

Gospel Unity Amid Diversity Part 2—Ephesians 4:1-16—4/15/18
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As I shared by email this week, my 2 oldest sons & I had the privilege of joining 12,000 others at the Together for the Gospel conference.

That was far more people than the 2000 who gathered in 2006.

The growth of such conferences is evidence of the growth of healthy biblical emphases in the church in our country.

But what was interesting this year was the evidence of how expansions in Gospel influence inevitably meet challenges.

One clear tension that arose this year related to ethnic disparity & diversity & historic tensions that still are a challenge.

I heard messages on those issues emphasizing the centrality of preaching Christ crucified & the priority of Gospel unity.

I was thankful for exhortations to love your neighbor & model here the unity Christians will have in heaven.

So I was grateful that we had begun last week taking time to recall the importance of Gospel unity amid diversity.

Last week we covered 2 exhortations to Gospel unity amid diversity & this week we'll add 2 more & then we'll see 2-3 more next week.

As I said last week, I want you to excel still more & I believe an honest look at our hearts show plenty of room for growth.

An honest evaluation of the descriptions & divisions of churches in the Roanoke Valley certainly prove the need for growth.

So what can we do?—how can we make a difference in our splintering culture of intolerance under the guise of tolerance?

Well, we can certainly remind others that we are all made in God's image as descended from Adam & Eve & later from Noah's family.

That biblical perspective is part of the wisdom & dignity that answers the emptiness & folly from lies like evolution.

And we can also seek to continually rid our hearts of prejudice & bigotry in our approach to different people.

But we must always remember that the most powerful unifying reality is the Gospel that forgives sins & changes hearts.

The most significant & transcendent tool for unity is the preaching of the biblical Gospel & its implications.

The Gospel unleashes power far better than any social program or government initiative or focus group.

So the church should be one place where the multi-ethnic diversity of heaven is reflected to each local community & is spread to the world.

We began recalling those themes last week as we dove into the depths of Gospel applications from the NT letter of Ephesians.

So turn to Ephesians & let me remind you that chapters 1-3 set the foundation on which chapters 4-6 build by stating what's true of a Christian as the basis for what to do as a Christian.

As we said last week, what has been done for those in Christ provides for what is to be done by those in Christ.

That is, the indicative precedes the imperative, the work of God for us in Christ is what feeds the work of God through us.

God's gracious initiative to save us & change us is what empowers our response as God sanctifies us & uses us.

We do not approach obedience a way to get right with God.

We approach obedience with faith in the God who has declared us right with Him based on what Christ has done.

Ephesians 1 praises God for His great love & His glorious grace that started in eternity past & stretches into eternity future.

Ephesians 1 is mostly a prayer of praise to God for all God has done in choosing to save sinners all by His grace.

It reminds us that biblical Christianity is first & foremost about what God has done in Christ by His grace for His glory.

Ephesians 2 extols the awakening of life by God's grace as the reason we can rejoice in Jesus & never boast in self.

No individual or people group can boast of having done it right.

The Good News of the Bible is about God's grace, God giving contrary to what we deserved, giving the opposite of what He could have given according to justice & fairness.

The Good News of the Bible is that not that God rewards good people but that He forgives bad people & all of us are bad.

The Good News is about God's justice against sin being dealt with in the death of His Son Jesus Christ.

If you turn from self & sin to Jesus, God will count Jesus' life as if you had lived it & count Jesus' death as paying for your sins.

He proved He can do so by raising Christ from the dead.

And He gives that gift of new life freely to those who trust Jesus.

Credit for that salvation in Christ goes all to God who gives it & no one can boast over anyone else.

Read Ephesians 2:8-9 to remember that. [READ]

As we consider the basis of Christian unity, we must count Christ's work as the precious treasure we claim that unifies us.

We must treasure what God has done for us as what removes any thought of us being better or doing better than anyone else.

So let's review the 2 exhortations from last week from chapters 2-3 because I want you to thoroughly grasp them.

We said a 1st exhortation is to prioritize Gospel unity.

Point #1 from last week was to prioritize Gospel unity, to put first & keep first the unity that comes through the Gospel.

