



Ephesians 4:1-3

PLEA TO MAINTAIN CHURCH UNITY

The apostle Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus follows the same pattern as his other letters. The first half of the letter declares great doctrinal truths upon which he makes applications for Christian living. He first states the abiding principles and then draws from these truths practical applications.

Behavior follows belief. Your walk is the result of what you believe. We put into daily practice our eternal position in Christ. We act on truth.

After his great prayer and doxology in Ephesians 3:14-21, Paul stresses church unity. It is an appeal to live in a manner worthy of the gospel. What we believe should affect our daily life style.

The basic plea Paul has in mind is to keep and continue to maintain the spiritual unity of the church.

It is important to stress that Paul is not referring to an ecclesiastical organizational unity, but a unity in which the Holy Spirit is the author. It is the work of the Spirit of God sustaining the spiritual life of the church. There is a unity by virtue of the very existence of a church. We are unable to create unity. The Holy Spirit did that when he created the church, which is a spiritual body. Our responsibility is to preserve church unity. In order to accomplish this Paul says,

LIVE WORTHY OF YOUR CHRISTIAN CALLING

The appeal of the apostle comes from the operation of God's grace in the believer. He does not command the body to create a church unity. He urges them from a heart that is filled with the grace of God.

I; "therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, urge you to live worthy of the calling with which you have been called (Ephesians 4:1 NET).

He was chained to an elite Roman soldier because it was God's will for Paul to be there. He never says he is a prisoner of Nero, or the Roman government, or as the result of Jewish religious leaders' persecution. He is the prisoner of the Lord. That brings eternity into the picture. He lives above his circumstances. He is there because God had called him to be a missionary to the Gentiles. As a result of the imprisonment the gospel was reaching the elite in the Roman empire (Phil. 1:12-14). With each rotation of guards a different soldier would have the experience of being chained to this little converted Jew. Take no pity on the apostle Paul. Have mercy on the poor pagan chained to a man who was filled up to all the fullness of God (Eph. 3:19). He cannot escape listening to the apostle of Jesus Christ praying and singing such doxologies as: Now unto him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly super abundantly, over and above and beyond all that we ask or pray or think. To him be the glory in the church as in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever.

or pray or think. To him be the glory in the church as in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen. The poor imprisoned Roman soldier cannot escape such a personal testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ. As a result the gospel was spreading throughout the empire as soldiers moved from command to command.

The apostle is living before these soldiers and a constant stream of visitors the victorious life in Christ. He also appeals to the church from a divine compulsion through grace to live a life worthy of the gospel. His life is a model for other believers.

The appeal is to be conformed to the image of Christ. You respond to the effectual call of the Holy Spirit and became a child of God. God's goal is that we be conformed to the character of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29). Paul prayed that every member of the church at Ephesus be strengthened with power through the Spirit in the inner person, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith (Eph. 3:16-17). That is being conformed to the likeness of Christ. We are to focus on the living Christ dwelling within us. As he lives, we live.

Paul appeals to the believers to watch their behavior. I . . . urge you to live worthily of the calling with which you have been called (4:1 NET). Live like a child of God should live. Live in a manner and life style in which you are conformed to Christ. Put into daily practice your eternal position in Christ. You were dead in your sins and Christ has raised you from the dead and lives within you. Live out your calling as one in whom God dwells.

What are the characteristics of someone who has experienced such grace? It may surprise you that these are also the characteristics of church unity in verses two and three.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHURCH UNITY

There is no unity in the church without true humility. Arrogance and self-interests destroy any chances of unity.

Christian humility

Christian humility is based on undeserved grace.

Let's face it; humility is not a worldly virtue. Humility is not the iff thing in our age. The worldview is iff your face, self-assertiveness, make your demands on society, take advantage of humble people and anyone who gets in your way. The person who dies with the most toys is the winner in life.

How tragic when the organized church has these carnal attitudes. God does not determine success by the applause meter or the popularity polls. He could care less about our appearance, performance and status. He looks upon the heart and sees the unseen. How much of Christ can be seen in my life? Have I experienced His grace?

