

Life Together

“Part 2: Unity”

Text: Ephesians 4:1-6

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on October 28, 2018 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** There is an allegory that imagines the church to be sailors on a ship. Through Jesus, God has rescued us as from drowning and enlisted us to serve on his ship that is sailing to the golden shore. But as the story goes,
- ***“This is no cruise ship; it’s a battleship. We aren’t called to a life of leisure; we are called to a life of service. Each of us has a different task. There is concern, however, regarding the disunity of the crew. When we first boarded we assumed the crew was made up of others like us. But as we’ve wandered these decks, we’ve encountered curious converts with curious appearances.***
 - *Some wear uniforms we’ve never seen, sporting styles we’ve never witnessed. ‘Why do you look the way you do?’ we ask them. ‘Funny,’ they reply. ‘We were about to ask the same of you.’*
- ***The variety of dress is not nearly as disturbing as the plethora of opinions...***
 - *Some think once you’re on the boat, you can’t get off. Others say you’d be foolish to go overboard, but the choice is yours. Some believe you volunteer for service; others believe you were destined for the service before the ship was even built.*
 - *Some predict a storm of great tribulation will strike before we dock; others say it won’t hit until we are safely ashore.*
- ***And then there is the issue of the weekly meeting at which the captain is thanked and his words are read. All agree on its importance, but few agree on its nature.***
 - *Some want it loud, others quiet. Some want ritual, others spontaneity. Some want to celebrate so they can meditate; others meditate so they can celebrate. Some want a meeting for those who’ve gone overboard. Others want to reach those overboard but without going overboard and neglecting those on board.*
- ***The consequence is a rocky boat. There is trouble on deck. Fights have broken out. Sailors have refused to speak to each other. There have even been times when one group refused to acknowledge the presence of others on the ship. Most tragically, some adrift at sea have chosen not to board the boat because of the quarreling of the sailors.***
 - ***‘What do we do?’ we’d like to ask the captain. ‘How can there be [unity] on the ship?’***
- **Unity.** It is a big subject in the New Testament. And yet in reality it seems there is often so little of it in the church. Why is that? This past week I figured out the problem with this church. It is simple really: the problem with most of *you* is that you are not like *me*.
 - Let’s just be really honest right now: this church is packed with all kinds of personalities, different opinions, different interests, different backgrounds, and some people just rub you the wrong way. I bet you are thinking of someone right now. But guess what? Someone is also thinking of you.
 - So how can Central be unified when so many things work against unity? In Ephesians 4:1-6 Paul gives us great help. He talks about three things: *the importance of unity, the meaning of unity, and the experience of unity.*

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNITY

- The first point is very quick. **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** Let me show you **the importance of unity**.
 - To feel the weight of this passage we must recognize where it falls within the book of Ephesians. For three straight chapters Paul has told us about the grace of God.
 - When we were dead in our sins God made us alive. When we were under God's wrath, Jesus redeemed us through his blood. We were far off but through the blood of Jesus have been brought near. We have access to God the Father and are loved and chosen by him. God called us into a relationship with himself. We did not earn it. We did not deserve it. God called us to himself. It is by grace we have been saved.
- Now that Paul has spent three chapters telling us of this glorious calling and all the benefits we receive in Christ, he turns in chapter 4-6 to tell us how this calling should change the way we live.
 - **READ 1 - *I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.***
 - Note that Paul says we received it. We did not earn it. We did not deserve it. But God called us to himself and lavished his grace upon us. Truly it is by grace that we have been saved. That is our identity.
- So what does that look like in every day practical life? Verse 2 says we are to be humble, gentle, patient, and forbearing. Why? For the purpose of unity. Look at verse 2. Verse 3 summarizes it for us.
 - **READ 3 - *eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.***
 - Do you see how important unity is? When Paul wants to begin applying the gospel to our lives, the first area he brings up is this issue of unity among Christians in a local church. Again, the whole context here assumes that every Christian is a committed member of a local church. And one of the key ways that you live a life worthy of the calling you received is to recognize the importance of unity in the church you are a part of.

