

Parish of Central Saanich - St. Stephen's & St. Mary's
LENT 2018 - BIBLE STUDY SERIES
"What the Church Is All About"

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Ephesians Study #4: The Unity and Ministry of the Church
Ephesians 3:14-4:16

Opening Prayer:

Heavenly Father, you have reconciled us to yourself and called us together in one body with Jesus as our head; help us now, by your Holy Spirit, to recognize your gift of unity and grasp how we are to work together to grow and build up that body in love, for his precious name's sake. Amen.

Introduction

In this study series in Paul's letter to the Ephesians we have seen the two main themes of the letter are God's plan for the universe, and how that plan is to be proclaimed and demonstrated. God's great plan is the reconciliation of all things in Christ: "To bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ" Eph. 1:9). How it is to be proclaimed and demonstrated is through the Church: "Through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known" (Eph. 3:10). This is the main thrust of the first three chapters; the remainder of the letter shows how that is to be worked out practically through the diversity of ministry gifts in the church, harmonious relationships, worship together (as we saw last week), and resistance to the forces that would seek to thwart God's plan.

Above all, Paul wants to show that if you can't see that reconciliation lived out in the in the life of the Church that proclaims it, the cause is lost. Therefore, at the end of chapter three and beginning of chapter four, Paul first prays for his readers, "For this reason I kneel before the Father" (3:14), then exhorts them, "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received" (4:1), in order that they might be empowered to carry out their commission to demonstrate that reconciliation. We then see in the rest of chapter 4 that one of the key ways that commission is carried out is through the exercise of diverse spiritual gifts. So we begin this fourth study of "What the Church is All About" by looking in more depth at the corporate nature of the Church, then at Paul's prayer and exhortation to unity and finally by looking at the Church as a working unit - "The Unity and Ministry of the Church."

The Corporate Nature of Our Faith

In our first study, we saw that one of the key images for the Church used by Paul is the Body of Christ. We are more than an organization, a group of individuals bonded together for a specific

task; we are an organism, where we are intimately connected one with the other. This concept of us as a body is a corporate image which we in the Western World have great difficulty grasping. Our classical and Protestant heritage has been of great worth in freeing us from the tyranny of an oppressive collectivity but we have pushed it to the opposite extreme of idolizing individuality. Because of our emphasis on making an individual decision for Christ (which we need to do), we have been led to think of the Church as a mere collection of individuals and not as the integrated organism the Bible portrays, as here in Ephesians. For example, I was at a Bible study looking at Ephesians and it was interesting to see the headings for sections of this letter found in one member's Bible: "The walk and service of the believer," "The walk of the believer as a new man in Christ," "The walk of the believer as indwelt by the Holy Spirit." Can you see the unhelpful assumption behind these descriptions? It is that the Christian life is primarily an individual affair.

This is not the picture we are given in Ephesians. For example, let us look at Paul's prayer at the end of chapter three;

¹⁴For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

²⁰Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Eph. 3:14-21)

Now, we usually interpret it as a prayer for us as individuals, but it is actually corporate. In chapters 1 and 2, Paul has just finished speaking about God's plan of reconciliation being shown through the Church and then leads into prayer with – "For *this* reason..." (3:1, 14) i.e. because the Church is God's vehicle to reveal his plan. The Father is spoken of in terms of him "from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name" (verse 14) referring to both the Church militant on earth and the Church triumphant in heaven. The prayer for strengthening with power, being rooted and grounded in love, and grasping the greatness of Christ's love (3:16-18) was for the Christian community as a whole, not just individuals in it. We are to grasp and to know Christ's love "together with all the saints" (verse 18) and God is to be glorified "in the Church" (verse 21). Our being "rooted and established in love" (verse 17) is not just our receiving and enjoying Christ's love personally but to experience and share it within our church fellowship and corporate life.

To further unveil this picture of the corporate nature of the Church, I am going to look specifically at the verses from the beginning of chapter four (Paul's exhortation) with a brief further reference to those at the end of chapter three (Paul's prayer).

Our Call to Unity

Chapter 4 begins with Paul's exhortation:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have

received.² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism;⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph. 4:1-6)

Paul's exhortation to unity begins with the *fact* of the unity we have in God. Paul tells us, "There is one body and one Spirit...one hope...one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all" (4:4-5). Unity is not something we have to manufacture or earn or win - we already have it. If you are a believer in Jesus you already belong - you are part of a family that crosses all barriers of time, race, intelligence, gender, or whatever.