The apostle stresses this attitude in Philippians 2:3 and the context of verses 1-5. Christ is the perfect example of such humility. Paul appealed to the Philippians to be of the same mind, having the same love, being united in spirit, and having one purpose. Instead of being motivated by selfish ambition or vanity, each of you should, in humility, be moved to treat one another as more important than yourself. Each of you should be concerned not only about your own interests, but about the interests of other as well. You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had . . . (Philippians 2:2-5 NET).

Paul illustrates the humility of Christ in verses 6-8 by the fact that Christ was truly God and by his incarnation became a slave and humbled himself, by becoming obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross! (NET).

The life of every true Christian should be characterized by such humility.

True humility comes through absolute dependence on Christ. Even the Christian life is not in our own strength, but the life of Christ lived in us. Jesus stressed to his disciples, I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me—and I in him—bears much fruit, because apart from me you can accomplish nothing (John 15:5 NET). This is why the apostle Paul stressed, even from his prison chains, I am able to do all things through the one who strengthens me (Phil. 4:13 NET). The *all things* is emphatic in Paul's statement. It is Christ who strengthens him. He had experienced God's grand provisions in his life (v. 19). Therefore Paul could boast in the Lord alone (2 Cor. 10:17; 12:5-10). He had learned from experience that whenever I am weak, then I am strong (v. 10 NET). We live such a life from the resources of our vital union with Christ.

We can summarize Paul's attitude in his own words in Romans 12:16; Live in harmony with one another, do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Do not be conceited (NET).

We could solve a lot of dissension in our churches and maintain unity by living in such a manner.

In addition to Christian humility, Paul says gentleness or meekness is another characteristic of unity.

Gentleness

Paul does not have in mind someone being walked over, but strength or power under control. This is the same word Jesus used in Matthew 5:5 when he said, Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ”

This meek or gentle person does not go off in extremes, is balanced, and under control. He has every instinct and every passion under the control of the Holy Spirit.

This beautiful word can be illustrated by the fierce, awesome power of a wild, bucking stallion out of control. Before the stallion is broken one rider after another limps away because of the untamed power of the stallion. However, after the animal has been broken in properly a small child can climb upon the back of the black beauty and ride off into a golden sunset. Why? Because it is power under control.

Every one of us wields power—physical, emotional, personal power—often it is out of control. How different our churches would be if every member lived every moment under the control of the Holy Spirit.

An attitude of gentleness would resolve many a church conflict. Wouldn't it be great if there were no more power grabs in churches? And do not get drunk with wine, which is debauchery, but be filled by the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18 NET). Yield to the control of the Holy Spirit every instinct, thought, imagination,

Spirit (Ephesians 5:18 NET). Yield to the control of the Holy Spirit every instinct, thought, imagination, ambition, etc.

Paul has already said members are to be filled up to all the fullness of God (3:19). The Holy Spirit fills us with the fullness of God. When we are under His control we are Christlike in attitude and behavior.

Gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23). Jesus was gentle. Can there be a better example of power under control?

We are to live a life worthy of our calling by being humble, gentle and patient.

Patience

We can preserve church unity by being patient. If we exercised patience with God and fellow believers we would cause less dissension, frustration and friction in the body.

How often we rush in to areas where angels fear to tread. Impatience gives the rush of feeling that we are omniscient and omnipotent, but the sad truth is we are neither.

Patience is an exercise of gentleness.

Tolerance is an exercise of patience.

Long tempered or patience is the opposite of being short-tempered with people.

It is most helpful to remind ourselves how patient God is with us (1 Pet. 3:20). God is extremely patient with us. You are a God of forgiveness, merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and unfailing in your loyal love . . . (Nehemiah 9:17b NET). God's patience is long-suffering with us. It is an expression of his love.

Thank God judgment did not come before he saved us. God is patient with us. His patience led to our salvation (1 Tim. 1:16).

The patient attitude does not give up on people, and does not give in to defeat.