We drew that application from Ephesians 2 where the Gospel is extolled as what reconciles us to God first & thereby to each other.

Paul was writing primarily to Gentiles, which means they were separated from Jews in religious & social life.

They were cut off from God & His promises that He had sent through Israel & so were without hope & without salvation.

But when God brought the Gospel to them, He did not merely reconcile them to Himself.

He also brought them together with Jews as a new people of God, as one new man, one new body, one new temple of God.

Read Ephesians 2:13-14 for a glimpse of that. [READ]

Do you see that?—Gentiles were brought near to God through Christ's blood & welcomed into fellowship with God & life in His kingdom.

And this brought together two diverse groups, two opposing groups that hated one another.

Then scan the following verses to see verse 15 call these formerly warring groups one new man & verse 16 call them one body.

Then verse 18 mentions the 1 Spirit they share with God as their Father & verse 19 calls them God's household & verses 20-21 refer to them as a building being built into God's temple.

So verse 22 says they grow together into God's dwelling in the Spirit.

As we noted last week, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the one message & power that can bring such enemies together.

The Gospel reconciles people to God & brings them into His family to live by His Spirit under the authority of His Word with a shared trust in His Son alone for salvation.

By that, those children of God come together with each other.

That Gospel unity is what must be first.

I review that partly to emphasize something shared several times at the Together for the Gospel conference this past week.

Don't miss that the church's first task is to preach the Gospel, to be clear & faithful to proclaim the biblical Gospel & then to live transformed lives that adorn that Gospel faithfully.

The church's first task is not to create social change.

When we talk about the problems of ethnic divisions & tensions & violence in society, the answer is first & foremost the Gospel.

The answer is not to jettison the Gospel in hopes of being nice in a way that constructs a false peace with no foundation.

Unity among Christians is first & foremost anchored in us being Christians, in being saved & changed by the true Gospel.

And change in people first & foremost only comes through new birth in the heart that comes through the Gospel.

Lives can't be changed to WANT God's design for the church & relationships unless they first & foremost receive the true Gospel.

That's why the Gospel is primary in what defines & drives God's people in any work for unity or any other issue.

So we said 1st last week to work to prioritize Gospel unity.

Then 2ndly we said to work to prize church unity.

Chapter 3 encourages us to work to prize church unity because we understand a proper definition of the church.

The church is this new work of God when God has temporarily set aside Israel as the one nation through whom He worked.

God will revive Israel again in the future, as Romans 11 says, but His diverse work through history proves His wisdom & grace.

Ephesians 3 says the church was a mystery, a plan of God hidden to OT saints before Jesus came.

God began the church as this new distinctive multi-ethnic people, this new gathering from every tribe & language & people & nation.

We saw that in heavenly scenes in Revelation in the end, but it was also evident from the beginning of the church in Acts 2.

This is an area where non-essential doctrines prove to matter & I review this point today to mention another illustration of that.

Seeing a distinction between Israel & the church in God's plan for the ages is not an essential issue because God has always & only saved by His grace through Christ in every age.

But He worked through one nation Israel to reach the nations for a time & now He is working to bring all nations together in the church.

Seeing the distinction between Israel & the church shows that.

But another non-essential issue related to this is the definition & significance of tongues or languages spoken in Acts 2 & NT times.

Their purpose was to be a sign that God was reaching out beyond the one language & nation of Israel to the many nations & languages that God began saving in Acts 2.

The different groups listed heard in their own languages when untaught people spontaneously began speaking different languages.

That miracle pointed to the new work of God creating a multilingual, multiethnic, multinational people in the church.

Often those who imagine those languages as gibberish still spoken today in prayer are missing the point of that miracle in Acts 2 & how it reoccurred in Acts with each expansion to another people group.

The point was not a therapeutic or ecstatic personal experience but a miraculous expression of newfound unity in the church.

Read of Paul defining that mystery in Ephesians 3:6. [READ]

This was newly revealed that Gentiles join together with Jews as all groups can come in equal footing to shared life in Christ.

That was the unique unity of the newly defined church.

