

Title: Unity
Text: Ephesians 4:1-6
Date: 9 October, 2011
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Ephesus was the second largest city of the Roman Empire, behind only Rome itself. In the first century anywhere between 300,000 and 500,000 people lived there. It was a prosperous city owing to the fact that it was a seaport on the major trade routes. Under Roman occupation it operated as the capital of Western Asian province. Ephesus was a multicultural city with a great diversity of ethnic and religious backgrounds represented, including a strong Jewish population with a number of synagogues.

Paul did not visit Ephesus until his third and final missionary journey, sometime between 53 and 57AD. Luke tells us in Acts that Paul preached in the synagogue and in the lecture halls of the city. He healed people, delivered demons and performed all manner of sign and wonders. Paul stayed in and around Ephesus for the best part of three years. As a result of his ministry, Luke tells us that:

All the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.
(Acts 19:10)

In other words, as Paul and his friends preached the Good News of Jesus, it spread like wildfire. In fact it spread so far and wide, and its effect was felt so deeply that it caused a riot.

Ephesus was perhaps most famous for being the site of the Temple of Artemis, a Greek goddess. The temple was magnificent. It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and drew pilgrims from hundreds of miles away. As a tourist attraction the temple created a bustling economy, including silversmiths who made silver shrines of Artemis for sale. After preaching for almost three years in and around Ephesus, Paul had impacted on the silversmith's livelihood. In turning to the gospel, people had turned away from idols. They were no longer buying silver shrines of Artemis. The head of the silversmith's union was a man called Demetrius. Demetrius called a stop work meeting and addressed the crowd:

See and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all.
(Acts 19:26)

Demetrius whipped the crowd into a frenzy, and soon the whole city was in uproar – there was a riot. The mob grabbed two of Paul's travelling companions and took them to the 25,000 seat theatre where a protest rally gathered. Paul heard about the riot and the fact that 25,000 people were gathered in one place and wanted to go and preach to them, but his friends were able to convince him it was too dangerous.

What does all this interesting piece of history tell us? After three years of gospel ministry, Paul and his companions had altered forever the social, political, economic and religious life of the second largest city in the Roman Empire. Astonishing.

When a community of believers preaches the word of God without compromise, with gentleness and respect and in the Spirit's power, lives are changed and cities transformed. If God did it in Ephesus, God can do the same on the Gold Coast through communities like ours. Amen?

The people of Ephesus and surrounds were close to Paul's heart. He had lived with them for almost three years. So it is no surprise that Paul writes to them a few years later to encourage them in their faith. Through July and August we explored the first three chapters of Ephesians – the first half of the letter. Today we turn the chapters 4-6 – the second half.

In the first three chapters Paul has illustrated the wonder and expanse of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He has reminded the Ephesians that in Christ we are sons and daughters of God that share a rich inheritance and that through Christ the dividing
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wall of hostility between us and God and us and each other has been destroyed once and for all. He has prayed passionately for the Ephesians, confident that God is able to abundantly more than we ask for or imagine according to God's power that is at work in us. In short, in the first three chapters of his letter, Paul has reminded the Ephesians what God has done for us in Christ. Now he turns to what we do for God in response. Paul now answers the question, in light of the incredible grace we have received, how then shall we live?

Paul turns from what God has done to what we must and should do in response.

Let's read the first six verses of Ephesians 4:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called— ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6)

Let's unpack this text:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. (Ephesians 4:1)

In Acts we read that Paul was imprisoned at least three times; in Philippi, Caesarea by the sea and in Rome. There may well have been other times we don't know about. What we do know is this; Paul did not waste his imprisonment. At least four of Paul's letters were written while he was in prison; Colossians, Philippians, Philemon and Ephesians. Most likely all were written while Paul was imprisoned for around two years in Rome around 60AD.

Paul describes himself as a prisoner for the Lord. This has two meanings. Paul literally is in chains. He has been imprisoned solely because of his faith in Christ. From the earliest days of Christianity right up to now people have been imprisoned, persecuted, tortured and even executed for their faith. In 21st century Australia we can fall for the lie that Christian faith is an optional extra of life – like an upgrade option at McDonalds. But faith- Christian faith – has always been a life and death affair.

This man's name is Yosef Nadarkhani. He is a 34 year old Iranian Pastor. Yosef converted from Islam to Christianity 15 years ago when he was 19. He now pastors a number of small house churches. Yosef was arrested in 2009 on the charge of apostasy – all because of his profession of Christ as Lord and Savior. The sentence is death and he has exhausted all of his appeals. And still he refuses to recant his faith. Even Yosef's lawyer has been sentenced to nine years in jail for standing up to the Iranian regime.

Yosef's last court appearances were a few weeks ago. Unless there is a miracle, his death sentence is likely to be carried out. This is his family.