When we exercise patience we refuse to retaliate when offended or take advantage of a person or situation. We do not exasperate when people manipulate us. Patience bears with injury without becoming bitter. It is the quality of a person who has the power to avenge perceived evils done to him yet refrains from doing so.

We need to put off judgment and action until we have all the information.

Patience is exercised in putting up with one another over a period of time. It restrains outbursts of anger. It is developed by waiting and trusting God. Patience comes through complete faith in God in all circumstances.

Our responsibility is to preserve the unity in the church with all humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love. ”

Bearing with one another in love

You could express the same idea as putting up with one another in love. ”

You could express the same idea as "putting up with one another in love."

The outworking of this attitude is seeking the highest good of the other person.

It is the opposite of manipulating people to achieve our goals. Manipulation and under the table tricks never accomplish long lasting results. The negative baggage is never worth the good accomplished. No one likes to be around a manipulator. You always feel like you have been had. You are left with a dirty "used" feeling. Unity is not the resultant behavior.

A better way is found in Romans 12:14-21. The apostle Paul wrote, "Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil; consider what is good before all people. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all people. Do not avenge yourselves, dear friends, but give place to God's wrath, for it is written, **Vengeance is mine, I will repay,** says the Lord. Rather, **if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing this you will be heaping burning coals on his head.** Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (NET). The bold type in the NET translation indicates it is a quote from the Old Testament.

The apostle sums up these characteristics of unity saying "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3 NET).

I stress the emphasis of Paul once again. We are not to make unity but to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Holy Spirit is the author of the unity.

It takes a continuing effort with eager earnestness to maintain the unity. The word translated "eager" suggests a burning zeal and denotes a constant action to keep under watchful care something that is already in our possession. Are we eager to maintain the unity the Holy Spirit has brought about when he created the body?

We should be eager to guard and protect the spiritual unity God provided by accepting true believers.

The peace the Holy Spirit produces in the body results from love, humility, gentleness and putting up with one another.

The apostle Paul is not advocating peace at any price whereby we tolerate immoral practices, heretical teaching, false teachers, etc. That is clear from other passages of Scripture.

However, we are to live at peace with one another whenever possible. The Holy Spirit always promotes peace, not divisions (1 Cor. 1:10). The indwelling Spirit is the means of achieving this peace.

Arrogance, pride, selfishness promotes contention, hostility and grieves the Holy Spirit. Contention among the brethren ought to be avoided like the AIDS virus.

The Holy Spirit is a person, and he can be grieved just as any other person. He sealed us until the day of our full redemption when we see him in glory. Until then we need to make every effort to keep an intimate relationship with him. How do we grieve the Holy Spirit? The apostle Paul says, "You must put away every kind of bitterness, anger, wrath, quarreling, and evil slanderous talk" (Ephesians 4:31 NET). These are the attitudes and behaviors that grieve the Spirit and prevent him from having full control of our inner person.

The one who indwells us is the basis for our unity. When every member is under his control we enjoy a body life full of spiritual power. Any sin against the unity of the body is a sin against the Holy Spirit.

SOME ABIDING PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

1. When we have experienced God's grace we want to live a life worthy of our high calling and see God touch every area of our personal life. We want to live like a child of God should live.
2. When we are living worthy of our calling we can see evidence that we are being conformed to the character and likeness of Jesus Christ.
3. When we realize that we really do deserve to be in hell we begin to appreciate the grace of God and are truly humble in God's presence and in the sight of other believers.
4. When we bring every ambition, instinct, thought, reaction to situations, etc. under the control of the Holy Spirit we preserve the unity of the body of Christ. Arrogance, pride, selfishness destroys body life in a church. Remove it from our lives at all costs.
5. When we are patient we see the hand of God in every aspect of our lives and we refuse to retaliate or take advantage of situations to promote selfish agendas. When we have an attitude of patience we trust God to meet all of our needs so we can build up the body of Christ.
6. When we realize we are all on the same level —sinners saved by grace —we learn to put up with one another to preserve the unity of the church. Because we have experienced God's grace we want to seek the highest good in every believer.

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Series: Letter to Ephesians

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