

*Building Biblical
Community in Christ
Ephesians 4:1-6*

God's "Onederful" Plan for His Church

*Yet she on earth hath union, with God the Three in One,
And mystic sweet communion, with those whose rest is won.*

It is that union with God the Three in One that Paul emphasizes in Ephesians 4:3-6. I invite you to stand together and read this inspired Word:

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. Eph 4:1-6

I received a phone call from one of our members the other day who asked me where the word "rapture" is found in the Bible. At first, she was rather disturbed that the English word is never found in our Bible. I reminded her that neither is the word "trinity" found in the Bible, and yet the doctrine of the trinity – or "tri-unity" of God – is clearly taught.

Over the centuries people have tried to illustrate the Trinity in various ways. Some have referred to the three different forms of water—vapor, liquid, and (when frozen) a solid. Others have compared the trinity to an egg, in which we have the shell, the white, and the yoke. Others have compared the Trinity to (believe it or not!) shortbread in which there are three ingredients: sugar, flour, and butter. Tertullian, who lived only 150 years after Christ, compared the Trinity to a plant, with its root, shoot and fragrance. He compared God the Father to the root, God the Son to the shoot which breaks forth into the world, and God the Holy Spirit to the fragrance of the plant. But in one way or another, each of these illustrations falls short of the truth of the Trinity. The biggest problem with all four is that each ingredient or part does not share the same essence as the other two. For example, the shell is not at the same time also the same essence or substance with the white and the yoke.ⁱ

Someone has said that the Bible demonstrates a "certain reverent reticence" when it comes to the Trinity.ⁱⁱ I like that description. The Bible speaks of the truth of the Trinity without coming out and stating it in so many words. The Bible often does this by assigning to each person of the great "Three in

One” the same work or activity. For example, the work of creation is attributed to God the Father (Gen. 1:1), God the Son (Col. 1:16) and to the Holy Spirit (Job 26:13).

Not only are the Father, Son and Holy Spirit active in creation, but also all three participate in our *recreation* (i.e. our salvation). This is seen here in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. In chapter one, God the Father *plans* our salvation; God the Son *purchases* our salvation; and God the Spirit *protects* our salvation.

We see a similar thought here in Ephesians 4:3-6. There is one Spirit, there is one Lord, and there is one God the Father. No wonder this letter has been called “Paul’s Trinitarian epistle.” But not only is this “diversity in oneness” of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit the foundation of our salvation, it is also the basis of our unity in the church.

In these three verses, the little word “one” occurs seven times. And in each instance, the word means far more than a mere number. Three of those times, the word “one” refers to one of the persons of the Trinity. The remaining four times the word occurs it refers to our experience in relation to our God who is Three in one.

In verse 6 Paul describes God as the Father “*of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*” Now Paul is not a pantheist, believing that God is in all that exists around us. Paul is writing to believers – they are the “all” – and reminding you and me who believe that the God who indwells you indwells me. The God who is over you is over me. The God who works through you works through me. *Friend, that truth unites you and me and all who believe in a unique, inseparable way.*

Moving up into verse 5 he says there is “*one Lord, one faith, one baptism.*” Christianity is exclusive and inclusive at the same time. It is *exclusive* in that *only* those who believe experience salvation. Jesus said with no hesitation, “*I am the way, the truth and the life.*” Peter reminded the crowds in Jerusalem: “*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*”ⁱⁱⁱ And for those who refuse to accept this now, someday they will – but then it will be too late. Paul tells us that someday, “*at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.*”^{iv}

While exclusive, Christianity is also inclusive. Only those who believe have

salvation in Christ, but *all* those who believe have salvation in Christ. It is not a question of being in a particular church, but of being *in Christ*.

Over the years I have had the joy of fellowshiping with Presbyterians, and Methodists, with Pentecostals and Catholics, and believers from many other denominations or traditions. To the degree that we both shared life in one Lord, Jesus Christ, we experienced oneness despite our differences.

How do we come to this point? Through “one faith.” I believe Paul is referring here to the essence of the gospel as spelled out in 1 Corinthians chapter 15: Christ died for our sins, he was buried, and he was raised on the third day. If the unity of the church is dependent on coming to agreement on the spiritual gifts, or on your particular view of the return of Christ, or on the proper form of church government, or on the proper interpretation of the Lord’s supper...then we are left with little hope of such unity this side of heaven.

