That word means “to carefully guard,” which says to us that this is something that needs vigilant attention on a consistent basis.

But how? We each are different, aren't we? We each have our favorite hymns, favorite places to sit, differing opinions about one thing or the other, and we may even disagree about some of the teachings of Scripture. One of the things I really like about reading Paul's writings is that when he gives us a command like this one in 4:3, he usually tells us how to do what he is commanding. So in verse 2, he gives us four areas of our lives—four “must have's”—that need extra attention if we're going to maintain this unity that Christ died to give us.

1 Humility instead of pride

He says, “*Be completely humble.*” The King James Version uses the word “lowliness” here, though in other places it does translate it as “humility.”

This is pretty significant, when you think about it. Remember that chapters 1-3 tell us some of the things we believe as Christians, and chapters 4-6 tell us that since that is what we believe, here is how we should behave. The very first thing Paul told us about how we should live is that we should live lives worthy of the calling God has placed on our lives. That's verse one, and it serves as sort of an introduction to all the rest of the letter. From 4:2 to the end of Ephesians, Paul is telling us how to live lives worthy of that calling—and he starts with humility. It's important that Paul put this one first, because you certainly can't have unity without humility.

We could say that the opposite of humility is pride, and pride has done more to destroy the unity among God's people than probably anything else. You put a bunch of proud people together, and you have anything but unity. Or just insert one proud person into a group, and the entire group changes.

Pride is what separates me from God, and from other people in my life, because pride is what causes me to say that I am always right, and others are always wrong. It causes me to reject the ways and discipline of God in my life. On the other hand, humility brings me to a state where I submit to the working of God in my life. In our day, the idea of humility almost carries the idea of someone cowering in the corner, being afraid to say anything. The world's opinion of humility is that I have a low opinion of myself, that I don't think of myself very highly.

The Biblical definition of humility doesn't mean that I become a cowering doormat, but it does mean that I put others first. When we each are doing that in the church, we are each working to maintain the unity Christ has died to give us. There must be humility if there is to be unity.

2 Gentleness instead of anger

Second, notice that gentleness is paired with humility, because the two just naturally go together. The King James Version uses the word "meekness" here, which may give the wrong impression, because in our day, "meekness" conveys the idea of "weakness." But this word is something totally different!

Picture a team of oxen, their massive shoulders under the yoke, pulling a fully-loaded wagon. Picture a war horse, impatient to race into battle, yet waiting for its rider to give the signal. Picture a wind, blowing through the blades of a windmill. Get those images in your mind, and you've got the idea behind this word. It has the idea of strength under control.

Here is why gentleness is so essential to unity. Imagine over against this wall we have someone who gets angry at the slightest thing. Then imagine over against that wall, we have someone who never gets angry at anything. Right here in the middle is the person who is gentle, the one who has the power to get angry but many times chooses not to, the one who has power under control.

One of Sharon's brothers has a boxer-pit bull mix, named Rusty. That dog is huge, but one of the most gentle dogs I've ever seen. He stepped on my foot once and it hurt! He wags his tail and knocks things off the coffee table. If he stood up, he could place his paws on my shoulder. He has great strength, but he is so gentle. When we first took our little dog Gabi with us on a visit, Gabi thought she would express herself by running around Rusty and barking at him. His head is so big that he could swallow her with one gulp. But he just calmly ignored her until she got used to being around him. The way Rusty handled Gabi gives us a pretty good idea of what the New Testament word for gentleness is here—incredible power than remains under control.

When we each recognize that we perhaps have the right sometimes to get angry about something or at someone, but we choose not to, we are being obedient to Scripture which says that we are to exhibit gentleness toward each other. There must be gentleness if there is to be unity.

3 Patience instead of impatience

Next, Paul says that we are to “*be patient.*” The King James Version uses the word “longsuffering.” If we tell a child to be patient, it’s like we’re telling that child to just sit on his hands and be still. But this word used here is much more powerful than that.

In the Old Testament we see that God is described over and over as being “*slow to anger*” (Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 145:8). That is a similar word that means “long of nose.” Sounds a little funny to us, but think of it this way. Think of anger as residing deep inside, and when it flares up, it has to come up and out. If you are “long of nose” then it takes longer for the anger to come out. The Old Testament describes God as being “long of nose” or “slow to snort,” That’s the Old Testament idea of patience.

