

# The One Church

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*The society into which the Christian is called at baptism is not a collective but a Body.*

C.S. Lewis, “Membership”<sup>8</sup>

## **READ EPHESIANS 4:1-16**

### **Unity in Practice**

This passage begins the second half of the book, which is a practical application of the grand plan laid out in the first three chapters. If chapters 1-3 discuss what God has done for us, then chapters 4-6 discuss how to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (v. 1). This worthy manner is characterized by lowliness and meekness (v. 2). God has worked hard to bring together all things in Christ, so it is now up to us to keep unity among God’s people (v. 3). Paul is teaching us to be humble, which means to think less often of ourselves and to think more often about others.

As a foundation for the unity that must grow in Ephesus between Jew and Gentile, Paul outlines the doctrinal concepts that were to be shared among all believers.

There is one body. The church is that body and Christ is its head. Christ cannot be served without his church, and the church cannot live with its Christ.

There is one Spirit. The Holy Spirit guided the men who wrote the Scriptures and continues to help the Church. Since

one Spirit acts among us, we should be unified in him.

There is one hope. Jesus is the hope of all the world. There is no hope apart from him. “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). This hope is offered to all, because all people need Christ.

There is one Lord. Because Christ is Lord, we all must submit ourselves to him. To enjoy what Christ has done for us, we must obey him. We will find no joy and no hope in rebellion against him.

There is one faith. The one faith is what we all believe and the allegiance we swear to our one Lord. Our shared beliefs and loyalty hold us together even though we are all different people.

There is one baptism. Baptism is immersion in water. Baptism reflects the death of one way of life and the birth of a new one. It enacts the gospel in our life and appeals to God for forgiveness.

There is one Father. There is no other god and no other creator. God alone is worthy of worship. All that we do together is to bring him glory. These seven basic beliefs above make us one people for God’s glory.

While we share the seven ones, we all have different work to do in the one body. Christ has given different people different “gifts” (v. 7-8, Psalms 68:18). Everyone is responsible for using Christ’s gifts to serve Christ.

Verses nine and ten seem a little out of place. They are a side point that Paul is making about Jesus. These two sentences about Jesus coming to earth and returning to heaven can be skipped over when reading, just like you would other information set off by parenthesis. The point seems to be that even rooted in the doctrine of gifts is the

gospel message. Christ can be the giver of gifts because he and he alone has triumphed over life and death.

Jesus' gifts to the early church are listed in verse eleven. The apostles are the followers of Jesus who were sent out to preach the gospel to the world and testify about the resurrection of Jesus. The prophets served as teachers and authors who spoke for God. Evangelists were the men who went out and shared the gospel. Shepherds, also called teachers here, guided congregations and taught the members God's will.

These gifts were to be used to produce mature Christians, convert the lost, and build up the church (v. 12). These gifts continued to bring the church to the "unity of the faith" and to share the knowledge of the Son of God. These gifts helped to produce a mature church (v. 13). The mature church helped to create mature Christians (v. 14).

Maturity is important for Christians because there are many people out there who will try to lead you away from Christ. False teachers prey on the immature. The only cure is to grow up and stop being prey to these spiritual predators. The more we know about Jesus, the less we will be tricked by bad imitations.

Instead of being immature, we should lovingly speak the truth and grow into Christ (v. 15). He is a high standard to grow towards, but well worth the effort! As every Christian grows, the entire body grows strong in the same way that the various joints, muscles, and organs of the body work together to maintain good health (v. 16). Every part of the body is different, but every part of the body is important. Everyone must grow and do their job to keep the body strong. Thus, this section comes full circle. We need unity, so Christ strengthened the church. The strong church makes

strong Christians. Healthy Christians make for a healthy church. And a healthy church is a united church!

## Members of One Body

So far, we have talked a lot in this study about different kinds of identity. The modern sense of identity is individualistic. “I am who I am.” The postmodern identity is collective. “I am who we are.” Christian thought seems to acknowledge both while challenging them.