There are seven unities listed – seven is the number of completeness. Three allude to the three persons of the Trinity:

- one Spirit (verse 4)
- one Lord, i.e. the Lord Jesus, (verse 5) and
- one God and Father of all (verse 6)

The other four relate to our experience with one or another of the persons of the Trinity:

- one body (verse 4) refers to the work of the Holy Spirit: "We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13)
- one hope (verse 4), one faith (verse 5), one baptism (verse 5) refer to Jesus. He is the object of our hope: we wait for his coming; our faith: in him we have put our trust; and our baptism: "All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:27)

Because of what God the Father has done through Jesus the Son, the Holy Spirit has made you one with Him and with all who confess his name. Our baptism is the sign of this and our active faith is the evidence that we have endorsed that personally. God has given us unity - we belong to him and to one another.

But should this surprise us? The fact that Paul sets all this in the framework of the Trinity – God's nature as a community of persons – shows that our unity with one another and him is to be a reflection of the unity found in the community of God himself. It is interesting that Paul's prayer at the end of chapter three shares this Trinitarian framework: "I kneel before the Father...that...he may strengthen you through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts" (3:14-17).

But is that all there is to it? No. Paul has already prayed that we might experience this unity we have been given in chapter 3 (verses 14-19) and now he tells us that we have to maintain it: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (verse 3). How do we do this? He says by living a life worthy of the calling we have received - by being "completely humble and gentle; patient, bearing with one another in love" (verse 2). A helpful analogy might be the human family. Most of us have stresses and strains in our family relationships; we might not even be on speaking terms with one another. Yet, we are still members of the same family and it takes all we have got to maintain that unity. But we do not have to manufacture the unity - it is already there - our job is to live it out as best we can.

Humility, gentleness, patience, and love are to be the way in which we approach our divisions,

says Paul. We are not to accept the latter as permanent - we are to do all we can to maintain the unity. This goes for our human families, our local congregation, and relationships between congregations and denominations. Are we demonstrating humility, gentleness, patience, and love at all levels?

Practical Implications of Unity

I now want to touch briefly on how we can express this unity. Here are three areas that might impact us as a parish where we can put this humility, patience, forbearance and love into practice.

1. Unity of the Wider Church:

The first area is the unity of the wider Church. In face of the current controversies in the Anglican Communion, some people are asking why they should stay in the Church any longer. “Why not leave and get on with the business of Christ’s Kingdom?” they ask. I have two observations. First, if, as described in Ephesians, the Church is both the agent and the demonstration of God’s plan to reconcile all things in Christ (1:10, 3:10) and we are called to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (4:3), we must not let the present multiplicity of denominations deceive us into thinking that the divided Church is a natural state of affairs. It is a blot on the witness to the reconciling power of Christ if we keep dividing! Secondly, I have a responsibility, out of compassion for my brothers and sisters, to speak to truth in love (4:15) and try to lead them away from the precipice of error they are heading for. Only when all efforts to maintain “the unity of the Spirit” (4:3) (keeping in mind that the Spirit is the “Spirit of Truth”) have failed and error has been fully affirmed and practiced do we have the option to distinguish ourselves from those who have embraced error.

2. Comings and goings in the local church:

The second area is the experience of “comings and goings” in a local congregation. If we are a body as depicted in Ephesians, then members of it can not just “leave” it without realizing the effect it has on others as well as themselves. I know there are times when it is right to leave a church fellowship for various reasons which I will not go into here. However, it is important that we recognize the bonds of love and affection that have developed. In my last parish, I saw the pain of one parishioner as she heard that a family in which she had invested much time and prayer and love had left without prior notice. The church is not just a collection of individuals – we are a body, a family, impacting one another; “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26). I have three suggestions to make. First, discuss problem areas long before you make a decision to move and try to work them through if possible. Second, if it is time to leave, then have an exit interview with someone in congregational leadership. Third, be honest about the reasons why you are leaving. Many find this difficult and don’t want to hurt others, but truth is important for both those who leave and those who stay. Try and work through things as best as you are able, because if issues remain unresolved, they can become a source of future bitterness.

3. How we pray together:

Lastly, our unity in our own local fellowship is demonstrated by how we pray in a group or public worship. When we gather for prayer together, and someone leads, they do so on behalf of the rest of the group, so we can pray as one; the verbalized intercession of the one is for the many. In

group prayer, unless the prayer is a very personal petition (e.g. Lord, I have let you down recently...”), it is good to say “*We pray...*” or address God directly “Lord, come upon us...” rather than “*I pray...*” or “*I ask you to come among us...*” as it can sound a little exclusive and a private conversation between God and the pray-er.¹ In recent years, many Christians, including clergy, have fallen into this pattern, and it would be good to become inclusive again! We are members of a glorious collective, the body of Christ. Let us reflect that in our prayers.

