

THE CRY FOR UNITY

by Ray C. Stedman

In this present series, we are concerned with the great questions the Apostle Paul is answering in Ephesians 4 about the fundamental nature and purpose of the church, and its relationships to the world in which it must live. You will recognize these as pertinent questions of the present hour as well. We are being told today that the church is irrelevant (I wonder if there was ever a more overworked word than that), that it is a useless appendage to a society which has long outgrown the need for the church. Well, let us be perfectly honest and admit there are churches that justify a view like that.

There are others who say that the church is very much needed in this hour, but it must change its approach if it is going to be meaningful (there is another overworked word) in our generation. They say that the church must forget its attempts to teach men about God, and invisible supernatural things, and exist only for the service of humanity. Again we must be honest and admit that there has been considerable weakness in this area of the practical application of the life of the church. But all of these misconceptions of what the church is arise because the church itself has forgotten its calling.

That is what the apostle reminds us of here. The church does not have the right to chart its own course. Its goal has already been set; its purpose has been determined by its Lord. Paul puts it this way,

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph 4:1-3 {RSV})

There is another set of voices in our day that seize on this word "unity," and say, "Here is the cause of the church's weakness: It is our lack of unity. If we could only get together then we would have a powerful church again. The problem is, we are so fragmented, we are so divided, so broken. Out of our disunity we have nothing to say to the world, therefore the church lives in weakness and is held in contempt by our society. Our need, therefore, above all other needs, is to unite. There is power in numbers and if we can get enough Christians together we can influence society as the church was intended to do." Out of that concept has arisen what many are calling today the age of ecumenism, a word which essentially means universal, an age when the church seeks to be a universal church and thus to have an ecumenical body. There are those who pursue this to such an extent they are called ecumaniacs.

Now, someone says, "What is wrong with that? Is this not exactly what the Apostle Paul is urging, that we maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace? In other parts of the Scripture does he not speak of the need of Christians to get together? Why not welcome these efforts to produce unity? Surely the union of all Christians can only strengthen and help the cause of Christ!" Well, let us examine this passage closely, and see if this is what he is saying, and whether it justifies that approach.

In Verse 3, the apostle declares for us two great facts about the church that are clearly evident:

First, there is the clear recognition of the existence of differences among Christians. He says we should be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, but there would be no need for that exhortation if there were not differences existing, if there were not pressures to break up, if there were not forces at work to divide the Christian body.

The word "eager" here is a bit too weak. The original word means, "to give diligence." Eagerness merely implies willingness, but the original word means "willingness plus activity" -- doing something about it. Perhaps the King James translation is more accurate: "earnestly endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," {cf, Eph 4:3 KJV}.

I know you will agree that it is unrealistic for Christians to pretend there are no differences among themselves. Thank God there is no group in the world so gloriously heterogeneous as the church. Its glory is that it is made up of different kinds of people. In the church of Christ the rich and poor alike are to gather on the same basis, without distinction and certainly without favor -- slaves and freemen, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, black, red, white, or yellow, it is to make no difference. This is not the way the church has always been, but this is the way the church ought to be. The church crosses all the boundaries that men erect and all natural distinctions and gathers all kinds of people, without exception, into one body. There is no other grouping in the world that attempts to unite people from such widely variant origins and sources.

But we do not ignore these boundaries easily. Friction often arises because of them. It was there in the 1st century, as you can see in several places in the Scriptures. In the letter to the Philippians are named two ladies who could not get along with each other, Euodia and Syntyche (or, as it has been rendered, Odious and Soontouchy), who had trouble working together. There were distinctions of personality then, and they still exist here in the 20th century. As I have often reminded you, the church is well described in the little jingle:

To dwell above with saints we love,
O that will be glory
But to dwell below with saints we know,
Well, that's another story.

There are differences of gifts within the body of Christ, and each Christian has a tendency to deprecate others' gifts and to exalt his own. We feel that what we are contributing is the important thing and others' contributions are not as important. So there is fertile ground for friction, and differences and distinctions will arise within the church.