We can read 1st & 2nd Timothy & Titus & other letters to learn of priorities for the church & its structures & roles & leaders.

But Ephesians 3 makes clear that by definition the church is to be the one place in society where different people are unified by Christ.

The church is to be the one new people of God, reconciled to Him & sharing life in a way like no other.

That sharing is specifically & especially to be marked by love as Paul's prayer at the end of chapter 3 seeks after.

And notice something about the prayer that begins in verse 14—it begins with the words "For this reason".

That's actually what Paul started to say in verse 1 of chapter 3.

He started to build on the Gospel unity in chapter 2 by praying for love in chapter 3 but first he had to define the church.

It's like he went on a tangent in verses 1-13 to be clear that the Gospel brings unity because the church is by definition multiethnic.

And by the way, that's also why missions are central to the definition & action of the church.

But in his prayer, he started in verse 14-15 with God as the Father of all believers & as the Creator of every family & then he prayed based on the truths of chapters 1-2 of God's power & Spirit.

Then read verses 17-19 to recall how love grows. [READ]

What God can do & has designed to do, is to grow His people in the experiential knowledge of His love.

And He does it within the sphere of life with all the saints.

That means all the different people like Jews & Gentiles who come to Christ & therefore are brought together in love with former enemies.

And we need to know that no matter how much one tribe or group of people hates another in our time, we won't find groups more opposed than Jews & Gentiles were back then.

So don't miss the significance of this love among all the saints.

God's love is manifested in His church when people saved from former enemy groups love one another.

We express His love when we seek to care for & invest in people who bother us or repel us or make us uncomfortable or who seem strange.

And why is that like God's love?—because God loved us when we were hostile enemy rebels & estranged, far-off, aliens.

So if we want to know the love of God in our hearts & we want to show His love to others around us, we first pray for it like Paul did.

Then we seek to cultivate it together with diverse believers.

Then, like someone shared with me after last week's message, we can appreciate a different believer's style of seeking or serving or praising God when we know of their heart for God & His work in them.

When we stop being provoked—because 1st Corinthians 13:5 says love is not provoked—& we start seeking love, then we can enhance our enjoyment of God's love.

As we do, Jesus said in John 13:35, all men will know we are HIS disciples by how we love one another.

Then the affection & appreciation we have felt on missions trips among Christians of different cultures can happen right here in our own context week by week.

Then we can have a strategy different from church-growth gurus who say to market to certain demographics, only certain groups of people.

That kind of marketing has separated churches into consumer gatherings built on music or clothing styles or programs.

Then we miss Jesus' strategy for the church to be marked by love among diverse people & holiness among growing people.

So we need to spend some time praying about these issues & asking God to open our eyes to ways He wants us to change.

I don't have all the answers so let me be clear that I preach these truths as I try to meditate & evaluate my own life.

One thing that going to conferences does for me after decades in ministry is to remind me how many things I've neglected or not done well though I would agree they were important.

So as we study these truths, I'm praying that God will show me where & how to repent & live & lead more faithfully.

One suggestion I was told last week was for us to seek out faithful Christians & churches among a different ethnic group & begin to build fellowship & mutual relationships together.

I think that could be a great idea & I think you may have other ideas that are better than mine so I welcome your input & intercession.

This is something we must work toward in this local body & in relationships with other churches locally & across the globe.

And that leads us to 2 more points for today.

Turn to Ephesians 4 to find the command to preserve unity.

As we said, that command is built on the unity already explained in chapters 2-3 & that's why those are foundational to grasp.

The truths of chapters 1-3 are even alluded to in the 6 times the word "one" is used in verses 1-6 to describe Christian unity.

To see that now, let's read Ephesians 4:1-6. [READ]

Ephesians 4:1 refers to the inward call by the Holy Spirit that awakens hearts to God and draws us to Jesus.

Paul began his exhortations with a plea for a walk worthy of that calling, of that new birth by God's Spirit.

And he first mentioned unity—the theme of verses 1-6 is unity.

He started with unity because unity is central to spiritual health of individuals and churches & chapters 2-3 have explained that unity.

