

Preserving Oneness

Ephesians 4:1-6

When sin entered the creation, the creation flew apart. According to God's eternal purposes, He is repairing His broken creation and now desires to showcase His restorative work in His church. The first-century church did showcase God's restorative power. Jews and Gentiles came together in Christ as one new race of people. Masters and slaves worshipped God side by side. Rich and poor became brothers because of the miracle of the Gospel.

In God's eyes, all believers are one, for He has made us one. He called us out of the world and placed us in His church. He has given us His mind. There is no project or vision of man behind which we all must rally as a basis for unity. The first thing we must do for the cause of unity is to simply recognize the unity God has already established and determine that we will never, ever do anything to harm it.

I. The Responsibility of Oneness (verse 1)

A. "Then ... " Then What?

¹As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you ...

That word, "then," means that Paul's current challenge to the Ephesians materialized out of something he just developed. He was writing while in chains in Rome, but he regarded himself not as Rome's prisoner, but the Lord's, bound by His service to the Gospel: Earlier, He identified himself: "I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles ... (Ephesians 3:1).

The basis for the current challenge could be this theme of restoration that has been developed. If the purpose of the church is to showcase God's work of restoration to the world, "then," it was perfectly appropriate for Paul to urge his readers to live in such a way that reflected that purpose. Jew and Gentile must not simply coexist in the church. They must actually like each other.

Is that possible? Immediately before this text, Paul worded a prayer that his readers might fully grasp the love of Christ and the resources of the Father. That prayer closed with this doxology:

²⁰Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. – Ephesians 3:20, 21

I believe that these familiar words have often been exploited to feed enthusiasm for the visions of men whether or not they reflect the will of God. But, in context, they remind us that we can be the church that exists in the mind of God. We can be God's showpiece in this world for oneness. He is able to cause us to do that.

B. So, Live Up to Your Calling, Christian

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

This phrase, "live worthy" actually means to "bring up the other beam of the scales." In view is a balancing of the fact that one has been called to be a Christian with the practice that authenticates that calling. The challenge is to "do" what is in keeping with a vocation. If a man claims to be a baker, eventually, somebody's getting a cookie. If a man claims to be a Christian, eventually, something specific will surface. What does it look like "to live a life worthy of the calling"? On the scales of life, what proper practice balances the name, Christian? Let us read on ...

II. The Realization of Oneness (verses 2, 3)

A. Christians Realize Oneness When Each Reflects Christ verse 2

An old axiom of mathematics says that things that are equal to the same thing are equal to one another. Orchestral instruments that all tuned to Concert C accomplish pleasant unisons and harmonies. If I am determined to reflect Jesus in my life, and you are determined to reflect Jesus in your life, then, there is an outstanding likelihood that the community of you and me will reflect Jesus. What more could Paul have meant but to reflect Christ when he commanded:

²Be completely humble ...

Measuring humility is tricky. I was once awarded a pin for my great humility, but when I wore it, they took it away. "Humility" was no virtue in the Greek world. It was a derogatory reference that described a groveling servant. Christianity appropriated humility and elevated to one of the crowning virtues of the faith. Boisterous self-assertion was the standard then. To be highly thought of was the reputation every Greek coveted. Humility still stands against the self-promotional spirit of our own age. True humility comes from a proper view of self and of God. We are by nature unfit for the presence of a holy God. Nevertheless, we are rendered fit by One, Who, though in his very nature was God, humbled Himself and died in the place of sinners.

²Be completely humble and gentle;

"Gentle" is the same word translated elsewhere as "meek." Meekness means "controlled strength or passion" and it was best illustrated by a broken mount. A horse was of no value to a cavalry officer unless all that speed and all that strength was under the control of the rider. When such a horse is broken, he does not cease to be fast. He does not cease to be powerful. But, for the first time in its life, the horse is useful. Paul is not asking believers to hide or recoil from their strengths and passions. Rather, such things are to be brought under the holy control of Jesus, so that they can be useful to Him.

²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient ...