But, in this verse, there is a second fact very evident: Beneath the differences there is also the fact of a basic unity. You notice the apostle does not say "eager to produce the unity of the Spirit," but, "eager to maintain the unity." We are never told to produce unity in the church. There is a unity that is already there by virtue of the very existence of a church. There is no need to create it, in fact we are unable to create unity. Here is the trouble with the modern movement today. By and large, those who are striving to produce unity in the church are ignoring this unity the New Testament mentions, and trying to produce another. Paul calls this, the unity of the Spirit, by which he means: It is produced, created, by the Holy Spirit working in the human spirit. The church has power because of this indwelling Spirit who is the Spirit of God himself. That is what creates unity. The ecumenists are trying to create a unity of the flesh, an organizational unity which draws its power from the number of bodies which can be joined together, quite apart from conviction and spiritual agreement. Dr. Bernard Ramm says,

When the modern groups deny the supernatural character of Christ the church becomes a society, a natural, human, nonsupernatural, religious community. It is bound together by purely natural ties, such as a common heritage in the Bible, a common belief in some sort of uniqueness in Jesus, a common belief in the historical continuity of Christians, and a common ethic of love. Now the church is a society, but this is secondary to its being the supernatural body of Christ.

This is the difference that needs so dearly to be pointed out these days. The church is not a conglomeration of individuals who happen to agree upon certain things. It is bound together as an organism in a bodily unity. It cannot therefore derive power from the association of individuals in a society. Someone has well described that as an attempt to put all the corpses into one cemetery, and thus make for a resurrection. But it cannot work. The church is intended to be an instrument of life, but putting dead bodies together does not produce life.

There are, in another way of putting it, two kinds of unity. One is an internal unity which manifests occasional external disagreement.

I remember the first time I ran into that kind of unity. As a boy I had two friends who were brothers, only a year apart in age. One day we were out playing around and these brothers fell to quarreling between themselves. I thought that one fellow was a bit sarcastic and so I chimed in on behalf of the underdog. To my amazement he did not welcome my help but turned on me and his brother joined him and both jumped on me. I

discovered I had made a very shallow judgment. I felt the differences they were airing represented a fundamental disagreement between them, but they did not mean that at all. Underneath there was a fundamental unity, and the moment I attacked one of them, it manifested itself and they turned upon me. That is the unity of the church, an internal unity with occasional external disagreement.

But there is also an external unity without internal agreement. By the very nature of the case, control and direction in this kind of a group always rests with a small number at the top whose power is measured by how successful they are in getting the mass to follow them. One is the unity of shared life, the other is a unity of imposed direction -- and that is a vital difference.

Now, in Verses 4-6 of this chapter, the apostle is describing the real unity of the body of Christ. We could spend a great deal of time with each one of these elements but I am anxious that we see them as a whole, so I shall run rapidly through these seven elements of unity.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all. {Eph 4:4-6 RSV}

That is the unity of the body. You notice that it gathers about the three Persons of the Trinity, the Spirit, the Son, and the Father. Now, let us quickly look at these one by one:

First, there is one body. Notice the apostle does not say one organization. A body is an organization, this is true, but it is much more than an organization. The essence of a body is that it consists of thousands of cells with one mutually shared life. It is the sharing of life that makes a body different than an organization. The basic, fundamental, underlying unity of a body exists despite surface divisions. Anyone who has had the privilege, as I have had, of contacting the body of Christ in widespread places around the earth, soon learns to recognize this fundamental unity among Christians.

I was recently at a weekend conference of forty pastors from twelve different denominations, and we had a wonderful time together for three days. Though we came from twelve distinct denominational groups, and probably represented widely varying degrees of theological viewpoint on many issues, there was a mutual life in Christ that was immediately evident. There was a sense of belonging to each other.

This is often discernible even when there is an official denial of this unity. A number of years ago I met with a Catholic bishop in Mexico and spent an hour or two in fellowship with him talking about the things of Christ. I was a Protestant and he was a Catholic. There has been, as you well know, a long-standing history of disagreement between the Catholic and Protestant points of view. I am sure, had we gone into these areas, we would have found differences. But with this particular bishop there was a sense immediately of the oneness that we shared together in Christ. We talked about him. Our organizations were not one, but we were one, because we had entered together into the experience of the unity of the Spirit, produced by the operation of the Holy Spirit in the human spirit.