Summary

Our call is to embrace and maintain the unity of the Church to reflect the unity of the community of God himself and demonstrate the reconciliation won by Christ which is God’s goal for all things. This goal moves Paul into a glorious stream of praise at the end of chapter three: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!” (Ephesians 3:19-20). God is glorified in the Church when people see it as a reconciled community, a unified body. We now turn to a most profound way of living out that unity and that is through its opposite - diversity. To do so we are going to examine the Church as a working unit, a body.

The Concept of Body

To explain how diversity works to bring about God’s purpose for us and the world, Paul expands on the analogy of the Church as a body. As we look at our own physical bodies, we realize that we are one unit made up of many parts. Each part has a specific function. Some parts are more important than others, but virtually every element has some role to play. We could not live without a heart, but that heart has to be carried around in skeleton which must be covered in skin and so on. Even the lowly appendix that was once thought not have an function now appears to have many hidden ones we didn’t know about!²

One of the reasons the physical body works so well is that each part has a *different* role to play. Where would we be if we were all eyes or legs or lungs? Nowhere! The analogy of a body shows us that there is a diversity in the unity. Looking at the church as a body, Paul says in Ephesians 4:7, “to each one of us grace is given” and goes on to talk about Christ giving gifts to people. God’s has given us grace (*charis* in the original) in Jesus to reconcile us to himself and one another - unity. God has given us gifts (*charismata*) so we can work together as a body in diversity.

However, the diversity is only effective if each part does its work. So in the last verse of chapter 4 (16), Paul says that the whole body grows and is built up “as each part does its work.” Each Christian has work to do. He begins by affirming that God has given us each gifts. He ends by saying that each of us is to use them appropriately to build up the body.

¹ Biblical examples of inclusive group prayer can be found in Revelation 11: 17-18 (using the “we” form of address) and Acts 23: 24-30 (directly addressing God).

² See “Your Appendix Might Serve an Important Biological Function After All”
<https://www.sciencealert.com/your-appendix-mightserve-an-important-biological-function-after-all-2>

Gifts that Build up the Body

What are these gifts that God has given to his people and how do they work? (Some of this we have looked at in our study series on “Spiritual Gifts” in the Fall of 2016, but it is good to have a review!). Here in Ephesians (verse 11) he lists four or five that we would identify as leadership gifts: “God gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.” Does this mean that people with these gifts are ordained or that all ordained people have these gifts? No. Certainly the ordained who are called to be overseers or shepherds in the church would possess some of these gifts, especially that of pastor/teacher, but not every pastor is an evangelist or exercises an apostolic or wider supervisory ministry. Then again, others with a prophetic ministry of denouncing injustice and calling people to social change and spiritual repentance are not all ordained.

To get a wider picture of the gifts of all Christians we need to see what these gifts and roles of leadership are for. Paul says that some are called to be prophets, pastors, teachers, etc... “to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (verse 12). “Well,” you might say, “the laity are supposed to serve the clergy so they can do the job of ministry.” Not so! The word for “service” is the same word for “ministry.” The leaders in the church are to equip all of God's people so *they* can do the ministry God has called them to. We will look at what these ministries are in a moment.

This concept of all God's people being ministers was obscured in English for centuries by a misplaced comma. In the older version it read: “God gave some to be evangelists, prophets, pastors...for the equipment of the saints, (*comma*) for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4;12, KJV). Looking at it this way, church leaders do “the work of the ministry,” and it is not sure what the saints, all believers, are being equipped for! Now, there are no punctuation marks in the original. It was put in because by the 17th century when the old translation was made, people automatically thought of the church leaders as doing all the ministry. That this is not so is clearly shown by Paul’s affirmation, “*to each one of us*” grace has been given. Every Christian has a ministry.

The Role of Pastor: So what is the role of the pastor or church leader? John Stott says, The New Testament concept of the pastor is not of a person who jealously guards all ministry in his own hands, and successfully squashes all lay initiatives, but of one who helps and encourages all God's people to discover, develop and exercise their gifts. His teaching and training are directed to this end, to enable the people of God to be a servant people, ministering actively but humbly according to their gifts...Thus, instead of monopolizing all ministry himself, he actually multiplies ministries.³

Leadership enables the body to grow and be built up. What is the model? It is not a pyramid with the pastor at the top, as is assumed in most congregations today. Using another analogy, the sports field, the traditional model is that of the clergy out on the field playing the game and the people in the stands cheering them on! According to the New Testament, the clergy are like playing coaches,

³ John Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*. (Downers' Grove: IVP, 1979), pg. 167

out on the field helping the congregation play the game and spurring them on. Or, we could go back to the body analogy and see the clergy as major organs. The role of the heart or lungs is to receive the oxygen necessary to life and pass it along to the rest of the body. But the heart or lungs would be useless without the circulatory system, the stomach, and so on. The pastors are there to facilitate life, they are not the source of it. They are not the head. Only Jesus is the head from whom we receive our direction and mobilization for life. Paul tells us, "From Christ the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (verse 16).

