

Unity

UNITY IS A GIFT IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

Focal Verses • EPHESIANS 4:1-16

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson we will: EXPLORE God's purpose for the Church; APPRECIATE that every believer has an important responsibility in the church; and DECIDE to pursue unity as the body of Christ.

In Focus

Aaron said a quick prayer of thanksgiving to God that he could walk away from Deacon Foster without an argument. Deacon Foster was a fine deacon, but as he advanced in age, his temperament became more disagreeable. Aaron still had great respect for him, but Aaron and many of the younger church members sought changes in the church's ministries, including its business practices. Some of the younger church members were frustrated because they wanted to use their gifts more meaningfully within the church.

Aaron laughed to himself, "I'm 42 years old, but 'Deac' still looks at me as one of the young folks in the church."

Deacon Foster saw no need for changes. The church had operated just fine for 137 years on the same practices and should continue to do so. Finding no common ground with Deacon Foster, Aaron determined to pray that God would unify the younger and older generations of the church under God's vision for the church.

Aaron is thankful he prayed for unity because there was a time when he would have exploded all over the elderly deacon for being so shortsighted. "By the grace of God," he thought, "I am maturing in Christ."

Although each church has its problems, how can the younger and older generations unite to use their gifts to build up the church to the glory of God?



Keep in Mind

"There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;
One Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:4-5, KJV).

Focal Verses

KJV **Ephesians 4:1** I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,

2 With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love;

3 Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

4 There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;

5 One Lord, one faith, one baptism,

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

7 But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.

8 Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.

9 Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?

10 He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.)

11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;

12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ:

14 That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive;

15 But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:

16 From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

The People, Places, and Times

Gifts. Spiritual gifts are the skills and abilities given to all believers by the Father through His Spirit. These gifts enable Christians to carry out His plan. Jesus promised His disciples that they also would receive the gift of the Spirit, who would guide them (Mark 13:11; Luke 11:13). His promise was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–47). The Spirit was given to every believer. Paul's epistles (letters to the churches) reveal that this continued in all the churches. Every believer receives giftings from the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4–7). Spiritual gifts are for the benefit of the body of believers, not just for individual benefit or pleasure. The greatest

gift, which Paul said every believer should possess, is love (1 Corinthians 12:31–13:1).

Background

In previous portions of his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul laid the foundation concerning Christ and His Church. Now, he switches his focus to a more practical purpose, setting out guidelines for his readers concerning Christian conduct. But first, he gives them an overview of the church's place in the world. Paul called for the Ephesians to be true to who they are called to be in Christ and noted several truths for them to embrace: (1) it's their responsibility to be one in the body; (2) the call for unity does not

mean that they should strive for a type of dull sameness; (3) the church is a living organism, made up of living beings who are expected to grow according to their use of the gifts Christ has given them; (4) Christ desires that the church reach maturity and that the people of the church be prepared to exercise their gifts; and (5) as the church grows, its members should take on the nature and character of its head, Christ Jesus.

At-A-Glance

1. The Church's Calling to Unity (Ephesians 4:1–6)
2. The Church's Gifts (vv. 7–12)
3. The Road to Maturity (vv. 13–16)

In Depth

1. The Church's Calling to Unity (Ephesians 4:1–6)

Paul considered himself a prisoner for the Lord as well as one who belonged to the Lord. Always positioning himself as the example, he issued a plea to the Ephesian Christians to walk worthy of their “vocation,” or to live in a manner that is consistent with their high calling from God (v. 1). The Christian's call is the divine summons that was answered at the time of conversion. Our calling is not a hobby or a pastime. It is our life's achievement—our job.

The word “walk” is a literal translation of a Hebrew idiom for everyday conduct. The word “worthy” connects God's plan for us and our acceptance of that plan, as demonstrated in the way we live. Paul had previously cautioned against boasting concerning good works. Now, he advises them to live out their calling with humility. He did not want them to become arrogant about their godly living. They were also to exercise patience toward the faults and failings of others and among those with different personality types

and temperaments. We are to genuinely have patience for one another with love. The reason for possessing these qualities—“lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing”—is for unity within the body of Christ (v. 2). When Christ established the Church, He abolished the greatest dividing line within humanity—the barrier that separated Jews and Gentiles.

Now, it was the responsibility of the early church members to try with all earnestness to avoid creating human divisions among God's people. Arguments and dissension threaten to destroy the “bond of peace” within the body of Christ. There is but one Spirit in the church; nothing can destroy that unity. However, bickering and quarrels can destroy the peace that binds the members of the body of Christ. A healthy formula for keeping the unity is threefold: unity in those things that are essential to the faith, liberty in those matters that are nonessential or not absolute, and love in all circumstances.

Despite the vast number of Christian churches worldwide, there is only one body of believers. The same Spirit who dwells in every believer also lives in the body of Christ. There is but one hope in which every believer has placed his or her trust. Our one Lord is the Savior who shed His blood for our sins. We all share a common faith in that one Lord and Savior. There is one baptism by which we profess our faith in Christ. The one God and Father is supreme above all.

2. The Church's Gifts (vv. 7–12)

The unity of the church must be balanced by its odd twin, diversity. Unity is often confused with uniformity. The Christian Church is communal; every member makes a contribution. Each member of the body of Christ has been given grace, or a particular gift or role to fulfill. No two members are alike. No member should try to imitate the other's gifts. In other letters, Paul outlines the necessity for giving equal value

to the gifts of every believer. By His grace, He has given these gifts as He sees fit. The risen Lord bestowed these gifts by first sending His most excellent gift, the Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 4:8, Paul quotes Psalm 68:18 as a prophecy that the Messiah would ascend to heaven and conquer His foes and lead them captive. As a reward for His victory, He would receive gifts for humankind.

