



A Call to Christian Unity

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:1-6

For the past few years, “diversity, equity, and inclusion” have been promoted as essential values in the workplace, education, and government of the United States. Is there anything wrong with any of these values? Certainly not. In fact, we see these themes in the book of Ephesians.

The problem arises when diversity, equity, and inclusion are pursued as ends in themselves, without any larger framework. Diversity—of what? Equity—on what basis? Inclusion—to what extent? And do all three serve any larger purpose?

In Ephesians, we see that God values diversity: Jews and non-Jews can be part of his family. God values inclusion as well: he *includes* both as his special people. And there is also equity: whether Jew or Gentile, all are *equally* dead in trespasses and sins; moreover, all are *equally* the recipients of his mercy and grace.

In other words, the church is really a place of diversity, equity, and inclusion; but on radically different grounds and for radically different purposes. Furthermore, we are called not to pursue these things, but to pursue the *unity* that has been brought about by the Holy Spirit: “*eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*”

In our study of Ephesians 1:1–6, we see: first, the call to unity; second, the character required for unity; and third, how this unity is possible.

1. The call to unity.

Note that this is a call to unity, not uniformity. It’s possible for a church to think that they are unified when in fact its members have simply eliminated or suppressed noticeable differences. It’s worth considering: have we settled for a surface level uniformity instead of addressing the hard work of unity in uncomfortable diversity? This call to unity takes hard work, as indicated by the verb rendered “make every effort.” Furthermore, this unity has already been established by the Holy Spirit (see Ephesians 2:18), and it is up to us believers to maintain it.

2. The character required for unity.

In order to pursue this kind of unity, believers must embrace certain virtues: humility, gentleness, great patience, and loving forbearance. Humility seeks the other person’s interest above one’s own. Gentleness arises from deep inner strength that has no need for harshness and machismo; rather, it is

courteous and respectful. Patience is the willingness to give someone a second chance—and a third, and a fourth, etc—without devolving into lazy permissiveness. Loving forbearance overlooks what should be overlooked, yet refuses to overlook what must be confronted.

All of these qualities have several things in common. First, they require self-denial. Second, they are the necessary ingredients for unity in diversity. Third, they are all traits of Jesus himself. Fourth, they are impossible to fully embody apart from God's life within us.

3. The possibility of unity.

This unity is possible only if the life of the Triune God flourishes in and among us, as it surely does! Paul goes on to say that “there is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” It's hard to miss the trinitarian shape of this statement, and the fact that he emphasizes God *in* us—just as Paul had been praying that Ephesians would experience at the end of chapter three.

We could bring out the force of this argument by posing it as a series of questions: “You're part of the same body, aren't you? You are indwelt by the same Spirit, aren't you? You share the same hope, don't you? You serve the same Lord and were baptized into the same name, weren't you? You have the same Father who is over, through, and in you, don't you?”

Here is a further answer to the prayer that Paul prayed near the end of chapter three: being “filled with all the fullness of God” means that Christians will earnestly pursue unity in their diversity for the purpose of Christlike maturity!

Discussion

- **Reflecting on Unity vs. Uniformity:** In what ways might a church confuse unity with uniformity? Can you think of examples where pursuing uniformity might actually hinder true unity?
- **Effort and Commitment to Unity:** Paul encourages believers to “make every effort” to maintain unity. What are some practical ways we can actively strive to maintain unity in our own church community?
- **Character for Unity:** Paul lists humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance as necessary traits for unity. Which of these traits do you find most challenging to practice? Why might that be?
- **Humility in Action:** How does humility promote unity within a diverse group? Can you think of specific ways humility could look in a situation of disagreement within the church?
- **The Role of the Holy Spirit:** Since unity is a work of the Holy Spirit, what does it look like for us to cooperate with the Spirit in maintaining this unity? How can we tell if we're pursuing unity with the Spirit's help?
- **Unity as Christlike Maturity:** In what ways does pursuing unity lead to Christlike maturity? How might unity and maturity relate to Paul's prayer that believers be “filled with all the fullness of God”?