

Introduction:

A. Illus.: Pastor Jared brought a story back to me from the Urbana Conference he attended last week. This is a conference for about 16,000 Christian students from around the world. After the main session in the evening, students went to smaller groups. There were contingents from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong that each met together in a large hotel banquet room, sectioned off by dividers. The big wall dividers were important because historically these three peoples have “harbored bitterness and animosity toward one another.” So they were each praying and worshipping each with their own people.

The Chinese students were praying when they told their leader they wanted to invite the other countries to join them. When the Taiwanese students got their invitation, they prayed and sang awhile and then they opened up the wall divider, which had begun to split open on its own. “Finally, the Hong Kong students pulled back their divider” and the 80 or so students mingled together. “*In Christ, we are all one family,*” said one leader. “*And he breaks down political boundaries. In Christ, we have the desire to make the first steps to connect.*”

The Taiwanese students asked the students from China and Hong Kong to lead them in worship. The next night, they invited the Korean and Japanese groups to join them, nations which also had experienced fierce animosity. The leader told them, “*We are living out what we have learned this week in John: This is ‘God with us.’*” One girl from China said, “*It was a really moving time. This kind of thing would not happen in another situation.*”

- B. That is what the book of Ephesians has been telling us about: 2:13, 19-22... Now let’s fast forward. Imagine those students go back to their campuses and folks from those three groups find themselves in a local InterVarsity chapter getting together every week. Imagine that there’s a guy in that group who always talks too much; always has an opinion on everything. And there are about four students who feel like the leader isn’t really teaching what they all need to know. There’s a girl who hasn’t handled her money very well and now might have to leave school. Some think they should take an offering for her and some think she needs to learn from her mistake. You get the idea. **I love the church; it’s getting along with people that’s the problem!**
- C. In our studies through Ephesians we’ve come to the turning point. Up to now we’ve been learning what an incredible position Jesus Christ has put us in through our faith in him. Now, in **Eph. 4:1**, Paul turns his attention to how such rich and privileged believers ought to behave: **v.1...** The next three chapters explore various practical ways in which we live out our Christian calling, but what is interesting is where Paul begins. *Not* with prayer, Bible study, worship, justice, evangelism, or spiritual warfare, but with **what we must do to maintain this precious unity that Christ has given us in the church: vv.2-3...**

I. LIVING A LIFE WORTHY OF OUR CHRISTIAN CALLING BEGINS WITH THE WAYS WE RESPOND TO EACH OTHER IN THE CHURCH (4:2-3)

A. The virtues listed here come dressed like **servants**. No pearls or power ties. No impressive business cards or degrees. Our high calling requires lowly loving.

And these virtues also come dressed like **first responders**. These are the things we must do *first* when our relationships here are threatened. Later, we may have to work hard things through and have tough conversations but first we do these things.

1. “Be completely humble”. The Greek word here means *humble-minded*. This is the **mindset of a servant**. We’re to come at our relationships and work here at church thinking, “*I’m here to serve, and I don’t mind being treated like a servant. I’ll let others go first. I want to take the lower place, to put her feelings above mine, to show how treasured he is. I don’t need to have the attention or the last word.*”

2. “Gentle” means meek, deferential. The Greeks never used this word as a virtue. It was a kind of **doormat** word. No one with any self-respect would say they wanted to be this. And our world is no different. But Jesus, who said of himself, *“I am gentle and humble in heart,”* showed us how powerful this gracious servant attitude is. So when there’s someone here at church who is difficult or needy or insecure, someone who comes on too strong or throws their weight around, we put *down* our dukes, and bring them a gentle touch of grace.
 3. “Be patient”. Long-suffering. Raymond tells his clients, *“The Bible calls it long-suffering, not long periods of contented feelings.”* Patience with other people can hurt! They get under our skin; they weigh heavy on us; they rub us the wrong way till we’ve got a relationship rash. But for the good of the church, keep your peace. Hold your tongue. Cool your heels.
 4. “Bearing with one another in love”. Some people are a load to carry. Too needy, too demanding, just too much, but we are to *endure* them (that’s really the word here) and do it with the love of Christ.
- B. **V.3... Go the extra mile to preserve the unity the Holy Spirit has given our church.** *“Make every effort”*—and effort it is! Responding in these ways to one another is hard work. But I see you doing this, for Jesus sake! And when we do these things, they begin to characterize us. Gradually, by responding to people this way, we are becoming like Jesus.

*“To **keep** the unity of the Spirit...”* We are all born again into a supernatural unity with one another. We are born again with a bond thicker than blood. Christ brings down the walls, and builds us together. Christ makes us his body. He does the miracle, but we must keep this holy unity by practicing these apron-clad virtues.