A body is not produced by combining sections of anatomy together. Contrary to the popular Negro spiritual, a body is not produced by the toe bone being joined to the ankle bone and the ankle bone to the foot bone and the foot bone to the knee bone, etc. A body is produced by the extension of one original cell, growing until it becomes a full-fledged mature body, but every cell of which shares that original life. That is the secret of a body -- all the parts of it share life together. And that is why the church is not just an organization, it is one body. Only the Spirit can produce it.

That brings us to the next element, one Spirit. Here is the great, eternal, invisible Person who is the power behind the Christian church. The strength of the church never comes from its numbers. This is the mistaken concept that many Christians have today. They think we only influence society and bear impact upon the world as we can gather together enough Christians and thus swing enough votes to sway our legislatures. That is not where the power of the church lies, and it never has. The prophet Zechariah was once confronted with a great mountain which God said would become a plain. When Zechariah began to look around to see how this could happen, where the power would come from, what instruments would be provided to level that mountain and

make it into a plain, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts," {Zech 4:6b RSV}. It is the Spirit that is the true power of the church, and there is only one Spirit. He is the same everywhere no matter where the church exists -- in every place and in every age. That is why the truth remains unchangeable, the passing of time does not change it. That is why the church is not dependent on many or few, or on the wisdom of its membership. It depends on one thing, the one Spirit.

Paul links with this the one hope, the hope "that belongs to your call." These first three things are linked to the Spirit because it is he who forms the body for its final and ultimate goal, which is the one hope of the church. What is that hope? It is expressed hundreds of times throughout the Scriptures. Perhaps the briefest expression of it can be found in Colossians, "Christ in you, the hope of glory," {Col 1:27b RSV}. Glory is the hope of the church. As John puts it, "that we might be like him when we see him at his appearing," {cf, 1 Jn 3:2}. That is the hope of the church -- that we should no longer be frail, stumbling, faulty men and women such as we are, but, fulfilling God's intention for manhood, we should be like him, like Christ.

I travel widely, and everywhere I have gone around the world, I have found this to be the one hope of Christians. No matter what their brand, their denominational stamp, their background or origin, their race or color, this is always the one hope. There may be many differences as to the detail by which this works out, and Christians have much room for disagreement here. There are premillennialists, amillennialists, postmillennialists, and other jawbreaker names which detail differences of viewpoint, but there is only one final expectation of Christians anywhere in the earth and that is that we will eventually be like Christ.

The next group of three gather about the second Person of the Trinity and begins with him, one Lord. Notice the apostle does not say one Savior, though it is true there is only one Savior. But everywhere in Scripture it is only when we acknowledge him as Lord that he becomes our Savior. Therefore the important issue which Paul centers on is that Jesus Christ is Lord. Lord means "ultimate authority." As Paul puts it in the letter to the Philippians, "he was obedient unto death, ... therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father," {cf, Phil 2:9-11 RSV}. He is the supreme person of the universe. There is no other Lord; there will never be another Lord.

Peter puts it bluntly, in Acts 4, "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved," {Acts 4:12b RSV}. That is why the early Christians could not say, "Caesar is Lord," as the persecutors of the early church attempted to get them to do. That is why the modern Christian cannot say, "Buddha is Lord," or any other person is Lord, only Jesus. The mystery and the marvel of his Person is this: The man Christ Jesus, the man who lived and walked and loved and worked and died among us, whose life-record is given to us in the Gospels, is also Lord of the universe, the supreme being the Lord of all things, the God-man. That is why John, in his letter, says that anyone who denies this is not a Christian, he has the "spirit of antichrist," {1 Jn 4:3}. Paul says a man can only say, "Jesus is Lord" {1 Cor 12:3}, by the Holy Spirit.

Now we come to the next, one faith. This is a little more difficult, but I am persuaded that it is not faith in general, i.e., the ability to believe, because all men have this. There are those who say, "I can't believe," but that is not true, of course. All men *can* believe, it is that they *will not* believe. But this is not what Paul is talking about here. He has in view that which is believed, i.e., the body of truth that has been revealed. There is only one body of truth revealed, one faith. It is what Jude speaks of in his letter, "contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" {Jude 1:3 RSV}, i.e., the whole set of revealed facts about Jesus Christ.