But it is *not* dependent on these things. What unites all believers – regardless of denomination, background, church affiliation or culture – is being in and having “one Lord.” How does this come about? Through “one baptism.” Now that’s strange. There are few things that have divided believers more than the mode of baptism. But Paul here is not talking about being poured, dunked or sprinkled. I believe he is speaking of the true meaning of the word “baptism” which is “to place into.” Those who believe in the one faith – the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ – experience the one baptism. That is, they are *placed into* Christ. *Friend, that truth unites you and me and all who believe in a unique, inseparable way.*

Finally, Paul picks up on the role of the third person of the Trinity in verse 4: “*There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called.*” Elsewhere Paul states it this way: “*For by one Spirit were we all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free, and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.*”^v

We are one body, not one organization. The human body *is* organized. But it is far more than that. The human body consists of millions of living cells, but only one mutually shared life. The human body is not the simple addition of parts of the human anatomy.

Remember the old popular spiritual – the toe bone is connected to the foot bone and the foot bone to the ankle bone and the ankle bone to the leg bone.

No, the human body is far more than this. It is not an organization of independent parts. It is a living organism of which all the parts mutually share life together infused into our very being the third person of the Trinity.

Friend, that truth unites you and me and all who believe in a unique, inseparable way.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is not a singularity, but marked by diversity in unity. One in essential being, and yet three individuals each possessing a distinct personality. This is our model for unity in the church. No wonder Jesus prays so intensely for you and me (and let's read these verses together) –

"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. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. John 17:20-23

[Break for worship; children dismissed]

What is God's "onderful" plan for his church? The basis of it is found in verses we have already looked at this morning, which are really only a summary of chapters 1-3 of this letter. Chapters 1-3 of Ephesians deal with our calling, whereas chapters 4-6 address our conduct. Chapters 1-3 speak of our heritage in Christ. But then there is a major shift of emphasis, highlighted by the word "therefore" in chapter 4, verse 1. Remember, whenever you see a "therefore" or a "wherefore" you must ask what it is there for! And here it introduces you and me to the practical application of all that we have seen so far in this letter.

It is always this way in the New Testament. Doctrine always precedes practice; being always come before doing. What we are to do flows out of who we are. Though in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, we are saved by grace, the motivation for living for God is different. In the Old Testament the prescription is: *Be good, I will bless you.* In the New Testament the prescription is: *I have blessed you, now be good.*

Paul doesn't beat you and me over the head with his "apostolic stick" trying

to motivate us to somehow get on with this thing called unity. He rather calls us to consider who we already are as children of the great “Three in One.” And what we are together in Christ has been outlined for us in chapters 1-3.

In light of all we have seen about our togetherness in Christ, how are we to live? Paul answers that beginning in verse 1: “*I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.*”

This does not mean deserving our calling in Christ, but understanding how much our calling in Christ deserves from us. We can picture here a pair of scales. Not the kind you stand on in the bathroom to determine your weight (God forbid!). But rather what is called an “analytical balance.” Do you remember the old “analytical balances” that people used to use? This kind of balance is for the purpose of comparison. It takes a standard or known weight and places it in one pan. This is then compared to an unknown sample or object placed in the other pan. The objective is to “tip the scales” or to “bring into balance.”

Paul is telling us that our lives, individually and corporately, are to be brought into balance with our true identity. And as he pursues this idea in the following chapters, we see that there are basically two areas in which this should be true: in our *purity* and in our *unity*.

More specifically, what does this look like? Paul continues: “*Be completely humble.*” Humility is an illusive thing. The more we think we’ve attained it, the less we have. It’s like the pastor who said, “My sermon today is on humility, and in my opinion, it’s one of the finest messages I’ve ever written.”

Paul’s words here may have come as quite a surprise to these Ephesian Christians. In Paul’s day, humility carried an extremely negative idea. It was most often used to describe a slave crouching in shame or fear.

But the biblical idea of humility has nothing to do with that. Paul has just spent three chapters talking about our high, exalted position in Christ. What he underscores, however, is that none of it is by our doing, *so that no one can boast* (Ephesians 2:8-9). We are God’s workmanship, not our own. If anything worthwhile is accomplished in and through our lives, it is to the glory of God alone. In other words, an understanding of our high calling should make us feel very lowly.^{vi}

For Paul, humility was an ever-increasing quality. And it should be for you and me also. When he wrote to the Corinthians, he said, “*I am the least of all the apostles.*”^{vii} About five years later when he wrote this letter to the Ephesians he says, “*I am the least of all the saints.*”^{viii} And then, at the end of his life he writes to young Timothy, “*I am the chief of sinners.*”^{ix} Again, humility says, “I do not deserve my high calling in Christ, but my high calling in Christ deserves much from me.”

The single greatest secret to unity is humility. Martin Luther once told of two mountain goats who met each other on a narrow ledge just wide enough for one of the animals to pass. On the left was a sheer cliff, and on the right a steep wall. The two were facing each other, and it was impossible to turn or to back up. How did they solve their dilemma? If they had been like you and me, they would have stared butting each other until they plunged into the chasm together. But according to Luther, the goats had more sense than that. One of them lay down on the trail and let the other literally walk over him – and both were safe.^x

The single greatest secret to unity is humility, and the single greatest secret to humility is our *identity* in Christ. Only as you and I discover our true identity in Christ can we allow someone to walk over us and still feel safe.

