

UNITY AND MATURITY

Ephesians 4:1-16

[Please refer to Ephesians 4:1-16 Study Notes.]

These opening verses of the second main section of Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus are something of a touchstone for many Christians. It is quite common for ministers, preaching with a view to joining a church, will be asked to expound this passage. The reason is simple. Here in this passage we have an apparently comprehensive picture of church life, with its exhortation to unity (1-6), its theology (7-10) and description (11-16) of different gifts given for the building up of the church. I say "apparently" because this passage is only comprehensive when it is read in the context of the rest of the letter and alongside the whole of Paul's teaching. It is a passage that is often taken out of context, divided into sound-bites and used to support particular models of church life and leadership. In fact, Paul's main (though by no means only) point in these verses is the centrality and importance of unity and maturity in the church, about how we treat one another.

Paul has laid out before the Ephesians something of the nature and wonder of their salvation. His main thrust has been the reconciliation made possible by Jesus, the breaking down of the dividing wall of hostility that cut them off from God and from one another. This has also formed the basis of his prayers for the Ephesians. It should come as no surprise that Paul now turns to the practical outworking of his theology and prayers. He is making a connection here that is fundamental to Christian thinking and action, a triangle of belief, prayer and behaviour: "the barriers are broken down – pray, with all the Lord's holy people, that we may be rooted and established in love – live a life worthy of your calling, especially make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit.

Given Paul's emphasis on this point it seems likely that here was a flash point in the church at Ephesus. If so, then that church has much in common with many, perhaps even most, churches today, and that is a lack of unity. This is no surprise in our own situation. After all we live in a society where the individual is valued above the group, and as much as we decry this

situation we are prone to follow worldly ways. This onslaught of worldly values and ways is very subtle, but very widespread, and we forget that we are called to a very different way of life. “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” (3) Is unity of more value to us than having our own way? The world’s answer to that question is a resounding, “No!” but we are to march to a very different beat. “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.” (2) As in the first century so in the twenty-first, the practice of humility, gentleness, patience and forbearance are not popular attributes, but we are called live lives that reflect these Christ like qualities.

Notice something important at this point. We do not need to establish this unity. It already exists, given by God. What we need to do is value and maintain it. “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.” (4-6)

The unity that Paul speaks of here is not uniformity, nor organizational unity – there are many varied and valid reason why there should be differences among us. Christians need not agree on everything to have unity, but we do need to live in the unity of a common commitment to Christ. As Richard Baxter put it centuries ago: “Unity in essentials, liberty in incidentals, and over all things love.”

And what makes unity so important? The mission of the church is at stake. Unity and mission belong together. In 3:5-10 unity among diverse groups is at the heart of the gospel and evidence of God's power and wisdom. The mission of the church is crippled by the division among various groups. Unless we evidence unity, our witness does not deserve to be heard.

In order to ‘keep the unity of the Spirit’, Paul tells us, Christ gives gifts to his church (7). Paul does not give an exhaustive list of these gifts, just a selection (11, note he doesn’t mention deacons or elders). Those mentioned are not a description of the hierarchy of the early church, but part of Christ’s loving gift: “To equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature.” (12f) It is not a little ironic that interpretations of this passage have had a divisive influence on the body of Christ when it should have brought us together.

These two verses tell us there are, in fact, two reasons why Jesus gives these particular gifts: that we may reach unity and that we become mature. In the last verses of this passage (14-16) Paul explains the link between these two ideas. He does this by contrasting an infant, unable to make up its own mind and thus at the mercy of whatever comes its way, and an adult. And not just any adult, but an athlete: “joined and held together by every supporting ligament, [that] grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” (16) The standard for this maturity is “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (13).

This passage is a challenge to us all. By fixing our attention on the so-called “four-fold ministry” of 4:11 we have missed and neglected its wider implications of unity and maturity. We need to reclaim these words and accept the challenge they offer.

Amen.

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Sunday evening, 16 June 2013