This "patience" never gives-in in the face of suffering and never blows-up when agitated. {picture} Have you ever seen a small yappy dog incessantly barking at a large powerful dog that could probably snap the little guy in half were he not so good-natured. That's a picture of patience. William Barclay describes this patience: "It is the spirit which can suffer unpleasant people with graciousness and fools without irritation." Patience is a virtue of God for which we should be especially grateful. Sure, we have spurned His love. We have trampled His holiness. But, we have also just plain old irritated Him. Still, in patience, He has spared us and saved us.

²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Most of my brothers and sisters in Christ have faults. Some of them have quirks. A few have idiosyncrasies. It is Paul's instruction that I should overlook certain things that annoy me rather than react to them in knee-jerk anger. The idea is that even though from my tiny frame of reference, I am, in fact, the standard by which all normalcy is measured, there remains a possibility that somewhere out there in the community, a brother sees things differently. My normalcy, he might deem a fault, a quirk, and yes, even an idiosyncrasy. To bear with someone is a choice on my part that is born "in love," *agape*. This is not a sentimental feeling, but a deliberate willful act to seek what is better for another even if his better comes at my sacrifice.

It is because of such virtues in our Creator that we were not obliterated the very first day our eyes saw light. If living worthy of our calling means to reflect Jesus, then we must extend these virtues to one another, for the absence of such virtues will certainly jeopardize the oneness that was declared by God Himself when we were called out from the world and placed into one body.

B. It Is Not Our Burden to Manufacture Christian Unity, Only to Preserve It verse 3

³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

God established His church in the unity of the Spirit. We are to "keep" or preserve that oneness because we cannot create it. Perhaps, maintaining a unity that already is should be easy, but Paul's makes it sound like arduous labor. Our sinful natures are selfish. Every fiber within us strains against unity. Our egos are fragile. Conflict is our nature, but conflict is not our calling.

"Peace" is described here as a "bond" or a clasp that holds things together. How does one apply the "bond of peace" to a tense situation, for even in the noblest of endeavors, disagreements on details can be irreconcilable? I may have a chance to make my point with a quick, powerful jab that has a razor edge, puts my opponent in his place, brings his motives into question and maybe even makes him look a bit silly. Or, I can stand my ground, but resort only to the gentlest, most wrath-avoiding words in my arsenal. Either option makes my position clear. Only one attempts to apply the bond of peace and preserve the unity that Christ died to bring to pass.

III. The Reality of Oneness (verses 4-6)

Sometimes, a text of Scripture causes me to back away just so that I can view it with a degree of breathless awe. For me, these next words are such a text. My first responsibility as a Christian preacher is not to proclaim unity with all the eloquence I can muster. Our primary responsibility as a church is not to make this oneness known by clever strategies and expensive programming. Our first duty to unity is to see that it is already perfect in heavenly realms. On earth, job one is simply not to mess it up, not to undermine or destroy it, it but to preserve it by our holy conduct and mutual love. Our job is to not allow "self" to destroy what is already beautiful about the church.

⁴There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

We live in an age of religious pluralism, which simply means that the shapers of the culture have declared all religions equally valuable and equally true (even when different religions hold to contradictory positions that could not possibly be true at the same time.) Any position is tolerable until one religion dares to take a position that they are exclusively truthful. That is intolerable to pluralism. For that very reason, Christianity must always be under some degree of attack.

It is not new for Christianity to exist in a pluralistic culture. Ephesus was such a culture. The temple of Dianna was there, but so were various cults, mystery religions and secular philosophers. Under Roman rule, people were pretty much free to do their own thing religiously just so long as they participated in the emperor worship that held everything together. Today, most everything still goes, religiously speaking. Tolerance is the new emperor to whom we must bow on the assumption that it will hold everything together. Christianity has always encountered problems because it is its very nature to claim the exclusivity of its truth. True Christianity shakes things up. It always will. Nevertheless, it is and must remain that there is ...

A. One Body and One Spirit

In this whole wide world, there is only one community of people that have been brought together as the people of God and given life by the Spirit of God, and that one body is the church. The divine life is not poured into the proponents of Islam or Hinduism or Taoism or any other “ism” on the planet. The divine life is poured out upon those who have come to Jesus Christ in saving faith. They alone are the household of God’s redeemed. That is an exclusive statement, but it is not a bigoted statement for the Christian Church is comprised of people from every race, tribe, language group and ethnicity of man – just as it was in the world of the first century.

