

EPHESIANS 4:1-16

THE CHURCH IN ITS UNITY, DIVERSITY AND MATURITY

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SESSION 4 - ESSENTIAL UNITY (Ephesians 4:1-6)

INTRODUCTION

Following three chapters of teaching and prayer, Paul turns to urgent exhortation.

- Stott "Instruction, intercession and exhortation constitute a formidable trio of weapons in any Christian teacher's armoury."

I. THE NECESSITY FOR EXHORTATION (4:1)

(a) Revelation leads to exhortation.

Although Paul has communicated doctrine and revelation of magnificent proportions, declaring all the breathtaking initiatives that God has taken and the extraordinary status into which each Christian has been brought, he does not take for granted that Christian standards will automatically follow.

Although he has also prayed prayers of breathtaking perspective - "That you may be filled up to all the fullness of God."! (Ephesians 3:19) Paul still sees the need to exhort.

God's actions always precede our response. Instruction always precedes exhortation.

(b) Exhortation must not be neglected.

We might ask, why do people who are 'under grace not law' and 'filled with the Holy Spirit' need any exhortation at all? Are we in danger of imposing law and commandment to those who should be simply 'resting in grace' and 'free in the Spirit'?

Paul clearly saw the need to urge, exhort and appeal (even, though rarely, command).

Spirit-filled Christians who are enjoying God's grace still need to be exhorted and will need such exhortation until 'the perfect comes'.

There will come a time when we live in glorified bodies on a glorified planet, when all that defiles and Satan himself has been destroyed. Then there will be no need for exhortation. There will be no enemies such as 'the world, the flesh and the Devil' and we shall be able to do what Augustine suggested, namely, "Love God and do what you like." But until the perfect comes we shall need exhortation and must not fear it or regard it as legalism.

As a movement, those of us within New Frontiers who have emphasised *enjoying God's grace* and *living in the Spirit*, must not be afraid of exhortation. We must receive it well and not fail to give it well.

(c) Passivity is to be avoided.

We are not called to work for salvation, nevertheless we are called to "work out our salvation".

God's activity comes first but the 'therefore' is addressed to us, calling for a response.

- Lincoln "It expresses a pastoral appeal to the reader's will and actions and Paul often made clear that such an appeal derived from the content of the Gospel. The imperatives of ethical exhortation were based on the indicatives of the eschatological salvation inaugurated in Christ."
- Lloyd Jones " 'Therefore' is a word which in a very practical way tells us how to read the Scriptures...In the light of this word *therefore* we must say that sanctification is not a gift to be received; it is rather something that has to be worked out in the light of the doctrine."

(d) Paul's personal appeal.

Paul writes with great urgency (emphatic - 'ego'). As the prisoner of the Lord, having set out the enormity and the glories of their 'calling' in the earlier chapters, he now appeals to them to walk worthy of such magnificent privileges. What follows, therefore, is not to be seen as mere moral advice.

- Lincoln "The appeal to live worthily of God's calling pre-supposes that God's gracious initiative requires a continuous human response and that his call bestows both high privilege and high responsibility."

II. CHRISTIAN UNITY DEPENDS ON EXCELLENT ATTITUDE AND CONDUCT (4: 2 & 3)

(a) Bearing with one another in love.

Love is a key word in this passage. The high goals anticipated for the body of Christ can only be accomplished by a walk of love.

We work with imperfect people so forbearance is fundamental.

- (i) With humility - Lit "lowliness of mind" (not high minded Ro 12:16)
Humility was regarded negatively by the Greco-Roman world - contemptible.
- Armitage Robinson "To the Greek mind humility was little else than a vice of nature. It was weak and mean-spirited; it was the temper of the slave; it was inconsistent with that self respect which every true man owed to himself."
- (ii) Gentleness (the meekness that is willing to yield).
Jesus was meek and lowly (Mt 11:29)
- (iii) Patience. (literally "long temper" as opposed to short-tempered).

(b) Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in bond of peace.

- (i) Make every effort.
- Barth "It is hardly possible to render exactly the urgency contained in the Greek verb. Not only haste and passion, but a full effort of the whole man is meant...excluding passivity, or a wait and see attitude."
- (ii) The unity of the Spirit.
- Lincoln "The unity of the Spirit involves not the human spirit but the Holy Spirit and is not congeniality of some social grouping but the unity which God's Spirit gives. Although this unity is already given and is not therefore their own achievement, it must be preserved and protected."
- Fee "The 'unity of the Spirit' does not refer to some sentimental or esoteric unity that believers should work towards. Rather, Paul is speaking of something that exists prior to the exhortation. Whether they like it or not, their lavish experience of the Spirit, which they have in common with all others who belong to Christ, has made them members of the one body of Christ, both on the larger scale and in its more immediate expression in the local community."
- (iii) The bond of peace.
- Fee "Along with Romans 14:17 and 15:13 this passage is the clear indication that for Paul 'peace' as the fruit of the Spirit refers not so much to inner tranquility as to the necessary *shalom* that Christ effected, in bringing an end first of all to the hostility between God and people, and secondly to the similar hostility between people(s)...'The war is over; let us keep the peace' is Paul's point."

III. OUR UNITY IS DEEPLY ROOTED IN GOD (4:4-6)

One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father.

- Morris "The style is staccato; there is a scarcity of verbs (we can insert 'There is' at the beginning but Paul actually starts right in with 'One body'). Paul simply has a series of nouns, each preceded by 'one'. The word 'one' runs through the whole section; seven times Paul uses this word. Clearly it is important for him that believers are one."
- Lloyd-Jones "We are all parts and portions and members of the Church, so if we do not understand the New Testament doctrine of the Church there is a sense in which all its appeals and exhortations and indicatives will be quite meaningless to us. Most of our troubles arise chiefly from the fact that we persistently start with ourselves; we are too subjective. This is one of the main results of sin. Sin puts man himself in the centre."

