

***PRESERVING UNITY***  
***EPHESIANS 4:1-3***

For several years, we have had a theme for the year — a biblical truth that would help orient us and guide us as we serve Christ. Often those themes come from circumstances that we see in the culture (both secular and church) that we want to be purposeful in addressing. So in previous years we have focused on things like “Excel still more” (in love, 2022), “equip the saints” (2023), and “be steadfast” (2024).

Last Sunday, at our State of the Church event, we talked about this year’s theme: “Preserving Unity.” We see nothing in our church body that makes us concerned that we are disunified; actually, we continue to be encouraged as God enfolds more and more people into the church body that our unity is being preserved. We just don’t want to be presumptuous. We want to be purposeful in preserving this good gift. So in sermons and in Sunday School, and in home groups, and in discipleship meetings, and in counseling rooms, our focus this year is going to be on preserving the grace gift of unity that the Lord has given to us.

Paul’s instruction to the Ephesians (4:1-3) will guide us.

In the book of Ephesians, Paul’s first three chapters expound the riches that the believer has in his salvation, and in chapter four, Paul begins applying those truths. How does the believer act in light of the salvation he has received? And the first principle Paul applies is the necessity of unity and community. Because we have been saved with a common faith and into one body, we should live in community and unity with one another.

We might summarize what Paul says this way —

***BECAUSE GOD HAS CREATED A UNIFIED CHURCH, BE FAITHFUL TO PRESERVE THAT UNITY.***

In this passage, Paul offers **two primary principles** to maintain unity and community.

**Context: The Priority of Unity**

- 1. Keep the Unity GOD Established (v. 3)**
- 2. Keep the Unity by Cultivating Unifying MOTIVES (vv. 1-2)**
- 3. Keep the Unity in COMMUNITY Contexts (chs. 4-6)**

## Context: The Priority of Unity

- The unity of God's people is a priority throughout Scripture — especially emphasized in the NT
- Christ emphasized unity of His people as **an expression of Trinitarian unity** (Jn. 17) —
  - ✓ Unity is Christ's gift to us — and it is first of all unity with the trinitarian Godhead (vv. 21-22)
  - ✓ Our unity is an expression of love in the Triune Godhead (vv. 23b-24, 26)
  - ✓ Unity is our great testimony to the world of God's grace (v. 23; 13:34-35)
- **The Epistles** repeatedly emphasize the priority of unity —
  - ✓ The first church gathered in worship and service with "one mind" (Acts 1:14; 2:46; 4:32; Rom. 12:16; 15:5; Phil. 1:27; 1 Pt. 1:22)
  - ✓ Christ's church has many individual members, but it is *one* church (Rom. 12:4-5...)
  - ✓ The emphasis on "one-another" and "each other" (58x) stresses the importance of unity (Rom. 12:10)
  - ✓ Prideful divisions in the church are an antithesis to our salvation ("I am of Paul..." 1 Cor. 3:4ff)
  - ✓ Christ is the example for how to maintain unity through humility (Phil. 2:2)
  - ✓ Christ is adequate in the same way for all His people and is our unifying principle (Col. 3:11)
  - ✓ As we love one another, we preserve unity (Col. 3:14)
- **Ephesians** is about life in Christ, but a major secondary theme is unity —
  - ✓ 1:11, 13 *suggest* the unity that exists between Jew and Gentile; 1:15 more boldly affirms the love that is experienced among *all* believers into one church (1:22-23).
  - ✓ 2:11ff clearly affirms that Gentiles are brought into God's people with the Jews, as the church, so that there is *one* body (2:16) and one church that is being built (2:21-22)
  - ✓ 3:6ff specifies that Gentiles are fellow heirs with the Jews — it is even a testimony among the angelic heavenly beings (3:10)
  - ✓ The unity of the church is a reflection of the unity of the Triune God (4:4-6)
- The uniqueness about our unity in the church is that while we are individually different, we love and care for one another as though there are no differences — and that becomes our great testimony...

"...It is in the midst of difference that we have our golden opportunity. When everything is going well, and we are all standing around a nice little circle, there is not much to be seen by the world. But when we come to the place where there is a real difference and we exhibit uncompromised principles but at the same time observable love, then there is something that the world can see, something they can use to judge that these really are Christians and Jesus has indeed been sent by the Father." [Schaeffer, "The Mark of the Christian."]

- That's the context (both broad in the Bible and narrow in Ephesians) for this passage. What does this passage teach about unity?

