



# CREATING COMMUNITY

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

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Ephesians 4:1-10  
Eleventh Message  
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Ari L. Goldman, an Orthodox Jew, was a reporter for the religion department of the *New York Times* newspaper. At 35, he entered Harvard University Divinity School on a year-long sabbatical. In his book, *The Search For God At Harvard* (New York: Ballantine, 1991), Goldman wrote about his family's Sabbath table where, he said, childhood dreams were fulfilled:

Friday night. It was a time when, by the magic of the Sabbath candles, we were transformed into a happy, picture-book family. The recriminations and bickering would cease and the music would begin. The children would sit at the gleaming white table in our "Sabbath outfits," dark blue pants and white cotton shirts open at the collar. Our hair was still wet from our pre-Sabbath baths, and it was combed neatly across our foreheads. Yarmulkes were bobby-pinned to our heads. My mother waved her hands over the lighted candles and covered her eyes as she stood in a silent moment of meditation. Afterwards, she took us into her arms and kissed us, lingering an extra moment to drink in our freshness. She told us that we looked like the two angels that tradition says accompany the men home from the Friday-night synagogue service.

When, a little while later, my father returned from the synagogue, we lined up in front of him for the Sabbath blessing. "May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe," he said...Bending down to reach us, my father cradled our heads between his strong hands as he recited the blessing. "May He bless you and keep you...and give you peace."

My father, who worked hard all week managing and selling real estate, became our rabbi and cantor on Friday night. He took us through the meal singing the joyous melodies of the Hasidim and the resolute songs of the Chalutzim, the Israeli pioneers who, we were told, were singing the same songs as they worked to turn the desert green (pp. 54-55).

This harmony and peace among the Goldman family was shattered when Ari was five. His parents divorced and his home life disintegrated. Ari was put on a train to Jackson Heights, a working class neighborhood. He began living with his in-laws, sleeping on a couch in the waiting room of a doctor's office. He writes about his parents' divorce in his book:

To my mind, divorce is a deplorable breach of contract, and I say without humor that children should be allowed to sue (p. 57).

All sons and daughters of divorce blame themselves. In their minds, the only way to expiate the guilt is to re-create that which was lost. That is why each of us harbors a dream, the dream of bringing our parents back together again. On a subconscious level, this becomes our life's work. For me, the mission was to re-create the serenity and harmony of the Sabbath table. That was all I needed to do to restore our fall from Paradise (p. 56).

Can the dream of community that has been destroyed by rejection, divorce, abuse and loneliness be re-created? There is

good news in the text to which we come this morning from the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Here is what Paul says: Jesus Christ re-created the dream by the sacrifice he made in the shedding of his blood. He created a new community whose bonds are stronger than flesh, stronger even than death itself.

We come now to the apostle's first command in this letter, one that is used five times in the course of the book (4:1, 17, 5:2, 8, 15). It is the command "Walk." (The NIV renders this word "live," but this is a poor translation.) This word was used in the Garden of Eden where, we are told, Adam *walked* with God, in complete harmony. In that garden there was intimacy and vulnerability in all relationships. Paul is implying that Christ's work in behalf of his church has, in a sense, re-created the Garden of Eden. According to Paul, unity should be the outstanding characteristic of this re-created Garden of Eden, the church of Jesus Christ. This is demonstrated in his use of the word "one" nine different times in just seven verses. The point is obvious: Christians should take pains to avoid damaging the unity that Christ has created in his death and resurrection.

Verses 1-10 of chapter 4 divide neatly into three sections.

## I. Expressions of Unity (4:1-3)

**Therefore, I, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience showing forbearance to one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.**

### (a) Unity Begins With Attitudes, Not Structures

While some might resort to structures and meetings in order to establish unity, the place to begin, says Paul, is with attitudes, not structures.