If the lessons of history tell us anything, they tell us that Christianity will flourish in an age of pluralism, not by hiding its claims to exclusivity under a basket, but by proclaiming them openly and by living uniquely as the Body of Christ infused with life by the very Spirit of God.

B. One Hope

Every religion has its own expectation of how things will work out. For some, death is the end of everything. For others, reincarnation occurs over and over until some point of Nirvana is reached. For Hollywood, we become angelic agents on special assignments to help people with their problems. But for the Christian, our one hope is the return of Jesus to set up His eternal rule. We await “the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ (Titus 2:11-14).

I do not see the church today as particularly identifiable by her hope. As I have lamented often, eternal hope doesn’t receive nearly enough attention from Christian writers. Everything is about now; our finances, our families and our fat. Joyful contentment rooted in eternal hope is what this world needs to hear about. Sadly, it is often what the church of this age needs to hear about.

C. One Lord

There is one Lord, one Sovereign to Whom every knee will one day bow, and He is Jesus. That was an irritating message in first-century Ephesus and it is an irritating message in 21st century America. Our age is not submissive to anything, but is the church living before a watching world as a people under authority? What should that look like? Are we living in ways that are in open conflict with our “me first” culture because it is more important to us that we honor the Lord?

Is it still normal for a Christian professional to refuse the promotion in order to spend more time with the family? Is it still normal for a Christian family to choose a simpler lifestyle so as to be able to give more away? Are Christians still by and large known as a people who are disciplined in the use of their time, careful about what they watch on TV, unwilling to bow to the gods of recreation, constantly engaged in personal moral judgments about clear options that do honor God versus options that do not honor Him? Do we live like a people who answer to one Lord?

D. One Faith

There is one response that embraces the one salvation that is extended to man from one God. That was volatile talk then and it's volatile language now, but how can we really be the church in the world in any true sense if the voices of this age shame us into silence. Peter was speaking to a hostile audience when he said, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). His words were not received warmly then and there are many places where they will not be received warmly today. Still, how can the church be the church at all in this confused and pluralistic age unless she is straightforward about the fact that there is no salvation apart from faith in Jesus Christ?

E. One Baptism

The Jews has many baptisms and ceremonial cleansings. Among the pagans, there were various ceremonial washings and external initiation rituals into various religions and secret societies. But, if there is only one true body and one true hope – and, if there is only one true Lord and one true faith, then, there is only one true rite of entry into those things. Baptism is the biblical point of entry into the body of Christ. It is in baptism that a repentant sinner is pictured as being robed in the righteous garments of Jesus. It is in baptism that a sinner is pictured as experiencing a death and a burial to sin and resurrection to a new life. It is in baptism that a believer's heart is pictured as being newly circumcised into a new covenant relationship with God.

F. One God and Father of All

In a city with its own patron goddess, Ephesus would not be naturally open to this declaration, but Paul stood his ground. In our modern pluralistic culture, the notion that there is one God is not so offensive. The idea of a Father to all is not troublesome to anyone save the feminists. It's all quite lovely just so long as we allow for a myriad of paths to get to Him. The idea that He is "in" everything and "through" everything is kind of sweet to the modern mind. That harmonizes nicely with the eastern pantheistic notion that God is in everything and everything is in God. But, Paul was talking about a God Who is distinct from His creation. Paul notes that He is "over" all, and that is where the one true God collides with the God of this age.

Paul is describing a personal God, that is, a God Who is a Person. He has a standard of righteousness. He has laws that are to be kept. He has values that are to be embraced. He has personal attributes that are to be soberly revered. "Over" all things, He is the sovereign Potentate of the universe. He is not the indulgent grandfather, who does not really mean what He says, that even many who profess to be Christians have embraced. When God speaks, His Word is truth. When He speaks, His Word is the light by which a man must walk, lest he walk in darkness.

The foolishness of the man who says that there are many ways to God should be somewhat self-evident. Has he somehow stepped back and seen God, not to mention this alleged big picture that shows all roads leading to Him. No, you must not sway in your own certainty of what you have been taught just because the foolish man of this age hides behind a false bravado of certainty. Only the Gospel of Christ is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe. Let's be united on those eternal truths. Let's preserve that oneness in our fellowship. Let's see together what a difference that can make in this utterly confused age in which we are living.