



## THE CALL TO COMMUNITY AND UNITY

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Ephesians 4:1-6

Second Message

John Hanneman

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What is the Church? When people are asked that question they tend to respond by talking about church buildings, the structure, organization, denomination, style of service and hymns that are sung or not sung in church. Many of us have had negative experiences in church. Much of what we hear in church is unbiblical. The Church in this country seems competitive and self-serving. Churches advertise like businesses. They have a *Consumer Report* mentality. Some churches seem to exist merely for the benefit of their members. Most non-Christians are more fearful of crossing the threshold of a church on Sunday morning than investing in the stock market. How often do we interact with non-Christians who are more open, accepting and vulnerable than the Christians we know? This is a sad commentary on the church and should not be the case.

In our first message in Ephesians we talked about the Christian's identity in Christ. As we come to chapter 4 of this letter today we will learn how we are to live in Christ. This chapter marks the major transition in the letter. According to John Stott, Paul turns "from exposition to exhortation, from what God has done (in the indicative) to what we must be and do (in the imperative), from doctrine to duty...from mind-stretching theology to its down-to-earth, concrete implications in everyday living."<sup>1</sup>

Listen to the words of the apostle from chapter 4 of Ephesians as he makes the transition from prayer to exhortation:

**Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, (Eph 4:1, NASB)**

Paul, who was under house arrest in Rome when he wrote these verses, begins with a strong charge. Notice three words in particular. The first is *walk*. This is one of the apostle's favorite terms. "Walk" describes the central idea in chapter 4-6, which is how Christians are to "walk" in Christ. Recall the apostle's words in chapter 2: "you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked...But God...made us alive together with Christ...we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them."

The second word is *call*. God chose us before the foundation of the world. He redeemed us in Christ and sealed us with the Spirit. He revealed to us his master plan, so that we might become his people, his possession, to the praise of his glory.

The third word is *worthy*. The adverb means comparable or corresponding to. We get our English word "axiom" from this Greek word. Paul's exhortation is that our walk should equal our calling. How we function in the church,

at home, at work and in society should correspond to our calling in Christ.

The apostle says that believers have been "blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ" (1:3). We have been chosen, redeemed, enlightened, inherited and sealed. We have value, freedom, revelation, purpose, and assurance. We do not seek to live a worthy life in order to gain blessing. This is where many Christians go astray. They rely on self-effort and seek approval from others. But that is living under the law. We are to live a worthy life because we have been so blessed. When we are called we gain a new identity: we are lifted with Christ into the heavenlies. As a result of our calling, therefore, we are to elevate our walk to correspond to that calling.

And how are we to walk? How should we live? Paul lists four characteristics of this walk.

**with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, (Eph 4:2)**

Humility was a much despised trait in the ancient world. The word was used to describe the crouching submissiveness of a slave. Abject subservience was regarded as a despicable trait. It was not a virtue but a defect. Here Paul is flying in the face of accepted values. Yet Christians are to become like Christ, who "humbled himself" (Phil 2:8).

The opposite of humility of course is pride. Pride is what makes us exalt ourselves, placing ourselves above others. But when we live like this our focus is inward. We become competitive; we try to meet our own needs. We cannot serve other people, because we are not motivated by a sincere love.

Gentleness was not an esteemed quality in the first century, either. The word does not denote weakness, however, but strength under control. This is a characteristic of a person with a strong personality who refuses to assert his or her own rights. Meekness is a virtue of those who are strong, those who could exert force to get their own way but choose not to. The Lord was both humble and gentle. Remember what he said, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt 11:29). He also blessed those who were gentle: "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matt 5:5).

Patience literally means "putting anger far away." Anger is an honest emotion that isn't always bad if we direct it in healthy ways; it should not be bottled up inside. But unhealthy anger creates barriers and causes division over small things. It is a disruptive and destructive force. Patience is a fruit of the Spirit, as is gentleness. Patience is required to build harmony and promote peace in the body of Christ.