THE MEANING OF UNITY

- So that is the importance of unity. Secondly, let's talk about **(SHOW SLIDE 3) the meaning of unity**.
 - This may come as a surprise to you but notice that
- **(SHOW SLIDE 4) unity is *not* something we must work to create.**
 - That may seem like a bizarre statement. Yet this is exactly where we must begin. To miss this point will derail us before we begin.
 - If we are going to experience unity, we need to begin by changing the entire way we think about unity.
- Notice Paul does *not* say, ***"Create unity, develop unity, or produce unity."***
 - No, he says, ***"maintain"*** it. To maintain something assumes it already exists but is in danger of being lost. If I say, ***"maintain the garden"*** then my words assume there already is a garden. This is very different than me saying, ***"make a garden."*** If I tell you to maintain the garden then my words also assume that the garden is in danger perhaps from weeds or deer eating the plants.
 - So notice that Paul assumes that Christians are already unified but we must maintain this unity because it is in danger.
- In verse 3 Paul says that our unity is a ***"unity of the Spirit."*** The Holy Spirit creates our unity with each other. We are already perfectly united in the Spirit.
 - When God saved us 1 Corinthians 12:13 says, ***"We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body...and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."***

- So this should change our perspective on unity. **(SHOW SLIDE 5) unity is not something we must work to create because we are already perfectly united in the Spirit.**
 - If you have placed your faith in Jesus then you have been united to Jesus by the Holy Spirit. The same thing is true for the Christian sitting next to you. We are one in the Spirit. We are one body. We are one family.
 - Our unity is not based on common interests, or ethnicity, or language, or the fact that we live in Victoria. Our unity is based on the good news of what God has done for us through Christ in uniting us to himself by the Spirit.
- Now we are ready to add the last part of what Paul means by unity. Let me take all we have said and reword it into one sentence with the last piece added. Here's what Paul means by unity. **(SHOW SLIDE 6) Christians do not create unity but are to preserve/maintain the unity we already have in the Spirit.**
 - The focus here is on preserving and maintaining the unity we already have in the Spirit. We cannot create this unity or remove it but we can fail to demonstrate it.
 - Let me put it this way: I am united to the Priebe family by blood. I cannot be more Priebe than I already am. Likewise, I cannot be less Priebe than I already am. That unity is unbreakable. I cannot create it or remove it. But I can fail to demonstrate this family unity in all sorts of ways. I can talk poorly about my parents, backstab my brothers, refuse to accept my two sister in laws, or reject my nephews and nieces.
- Do you see Paul's progression of thought? The deepest reality about us is that we are all one in Christ by His Spirit. Paul is saying then, ***“Christian, the way you outwardly treat other Christians must reflect the inward reality of your oneness in the Spirit.”***
 - Paul is saying that we must strive to ensure that this amazing invisible reality of unity is manifested in everyday concrete visible ways.
- And Paul's language could not be more forceful on how hard we are to work at this. He knows people are difficult. He knows this takes effort but he says we are to be ***“Eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit.”*** Commentator Marcus Barth puts it so well:
 - ***(SHOW SLIDE 7) “It is hardly possible to render exactly the urgency contained in the underlying Greek verb. Not only haste and passion, but a full effort of the whole man is meant, involving his will, sentiment, reason, physical strength, and total attitude...[it] excludes passivity, quietism, a wait-and-see attitude...Yours is the initiative! Do it now! Mean it! You are to do it! I mean it! – such are the overtones of verse 3.”***¹
- Do you see the consequences for us? If we allow gossip or criticism in this church, we fail to demonstrate the reality of our oneness. If we allow anger and bitterness in this church, we are denying the reality that we are brothers and sisters in the one family.
 - John Stott puts it this way: ***(SHOW SLIDE 8) “We are to demonstrate to the world that the unity we say exists indestructibly is not the rather sick joke it sounds but a true and glorious reality.”***²
 - Brothers and sisters, you and I are called to diligently work at maintaining the unity we already have in the Spirit.