Now, we should be able to see this picture clearly through common sense. How could one person try to meet all the needs and exercise all the ministries and gifts for all the people in the congregation? But it isn't so clear. In the Old Testament story of Moses (Exodus 18:13-26), he was trying to do all the ministry himself and getting burnt out. His father-in-law, Jethro, had to take him aside and get him to share his responsibility with others, keeping only the more complicated decisions for himself. "What you are doing is not good... You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone" (Exodus 18:17-18). If even Moses had a hard time seeing ministry as a shared concept, no wonder we do!

It is interesting that in North America today, for a congregation where ministry is clergy-focused, the maximum number it can grow to is about 150 to 200 attenders. I would propose this is why most congregations do not get beyond this level – it is not because people are not interested in spiritual things but because our way of operating with ministry as clergy-centred has prevented growth beyond this point. This means that not only are the clergy getting burnt-out from trying to do everything, the laity are not getting the opportunity to exercise *their* ministry.

The Ministry of the Whole People of God: Well, what is the ministry of the whole people of God? At this point, some of you might be saying, "Who me, a minister? You must be joking! I'm no minister." But you are.

- **Terminology:** The problem comes because we have seen only clergy as ministers and called them such. We speak of people being "called to the ministry" and "the minister." But when we call a pastor, "the minister", this is unhelpful, because it implies that others, the laity, are not ministers. But, as we have already seen, ministry is service carried out so that the body of Christ may be built up. We *all, clergy and laity*, have that responsibility as leaders and regular Christians, to build up the body "until we reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God...attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (verse 13). Because of this, some churches have put on their bulletins, "Pastors: so-and-so and so-and-so; Ministers: the whole congregation." I have also begun to speak of candidates for the priesthood/pastorate as called to "*ordained* ministry."
- **Ministry gifts:** But what is this ministry or service to which the whole congregation is called? In Ephesians, the gifts listed are those involved in leadership. The other gifts for ministry are listed elsewhere in the New Testament such as in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. These lists of gifts are open-ended and include such abilities as healing, prayer, administration, teaching, mercy, speaking in tongues, serving, and giving. These are called "spiritual gifts" and not just natural abilities. They are capabilities especially empowered by the Holy Spirit which may be

as seemingly "mundane" as administration or as seemingly "spiritual" as healing or speaking in tongues.

No one gift is "higher" than the other in terms of holiness or importance to God. The mark of Christian ministry is that what is being carried out is done to build up the body of Christ. This can be whether we are in the kitchen using our gift of service or on the prayer chain using our gift of intercession. Something is spiritual and a ministry if it is done for Jesus in the power of the Spirit, not because it appears to be more "religious."

Therefore it is vitally important that every member of the congregation discover and develop their spiritual gifts. (See material used in our Fall, 2016 Bible study series, "Discovering and Using Your Spiritual Gifts".) A prime location for exercising gifts and receiving ministry is in a "House Church" or small group. These are gatherings of six to twelve people who meet regularly for prayer, Bible study and fellowship. It is in this context that we develop close relationships within which God can work through the gifts of those who belong. Another is through a congregational "Pastoral Care Network" where members with gifts in this area are assigned to keep in touch with parishioners and ensure that people are kept in touch with and ministered to as well as engaged in areas where they, too, can minister. All these ways are a practical working out of the ministry of the whole people of God.

John Stott has said that at the Reformation in the sixteenth century, we recovered the "*priesthood* of all believers," that each of us could relate to God directly. However, today, we are recovering the "*ministry* of all believers," that each of us can be used by God to do his work in the church and in the world.⁴

Summary

A good example of looking at ministry in this Biblical way is an incident that happened during the building of London's St. Paul's Cathedral. The architect, Christopher Wren, was walking on the construction site, unrecognized by the workers, and stopped to ask three stone cutters what they were doing. One man said, "I'm carving a piece of stone." Another said, "I'm making a beautiful column." The third one replied, "I'm helping Sir Christopher Wren build his cathedral." Do you see yourself as a minister for God, exercising your gifts in diversity, working with Jesus as your head in unity with other believers, so that "the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as every part does its work?" (Ephesians 4:16). This is your calling. This is part of what the Church is all about.

Closing Prayer:

Lord Jesus, thank you for the diversity of gifts you have given your body, the Church; grant that in this parish, we may be so equipped for the work of ministry, that your body may be built up, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. Amen.

(Adapted from Ephesians 4:11-13)

⁴ Stott, *ibid.*, pg. 168.