Tolerance means putting up or bearing with one another. Paul is realistic. He knows that we all have irritating faults. We rub each other the wrong way. One characteristic of a worthy walk, however, is accepting people the way they are, the way Christ accepts them, forgiving them the way Christ forgives us. We must be tolerant even towards people for whom we might not have a natural affection.

Now we will draw three observations from these four general characteristics.

### **1. Character is the first concern of a worthy walk.**

The question of character is of prime importance when we evaluate our life in Christ. Character is the very foundation of a worthy walk. Character in a church is more important than the church's structure or organization, perhaps even some points of doctrine. That may sound heretical, but this is the order that Paul chooses.

Leadership, structure and doctrine are of utmost importance, but character is even more important. A church might have a leadership structure that is biblically sound, but if it doesn't have good character it will not be effective. On the other hand, a church's leadership structure may be flawed, but if it has good character, good things will result. As we will see shortly, there are some doctrinal issues that we must fight for. However, when a question arises over a doctrinal issue it will not cause upheaval or divide a church that possesses the kind of character that Paul is speaking of. Usually people ask about a church's leadership style or its doctrinal statement, but Paul would ask about the character of its people.

### **2. A worthy walk assumes and demands that we live in community and relationships.**

Notice that all four of the words which the apostle uses have to do with relating to others. We are created in God's image. God lives in community, and he has created man to do the same. When God said that it was not good for man to be alone, he was not talking about marriage only. Man was designed to relate to God and to other people. It is in relationships that our character and our walk are displayed. When we evaluate people's character we look primarily at how they relate to their spouses and families and society.

The Church is designed to be made up of God's people living and growing in community. Everything in us and in society fights against this. Oftentimes our lives can be characterized by centrifugal force—the pull toward the outer edge rather than the center. Our natural tendency is to sit on the perimeter so that we don't get too close or too involved. But God does not want us to live that way.

No amount of meetings, plans and organizational charts will help our character grow if we are not relating in community. We can choose to isolate ourselves and sing, with Simon and Garfunkel, "I am a rock, I am an island; because a rock feels no pain and an island never cries." Many people make that choice. On the other hand, we can make a choice to integrate our life with the lives of others and become part of the community. This may not seem natural to us, but it is what we really desire and how we were created. The fact is, rocks do feel pain, and islands do cry. It was John Donne who said: "No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine; if a Clod bee washed away by the Sea, Europe is

the lesse, as well as if a Promontorie were, as well as if a Mannor of thy friends or of thine owne were; any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee."

Everything that happens here on earth affects us, and it affects God, because we are designed to live in community.

### **3. A worthy walk assumes that we will have difficult relationships.**

Why must we be patient, gentle, humble, and tolerant? It is because the church is made up of flawed and broken people who will have difficulty relating to one another. Most of us relate to others in unhealthy ways. We learned this in our family of origin, when we were controlled by sin. It is natural to expect difficult relationships in the world, but we come to church with very different expectations. We expect to be treated the way we would like, to be loved the way we expect. So we shop around for a church consisting of people we get along with, people who love us and meet our needs. We don't want a hospital, but a country club.

Well, the bad news is, there is no such church! There is no such family! Most church splits are caused not by doctrinal divisions but by people who can't get along. Character is the issue. We will always have to deal with difficult people. We can never weed out all those who cause us problems. As soon as one leaves, another will appear. God allows this to show us what is in our own hearts, because oftentimes we are the problem. He wants us to grow in character, to learn to relate to others in a healthy and mature way.

Now being humble, gentle, patient, and enduring does not give others the right to control, manipulate or abuse us. We do not always have to say "yes" to people in church. Our responses are to be motivated by sincere love, out of freedom, not guilt, fear, anger or the need to be loved. If we are motivated by these things, then the problem lies not with others but with ourselves. Church should be so safe and secure that we can risk being ourselves in order to develop healthy relationships. We can disagree, confront, and speak the truth in love, so secure in our acceptance by God and our love for one another that we grow together rather than apart.