Paul's exhortations are rooted in God and the Trinity. In fact the church on earth is to be a demonstration of the oneness of the triune God.

Although the Trinity is undergirding this passage, the normal order of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is reversed by Paul, reflecting their actual experience in church life. (see also 1 Cor 12:4-6).

(i) One Body.

- (a) One of Paul's favourite illustrations in connection with the Church, particularly when emphasising its unity (Eph 1:23-2:16).
- (b) In spite of many groups and denominations the true 'mystical' church is only one.
- (c) Down through the centuries there has only ever been one church.
- (d) Not the amalgamation of individual entities brought together to make a body, but all growing out from one.
- (e) Great diversity in members as in a human body. Nevertheless, one.
- (f) Even uniting Jew and Gentile (Eph 2:16).

(ii) One Spirit.

Their experience of the Holy Spirit underlined their unity.

Acts 2:4 "*All* were filled with the Holy Spirit."

Acts 4:31 "They were *all* filled with the Holy Spirit."

Acts 10:44 "The Holy Spirit came on *all* who heard the message."

- Fee "They are the one body of Christ by their common life in the Spirit."

1 Cor 12:13 "We were all baptised in (Greek 'en') one Spirit into one body, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."

Not only that, the Holy Spirit was the foretaste and guarantee of future inheritance (Eph 1:14), pointing forward to the hope before them.

(iii) One Hope.

Once, as sinners, they had no hope (Eph 2:12), now they are filled with a glorious hope.

- Lincoln "The one hope of Ephesians is not something individual and private but corporate and public, hope for a cosmos that is unified and reconciled, a world in which everything is brought together in harmony through that which God has done in Christ... The writer recognises that what his readers hope for in the end will determine what they practice in the present. The one hope of final cosmic unity is therefore meant to produce the urgent effort to maintain and demonstrate the anticipation of this in the Church."

Hope for a glorious future gripped the early church.

Romans 8:23 "And not only this but also we ourselves having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved but hope that is seen is not hope. For why does one also hope for what he sees?"

Future salvation includes the redemption and glorification of our bodies.

Indeed, a new glorified creation.

Matt 19:27,28 "In the regeneration when the Son of Man shall sit on His throne in glory."

Acts 3:19 "Heaven must retain Him until the restoration of all things."

The fate of creation is indissolubly linked with that of man.

The fate of man and that of the cosmos are inextricably linked.

- Lloyd Jones "The redeemed will dwell in our glorified bodies on a glorified earth, under glorified heavens."

NOT - "In the ocean of your love
We lose ourselves in heaven above."

The blessed hope of His appearing.

(iv) **One Lord.**

He is unique in His person.

(a) He was the man who captivated Peter - "It is the Lord!"

(b) But Peter came to see he was "both Lord and Christ - this Jesus whom you crucified!" Peter came to see the fulfilment of the prophetic Psalm, "The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand..." (Acts 2:34-36).

- (c) One of Paul's favourite titles for Christ, by virtue of Christ's resurrection and ascension, he was honoured with the title 'Lord' (kurios) formerly reserved for Yahweh (Phil 2).

He is unique in His Work.

There is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

He is unique in his relationship with us.

1 Cor 6:19-20 "We are not our own. We are bought at a price."

Christ is uniquely our Lord and master.

Not only objectively declared to be Lord but also subjectively honoured as our personal Lord.

(v) One Faith.

- (a) Probably not a reference to the subjective experience of faith.
- (b) Probably not a carefully detailed and finalised creed. (Since Paul projects in Ephesians 4:13 that we will ultimately attain to the unity of the faith.)
- (c) Probably a reference to the basic certainty of salvation by faith in Christ, knowing him to be Lord and receiving his gift of righteousness, the fundamental truth of salvation through Christ alone, which we express in our baptism. (See Col 1:23 "...if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard..." (ESV) - see also Col 2:7)

(vi) One Baptism.

Strange for us to think of baptism as a uniting factor! Sadly, baptism has been a divisive factor in church history.

But in the New Testament water baptism was expected upon conversion (not as vital to salvation - eg man on the cross). But in normal Christian church life a recognised accompaniment to conversion.

A place where initiation, commitment and devotion is expressed, carrying with it the concept of the end of one life and the beginning of another (Rom 6:3, Gal 3:27).

(vii) One God.

"One God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

- Lincoln "Behind this acclamation lies that of Paul in 1 Cor 8:6, which was in turn a Christian modification of the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4. It contains the characteristically Christian way of speaking of the one God as Father (see also Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15). Here in Ephesians is basically an affirmation of God's supreme transcendence, 'above all', and his pervasive imminence, 'through all and in all'."
- Stott "We must assert that there *can* be only one Christian family, only one Christian faith, hope and baptism, and only one Christian body, because there is only one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. You can no more multiply churches than you can multiply God. Is there only one God? Then he has only one Church. Is the unity of God inviolable? Then so is the unity of the Church. The unity of the Church is as indestructible as the unity of God himself. It is no more possible to split the Church than it is possible to split the Godhead."

The unity of the Godhead is expressed in the mystery of the diversity of the persons of the Trinity. There is not total uniformity between the three persons but there is absolute unity.

CONCLUSION

Paul opens the way to his majestic chapter on the Church as Christ's body with an urgent appeal for humility and love, followed by a thoroughgoing argument for its essential unity, because of the Church's roots in the Trinity itself.

In an age of disunity and private and public selfishness and individualism we must be consistent in our urgent desire to maintain true unity within the Church, remembering that the Church of which Paul speaks consists of those described in his first three chapters.