Notice this is linked to the Lord Jesus, it is the truth about him. Again, there may be many questions on details, there is much room for disagreement as to meaning, but what Paul is getting at is, there is full agreement everywhere among true Christians that there is a body of truth revealed about Jesus Christ; there is only one set of facts; there is only one faith. There is not a faith for the Jews and another faith for the Gentiles, there is one set of facts for all men everywhere. God has spoken through the prophets and the apostles and the seers, but it all forms one total picture, articulated together, explaining itself. Therefore, there is not a God of

the Old Testament versus a God of the New Testament, as we sometimes hear. We cannot say, as some people do say, "Well I have my Christ and you have your Christ." No, there is only one Christ. There is only one historic Jesus. There is only one faith.

Now we come to the one baptism, and here there is much apparent disunity. The Baptists say, "Ah, this is water baptism, baptism by immersion only." (The latest sign to appear in Baptist churches now says, "Put a tither in your tank!") The Presbyterians say, "No, you're all wet, sprinkling is the only way." There are other groups that say babies ought to be baptized, while others say, "No, it is only for adults." There seems to be such disunity on this question of baptism. But the amazing thing is, despite this difference over the symbol (and, after all, water baptism, in whatever form, is recognizably and demonstrably a symbol for something else), there is one baptism everywhere agreed upon by the church. It is the baptism of the Spirit, the real baptism of which water baptism is always a symbol. That baptism is linked here to Jesus Christ because it is baptism into his body. As we read in First Corinthians 12, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" {1 Cor 12:13}, the body of Christ. Or, as Romans 6 puts it, we were "baptized into his death," {Rom 6:3}. We have been made one with him, united with him in all the value of his death and his resurrection. Now that is the one baptism of the church and it is everywhere confessed.

Then we come to the last of these seven unities, "one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all." Here is the ultimate aim of the others. All the rest is, as Peter puts it, "in order to bring us to God," {cf, 1 Pet 3:18}. He is the goal and the aim. The mark that we have found him is that we recognize him as Father, we feel his father-heart. You know how Paul puts it in Romans 8, "We have been given the spirit of adoption whereby we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" {cf, Rom 8:15 KJV}. John writes his first letter on this theme, that the one mark of a new-born babe in the family of God is that he immediately knows his Father, and calls him Father. What a far cry this is from some of the views of God that are abroad today. God is called the Ground of our being, the Ultimate Cause, the Infinite Mind. He is all these things, it is true. These are not wrong, but they are inadequate. As Paul puts it here, he is above all, and through all, and in all. He is the end and the beginning; he is the beginning and the end. All things exist because of him, all things are trending toward him, all things originated from him. Beautiful language here, and all true. But when you actually know him, you find he can only be properly addressed as, "Our Father which art in heaven," {Matt 6:9 KJV}.

Now, there is the nature of Christian unity. Notice, it is not a union to be produced, but a unity that already exists. These, in other words, are not articles of theological agreement. This should never be put into a creedal statement as though we are to agree to these things and thereby become Christians. No, these are areas of mutual experience. These are things that lay hold of us, not we laying hold of them. These are not debatable. If anyone challenges or disagrees with these, he is simply manifesting the fact that he is not yet a Christian, because when he becomes a Christian he will experience these things. He may not be able to articulate them clearly, but he will understand them when they are set forth. All these are immediately experienced by all who are in Christ. Therefore, the way to create unity is simply to bring men to Christ and the unity of the Spirit will be produced in them by the Spirit. It is impossible to make any meaningful or significant union apart from this unity which is only produced by the Spirit.