Every year our high school kids travel down to Mexicali to minister in the villages there. We have learned that what makes the greatest impact on them is not that everything goes perfectly during that week, because it doesn't. What changes them is the humility, patience, tolerance and gentleness they see from the staff and parents when everything falls apart, when plans fail and deadlines are not met.

Paul lists one more characteristic of a worthy walk, which brings into focus elements of character and doctrine.

**being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph 4:3-6)**

The apostle charges believers to walk in unity, holding firm to the things that we have in common. The assumption is that unity will not be easy to maintain. The Jew/Gentile debate was one such issue that probably was causing strife in the church at Ephesus.

Paul says we are to be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit. We are to be zealous, sparing no effort to do this. And the bonding agent that we are to employ is peace. The word “bond” was used of the ties that held ships together, or the sinews that hold one’s body together. Peace is what will allow us to maintain unity in the body. But not peace at all costs. We have peace with God and, as much as it is possible, we are to wrap ourselves with peace.

A number of our singles went to the Yucatan Peninsula in May to minister in a small Mayan village. Our women went door to door inviting the women of the village to gather for Bible study and to make a banner for their church, and about fifty women came to the first meeting. When it was time to begin work on the banner, a heated discussion arose. It seems that women from four different churches were present. Our women decided to take the materials they had brought with them and divide them up between the four churches so that each could make a banner. On the last night of our stay in the village a service was held to commemorate the work we had done. Everyone in the village came, and our team watched in amazement as four banners were hung on the wall and presented side by side. The bonds of peace, rather than the cords of division, had brought four churches together for the common good.

What exactly is this “unity of the Spirit” that Paul is referring to? The apostle lists the seven essential elements which believers hold in common.

*One body.* There is one universal set of believers among whom Christ dwells. This body transcends denominational barriers. It is not the visible but the invisible Church. Christ is the Head; believers make up the body. This is not an organized church but a living organism. There is not a Gentile church and a Jewish church. There is only one Church.

Churches tend to make a big deal over organizations and denominations, but every believer is a member of the same body. We meet in local churches, and yet we are joined spiritually to the whole, just as every cell of our body is joined to the whole. This is why we can travel across the world and sense the same life and joy when we meet other members of the body of Christ.

*One Spirit.* Each believer is indwelt by the same Spirit, who is given to all believers as a pledge or down payment. There is one body because there is one Spirit. “By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13). We cannot divide this Spirit. All believers, Jews and Gentiles, possess the Spirit in common.

*One hope of your calling.* Believers are called, chosen by the Father, before the foundation of the world. Associated with this calling is the great hope which all believers possess—the hope of eternal life and glory. Our hope lies in the return of Jesus Christ to establish his heavenly kingdom, and our sharing in his glory. This is what Paul is re-

ferring to in Colossians: “the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:27).

*One Lord.* There is only one Lord. Jesus is the Savior of the Church. He was crucified, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and everyone who believes in him has eternal life. But Jesus isn’t just a Savior: He is Lord, he is Head of the Church. He is still alive and active in leading his Church, and is Lord of all who place their faith in him. Caesar isn’t Lord! Buddha isn’t Lord! Jesus alone is Lord, and believers are the only ones who can say that Jesus is Lord. “For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:9-11).

*One faith.* Jesus is the object of the faith which allows man to be brought into fellowship with God. There is only one faith that will result in salvation. This is not referring to a vague acknowledgement of a god, but a specific, active belief in Jesus. As Romans 10:9 puts it, “if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved.”

*One baptism.* This is not referring to water baptism, which gives rise to controversy concerning sprinkling versus immersion, etc. This is the baptism into Christ that takes people out of whatever religious allegiance they have and marks them as Christians. Those who have been “baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal 3:27). Romans 6 says that Christians have been baptized into his death, burial, and resurrection. We are united in Jesus.

*One God and Father.* Paul ends his list by mentioning the third person of the Trinity, reversing the usual order. Deuteronomy declares: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one” (Deut 6:4). God is one, and he is the Father of every believer in his family. There is one family, with one Father who loves us and cares for our every need.