So the next exhortation is to work to protect existing unity.

Point #3 overall is to work to protect existing unity.

We've said to work to prioritize Gospel unity, prize church unity & now 3rdly protect existing unity.

Whether we realize it or not, all true believers share an inherent unity that is given by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Verse 4 speaks of unity by the one Spirit who called us into the one body of the church with one common hope.

Verse 5 mentions unity in God the Son with Jesus as our one common Lord with one common Gospel & one Christian faith.

There may be differences on secondary issues, but all true Christians hold to the one and same faith.

That is once for all delivered the Christian faith, as Jude 3 put it & it's not the Muslim faith, not the Buddhist faith, not any other.

As God's children in Christ, we have one common God the Father as verse 6 describes Him over us all.

Therefore, unity is a reality God has granted all believers.

It's not something we have to force by alliances with pseudo-Christians or cults who don't believe the Gospel.

True spiritual unity among Christians is a gift from God in answer to Jesus' prayer in John 17 for us to be one.

The Father answered Jesus' prayer by giving us the same Holy Spirit & shared life in Him.

We want that to grow & flourish in experience, but it has been given.

So no matter how lonely you may feel, you already do have an amazing spiritual unity with other Christians.

Don't assume you are outside of it if you know Christ—go enjoy it.

When you feel disconnected, recall what our gracious God has given you in unity with others and go seek to experience it.

We can be encouraged that unity is there if we go after it rightly.

And since God has given true unity, verse 3 tells us that we must work to protect it.

It takes diligent work to preserve unity and peace.

We are bound together with a spiritual chain of peace with God that puts all true Christians on the same team.

As fellow members on any team, we need to value and encourage each other and work hard to protect the team unity and commonness.

Even in the world of sports or even of business or other arenas, people recognize how we need our teammates and how it makes no sense to ignore them or tear them down.

Much more then, we as Christians should zealously work to guard our unity when God is the One who chose our team!

We should work for unity anywhere we witness true Gospel & faith even if we must graciously disagree on nonessentials.

We must emphasize what is central and essential to our unity and not allow side issues or preferences to divide us.

And we should especially work for unity in the local church.

When you are bothered by something, ask whether God want that issue to disrupt the unity He created by His Spirit & paid for by His Son.

Ask if God would want me to speak against this person whom He has spiritually bound to Himself and to me.

And if Jesus has already paid the punishment for this person's sin, then consider if He wants you to hold it against him or her.

When we ask such questions, we may find far more things sliding off our backs for the sake of unity.

Verse 2 says humility is the key, a lowliness of mind & a low view of ourselves compared to God and others.

If we have a small sense of how sinful we are & imagine how much more we are blind to, we'll be more likely to be gracious.

And if we properly exalt God in all His glory and greatness, we'll more genuinely feel our smallness with all humility.

Then verse 2 says unity is also preserved by all gentleness, or meekness, which is best defined as power under control.

That is not a lack of power because our all-powerful Christ was meek even when He cleansed the Temple.

But instead, meekness is power under perfect control to make actions & words flow with great power but a fitting touch.

And that relates to Paul's mention of patience, which is a long fuse to endure with people in love for them.

Verse 2 ends with that need for a supernatural love to show forbearance, to persevere and tolerate whatever annoys you.

Remember that we're all in process—every single one of us bothers other people in one way or another.

So we need forbearance with each other.

We need each other to help us all along & that takes love and time.

We need a committed love like God has for us.

And let me clarify that Paul doesn't mean here that we should tolerate continual sin or error.

This is not the current American idea of tolerance where you allow all kinds of sin and dangerous error to run free.

Love addresses real sins—not petty issues, but sins—and it does so by talking to the person not merely about the person.

And we all know that can be hard & uncomfortable just like all of this can really be hard work to faithfully do.

But this is all work that God loves to do by His grace for His glory.

So work to prioritize Gospel unity, prize church unity, & protect existing unity.

Then 4thly & finally today, work to promote broader unity.

That's point #4—work to promote broader unity.

Read verses 7-12 for how to work to promote broader unity. [READ]

The key term here is gift or give—in verse 7, to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

Then verse 8 & 11 again state that He gave and gave gifts.