Around our world tens of thousands of our brothers and sister are martyred every year, hundreds of thousands are imprisoned and millions of our brothers and sisters are persecuted and harassed all because they claim the name of Jesus.

I want us to pause for a moment in silent prayer of Yosef and his family and all those in chains for the gospel.

Paul is a prisoner for Christ – that is the only reason he is in chains is because of his faith. But Paul is also a prisoner of Christ. In his letter to the Galatians he said this:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. (Galatians 2:20)

Paul is a slave, a prisoner a disciple of Christ. He no longer lives according to his agenda but according to God's agenda for him.

Paul urges the Ephesians to love a life worthy of calling they have received. This begs the question as to what a life worthy of God's calling is. For the rest of the letter Paul gives us an answer. It can be summarized under two broad headings; unity and purity.

A life worthy of Christ's sacrifice, of God's calling is a life that seeks to be reconciled to God and each other (unity) and a life that pursues holiness (purity).

Unity is the focus of the first six verses of Ephesians four. In this passage Paul is saying that:

Unity is a gift of God
Unity is an Expression of Love.
Unity is a God-honoring obsession.

Unity is a gift of God

**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.
(Ephesians 4:4-6)**

If this sounds like a creedal statement; it's because it is. These three verses are packed with incredible theological depth.

The first thing you will notice about it is that it is very repetitious. The word 'one' is mentioned seven times. I don't think this is a coincidence. In the Hebrew faith that Paul was schooled in seven was the number that signified completeness. For example, in Genesis the world was created in seven days – the world which God declared as very good or complete. Paul says 'one' seven times. Let's break them down. If we look closely we see that three references are to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the Trinity.

Paul is reminding the Ephesians there is one God known in three persons.

The concept of the Trinity is notoriously difficult to understand and explain. One of the greatest Christian minds ever to live, St. Augustine, wrote a theological tome *On the Trinity*. Soon after finishing it, he was walking along the Mediterranean shore on the coast of North Africa when he chanced upon a boy who kept filling a bucket with seawater and pouring it into a large hole in the sand.

"Why are you doing that?" Augustine asked the boy.

"I'm pouring the Mediterranean Sea into the hole," the boy replied in all seriousness.

"My dear boy, what an impossible thing to try to do!" chided Augustine. "The sea is far too vast, and your hole is far too small."

Then as Augustine continued his walk, it dawned on him that in his efforts to write on the Trinity he was much like that boy: the subject was far too vast, and his mind was far too small!

Perhaps the best explanation of the trinity is summarized in an ancient Latin term called perichoresis. It is an ancient Greek word that literally means dancing around. That is God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is a dynamic community, or dance of love. That to see the Father is to see the son. To see the Son is to see the Spirit. I love this image – that God is a dance, a dynamic of love. If God is love then God is not static but always loving.

And here's the amazing thing; God invites us into the dance.

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I have been here almost six years now so you will have to forgive me when I occasionally repeat myself. But years ago God gave me a revelation about this beautiful truth. When my daughter Emily was a small child I was in Bible College. It was often my job to prepare her for bed. She would have her bath, get into her pj's and then we would have daddy-daughter time. Often we would end up dancing. Actually, dancing is a very loose term; we would put on a worship album and jump and hop and laugh hand in hand around the lounge-room together. When a song would finish, Em would seek to stall bed time by putting up her hands again and say 'Dance with me daddy! Dance with me daddy!' I could never resist. Still can't.

God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit comes to each and every one of us and invites us to dance. 'Dance with me Stu, dance with me...'

Let's go back the passage to see what this dance looks like:

Paul reminds us that the one father creates the one family. We are all God's sons and daughter and each other's brothers and sisters.

Second, Paul reminds us that the one Lord Jesus creates the one faith, hope and baptism. Because of his death and resurrection we can discover saving faith through him. Because of Jesus we have an eternal hope. And commanded by Jesus, we are baptized into this faith as we die and are raised with him.

Third and final, Paul reminds us that the one Holy Spirit creates the one body. This body is called the church, of which Christ is the head. We who were alienated from God because of our sin have now been joined with him in this one body. Wow!

Unity is a gift of God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was both a prisoner for and of Christ like the Apostle Paul said this:

(Unity) is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Unity is an expression of Love

Let's go back to verse 2:

**Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.
(Ephesians 4:2)**

While unity is a gift of God that we participate in, we protect or destroy that unity through our own actions and choices. It is with humility gentleness, patience and forbearing love that we work for unity.

Humility was not considered a virtue in the Greco-Roman world. It was associated with cowardice and slavery and was seen as a pathetic sign of weakness. But Paul is saying to the Ephesians and us that we are called to counter-cultural way by a counter-cultural savior who chose the abject humility of the cross to demonstrate the power of his love.