These seven things which are common to all believers create the oneness of all believers. The basic core of Christian truth centers around the three persons of the Trinity. John Stott put it this way: “First, the one Father creates the one family. Secondly, the one Lord Jesus creates the one faith, hope, and baptism. Thirdly, the one Spirit creates the one Body.”<sup>2</sup> These are the things that demand our diligence.

The clarifying work in these essential doctrinal issues continued for five centuries in a number of ecumenical councils which were held to hammer out the tenets of the Christian faith. The three most important councils were: “Nicea in A.D. 325 (which confessed Christ as fully divine), Constantinople in A.D. 381 (which confessed Christ as fully human), and Chalcedon in A.D. 451 (which confessed the unity of Christ: two natures, one person).”<sup>3</sup> Paul’s word here in Ephesians may well have been an early creed that predated these councils. This is the unity which believers are to maintain with the bond of peace.

Now I will make three observations about this unity.

### **1. We are not to create unity, but to maintain unity.**

The church is not to impose an external unity or structure to bring about universalism. This is what the ecumenical movement seeks to do. Believers already possess unity, not an external union but internal unity, by means of the Spirit. We have a common understanding of Christ and salvation. We belong to one another by the Spirit. Believers are to maintain visibly what is true by the Spirit invisibly.

### **2. We are not to fixate on nonessential issues and major in minor matters.**

When we major in minor matters we classify people by what organization they belong to. We become critical of others and divide over issues which are not essential to unity—things like worship style, dress, music, eschatology, etc. The first time I ministered in Mexico, a pastor asked me, “What view do you hold regarding the end times?” That’s all he wanted to know about me. But listen to these words from Richard Foster:

All doctrines are important, but not all doctrines are of primary importance...the following principle can help: the closer the issue comes to the heart of the Christ event—Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection—the more it becomes a matter of primary importance...you and I may have strong opinions on double predestination, supralapsarianism, and biblical inerrancy, but these should not be considered evangelical essentials. Even issues as pressing as women in ministry or glossolalia...must not be made a test of evangelical orthodoxy. We must never allow pious convictions to be elevated into central dogmas of the Church. In these matters the old saying, first articulated by Augustine, can serve us well: *In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas.* ‘In essentials unity, in doubtful questions liberty, in all things charity.’”<sup>4</sup>

### **3. Whenever we see too much discussion and debate on nonessential issues we need to get back to the center.**

Are we talking about Jesus? Are we sharing his saving life? When people come to church do they see Jesus? Do

they see humble people being patient with one another? Jesus is healing us, comforting us, preparing us for heaven. If we are not talking about Jesus and his salvation, we are headed for trouble.

Paul gives this exhortation to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the bond of peace, because our natural tendency is to become sidetracked. When that happens we need to walk with patience, gentleness and humility and move back toward the center. We need to talk about Jesus, salvation, redemption, and forgiveness, not whether we are Catholic, Baptist or Presbyterian. “The Church is Catholic, universal, so are all her Actions; All that she does, belongs to all” (John Donne).

How many of you feel worthy to live a life corresponding to your calling? Most of us don’t. We think that what Paul is saying is, “Walk worthy of your calling, make no more mistakes, and live a perfect life.” When we fail to live up to this we feel guilty, ashamed and worthless. But that is not what my Bible says. We will make mistakes, we will hurt and get hurt. God doesn’t ask us to be perfect. He wants us to be humble and gentle. We grow more godly not by trying to do everything right but by forgiving one another and bearing with one another. The important thing is that when people walk through the doors of this church they see Jesus, they see a group of people “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love.”

What is the Church? The Church is believers coming together to experience life in Christ. The Church is believers risking, becoming vulnerable and honest with each other, to the glory of God.

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1. John R.W. Stott, *God’s New Society* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 146.
2. Stott, *God’s New Society*, 151.
3. Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 223.
4. Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 228-229.