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## The Basis for Unity

### Ephesians 4:4-6

**Intro:** We have entered into the exhortation portion of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. The first 3 chapters deal with doctrine while the last 3 are instructions on how Christians are to live in light of that doctrine. The main theme of this section (4:1-16) is that believers are to walk in unity. Paul's spent a lot of time explaining the unity that Jewish and Gentile believers possess within the Body of Christ; now he's revealing what that blessed truth looks like in the lives of believers. As he puts in v1, we're to walk worthy of our calling; the worth of our walk should equal the worth of our calling. In other words, the weight of our Christian walk should equal the weight of the doctrine we've received.

Following his call to walk worthy, Paul provides a list of 5 characteristics that are reflected in the worthy life. The first 4 are humility, gentleness, patience and forbearance. Each of these character traits is related to the others and they have all been leading towards the final trait: the unity of the Spirit. It's called the unity of the Spirit because it's a unity that's already been given to the church by the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, Paul says we're to endeavor to keep it; to deliberately work at maintaining and guarding it. Paul, being the good pastor that he is, isn't content to simply exhort his readers to do something; he truly wants them to know why they should do it so in light of this, he provides a list of 7 things that form the basis of Christian unity. These are 7 basic spiritual realities that unite all true Christians (4-6).

This is a beautiful passage both in its content and brevity. It's just one sentence and this one sentence deals with the unity of the church. Now, I'm not one that puts a lot of stock into numerology but it's clearly obvious that the structure and terminology of this sentence imply some symbolism. The main characteristic of the passage is its sevenfold repetition of the word "one": one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in you all. And there's a fourfold repetition of the word all. If "7" is the number of perfection and if "4" actually refers to creation, could it be that Paul is suggesting that the created order finds its perfection by being joined to God within the church.

This may be a stretch but what had all of human history been leading up to: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the subsequent establishing of His church on earth. In an age where most people look for a church with a consumer mindset – what do they have to offer for my attendance – the Bible teaches that there are greater, more important reasons for being part of a church. In fact, it's never about what the church has to offer to me but rather, what do I have to offer to Christ? Of course, the church is not the end all, be all of Christianity. There'll be no church in eternity. On earth, we are the Body of Christ, but in eternity we will be the Bride of Christ.

**4** – Our text today is clearly about the church (although church doesn't appear) and Paul's concern is to stress the church's unity. This is the point at which this sentence begins: one body. Body is a metaphor for the church. There are many good metaphors for the church in Scripture, even in this letter. It's compared to a kingdom, a family, and a temple in ch2. In ch5 it is compared to a bride. But, comparing the church to a body is particularly appropriate here in our text because a body is something that works together, even though it's composed of many diverse parts. Plus, the unity of the body is organic. That is, it's achieved not by joining a number of diverse parts or pieces in the way one would build a machine, but by growth. The church is not a diesel engine or a watch or an airplane. It is a body. It grows by the multiplication of cells.

This is a brilliant metaphor that highlights the essential importance of unity in the church while, at the same time, demands diversity in the church. a body must be unified to function properly but that proper functioning depends on the diversity of its parts. Paul develops this image at great length in **I Cor 12:21-26**, where he stresses the mutual interdependence of the body's parts. Clearly, this is a great argument for preserving the church's unity. It's an argument based on what we are: one body. Thus, we suffer divisions only at great personal loss and we shouldn't let them happen. Divisions can produce godly growth. If a church experiences exponential growth and decides to send a group out to a distant area to start another church, that's great! It's also quite rare.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> basis for unity in the church is the fact that we possess one Spirit  
Notice: Spirit is capitalized, and rightly so. Sometimes when spirit is used, it

refers to what we'd call the human spirit or the spirit of a thing. That's a valid use of the word, but that's not its use here. Paul's not saying, "We're all one spirit in the sense that we're one in our goals and enthusiasms." What he's saying is, "We're one because of the one work of the one Holy Spirit."

Paul's calling our attention to what the Holy Spirit has done in our conversions. Sometimes, when we hear people give testimonies, they focus on the uniqueness of their experience and in all fairness; we do all come to Christ by different paths and under different circumstances. When people give testimonies, they tend to emphasize variety. But when Paul says there's not only one body but "one Spirit," he's asking us to think of the way in which the Holy Spirit works unvaryingly in all who come to Jesus.