And when we come to the New Testament, we find pretty much the same idea. The New Testament word means “to be slow to burn,” and refers to how we handle anger. But this is more than just counting to ten when something happens we don’t like. When you combine patience with gentleness, you get the idea of great strength which is under control, strength which has the ability to lash out, but chooses not to.

I’ve seen it too many times, and you have, too. God’s Holy Spirit is moving in a church, with people being saved and hearts getting right with God. Then somebody loses patience with someone else or some decision that has been made, and the anger comes out quickly. They are not “slow to snort”; they are not “long of nose.” They are not “long-tempered.” They are *short*-tempered. And that demonstration of impatience destroys the work of God in that body of believers.

Look at all of what Paul said here—get the flow of his thought. “*Be patient, bearing with one another...*” *The New Living Translation* puts this as “making allowance for each other’s faults.” You see, it’s a whole lot easier to be tolerant of you and your faults when I remember that I probably have more faults than you do. The words that Paul used here refer to being patient with the shortcomings of others. We want God to be patient with us because of our sins; this is merely saying that unity in the Body of Christ depends upon our being patient with others when their flaws are out in the open.

Maintaining the unity that Christ died to give us requires that we refuse to let ourselves be inserted too much into the situation, that we step back and allow God

to do His work. There must be patience, bearing with one another, if there is to be unity.

4 Love instead of apathy

This is last, but it caps off all the rest: *“bearing with one another in love.”* Paul wrote in another place, *“If I have not love, I am nothing”* (1 Corinthians 13:2). We can be perfectly humble and gentle, patient and bearing with one another, but if the love of God is missing, we’re going to run into trouble at some point along the way.

Some might say that the opposite of love is hate, but I think it is apathy. Apathy causes us to not care when someone is in trouble and hurting, or when they need a listening ear or a helping hand. Apathy causes us to shut down our love for others while we move on to something else.

There are two primary types of love in the church today. One is brotherly love, many times expressed in a firm handshake and a hug and a “how are you doing today?” But it has to be much more than that, because sometimes we just don’t feel like going through the motions. We don’t feel well, or we didn’t sleep much the night before, or perhaps we’re just in a general bad mood. And if I walk in one day with a frown on my face because I didn’t sleep much last night, and I don’t greet you as heartily as I did the time before, you might say to yourself, “Hmmm... wonder what’s wrong with him?” I might think the same thing about you. Brotherly love begins to break down here if we’re not careful. So there must be a different kind of love in the church if we’re going to maintain this unity Paul is writing about. It has to be more than that.

So Paul didn’t use the word for brotherly love here—he used the word that describes God’s love for us when He sent Jesus to die on the Cross for our sins. Look at that phrase again and read it this way: *“bearing with one another with the love of God.”* The love of God is expressed in the way we stand in the gap in prayer for one another. It is fleshed out in the ways that we forgive each other and refuse to believe the worst about each other. I communicate the love of God toward you when I hurt when you hurt and rejoice when you rejoice. We share the love of God for each other when we put the needs of each other first. The love of God is lived out in the ways that we serve one another, in the ways we show humility and gentleness and patience toward each other. There must be the love of God lived out, demonstrated even toward those with whom we may not have much in common, if we are going to maintain the unity Christ died to give us.

There it is—four indispensable qualities that must exist in the Church in order for there to be the kind of unity that honors God and glorifies Christ. There must be humility. There must be gentleness. There must be patience, bearing with one another. And above all, there must be the love of God.

When there is this kind of unity, the church is more effective in reaching others with the Gospel. This unity we read about here in the Scriptures is what brings us together and causes us to work in unity and synergy with one another, even if we are different in many ways. We not only are different in our appearances and our opinions and convictions, but we are different in the gifts God has given to us as well.

Bringing it all together under one Head, which is Christ, was God’s glorious plan from the beginning. But according to the Scriptures, it is up to us to maintain it. We do that with humility, gentleness, patience and love.

Paul wrote in Romans 15—

“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”
(Romans 15:5-6)