Now there are certain practical conclusions that come from a passage like this. As we apply this great, central truth to the outer areas of our life, especially as we confront with it the problems of our modern existence in this generation, there are certain things that are immediately evident:

First, we cannot classify Christians by organizations. We cannot say that everyone who belongs to the Baptist Church, for instance, are Christians, but all those who are Catholics are not. We cannot say that all those who belong to the World Council of Churches are Christians while all those who belong to the Independent Fundamental Churches of America are not. This is all wrong. God's Spirit forever overleaps human boundaries. The unity of the Spirit will be found in people in many different groups, and we have to recognize that. We will find Christians everywhere and it becomes our responsibility to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace with Christians wherever we find them. As Paul says in Romans 14, "Him that is weak in the faith" -- what? Cast him out? No, "receive him!" {Rom 14:1 KJV}. Receive him, even though he does not see as clearly as you do and has not graduated from the right seminary. Nevertheless, receive him. Recognize him as a brother if he manifests this experience of the unity of the Spirit, no matter what his label may be.

A second conclusion from this study suggests that true Christians (i.e., those who have entered into this unity of the Spirit), cannot possibly join in an evangelistic endeavor with those who deny this fundamental unity. Why not? Because our actions are determined by our beliefs. These are such fundamental beliefs, they so fundamentally affect us, that they set the direction of our life. Where one person accepts these and has experienced them and someone else does not, you have two fundamentally separate directions. You have two people going different ways. It is impossible, of course, to ride two horses going in opposite directions -- to attempt it puts a terrific strain upon the anatomy. This is why the Israelites were ordered not to yoke an ox and an ass together. Why not? Well, they go at two different speeds, they are two different heights, and they would simply chafe one another all the time. It would be cruelty to both to link them together. This is God's way of teaching us, symbolically, that there are fundamental differences of gait and direction -- that two cannot walk together except they be agreed.

There are areas and levels of cooperation that we can have with those who do not share this unity. After all, though we may not be one in the body of Christ, we are one in sharing human life. We can join with them as human beings in relief of human ailments, in healing, in government, in education, and many other enterprises in life. We are not to shut ourselves away from them because we do not share the same life in Christ. Someone says, "Can we worship together with people like this?" Yes, we can. God commands all men everywhere to worship him. Wherever someone is worshipping God as supreme and not some lesser concept of him, as an idol, then Christians can join together with them in worship. But in the enterprise of proclaiming the great life-changing message of the church, then we cannot work together, for their understanding of the gospel is entirely different from ours. What they are attempting to do among men is entirely different -- we go in opposite directions.

Now there comes a third very practical application of this. The efforts of Christians are not to be directed toward creating unity, but toward maintaining peace in the body. That is the way the Apostle Paul puts it, "eagerly endeavoring to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." It is important that Christians not be quarreling, bickering, and struggling against one another, filled with resentment and hate. A church that is like that is a totally ineffective body in its community. A church that has that kind of activity going on in its midst will have nothing to say to the world that the world will pay any attention to. It is important that when Christians meet together they recognize that they are called to understand one and other, to forbear one another, to pray for one another, to forgive one another, to be kind, tenderhearted, not holding grudges, not being unforgiving, bitter, resentful, and hateful toward each other. This is where the Spirit aims when he comes into our midst, at the healing of long-standing grudges, deep-seated resentments, and bitter hostilities that are harbored against one another. We must fulfill what the apostle tells us to do, to maintain the unity of the Spirit. The unity is already there, we simply need to get below the surface, behind the differences that are apparent, and then it will be evident. We will discover that, if there has been a work of grace at all, there is a marvelous, underlying, fundamental, foundational unity that will come welling up through all the differences and express itself, by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, in love manifested to the unlovely. That is where our effort must be put.

Prayer

Our Father, we feel the Spirit of God has been searching our hearts about our attitudes toward one another and toward the world in which we live. We thank you, Father, that it is not our calling to produce a union of Christians or those who call themselves Christians, but rather to discover that unity of the Spirit which is produced only by the Holy Spirit and which already exists. Where it does not exist, Lord, we are not called upon to be judgmental and harsh and cruel, but to evangelize in the spirit of love and grace. And when we do find this unity we are to be forgiving and understanding, holding these great fundamental issues above all else, valuing that other person. Teach us, by thy grace, to live these in practice as well as to preach them. In Christ's name, Amen.

Scripture: Ephesians 4:1-6
Message No: 2
Catalog No: 109
Date: January 23, 1966

[PBC Homepage](#) | [Discovery Publishing](#) | [Ray Stedman Library](#)

Copyright (C) 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.