You and I are called not only to humility, but also to *gentleness*. As with humility, gentleness also carried many negative overtones for Paul’s readers. For them, gentleness implied weakness. And yet the word means just the opposite. Gentleness is strength under control. Before Paul’s day it referred to a strong horse, such as a stallion, broken to the bridle.^{xi}

One has defined it as the “unwillingness to establish yourself by might or right.”^{xii} This is often done in the church. People jockey for position. They maneuver to gain the respect of others. Or they try to establish themselves by “might or right.” This is often seen in the way we speak to one another. Did you know that ninety percent of the friction of daily life is caused by the wrong tone of voice? The world tells us to be aggressive and assertive, the Word tells us to be gentle and kind.

The next quality that should characterize our lives is *patience*. “*Be patient, bearing with one another in love.*” Paul tells us *what* to do and he tells us *how* to do it. Be patient with one another. How? By “bearing with one another.” That means literally by putting up with one another.

Paul writes with a good dose of realism in these verses. He knows that there are a few people at Central Bible Church who are grumpy and critical and judgmental. He also knows that the Sr. Pastor and the pastoral staff as well as the elders have gaping holes in the fabric of their sanctification. He's not telling us here how perfect people can get along with each other, but how EGRP's (Extra Grace Required People) can live in harmonious unity.

How can you genuinely care for the person who ignores you, or doesn't like the same music you like, or is critical of your service to others? By being patient and putting up with them in love. This kind of patience and love is not cheap, it's costly. It's not natural, it's supernatural.

Finally, Paul concludes with one overarching command: *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace* (v 3). This unity of the Spirit has already been described in verses 4-6. It's the same unity that characterizes the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is the unity that Jesus prays for in John 17.

We are to make every effort to keep this unity. Literally, we are to go to great lengths, take great pains to *keep* this unity. We can't *create* this unity. It already exists. We can't create this unity, but we can *confuse* it!

One last word. I believe that we have in Paul's initial words in this chapter the key to putting all of this into practice. Notice how he introduces himself: "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you..." Paul is writing from prison. Following Christ is always safe in the long run, but it is very dangerous and risky in the short run. Paul is not concerned here about comfort and safety in the short run. Why is he willing to suffer persecution? Why is he willing to be misunderstood by the very churches he founded? Why is he willing to (as he puts it) "fill up in his body the sufferings of Christ" on behalf of the church? It is because he saw himself as being ultimately as prisoner of Jesus Christ and not of his circumstances. He saw himself as being a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and not enslaved to other people's opinions of him or their attacks upon him.

Let me ask you: Are you making every effort to maintain the unity that already exists but should now characterize the Body of Christ? Or are you allowing bitterness or unforgiveness to fester in your heart? Do you realize that such attitudes and actions are an affront to the great "Three in One" who has saved you? Are you willing to reaffirm this morning your true calling as

a “prisoner of Jesus Christ” and your commitment to walk in humility, gentleness, patience and love towards others?

ⁱ Henry Morris notes that the entire universe is trinitarian by design. The universe consists of three things: matter, space, and time. Take away any one of those three and the universe would cease to exist. But each one of those is itself a trinity: Matter = mass + energy + motion; space = length + height + breadth; time = past + present + future. Thus the whole universe witnesses to the character of the God who made it (cf. Psalm 19:1). Cited by "God in Three Persons: A Doctrine We Barely Understand" by Dr. Ray Pritchard. Calvary Memorial Church, Oak Park, Illinois, 1997.

ⁱⁱ F. W. Boreham, *A Late Lark Singing* (London: Epworth Press, 1945), 14.

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 4:12

^{iv} Phi. 2:9-11

^v 1 Corinthians 12:13

^{vi} Humility then is not self-degradation, but a proper evaluation of oneself and others.

^{vii} 1 Corinthians 15:9

^{viii} Ephesians 3:8

^{ix} 1 Timothy 1:15

^x Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations and Quotes*, 463.

^{xi} In the movie, *The Horse Whisperer*, Tom Booker, played by actor Robert Redford, employs his special gift of "gentling" horses. A tense, New York magazine editor can't believe her eyes as she witnesses the gradual transformation of her daughter's horse from traumatized to tamed. In one telling scene, the horse, frightened by the editor's ringing cell phone, gallops off into the far end of a large pasture. Booker walks into the pasture and sits down, where he waits for what appears to be hours. The horse, drawn by its curiosity, inches closer and closer. Finally, it cautiously approaches close enough to touch the "whisperer," and allows itself to be led back to the safety of its stall. That's the way it is with God, as he "gentles" the untamed or traumatized people who run from him.

^{xii} Markus Barth