The apostle illustrates his call by listing some character traits that should be apparent in Christians. The first two are humility and gentleness. This word "humility" means "to think low, take a lower place, be lowly, undistinguished." This was a despised trait in the Greek world of Paul's day, of course. To the Greek mind, humility meant having an abject, servile attitude. But in the NT, humility is always used in a positive, godly sense. It is the very word spoken of Christ. Philippians says of him that "...although He existed in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of men" (2:6-7). Humility was what drew people to Jesus. Pride, of course, has the opposite effect. Pride is the note of all discord. Pride repels; it does not draw people

The second trait, "gentleness," does not mean weakness, but rather describes one who is humble, considerate, meek and unassuming. In his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus presented himself as King in a most unassuming way. He did not make a pompous show, but rather rode into the city mounted on the foal of a donkey, his feet dragging in the dust of the streets. "Gentleness" can be used of a strong personality who nevertheless is mas-

ter of himself and a servant of others. This quality, says Paul, is an indispensable tool in disarming the devil (2 Tim. 2:25).

And gentleness is a quality required of God's leaders. Numbers 12:3 says of Moses, Israel's great leader, when he came under attack by Miriam and Aaron because he had married a Cushite woman: "Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth." Moses did not utter a word in his own defense. He had learned gentleness through forty years of living in the wilderness. The unpleasant circumstances that you may now be chafing under, far from denying you what you vainly think of as your potential as a leader, are in fact working in you the characteristic of gentleness — the very thing you need to develop in order to be considered great.

So unity, according to Paul, begins with attitudes, not structures.

Secondly, says the apostle, unity is expressed in how we react toward others.

### **(b) Unity Is Expressed In How We React Toward Others**

"...with patience, forbearing with one another." Being patient means "choosing to have a long fuse." Patience does not demand instant change. It puts up with people, choosing to wait upon God to change them. "How much longer must I bear with you?" said Jesus to his disciples on one occasion (Matt. 17:17). He would wait until God changed them — and that did not happen until after his death and resurrection.

Some people have such high expectations in relationships that if any little thing goes wrong, they explode. They are touchy and moody. Like peacocks, you dare not ruffle their feathers. You have to take a detour around them. When you live in the context of a family, of course, you expect failure. Parents don't take long to discover that there is no such thing as a perfect vacation or outing or romantic weekend. Something invariably comes up to dampen the fun, but this is how patience is learned. So remember, the church is a family. Lower your expectations of people.

Thirdly, Paul says that unity is expressed in how we pursue others.

### **(c) Unity Is Expressed In How We Pursue Others**

When you are wronged, you should respond with patience, showing forbearance. But when you have wronged others, you should take the initiative to clear up the problem. This is what Paul means by "being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." This is such a priority in the church that Jesus said if we have a problem with someone, we should leave our gift at the altar and go and reconcile with our brother or sister before we come to church. Love and unity among Christians are much better gifts than money.

For years, I had been close to a Christian brother, but something came between us that in time became a wedge that drove us apart. Whenever I tried to talk to him, I became so emotional that I usually had very little to say. As a result, the wedge between us, far from being removed, was driven deeper. I was encouraged, however, when another brother told me that he had been praying for a year that this problem could be worked out, and that he was personally committed to working toward that end. Then the brother from whom I was estranged wrote me a letter which pained me deeply. I shared it with the brother who was committed to working out the problem and he responded by immediately going to talk to my brother. He became my advocate, doing what I could not do for myself. When he returned from his meeting, he said to me the very words I wanted to hear,

"He loves you." The joy I felt upon hearing this could be compared to the joy that Joseph felt, following his years in Egypt, when he saw his brother Benjamin: "...then [Joseph] fell on his brother Benjamin's neck and wept; and Benjamin wept on his neck." My friend was committed to the apostle's appeal here that Christians "preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Walking in a manner worthy of our calling cannot be accomplished in isolation, therefore. In order to experience God we must walk with him and with fellow-Christians, either putting up with them or pursuing them. This is hard work certainly, but this is what we are called upon to do, and the rewards for faithfulness in this area are many.

Paul now moves from the expressions of our unity to the theological basis for it.

## **II. The Theological Basis For Our Unity (4:4-6)2**

**There is one body and one Spirit, just as 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.**

This verse is as important in NT theology as the Shema is in OT theology. The Shema, "*Hear O Israel, The LORD is our God, the LORD is One,*" is the life verse of the Jews. What it is saying, of course, is that there is one God, and Israel is his people — monotheism (one God), and election (he has chosen Israel to be his people). This is the bedrock of Judaism. And these Jewish people were given one law, Torah, through Moses, the essence of which was as follows: Since God was One (he was a God of integrity, with no division in his heart), his injunction was to love him with a whole heart (without division in your heart), and love your neighbor as yourself. This was how the one God would be made visible, through love in one community, the people of Israel.

But Israel's record in the land into which they entered was one of failure, tribal jealousies, civil war and corruption. Thus the prophets looked ahead to the New Covenant, when God would put the law into the heart of every Jew, by the Spirit; then there would be one united family. Paul is saying here that the dream of the prophets had now become reality in the work of Christ who established the new community (where "the wolf would lie down with the lamb," as Isaiah prophesied). So the apostle rewrites the Shema, saying it has been fulfilled in Christ. There is one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit. These three persons have made one community, one people of God, who have "one hope, one faith, one baptism," etc. This is why this text is just as important to Christians as the Shema is to the Jews. What the Jews longed for became a reality in Jesus Christ, an even better reality actually, because the family of God is now open to all the nations of the earth.

Let's look now at the implications of the Trinity in this text.

### **(a) One Spirit Implies...**

Because there is only one Holy Spirit, there is only one body of Christ (filled with the life of that Spirit), and there is only one hope (of which the Spirit was a pledge). In the OT, when the Jews came to unity, they sang the beautiful words of Psalm 133, recognizing that their unity was a special anointing of God's Spirit:

**Behold, how good and pleasant it is  
For brothers to dwell together as one!  
It is like the good oil poured on the head,  
Running down on the beard,  
Running down on Aaron's beard,**

### **Down upon the collar of his robes.** (Psalm 133:1-2)

Paul is saying here, however, that now the Spirit is given without measure to all, Jew and Greek alike. The Spirit transcends all fleshly distinctions. The unity that Christians have in the church, therefore, is stronger than the unity that was the portion of the Jews of the blood line of Abraham.

We cannot divide the body of Christ any more than we can divide the Holy Spirit. We must never refer to local assemblies of Christians as though they alone are the body of Christ. I have a friend in Oregon who refers to the church where he gets his sustenance from as his “feeding trough and watering hole.” This description puts local assemblies in their proper perspective. They are merely feeding troughs and watering holes where Christians get their spiritual sustenance.

There is only one body of Christ.

Second, there is “one hope.” The hope of the Jews is clearly stated in Leviticus: “Be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 20:26). The people of Israel were called to holiness. The dietary laws, sacrifices, etc., were saying that they were set apart to God to be wholly his. But Christians live in an age when the Spirit does what Moses could not do: The Spirit writes the law on our hearts, making us holy. This is a down payment on the promise that God’s holiness will one day encompass the whole earth. All Christians long for the same thing, and this hope will one day be consummated in New Heavens and the New Earth. Do not set your hope on anything short of this.

In this country today, nothing divides Christians more than eschatology, the subject of last things. Christians are asked whether they are pre-trib, post-trib, a-mill, pre-mill, or post-mill. The older I get, the less certain I am about all the details of how everything is going to end. But I have become more certain for that to which it shall end, and that is *holiness*. Christ will reign over the entire New Heavens and the New Earth. We are going to be fully holy, without sin. This is our hope. If we emphasize this, we will not be party to division among the brethren.

### **(b) One Lord Implies...**

Paul writes there is only one Lord, one faith and one baptism. In the Old Testament, the one God gave one teaching, the Torah, through Moses. In that Torah Moses wrote in Deuteronomy, “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it...” (Deut. 4:2). Now in Christ, the law is not set aside, but rather is fulfilled. Christ is the true temple, the true Israel, the true priest, the New Adam, the Davidic King, the One Prophet, the Great Sacrifice.

The apostles set forth that faith in the NT, and the same thing is said about their writings as was said of Moses in Deuteronomy. For instance, John wrote in Revelation, “...if anyone adds [to the words of the prophecy of this book] God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book” (Rev. 22:18-19). So much for the book of Mormon. Don’t add to the word that God has given. On the other hand, if you take away from it, God will take away your part from the tree of life.

The apostolic teaching is the only teaching for Christians and the church. There is no other. The apostolic teaching alone is what makes Christ Lord in the human heart.

Some people today, of course, don’t care for the apostles’ teaching on certain subjects — things like divorce, homosexuali-

ty, pride or servant leadership. So they delete or misinterpret these matters in the mistaken impression that doing so will foster unity. They are like Linus, the cartoon figure, whose theology holds that “it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.” The apostle, however, declares there is only one faith — the apostolic faith. If we compromise that, we compromise the Lordship of Christ.

And there is one baptism. In Judaism, circumcision was the initiation rite that permitted entry into the family of Judaism. In Christ, however, baptism — circumcision of the heart — is the rite of initiation, symbolizing that the Holy Spirit places the person who was baptized into the body of Christ. Do not add to this one baptism, is Paul’s implication. If that initiation rite was good enough for the apostles, it should be good enough for us. This is why we don’t have church membership here. We don’t want to create divisions within the body of Christ. Everyone who belongs to the body of Christ is considered a member.

### **(c) One Father Implies...**

Then Paul concludes his theological treatise with the words, “one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.” This international family has only one Papa. He is the source of all life and its sole authority. Authority does not rest in you. Do not let it be said of you what Winston Churchill said of an arrogant colleague, “There but for the grace of God goes God!” The highest title you can acquire in the church in terms of your identity in the family is “brother” or “sister.” Even titles like elders and deacons refer to people of gift and godly character who have the privilege of serving meals at the feeding troughs, dispensing spiritual and physical food. But they are still just “brothers” and “sisters.”

In the church, we are all brothers and sisters. And we all worship one Father. This is the basis for unity. Notice the lengths to which God has gone to establish this unity — how deep it is: as deep as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, as deep as the Lordship of the Son, as deep as the life of the Father. Unity has already been divinely created; our task as Christians is to maintain it.

Does this mean that all Christians should look and act the same? Does unity imply sameness, in other words? No, says Paul. On the contrary, our unity is enriched by the diversity of our gifts.

## **III. Unity Is Enriched By the Diversity of Our Gifts (4:7-10)**

### **(a) The Universality of Gifts**

**But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift.**

Some people insist on jumping into the middle of things and competing for position when they want to become involved in a work. But that must never be allowed to happen in the church. Competition destroys unity. In the church, each one has been given a gift, and when they respond in harmony one with another, all of these gifts play together, like an orchestra of many instruments. And, furthermore, each one has been given a measure of grace so that he or she may use the gift. This is why different gifts come with different capacities to bestow love upon one another. So we are free to be different.

If we liken spiritual gifts to the instruments in an orchestra, I like to think of myself as just an oboist. We have a number of preachers in our church because the elders think it might be boring to hear the oboe played every Sunday. I think John Hanne-man sounds like a trumpet. There is a ringing, piercing clarity

when he preaches the gospel. Gary Vanderet reminds me of a cello. His deep, resonating tones with their wide range move my spirit.

Discipleship then is the process of setting people free to serve with their unique gifts and unto their own capacities. It is not coercing them to look and sound like their favorite teacher.

And where do these spiritual gifts come from?

### **(b) The Origin of Gifts**

**When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men. (Now this “He ascended,” what does it mean except that he also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)** Eph. 4:8-10

These gifts, says Paul, are bestowed as a result of Christ’s ascension into heaven. Psalm 68, which he quotes here, is filled with the imagery of a battle. God is pictured like a general with an invading army. He has entered into battle and won the war. He returns to his capital city with a host of captives and there he dispenses the spoils of war among his people.

The original context of Psalm 68 was the Exodus. God went down into Egypt and dealt with Pharaoh. Then he took his captives in train and led them out. The spoils of war were the riches of Egypt, and he gave the people his law. Paul says that what happened in the Exodus is now fulfilled in Christ. Our Lord came to earth to battle with the forces of hell itself on the cross, and he defeated them. He now comes to his throne, the heavenly mountain, as Victor, with a train of captives (of whom Paul was one), carrying the spoils of war, a booty of gifts to distribute to his people. As Isaiah 53:12 says, “He will divide the spoil with the strong.”

### **(c) The Importance of Gifts**

Where did Christ “ascend” from? Paul says that “he who ascended” is also the one who “descended.” Let us not forget what these gifts cost. They cost Christ humiliation and death on the cross. They were infinitely expensive, beyond what we could ever imagine; therefore we should value them.

Second, says Paul, the distribution of these gifts signified victory over the enemy. This clearly indicates that Jesus is Lord. Gifts are the vehicle by which God is going to fill out the heavens and the earth, that he might “fill all in all.” If we want to have victory on earth over the power of the devil and the power of evil in the world, we should not take up the sword or envy the mantle of the politicians. The true power to defeat evil is found in these amazing divine gifts. So use them! Play your instrument. As you do so, harmony and love will issue forth, creating a community of love that will overpower the evil one and demonstrate to the world that Christ is Lord.

I was reflecting last week on the great reformation which changed not only the church in the 16th century but the history of the world ever since. In his book, *I Believe In Preaching*, John Stott has a word on what was the one element that accomplished this great work of renewal:

It was preaching of this divine Word, not political intrigue or the power of the sword, which established the reformation in Germany. Luther put it later: ‘I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s word: otherwise I did nothing. And when, while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my Philip and my Amsdorf, the word so greatly weakened the Papacy that never a Prince or Emperor inflicted such damage upon it. I did nothing. The word did it all!’

What a wonderful illustration of spiritual gifts in action, changing the very history of the world!

Spiritual gifts demonstrate the dominion of Christ and bring victory over evil in the world. The mission of Ari Goldman to recreate his dream has been gifted to all of us in Christ.

Ari Goldman was so grieved by his parents’ divorce, which destroyed his family’s Sabbath table unity, that he thought perhaps at his bar-mitzvah everyone would set aside family animosities for a time. But to no avail. The occasion was a disaster. He wrote,

I harbored a fantasy. I dreamed that someday I would get married and invite all of my relatives, on both my mother’s and father’s sides, to a festive wedding banquet. I would have them all together in one room, and it would be up to me to make the seating arrangement. My mother and father would be at the same table. My aunt who filled my ears with ugly gossip about my grandmother would be seated next to her. The people who disliked each other the most, that is, would be forced to smile and be polite. The main course would be rib steak, and the table would be set with steak knives so sharp that they would catch the glimmer of the chandeliers. In the middle of the meal, just as all the family, exercising the greatest politeness, would be lifting their knives to cut into the steak, I would sneak outside and pull the main power switch so that the hall would be cast in total darkness. Would anyone survive, I wondered, or would it be like the last scene in Hamlet, where hatred triumphs and no one lives? (pp. 62-63).

Aren’t you glad that you have been placed in a new family whose bonds are stronger than flesh, stronger even than death? And this family is moving towards the dream of a wedding, the day when the trumpet shall sound and we shall make our way to Heavenly Zion, where peoples from all over the world will assemble to worship the King of kings. God grant that on that day it will not be said of any of us that while we walked on earth we disrupted the joy of the Bridegroom. Let us walk worthy of the calling with which we have been called, therefore, maintaining the precious unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Then on that great day, we can sing with all of Israel,

*Behold, how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together as one.*

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