¹ Cited in John Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today – Ephesians*, 154.

² Ibid., 152.

FOCUS ON COMMON CONVICTIONS

- Now that we have seen the importance of unity and the meaning of unity, let's turn in the final place to talk about **(SHOW SLIDE 9) the experience of unity.**
 - Now we are getting really practical. What should we do to guard the unity we already have in the Spirit? Notice that Paul's thesis in verse 3 is sandwiched on either side by verses that talk about how we maintain unity.
 - Like a sandwich has two pieces of bread, let me show you the two things we must do that we might taste the goodness of our unity in the Spirit.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 10) First, we must always focus on our common convictions.**
 - Look at verses 4-6. As we read it see if you can pick out the key word. **READ 4-6 - *There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.***
 - What was the key word? **“One.”** Paul uses the word **“one”** seven times in two verses.
- With this sevenfold usage of “one”, Paul is clearly trying to communicate the essential unity of the Church by focusing on the common convictions of all Christians.
 - He is saying, ***“Look we must maintain unity because we are all part of one body, we believe in one Spirit and we have one future hope. We believe in one Jesus, one Lord, one common faith in him which is expressed in that we have all been baptized. Moreover, we believe in one Father, who is sovereign over all his people, is in all his people and works through all his people.”***
- What unites us is our common convictions. As I have jokingly said before, ***“If I were not a Christian, I would not hang out with most of you.”*** Apart from Jesus, this group of people would never be in the same room together. We are very different from each other.
 - Ah but listen to this: hobbies or interests do not unite us. Educational levels, whether high or low, do not unite us. Socio-economic levels, whether high or low, do not unite us. Our nationalities, whether Brazilian, Canadian, American, Pilipino, Indian, Chinese, Dutch, Korean, Rwadan, or Zambian, do not unite us. What unites us is that we are all sinners saved by the sheer grace of God. What unites us is what God has done for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that gives us His Spirit.
 - So we maintain unity as we cherish and delight in our common convictions about God and the gospel.
- But notices that even though truth unites us, Paul prioritizes which truths are most essential to unite us. There are some truths that are more essential than others.
 - Really it boils down the gospel – what the Triune God has done to save us. The gospel is what unites us and that is what we must focus on.
 - Brothers and sisters, the gospel is the main thing and we must always keep the main thing the main thing.
- Christians have a hard time doing this. Have you ever met those Christians who always have a hobbyhorse topic? No matter what you are talking about they steer the conversation towards their pet topic.
 - There once was an old Baptist minister who preached every Sunday about baptism by immersion. His members agreed with his doctrine but they were tired of hearing the same subject dealt with week after week. The deacons undertook to solve the problem through diplomatic means.
 - They complimented him on his pulpit skills. Then they suggested to him that he was such a natural preacher that they wanted to try an experiment where they would give him a piece of paper with the text just as he stepped into the pulpit.

- ***“We believe you are so good that you can preach a great sermon with no preparation at all - just the slip of paper.”*** He agreed.
- So the deacons got busy searching for a text, which was totally unrelated to baptism by immersion. They selected the opening verse of Genesis – ***“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”*** When they handed him the text the old preacher read it aloud three times. Finally he turned to his congregation and said,
 - ***“If I remember geography correctly, the earth is ¼ land and ¾ water. Water brings me to my subject for this morning’s message: baptism by immersion.”***
- We laugh but we all have our hobbyhorse topics. Let me name a few: home schooling, speaking in tongues, baptism of the Holy Spirit, eternal security, which Bible version to use, end times views, who Christians should vote for, gender roles, six day creationism, what type of music should be in the church, how people should dress in church, predestination, ...etc.
 - Now do not get me wrong. These all have their place. Some are quite important. But hear this: as important as they may be they are just not as important as the gospel that unites us.
 - If we are going to maintain the unity of this church we must focus on what unites us. We must lay down our particulars and unite around the gospel – the message of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. We must always focus on our common convictions.
- As an aside, we have been emphasizing membership this fall. But I know there are special cases where people are committed to Central but have not become members because of various reasons such as differing modes of baptism or difference of opinion on some points in our Statement of Faith. And so perhaps you agree with the whole idea of committing to a church but this emphasis on membership has caused you some angst.
 - If you are one of those special cases, please hear me on this: let’s sit down and talk about it. Let’s work it out. At Central we truly want to keep the main thing the main thing. Let’s figure out a way for our unity in the Spirit to overcome matters of secondary importance.
- **we must always focus on our common convictions.**
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PURSUE CHARACTER AND COMMON CARE