When we speak of identity, we tend mean something I am and you are not, or something we are and you folks are not. But Christian identity is meant to be shared, extended beyond the current boundaries of who I am and who we are. We are “eager to maintain unity” rather than looking for a way to distinguish ourselves from others.

C.S. Lewis spoke on this topic at Oxford back in 1945 in a lecture titled “Membership.”<sup>9</sup> First, he argues that Christianity is not individualistic. “We are forbidden to neglect the assembling of ourselves together. Christianity is already institutional in the earliest of its documents.” Christianity, he says, knows nothing of solitary religion. To the stubborn individualist, Lewis warns, “The very word *membership* is of Christian origin.” Indeed, here in Ephesians, Paul speaks of as “members one of another” (4:25) and “members of his body” (5:30).

So does that make Christianity some sort of socialist commune? Lewis thinks not. “The society into which the Christian is called at baptism is not a collective but a Body.” In a collective, a mass of interchangeable individuals acts as a whole. They are classified together because they are identical,

the way one hundred identical pennies make a dollar. Individual qualities do not matter in a collective.

But in Christ, we are members of a body. Each organ in the body is different, and the body functions *because* they are different, not despite those differences. The diverse gifts of the church make it a fantastic body but a terrible collective. “Those who are members of one another become as diverse as the hand and the ear.”

With this in mind, we can truly begin to understand human value. The individualist says we have value as individuals. The collectivist says we have value as a group who then may act as if they were one large individual. Christianity rejects both in favor of something far better. As Lewis explains, “The infinite value of each human soul is not a Christian doctrine. God did not die for man because of some value He perceived in him. The value of each human soul considered simply in itself, out of relation to God, is zero. ...God died for sinners. He loved us not because we were lovable, but because He is Love.”

At the root of every human philosophy is the craving to find our value in ourselves. Whether we look at ourselves as an individual or a group, we want to find something worthy when we look in the mirror.

Christianity begins with the premise that we will have no such discovery within ourselves. The self is what must be crucified in order to find something more as a gift of God. We grow in Christ as a member of his body and become more than what we have been. With a flourish, Lewis writes, “As organs in the Body of Christ, as stones and pillars in the temple, we are assured of our eternal self-identity and shall live to remember the galaxies as an old tale.”

In short, the identity that we current seek is a sad shadow

of our true potential identity. We are sinners trying to make something out of our sinfulness. We want our identity to be valuable apart from anything else. But organs don't work that way in our bodies, and humans don't work that way in God's creation. We were meant to be part of the body of Christ. We were meant to grow into him. As Lewis concludes, "Christianity is not, in the long run, concerned either with individuals or communities. Neither the individual nor the community as popular though understands them can inherit eternal life: neither the natural self, nor the collective mass, but a new creature." Lewis had clearly been reading Ephesians!

## **Who Am I?**

I am a member of the body of Christ. My value does not come from the sinful person I have been, nor from the class of sinners just like me. My value is in the potential to be with Christ and grow into him.

I am not seeking to be my "true self." Christ is the true one, not me. I want to be found in him. Nor am I seeking to be part of a class or a group that works for its own agenda. I want to be a member of Christ, one part of a body living and breathing for Christ's agenda.

I cannot truly live apart from the oneness of faith in Christ. The Church is where my gifts – gifts given to me by and in Christ – are found and where they are put to use. Cutting myself off from that body is to cut myself off from my truest possible identity and my purpose in this world. Christ did not die to save me apart from himself but rather in himself. That is where I am truly alive.

## Discussion Questions

1. According to Ephesians 4:3, what is the key to maintaining unity among believers? Why is it essential for Christians to be diligent in preserving the unity of the Spirit?
2. In what ways can differences among believers be embraced without compromising unity, as suggested in this passage?
3. According to Ephesians 4:13, what is the purpose of the various gifts and ministries in the church? How do they contribute to the spiritual growth and maturity of the believers?
4. How can the principles outlined in Ephesians 4:1-16 be practically applied in our local church or Christian community to strengthen relationships and promote spiritual growth?