We have many differences in the small particulars of our conversions. But when we talk about what the Holy Spirit did in our hearts to bring us to faith in Christ, our experiences are identical. There's an awakening to sin whereby we become conscious that all is not right between us and God; that we're in violation of His laws, hostile to His holy character, and under His just wrath. There's the work of regeneration, whereby God in a supernatural way places the new life of Christ in our hearts so that we change. We become different from what we were before. There's the work of faith which follows upon that whereby, having been made alive in Christ by the Holy Spirit, we are drawn by that same Spirit to place our faith in Jesus. Following that, there is the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification, which produces the same fruit of the Spirit—"love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" ([Gal 5:22-23](#))—in all of us.

When we consider this truth, we see how marvelous it is that, regardless of what background we've come from or how we've come to Christ, the one Holy Spirit of God has united us in a much more important common experience!

Besides this, the presence of the Holy Spirit naturally seals all believers in unity since He is the one Person dwelling within the lives of the many.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> thing Paul talks about is our hope. This word has suffered much in English, so that today it doesn't mean quite what it meant in NT days. Today hope usually means something uncertain, something we perhaps hope for wistfully but do not really expect. The biblical idea is quite different. At

funeral services we speak of our sure and steadfast hope (**Heb 6:19**) meaning the resurrection of the dead. Sure and steadfast is the biblical idea of hope. It's still future, sure. We have only an earnest of it now: indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit is proof of what's to come. Nevertheless, our hope is not uncertain just because we don't hold it in our hands at this precise moment.

Now, we might wonder why Paul refers to hope as something that should unite the church. Is it not the case that ideas of the future divide the church more than they unite it? Some people believe there's going to be a Millennium while others believe there won't be one at all; still, a few other believe we're already in it! Some think Christ will come before the Millennium; others think He'll come after it, and when you throw in the Tribulation it gets even worse. You have pre-trib, post-trib, and mid-trib. It gets very complicated and very tedious. Some have divided the church along these lines. They've even made eschatology a test for fellowship. But Paul's not talking about those details of eschatology which have come to divide large bodies of the church, but rather those on which we all agree: the return of Christ, the Resurrection, and the Last Judgment.

Of course, these are unifying simply because they are future. If we look to the past, we can easily slip into divisions. The original division went like this: "I'm of Paul; I'm of Apollos; I'm of Jesus!" If we look to the present, we'll still have divisions when we overstress our denominational distinctives (or lack). It's entirely different if we look to the future. Jesus is going to come back and we're going to be with Him. There's a home for us in heaven. If we look forward to these things, if we anticipate the day when we'll stand shoulder to shoulder with people from other denominations, nations, races, and experiences, and if in that day all the things that divide us now will fade away, then that should certainly influence the way in which we think about those divisions now. We will be free to reach out across all man-made or imagined barriers and join hands with those who, like us, believe in Christ and desire to serve Him.

**5** – The unities of **v4** go together. It's **the work of the** one Holy Spirit to graft us into the one body and give us that one hope. **V5** introduces another set of 3: "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." These unities are clustered around the one Lord Jesus Christ, just as the first are clustered around the Holy Spirit.

To hear some Christians talk, you'd think there were many Lords. One says, "I follow a Jesus who causes me to do such-and-such, which excludes you." Another will say, "I don't follow that Jesus; that's not the Jesus I know." And so it goes. There aren't many Lords; there's only one Lord, and that's the Lord Jesus Christ. If we're following Him, if we're open to what He's doing in His own church; that must be a force for drawing us together.

Imagine, for a moment, a conversation that could've taken place between the man who had been born blind in [Jn 9](#) and the blind man who was healed by Jesus in [Mk 8](#). The difference between the two stories is that in [Jn 9](#) Jesus healed the blind man by spitting on the ground and making clay, which He used to anoint the man's eyes. This didn't happen in the case of the man in Mark's gospel. Now imagined these 2 getting together to discuss how Jesus healed them. The man who'd been healed without spittle would tell his story and the man who'd been healed with spittle would tell his. He'd then say to the other, "But you left out the part about Jesus spitting in the dust and making clay and placing the clay upon your eyes." "I don't know anything about that," the first would reply. The man from John would answer, "It has to be that way, because that's the way Jesus gives sight to people. You must have forgotten it. He spit on the ground; he made clay; he put it on your eyes, and he sent you to wash in the pool of Siloam."