Illus.: We’ve all seen the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. It is one of the symbols of our national unity. There is the man who held this nation together. There on the marble walls are the words, *“With malice toward none, with charity for all...”* It used to be that you could walk around the left side of the monument, go through a couple of doors, and see *under* the great structure. There were great granite pillars, holding up that monument to our national unity. Here in **Eph. 4:4-6** it is as if Paul shows us the great pillars holding up the unity of the church. **Vv.4-6...**

II. OUR CHRISTIAN UNITY IS ANCHORED IN OUR CHRISTIAN CALLING (4:4-6)

These seven bedrock beliefs are not only what define Christian orthodoxy, they are also the ever-fresh spring that brings life to our unity. These tell us and *make us* who we are.

- A. “There is one body” – Jesus has bound us together as one living organism here in our congregation. We’re actually more like one person than many people, and that one person is Jesus! We have one head, one pulse, one identity. If some here quarrel, then we all feel ill, whether we know why or not. And when we love and serve Jesus together, it is as if Jesus himself were doing it, because we are *his* Body.
- B. “One Spirit”. The Holy Spirit who has given me new life is also in you. You might say we breathe as one. The Spirit, alive in all of us at once, can prompt us all to the same direction, can give us all one holy passion. He can bring our thoughts together. When he is working in one life he is synching up that work with what he’s doing in other lives here in our church.
- C. “Just as you were called to one hope when you were called”. No one has ever barged into the church. We are *only* here because God **called** us out of darkness into the light. We were all hunted down and captured by God’s grace. We all sing of Christ’s return with the same yearning and we all face our own funeral with the same hope.
- D. “One Lord”. In this context, he means Jesus Christ in particular. There is only one Master giving this church direction, only one Master whom we all must love and please. One Lord to whom we pray and sing. And he will never set some of us against others of us. He has prayed more fervently for our unity than any other thing.

- E. “One faith”. We have all *trusted* in the promises of God and the gospel. There are a lot of ways in which we’re different from one another, a lot of ways in which we do not think alike, but in this we are one: we have each and all heard God’s promise of grace and believed it. We have believed that Jesus is Lord. We have believed the Bible. One faith!
- F. “One baptism”. There is no one who has trusted Christ who has not been plunged into him, drenched and quenched by his Spirit. Baptism is our watershed moment, when we publicly separate ourselves from the world, and declare our complete allegiance to Jesus Christ.
- G. “One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” Others around us may not know God this way, but this bedrock belief in God’s Fatherhood and absolute sovereignty is what we have built our lives on. It is what shapes our prayers, and holds up our hope. We believe that nothing escapes his rule or attention, and that *“the Judge of all the earth will do right.”*

SUMMARY: Now if we have all those precious, rock-solid, life-giving treasures to hold you together, what could we possibly allow to pull you apart?

Conclusion:

On Nov. 9, 1997, when I candidated at this church, this was the text I chose to preach on. In a way, this church at that time seemed to belie the truth of this passage. There had been deeply wrenching conflicts, a poverty of humility and gentleness, and a shredded reputation in the community. This passage spelled out our agenda, and it set forth what I as an outsider had in common with the struggling believers in this place then.

God has done a marvelous thing here among us since then. People really have exercised these servant-hearted virtues. We have re-anchored our church life in these great Christian certainties. We have experienced “the bond of peace.” So what now?

- **Be together deeply.** Be in a small group, and be there often. If you have to meet more frequently, work that out. Pray with other believers here. Share meals together. Practice hospitality. Come to the Table Grace events. Serve with other believers in compassion ministries or ministries here within the church
- **Be ready to respond to one another with the servant virtues.** We’re going to need this reminder: *“Be completely humble-minded and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”*
- There’s one more thing. Illus.: A friend here wrote me an email this week in which he asked, *“At some point shouldn’t we make a move to assuming a certain level of unity in the church and begin emphasizing church-based evangelism in the community?”* I had just been thinking about that. Interestingly, Ephesians and most of Paul’s other letters, for that matter, rarely mention Christians being involved in personal evangelism. But he writes a lot about what I’d call Christians living out loud in the community. Christian unity is the advance work of evangelism. Christians whose love for one another shines like a light, whose righteous behavior stands out in the dark world and wins a hearing for the gospel. The problem is, as my friend pointed out, *“Unsaved people simply don’t see the unity that exists between you and I because we’re never in each other’s presence except in church on Sunday. It’s not enough to be unified, that unity also has to be visible.”* So that is our frontier for 2010. **How do we live out loud together as a community of Christians?**

For example, I’ve heard about small groups that choose to meet in a restaurant rather than a living room so others can overhear and see Christians in fellowship together. Christians going out together to serve the community with acts of compassion and justice are living out loud. When we tell someone that our church will pray for them in their *Tough Time* we’re doing this.

So how can we do that better? We have a wonderful and holy unity in this church. It is a remarkable gift, magnetic to others. The relationships we enjoy here are like an oasis in this dry and weary land. So talk to me and the other elders about how we can create, as one brother here calls them, *on-ramps* into this church. How can we better live our unity out loud in this community? I invite you to help us think about that.

ⁱ Corrie McKee, “Asian students tear down walls,” *Urbana Today*, 12/31/09, p.6