- So that is the bottom piece of bread. Or, to change the metaphor, our common convictions are like the right wing on the airplane of church unity. That wing really matters but we need a left wing as well.
 - So if the right wing of unity is that we must always focus on our common convictions then the left wing is that **(SHOW SLIDE 11) we must intentionally pursue Christ-like relationships with each other.**
 - This is what verse 2 is all about. This is the really practical stuff of how we maintain unity in this church. ***READ 2 - with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.***
- Notice the four key words here. **(SHOW SLIDE 12) First, intentionally pursue humility.**
 - Pride brings destruction on our relationships. Pride makes us fight for our rights. Pride makes us view everything in light of ourselves because we are the centre of the universe.
 - That is why I Peter 5:5 says we are to ***“Clothe yourselves with humility.”*** That is, put it on, like an apron. Surely Peter was thinking of Jesus as he put on the apron and washed feet. Like Jesus we are called to serve each other and put each other first.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 13) Second, intentionally pursue gentleness. READ 2 - with all humility and gentleness.**
 - I cannot help but think of the tongue when it comes to this. Oh, how we need to be gentle with our tongues.

- The story is told of a young man during the Middle Ages who went to a monk saying, ***“I’ve sinned by telling slanderous statements about someone. What should I do now?”*** The monk replied, ***“Put a feather on every door step in town.”*** He did it and then returned to the monk wondering if there was anything else he should do. The monk said, ***“Go back and pick up all the feathers.”*** The young man replied, ***“that’s impossible! By now the wind will have blown them all over town.”*** Said the monk, ***“So have your slanderous words become impossible to retrieve.”***
 - Let us be gentle with our tongues.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 14) Third, intentionally pursue patience.**
 - What is the first description of love in I Corinthians 13? ***“Love is patient.”*** There are Christians who aggravate us. They do things that we do not like. They are not as mature as we think they should be.
 - But brothers and sisters, let us be patient with each other. Has not God been so patient with you? Who do you need to be patient with today?
- **(SHOW SLIDE 15) Fourth, intentionally pursue forbearance. READ 2 - with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.**
 - Forbearance. What does it mean to forbear with each other? It means that you put up with another’s idiosyncrasies, quirks, and peculiarities, knowing that you have your own. It means to show how much you love one another by receiving them as they are, without trying to make them like yourself.
 - Some people talk to close to you. Others are overbearing while others are hard to talk to. Some rub you the wrong way. Some people’s personalities just grate at you.
 - But friends, if we are going to maintain the unity of the Spirit it means we overlook these things, we pass them by, we do not make a big deal about them. Sometimes, we need to confront each other but the general tone of marriages and our life together in the church is that we forbear with each other. This is the way to peace and to manifesting the unity of the Spirit.
 - Prov 19:11 – ***“It is to [a person’s] glory to overlook an offense”***. Christians, we are called to forbear with each other.

CONCLUSION

- So you see, we are all one in the Spirit and we are called to ensure with all of our might that our relationships with each other manifest that oneness. We do this first of all by focusing on and delighting in our common convictions.
 - Our common doctrine is the right wing of unity. But that is not all. The left wing of unity is our common care for each other. We must pursue humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance.
- So do your relationships with the others in this church reflect the oneness that you have with them in Christ? Or are you at odds with someone else?
 - Let us be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit.