

“THE BASIS OF CHURCH UNITY” **(Ephesians 4:4-6)**

As we continue our study of Ephesians, we are going to talk about what unites us as a church, and this week I was reminded of a joke I’ve told more than once about a man who was stranded on a deserted island for several years, when one day he looks up and sees a boat out on the horizon and begins waving frantically. The captain of the boat sees him, lands the boat on the beach, and gets out to greet him. As they’re talking the captain notices three handmade huts on the beach off in the distance. “What are these huts over here that you’ve built?” “Well, the first hut over there is my house,” the man said. “What’s the second hut?” “That hut is my church.” “What about the third hut?” “That’s where I used to go to church.”

We laugh because if a church with only one member can’t stay united, what hope is there for the rest of us? We also laugh because know how common it is for people to leave or change churches, and this is especially true the past couple years as society has gone through so much upheaval and reshuffling. Whether it is over politics or the hot-button cultural issues of the day, many people are either leaving their church to go to another church or quitting church altogether.

Some say, “Wouldn’t it be great if we could go back to the days of the early church in the New Testament and experience the unity they enjoyed?” It’s true as you read through the book of Acts that the early believers had a special unity of spirit and belief and purpose, but they were not immune from problems and divisions. Their unity was constantly threatened by rivalries, false teaching, and disagreements over cultural issues.

Since the Day of Pentecost – the day the church was born – the church has struggled to maintain unity. The church is made up of fallen, broken people who live in a fallen, broken world who each are in the process of becoming more like Christ – and none of us have yet arrived. New believers often wonder why there are so many churches. In most every town, big or small, there are a variety of churches with different names, traditions, and identities.

Researchers estimate that there are more than 30,000 Christian denominations in the world, and there are over 100 varieties of Baptist churches in America alone. Some of the more interesting names are Hard Shell Baptists, Duck River Baptists, and one called Two Seed in the Spirit Baptists. The church is made up of a vast number of individual congregations of all shapes and sizes, some with crazy names, and each with a unique style and emphasis. How do we know if a church is a good church? Is there a way to evaluate if a church truly belonging to Christ? What is the basis of true Christian unity?

Our passage today in Ephesians 4 gives us the answer. In Ephesians 2-3 the Apostle Paul describes how Christ has brought Jews and Gentiles – with vastly different backgrounds and cultures – together to form the church. And for the last 2000 years God has continued to call people out of the world to be saved and become members of His worldwide family called the church.

After describing who the church is, in chapters 4-6 Paul says, “Here is how the church is to act – this is how God wants you to live.” And he begins in verses 1-3 of chapter 4 with unity. He writes... “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

We learned last week that unity is not something we manufacture or create – it’s something we already have through our mutual faith in Christ. Our job, our responsibility, is to preserve it. We do this by acting in a Christ-like way – by being humble and gentle and patient and loving towards each other. That’s how we keep unity, but what exactly is unity? What is unity based on? What are matters that we can agree to disagree on, and what are core doctrines and truths that should cause us to separate?

In verses 4-6 Paul writes something like a creed or confession – a list of seven foundational elements that tie all genuine Christians together. He says... “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.”

Right away we notice a few things about this creed, starting with the word “one.” As a church we are made up of a variety of different people with different backgrounds and perspectives, but we come together as one in these seven areas. It’s similar to marriage, where two different people – sometimes very different – come together as one flesh. They do not cease being individuals, but they join together to become one.

We also notice that this list of seven things revolves around the trinity – there is one Spirit, one Lord – Jesus the Son – and one God. Even though the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three distinct persons, they are one in essence and work together without division. We saw this in chapter one of Ephesians in the work of the trinity in our salvation. The Father initiated our salvation, choosing us and adopting us – the Son obeyed the will of the Father in coming to earth to purchase our salvation on the cross – and the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son to indwell us and seal our salvation. Each have different roles, yet they are one – each is equally God. There is no jealousy or rivalry – they dwell together in perfect unity. Now that we have “joined the family,” we are to relate to another as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to each other.

Another thing to notice is that there are seven things that unite us. Seven is the number of perfection, and these seven elements summarize the perfect unity we have. So what is the basis of our unity?

First, we see that unity is based on the truth that there is one body. The body was one of Paul’s favorite metaphors for the church. Earlier in Ephesians he described the church as a *building* made up of living stones growing to become the temple of God. In chapter 5 he calls the church the *“bride of Christ.”* Each analogy highlights the meaning and purpose of the church. But here, and in several others of his writings, Paul uses the metaphor of a body.

The body is a great picture of Christ’s church because when Jesus came to earth, He took on a human body, and through His body He demonstrated the love of God to the world in a tangible, visible way – culminating with His death on the cross. Now that He has ascended back to heaven, Christ continues His work on earth through the bodies of those He has redeemed. In chapter 2 we saw that our bodies are the dwelling place where Christ dwells. We are His living, breathing representatives commissioned to carry out His purposes on earth.

While the universal church is made up of hundreds of thousands individual, local churches around the globe, collectively we are one body in Christ. In 1 Corinthians we Paul talks about our physical body being one unit – if your arm or leg were detached from the rest of your body, it would no longer function. The body is made up of many parts, but is one body.

At any given time, something in your body hurts. Amen? You may take that part of your body for granted until it starts hurting and you realize how important it is. I have read that without your pinky toe, you lose your balance and you're not able to walk. Every part of your body has a different function to carry out and each part is important.

That's a perfect description of the church – whether you're a big toe or a little toe, we're all part of one organic whole. Everything that happens in your body is controlled and directed by the head, and several New Testament passages speak of Christ being the head of the church. As the head Christ delegates leadership of the church to pastors and elders and deacons – but He is the head. It's easy in our celebrity culture to fixate on human leaders, but we must always remember that Christ is the head of the church and we look to Him in everything we do.

Second, **unity is based on the truth that there is one spirit.** This is talking about the Holy Spirit. The moment we're saved the Holy Spirit comes into our lives – into our inner being – and dwells within us. Before Jesus went to the cross, He promised His disciples that he would return to them. He did return, temporarily, in his resurrection body. But after He ascended back to heaven, He came to indwell them permanently by sending the Holy Spirit. This happened on the day the church was born – the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 – when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples in the Upper Room and filled them. The presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives transformed a group of fearful, timid disciples into spiritual dynamos who turned the world upside down with the gospel.

The presence of the Holy Spirit joins believers together as the body of Christ. Romans 8:9b says, **“If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ.”** Our unity as believers is not something we create, it's something that we have by each being filled with the Holy Spirit. Coming to church on Sunday doesn't make you a Christian – what make you a genuine believer is being regenerated by the Holy Spirit and receiving new life in Christ. The presence of the Holy Spirit in your life is evidence that you're truly born again. His presence will be manifested by the way you live – as Jesus said, by their fruit will you know them. There will be an obvious change and difference in your life.

Even though the church is made up of individuals, we are united in one Spirit. Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13... **“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”** Despite our differences we are united in one Spirit, and next week we'll talk more about how we all work together in one Spirit to contribute to the health and growth of the church.

Third, we see that **unity is based on the truth that there is one hope.** Verse 4 says, **“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called.”** By “calling” Paul means the call to be saved and become part of the church. One of the greatest blessings of salvation is hope – the confident expectation and assurance that God will keep all the promises He has made regarding our future.

As believers we have hope that a glorious future awaits us. Things may look grim and bleak now, but we place our hope in the certainty that Christ will one day return to earth and unite all things in heaven and earth to Himself. It's the day that all sin will be vanquished and all that is wrong with the world will be made right. Peter calls our hope as Christians a “living hope” – a hope that energizes and motivates us – a hope that anticipates and lives in expectation of all that awaits us in the future.

As Christians we should be the most confident and optimistic people in the world, because our hope is placed completely in God and what He has revealed about our future. We know how it all turns out. This doesn't mean that we deny the harsh realities of this present world – it doesn't mean that we do not lament and feel sorrow – but as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:13... “We grieve, but not as those who have no hope.” There's a big difference between grieving without hope and grieving with hope. This is what makes Christian funerals unique – we fully express sorrow for our loss, but through the tears we cling to hope that the losses of this life are temporary. We are united in one hope.

Fourth, we see that **unity is based on the truth that there is one Lord.** One Lord speaks of Christ and the fact that as a church we are united in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Today we're used to calling Jesus “Lord,” but to call Jesus “Lord” when He was on earth was shocking. That's because in the Old Testament the holiest name for God was Yahweh, which was translated “Lord.” Whenever you see the word “LORD” in capital letters in the Old Testament it is talking about Yahweh – the one true God.

During Jesus 3 ½ years of ministry on earth he referred to Himself as “LORD” several times – and each time His enemies heard Him say He was Lord, they knew what He meant – He meant that He was God. One of the primary beliefs that unites us as a true church is the deity of Christ. Not every church believes this. In fact, a hundred years ago a number of churches, especially in the northeast, began preaching that Jesus was a great teacher and moral example, but He wasn't God. They rejected the doctrine of the virgin birth and that Jesus was God come to earth in the flesh. Jesus was someone we should model our lives after, but He was not divine.

This led to many people to leave churches that taught this and start new churches that firmly upheld the deity of Christ. Our church is one of those churches. We belong to what is called the Conservative Baptists of America. The CBA was started in 1948 in response to the liberal teachings that denied Christ's deity and many other clear teachings of the Bible.

If a church does not believe and teach that Jesus is God, then it isn't part of the body of Christ. It may call itself a Christian church, but it's not part of Christ. 1 John 4:2-3 says, “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.”

Notice also that Paul says there is one Lord. Another false teaching that has crept into the church, especially in recent years, is that Jesus is not the only way to heaven – He is a way, but not the only way. In fact, a 2020 poll revealed that 70% of born-again Christians say that Jesus is not the only way to God. How could professing Christians reach a conclusion that contradicts the clear teaching of the Bible? One reason, I suppose, is ignorance of what the Bible actually says. Another reason is because in the politically correct climate of the day it is forbidden to say that there is only one way – you can believe your way, but you can't tell someone else that their way is wrong.

But the true church believes what Jesus said – “I am the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through me.” One of common misperceptions is that all religions are basically the same – they're just different paths you chose, but all paths lead to God. But any honest person who takes the time to study the major world religions will see that each religion teaches a different way to God.

As Christians we believe that Christ is the only way because as sinners separated from a holy God, we need someone outside ourselves, a mediator, to come and reconcile us to God. Jesus came to earth as

God in the flesh to pay the penalty of our sin on the cross so that we can be forgiven of our sin and be made right with God. This is what makes Christianity unique, and the truth that there is one Lord is what unites us as a church.

Fifth, **unity is based on the truth that there is one faith**. Faith could refer to the saving faith that we place in Christ, or it could refer to the core truths that make up the Christian faith. Most commentators take the latter view. The writers of the New Testament refer to a settled body of doctrine that is often called “the faith” or “the gospel.” Jude 1:3 speaks of “contending for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” This settled body of doctrine is the Bible that we hold in our hands. The church is united in the truth of God’s Word as our final authority in all matters of faith and practice.

Today there is a huge divide between churches that hold fast to the teaching of the Bible and those who interpret the Bible to accommodate the cultural trends of the day. Most of these battles have to do with God’s standards of marriage, sexuality, and gender that go all the way back to the opening chapter of Genesis. These standards – so clearly taught in scripture – were not questioned until the sexual revolution of our day. When a church decides to accommodate culture and teach that marriage between a man and a man, or a woman with a woman, is acceptable to God – or that God did not create us with a specific gender – it’s clear that these churches have deviated from biblical truth held for thousands of years – and since unity is based on truth, there can be no unity when there is false teaching. Regardless of what the issue is, we must test all things based on what the Bible says.

This doesn’t mean that sincere, Bible-believing Christians are going to agree on how to interpret everything in the Bible – very godly people have taken different views on a variety of subjects. But in there are some core, foundational truths that we should agree on and form the basis of our unity.

Picture in your mind two circles – an inner circle and an outer circle. The inner circle consists of those core doctrinal truths that are non-negotiable. The deity of Christ is one of those core beliefs. So is the resurrection of Jesus, and that Jesus is the only way to God. So is the fact that the Bible is the Word of God and our sole authority in all matters of faith and practice. So is the teaching that salvation is by grace through faith, and not of works – and the belief that Jesus will return to earth. In this circle is all that the Bible teaches about marriage and sexual behavior. These core beliefs have united the true church for 2000 years, and without these core truths we do not have unity.

The second outer circle represents what we might call “secondary issues” or teachings that Bible-believing Christians do not always see eye to eye on. They may be important issues, but they are not core issues. These are things in the Bible can be taken in more than one way, like the mode of baptism; or whether certain gifts of the Spirit are still for today; or how you view the timing and specifics of end time events. These are things we can legitimately disagree about in the Christian community and still be in harmony with each other. There is a wide variety of Bible-believing, Christ-centered churches that have different ways of doing things, different traditions, and different kinds of people that make up their fellowship.

As we strive to maintain unity, we must avoid two extremes. One extreme is being *inclusive* and watering down truth in order to get along. As we’ve seen, unity is built on truth, and any unity that is built on error is false unity. There may be the veneer of unity, but unity without truth is superficial unity.

The other extreme is being *exclusive* and refusing to fellowship with other believers that do not agree with us on secondary issues. I had a family member some years ago that attended a church in San Diego. I asked him what the name of his church was and he said, “The church that meets at San Diego.” This

was a not-so-subtle hint that they were the only true church in San Diego and all other churches were false churches. Some years ago I met with a group of pastors in the office of one of the pastors, and some people from his church saw him meeting with us and this pastor was fired from his church. Although we all agreed on the core beliefs of the Bible, the people at this church felt like they alone were the true church and wouldn't fellowship with anyone who didn't believe exactly as they did.

Augustine, the great Christian leader in the fourth century, put it this way, "In essentials there must be unity; in non-essentials there must be liberty; In all things there must be charity."

Number six, **unity is based on the truth that there is one baptism.** Some think this is talking about the baptism of the Spirit where the Holy Spirit of God places believers in union with Christ at the moment of salvation. Others think it is talking about water baptism which symbolizes our union with Christ. While both unify us as a church, Paul is probably talking about water baptism.

In water baptism believers give public testimony of their faith in Christ, and by going under water they identify themselves with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Baptism not only symbolizes our new life in Christ, it visualizes our incorporation into the body of Christ. It says to the world, "This person is now one of us!" When new believers are baptized, we welcome them into the fellowship of the family of God.

Number seven, **unity is based on the truth that there is one God.** Verse 6 says, "(There is) one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." As believers we are adopted into God's family, and as brothers and sisters in Christ we all call God "Father." In your earthly family you may be different than your siblings, but you have the same father – you share the same DNA and despite your differences you are family. Blood is thicker than water, and even if you don't see eye to eye with your sibling, if anyone messes with them, they'll have to answer to you.

As believers we are born again into God's family and share the same spiritual DNA, and Jesus said that our bond with our spiritual family in many ways is stronger than the bond with your earthly family. Whenever you meet another Christian when you're traveling there is an instant kinship – you don't know them from Adam, but they're kin and you share one Father who is over all believers, working through all believers, and is in all who share faith in Christ.

The basis of our unity is that...

- We are all one body in Christ
- We are all indwelt by one Spirit
- We all share the same hope of Christ's return.
- We all believe in one Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
- We all hold to one faith revealed to us in God's Word.
- We all share one baptism, and one Father.

We do not do anything to create unity, we are simply called to preserve the unity we already have, and by God's grace may we fulfill Christ's prayer for us to be one.