"Oh, no," the man from Mark says, "He didn't do any of that with me. He just spoke and I received my sight."

The first man digs in his heels. "That isn't right," he says. "Jesus heals with clay! If you haven't had that experience, I am beginning to doubt if you can really see!" Thus originates, in the earliest days of the church, the denomination of the "Mudites" and the "Anti-Mudites;" two divisions. That is what happens when we get our eyes on the modes of God's working rather than upon the Lord who works.

As Paul has stated already in his letter, Jesus Christ is the head of the body (the church); all believers are blessed "in Christ;" salvation is predicated on our being made alive with, raised up with and seated with Christ in heavenly places; and it is He who brings peace between Jew and Gentile. Every person who knows Christ as Lord is united to each other person in Christ as members of His body.



Paul goes on to say that we not only have one Lord but also one faith.” Faith can be used objectively or subjectively. Subjectively it means our experience of faith; there’s no salvation apart from faith. Objectively it means the content of faith or what we believe; i.e. the gospel. This is Paul’s meaning.

He’s saying that because we have one Lord we also have one faith. That is, we don’t hold diverse doctrines where the core of the gospel is concerned. We believe that God Almighty sent His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to become like us and die for our salvation. And, it’s through faith in His work, not in anything that we have done or can do, but in His work of dying for us that we’re saved. That one gospel joins all Christians across all barriers of time, nationality, race, sex, and anything else we can imagine. If we have one faith, then we should be able to stand shoulder to shoulder before the world and give a united testimony of God’s saving work in Jesus Christ.

Paul then includes one baptism in his list of unities, which is interesting since opinions on baptism have certainly divided churches. Do you sprinkle? Do you immerse? What about children—do you baptize them? Here, Paul’s not concerned with modes of baptism, but rather, with what baptism signifies: identification with Christ’s death. That’s the unifying thing. Have you been baptized into Christ? It really doesn’t matter how or where you were baptized; whether in a baptistery, stream, swimming pool or horse trough, whether it was with a little bit of water or a lot of water. Have you publicly identified yourself with Jesus Christ? That’s the real issue. And if that’s the issue, then through baptism we’re identified together with Christ’s death before the whole world and thus, we must stand together for Him.

**6** – The last item on Paul’s list concerns God the Father. The first 3 have been centered around the Holy Spirit; the second 3 have been centered around the Lord Jesus Christ. This one concerns the first Person in the Godhead.

This is a good time to consider the order of these unities. If they’re grouped around the Trinity, as they obviously are, why is it that Paul puts the Holy Spirit 1<sup>st</sup>, the Lord Jesus Christ 2<sup>nd</sup>, and God the Father 3<sup>rd</sup>? When we talk about the Trinity it is usually the other way around, and Paul generally puts it the other way around himself. We say Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Here Paul says, Spirit, Son, and Father. Why? It’s because he’s arguing from

the effect to the cause. He's said in v3, "endeavoring (making every effort) to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." This refers to the visible unity the Holy Spirit's given the church. So Paul starts with the one body, which is visible, and with the Holy Spirit Himself.

Of course, the logical question then is, "Where did this effect come from? How did the church get to be the church?" The answer is: through the work of Christ. The church is the company of those who follow Christ. Thus, Paul moves from a discussion of what the Holy Spirit does to what the Lord Jesus Christ has done. And if at that point we say, Yes, but why did the Lord Jesus Christ do that? The answer is that all this flows from the one God who is over all and through all and in all.

If any of these points have their proper effect on us, this one at least should strike home. Whatever else you may say about the church, the church is God's church. It's composed of God's people, it's the result of God's work, and it exists for God's glory. So let that be our overriding vision. If it is, we'll not find it difficult or tedious to keep or even make visible the unity that God Himself has already worked into the very fabric of our experience together as Christ's body. The things that unite us in Christ are far more important and far more glorious than the silly little things that try to divide us.

Paul exhorts us to make every effort to maintain and guard the blessing of unity that has been given to us by the Holy Spirit. What part do you have in this exhortation? What steps are you actively taking to maintain, guard and make visible this unity we experience within the walls of this sanctuary? Do you carry the testimony and reality of it with you when you leave? 😊