In Ephesians 4:9, Paul wanted to show that the prophecy could have referred only to Christ. If Jesus ascended into heaven, He must have first come down from heaven. Paul and others understood “lower parts of the earth” to mean that Christ descended into hell. The Gospel of Luke, however, indicates that His spirit went to heaven when He died (Luke 23:43, 46). The prophecy of Psalm 68:18 was fulfilled by the birth, death, and burial of Jesus. The ascended Christ is the giver of all gifts and the source of all blessings. He fills all things. In giving us gifts, Christ has a specific purpose in sight. All of God’s saints are to be equipped with the gifts necessary to discharge their duties in the world.

In Ephesians 4:10, Paul proceeds to explain the nature of some of these gifts of grace. Apostles were those persons directly commissioned by the Lord to preach the Word and plant churches. They were those who had seen the risen Christ. Prophets were the mouthpieces for God. They received revelations directly from the Lord, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, and passed them on to the church. Evangelists are those who preach the Good News. They have been divinely equipped to go out into the world and lead persons to Christ. Pastors are those who serve as God’s under-shepherds, caring for the sheep of His flock. It is their responsibility to guide and feed the flock. The New Testament gives the impression of a number of pastors at a local church instead of one (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Peter 5:1–2).

Teachers are persons divinely gifted to teach and explain the Bible and what it means. A Bible teacher endeavors to connect God’s Word into

everyday life. The purpose of all these gifts is for leaders to enable “the perfecting (or equipping) of the saints” so that all are prepared “for the work of the ministry” and, ultimately, “for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12). These gifts should always be used to empower others to do even greater deeds for the sake of the kingdom.

3. The Road to Maturity (vv. 13–16)

At this point, Paul may have anticipated the question, “How long will this process of growing continue?” In verse 13, Paul explains that this will go on “Till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.” Little can prepare the mind for the unity that exists in the afterlife. As long as we live, no matter how hard we try, we will have innumerable differences. This will continue until we are able to see Him as He truly is and to know as we are known. At that time the “unity of the faith” will occur. Until then, there will be room for growth. When we obtain full knowledge, we enter the state of “perfect man.” The word “perfect,” used in the King James Version, is translated “complete.” Our Christian journey is done when we come to the place of full knowledge of Christ and unity of our faith.

Verses 14–15 describe the growth process in the body of Christ. As we continue toward spiritual maturity, some things will become apparent. We are no longer like “children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (v. 14). As we grow to be more like Him, we grow in our knowledge of Him. Our understanding is solid and sure. No one can then persuade us to change our beliefs. All disciples are called upon to grow. Discipleship is a process. It is not a course of study from which we will earn a diploma and never revisit again. There is always room for growth, for training, for new understanding, and for enlightenment. As we grow in Christ, so do our challenges. The longer we live, if we are achieving spiritual maturity, we learn to lean on Him more, trusting more fully

in His promises and His providence. When we encounter brothers and sisters who have gone astray in their thinking and beliefs, we are commanded to speak “the truth in love,” helping each other to grow toward the head, which is Christ Jesus. He is both the goal of our growth and the source of our growth. As the church receives its life from Him who supplies all of our needs, quite naturally, growth comes from Him, too. But Paul adds that the church grows “toward” Christ as we as individuals grow “in” Christ.

Search the Scriptures

1. What did Paul “beseech” the Ephesian Christians to do (Ephesians 4:1)?
2. What reasons does Paul give them for exhibiting characteristics such as lowliness and meekness (v. 3)?
3. What are the seven things we are to share as one (vv. 4–6)?
4. How is the body of Christ put together through Christ (v. 16)?

Discuss the Meaning

Some Christians tend to forget that their talents and abilities are spiritual gifts from God. In what ways do believers begin to take credit for themselves? Include yourself.

Liberating Lesson

There is a real danger among Christians to look at ourselves as having “arrived” in regard to our spiritual growth. We can never fully know God in this life; therefore, Christian discipleship is not a course of study to be completed. It is a process that causes us to change and grow continuously if we yield ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We are never too old to learn in matters concerning the kingdom. The oldest, most seasoned Christian can still learn about God’s love from a newborn baby. A true sign of Christian maturity is in knowing there is still more to be known.

Application for Activation

Are there ways that you stunt your own spiritual growth because you are not willing to lend yourself to new challenges that are presented to you? Do you ever think, “I’m too old to be learning how to do that now,” or “I’ve lived long enough to know what I’m talking about”? Think about an area of your life where you may be inhibiting your spiritual development, thereby building a wedge between you and the Father.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

Sources:

- Butler, Trent, ed. *Holman Bible Dictionary*, Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991. Dictionary.com. <http://dictionary.reference.com/> (accessed October 20, 2011).
- Henry, Matthew. “Ephesians 4.” Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible. Vol. VI – Acts to Revelation. Christian Classics Ethereal Library.org. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc6.Eph.html> (accessed October 20, 2011).
- New Testament Greek Lexicon. Bible Study Tools.com. <http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/> (accessed October 20, 2011).

Say It Correctly

Stature. **STACH**-er.

Sleight. **slite**.

Daily Bible Readings

DAY 281

John 8:1–59

Psalms 117

DAY 282

John 9:1–41

Psalms 118:1–7

DAY 283

John 10:1–42

Psalms 118:8–14

DAY 284

John 11–13

Psalms 118:15–21

DAY 285

John 14–15

Psalms 118:22–29

DAY 286

John 16–17

Psalms 119:1–32

DAY 287

John 18–21

Psalms 119:33–64

Notes