These refer to the diverse spiritual gifts that Christ gives members of His church.

Though verses 8-10 may seem out of place here, the point is to explain how Christ won the right to give gifts.

Christ's ascension through His death, resurrection and return to heaven captured a host of sinners that were prisoners of sin.

He ended that captivity for all who are in Christ.

And verse 9 speaks of Christ's incarnation, His descending from heaven to earth to die as a human and be buried.

He descended but rose in victory and returned to the Father.

Thereby Christ fulfilled all things and had the right to measure out spiritual gifts to each Christian.

And among those gifts, verse 11 says, were apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers.

Ephesians 2:20 says the apostles and prophets were used to set the foundation of the church.

And evangelists and pastors and teachers are the continued gifts God grants to build and equip His church.

Verse 12 says equipping is the purpose of all those offices.

Apostles and prophets equipped the saints with revelation from God written in the New Testament.

And evangelists and pastors and teachers equip the saints by telling the Gospel and teaching God's Word.

The goal and result for the saints in verse 12 is the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.

That happens when the saints use the spiritual gifts Jesus gave.

And by the way, saints are not just extra-special Christians on statues.

All Christians are saints—we are set apart to God in Christ.

Saints need equipping to know the gifts God gave and how to use them with wisdom and faithfulness.

Then it is the saints' duty—your duty as Christians—to do the work of ministry and build up the body of Christ.

So it's not the job as the pastors or elders to do everything—we as leaders are not to do all the work of the ministry.

And I'm thankful that many of you know that and are faithfully doing the work of the ministry.

But we need to point out that serving is connected to unity here.

As each person serves and receives service, it promotes unity.

As more believers get involved in serving and being served, it promotes an even broader experience of unity.

That means you need to use your gifts and we all need to encourage others in using their gifts.

Sometimes that simply involves developing relationships with people and praying for them.

And this equipping of you for ministry is something we're striving to evaluate & recommit to as elders.

It's one of those areas I can see I've not done well in recent years for various reasons & it's something I've asked the elders to forgive me for not persevering & planning & pursuing well.

I'm thankful for your grace with me as I realize that you do not have a perfect senior pastor & I appreciate your prayers.

We want to strengthen & sustain a better culture of discipleship & outreach where all Christians are being trained & serving.

As we do, we again need to realize that people will not always be top-notch quality or finely experience when they start.

But we need to be thankful and encouraging of others so that in our day of access to all the best of everything, we don't fail to appreciate that everyone has to start somewhere.

And God's work in each of you to serve may mean we need you to come to us as elders with ideas & energy to do new things or to improve what is being done.

Being an elder-led church does not mean that elders do everything or that no one has any freedom to serve in their area of ministry or that they can only serve if they do it as well as we want.

Please understand that because after being in the same place for a long time, I am likely blind to things that I once saw as areas that needed to be addressed.

Since the role of pastors and teachers is to equip you all for serving, we simply want to help you serve in the ways that most glorify God.

So we welcome your input & action because Ephesians 4 says your serving will promote broader unity in the church body.

As each of you uses your diverse gifts, it will develop fuller unity.

So get into the work of ministry and use your various gifts.

And those of you who are already serving can help others by getting others involved and asking them to help.

Help others plug in and find their niche.

Promote the broad use of people's spiritual gifts and unity will grow.

The different gifts that exist are a help not a hindrance to unity.

Don't ever feel threatened by someone's different or greater gifts—be encouraged and helped by them.

When equipped saints do the work, it builds up the body and unity will grow in ever greater measures.

So work to prioritize Gospel unity, prize church unity, protect existing unity, & promote broader unity.

And if you don't have any sense of that unity with God or other Christians, we'd love to talk with you further.

It is a wondrous gift from God to be welcomed into His family & have spiritual family members all over the world and throughout time.

We'd love for you to know that gift from God through Jesus.

If you do know that gift from God, then will you share it?

And will you pray for God to spread it through His growing love in this body that overflows to diverse people here & around the world?

Bow with me and let's close in prayer.