Similarly gentleness or meekness was seen as a weak and feminine trait in the ancient world. Paul again is making a counter-cultural call for the church to mimic the character of Christ in the way they deal with each other. Jesus said:

I am gentle and humble in heart.

(Matthew 11:29)

William Barclay has a great definition of what true gentleness or meekness is like:

Meekness in strength under control.
(William Barclay)

If we are to enjoy and protect the gift of unity we will need to be patient with one another. John Stott, whose commentary on this passage I have found incredibly helpful, has a great definition of this sort of patience:

Patience is longsuffering towards aggravating people.
(John Stott)

Ever met an aggravating person at church? Ever been an aggravating person? Ever been so annoyed with someone you have wanted to give them a piece of your mind? I don't know about you, but I have little enough mind that I can't afford to give a piece of it away!

Patience is a wonderful virtue in that it was because of God's patience towards us – his long-suffering love that we enjoy community with him and each other. We aggravated God again and again with our sin. We are an immensely aggravating people. Make no mistake, God had every reason to turn his back on us, but in his patient love he chose not to. If God refused to turn his back on us, how can we even contemplate turning our back on each other?

The final and most important virtue that protects and enhances unity is forbearing love. Paul is saying to the Ephesians, whatever you do, put up with one another in love. Learn to love even the sandpaper people in your church – the ones that have the unhappy knack of rubbing you up the wrong way.

Unity is an expression of love – humble, gentle, patient and forbearing love.

Unity is a God honoring obsession

Finally, Paul implores the Ephesians to make maintaining unity a God-honoring obsession.

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:3)

The word that is translated every effort is the Greek work spoudazontes. It means to invoke all of your passion, will, sentiment, attitude and physical will to see that unity is protected. Paul is saying spare no effort, never give up, take the initiative – be totally obsessed with protecting the God-given gift that is the unity of the church.

Unity is a gift of God that is treasured and protected at all costs.

Let's talk about what unity is and isn't.

Unity is not uniformity. The church is made up of diverse people with diverse gifts, ethnicities, personalities and so on. The church should never be filled with people who look the same, talk the same, live in the same circles and listen to the same music. Church is at its best when it is made up of people who would otherwise have nothing in common except that they know they are all sinners saved by God's amazing grace.

Unity is the coming together of a diverse group of people through a common Lord and Savior and for a common mission – to make disciples, for a common purpose – to glorify God.

Unity should exist within churches and between churches.

Am I overstating things when I say that unity should be our God-honoring obsession? Paul's words suggest not. And if his words don't convince you, Jesus final prayer before his arrest should. Jesus prays for us, for you and me:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.
(John 17:20-21)

If Jesus was so obsessed with our unity he prayed for it, I think perhaps we should be just as obsessed.

I love this church. I mean, I really love this church. I love our diversity. I love it that we have 34 different birth nationalities represented here. I love it that we are made up of newborn babies right through to 96 year olds. I love our diversity. But more than that, I love the gift of unity God has given us. And let me make a personal promise to you as your Pastor.

By God's grace, I will do everything I can to protect that unity.

If I hear any hint of gossip, I will seek to stamp it out. Gossip is an insidious cancer that kills churches. It destroys unity. It can never be allowed to fester.

If I sense any prejudice or discord or unresolved conflict is undermining our unity, I will seek to have it resolved.

If I sense we are drifting from the core of the gospel message, I will see to prayerfully bring us back to the centrality of the Cross – which will always be the foundation of our unity.

If I sense we start to believe we are better than we actually are, if we begin to succumb to pride, I will seek to lead us to a place of repentance.

But this is not my job alone. This is the task of all of us. All of us are charged to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

So, if someone starts to gossip about someone else to you, lovingly ask them to stop or if appropriate, to talk first to the person they are talking about.

If you have an opportunity to serve, rather than be served – grab it.

If you are holding a grudge, if there is an unresolved conflict between you and another person in this community, do all you can to live at peace with that person. Deal with it. Get a mediator if necessary. Here's the problem with unresolved conflict – it doesn't just affect the two parties in conflict, it also robs the community of the harmony and unity we would otherwise enjoy.

If you learn someone is hurting in our community, pray for them, look for ways to serve them.

Unity is God-honoring obsession.

You have heard me say this often. Here at Newlife we are one, big, happy, dysfunctional family.

We are family. We are sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters together.

We are happy. Mostly happy. God has blessed us in so many ways.

We are big, by God's grace. We're spread over six weekend services over two locations. Our mission extends to Thailand, Cambodia, Bosnia, the Solomon Islands and beyond.

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We are dysfunctional. It's to be expected. We are broken people who God is fixing bit by bit. Some days our brokenness gets the better of us and we hurt ourselves, we hurt other and we hurt God.

But far more than all of this, we are one. We are one people, serving one God – Father, son and Holy Spirit, with one mission, one faith, one baptism and one Lord and master of us all.