## 1. Keep the Unity GOD Established (v. 3)

- As Paul begins applying the theology of our salvation in chapter 4, unity is foremost on his mind:
  - ✓ 2x **unity** is mentioned explicitly (vv. 3, 13)
  - ✓ 4x **one another / each other / all** is used (vv. 2, 6, 7, 13)
  - ✓ 7x “oneness” is mentioned (vv. 4 [3x], 5 [3x], 6)
  - ✓ There are other references where unity could be implied (vv. 7, 12, 15, 16).
  - ✓ Of all the responsibilities he could have mentioned, unity is first.
- Unity is a favored word among many in the arena of the church — “don’t divide over doctrine.” Is that what is meant here by **unity**? Verse three guides our thinking...
- Biblically speaking, unity is not something that believers or the church produce.
  - ✓ Notice the text — **unity of the Spirit** = the Holy Spirit is the One who generates unity.
  - ✓ We do nothing to produce our unity with Christ or with each other.
    - Unity was prayed for by Christ in the Garden (Jn. 17:20ff)
    - Unity was accomplished by Christ on the cross (Eph. 2:14-16)
    - Unity is produced and given by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:3; 2:18) — it’s His unity.
    - Implication — we do not and cannot make unity; we already have it. God’s church *is* unified.  
(Which may also mean that all that is purported to be the church is not the church...)
- So, what is our responsibility in relation to unity? The Ephesian believers and we are to **be diligent to preserve** the unity we have received from the Holy Spirit.
  - ✓ **Be diligent** has a sense of urgency and haste — be zealous. Spare no effort. Make it a priority.
  - ✓ **Preserve** = “keep,” “guard,” make sure it remains unharmed — ready for its intended purpose (e.g., Js. 1:27; 2 Tim 4:7; Jude 6, 21).
  - ✓ Both verbs (**diligent** and **preserve**) are present tenses — *always* be at this task of preserving the unity we’ve been given. And, protecting unity is the constant responsibility of *every* believer.
  - ✓ Principle: we don’t create unity; we have been given unity and made unified (2:11 – 3:13). But we live and act in such a way that the unity is either damaged or protected.
    - This is the same principle of unity in a marriage. The husband and wife don’t make themselves one flesh; they *are* one flesh. But their conduct can either protect that oneness or destroy it.
    - Always seek to protect unity in the body of believers.
      - ... We are prone to being dis-unified. That we are commanded to *always work* at unity implies that there is always an opportunity and temptation to be disunified. Sin always moves us towards disunity; reconciliation always moves us towards unity.
      - ... Like the man rescued from a desert island and the rescuer noted two buildings on the island — “that’s my church...and that other building is the church I used to go to...”

- Work hard at pursuing unity. Don't give up quickly... (And *it is* hard work.)
- So how is this unity protected? What do we do to keep the unity we've been given?
  - ✓ The bond that keeps believers unified is **peace** — Christ came preaching peace (2:14, 15, 17), and the message of the gospel is peace (6:15), and peace is a gift of God to believers (1:2; 6:23). We have been reconciled to one another through Christ, so let all your relationships in the church reflect that reconciliation. Be peaceable, pursuing peace with one another (Rom. 12:18).
    - We use our spiritual gifts to serve one another to build up one another (vv. 11ff, esp. v. 13)
    - We use our lives to speak the truth in love so that we all grow into Christ (vv. 14ff, esp. v. 16).
      - ... Speak truthfully (and righteously and graciously) with one another (vv. 25, 29)
      - ... Do not be sinful in your anger with each other (v. 26a)
      - ... And the most obvious way is to confess and forgive every instance of sin that breaks unity — do always reconcile with each other (vv. 26b, 31-32)
      - ... Every marriage, every relationship, every church has sinners in it (and only sinners and no perfect people); yet there are thriving marriages, friendships, and churches. The secret is not to avoid sin (because we can't and won't), but to reconcile sin to preserve unity/fellowship.
    - Am I eager and diligent, making every effort to guard and maintain the unity that God has given the church body? Am I taking initiative to preserve peace?
    - This is a challenge when we are so different from one another. Yet we are not *so* different:

“The world celebrates diversity. But the Bible does not celebrate diversity per se. The Bible celebrates *unified diversity*. In other words, the miracle of the gospel is not simply a diverse crowd. You can go to a football game and see black, white, Asian, Hispanic all wearing the same color. You can gather a diverse crowd around classical music or jazz. You can gather a diverse crowd around food or wine. But the gospel doesn't merely gather a diverse crowd. It gathers a diversity *and makes us one*.” Juan Sanchez, *A Biblical Answer for Racial Unity*.]

- ✓ Some of what we do as believers is unremarkable to the world. When we get together for Super Bowl watching parties with our friends or enjoy a Thanksgiving meal with our best friends, it's no different than what the world does. Where is the testimony in that? *But* when we sin against each other, forgive each other, and then intentionally seek opportunities to be with those who have sinned against us, that's unifying and that's different from the world! And that's the very reason God has put us together — to testify to the power of the gospel to change us.
- Do you want a life that is worthy of and in character of the salvation of Christ? Protect our unity. Protect our unity by being at peace with one another.

## 2. Keep the Unity by Cultivating Unifying MOTIVES (vv. 1-2)

- Verse 1 serves as the topic sentence for the rest of the book of Ephesians. It's the "hinge."
- **Walk in a manner worthy** = live a life corresponding to Christ because He has saved you.
  - ✓ **Worthy** means corresponding to, matching, equivalent (as in math), like a coordinating or matching outfit. It is to be in balance with — as w. scales so what is weighed matches the standard.
  - ✓ So, used in relation to spiritual life, it means a life that is consistent with Christ and his **calling** (1:18). There is equivalence between the manner of our lives and the purpose of our salvation. The conduct of our lives is in keeping with our name "Christian."
  - ✓ Salvation has implications; here Paul will emphasize the importance of unity. But before he gets to the main verb of unity, he offers four motives that compel unity.
  - ✓ **Paul, a prisoner** refers to his imprisonment in Rome. Why does he begin his appeal this way? Because he is reminding them that living the Christian life is costly — even to imprisonment and death — but that he has willingly paid that cost and is not asking them to do what he has not done.
  - ✓ He also affirms the difficulty of the spiritual life when he says **I implore you** = "encourage, exhort." He says that because the spiritual life is unnatural; it is supernatural. As Chesterton said,

"The Christian life has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."

- ✓ To walk worthy of Christ is to be intentional in making your life an equivalent to His purposes, especially to His purposes for the church body — many individuals made into one church.
- ✓ Our relationships with each other should reflect the unique way that God has put us together.
- ✓ What follows are four motives that Paul says will produce unity —

### • Be HUMBLE with One Another (v. 2)

- ✓ Humility refers to "lowly thinking." It combines two separate thoughts — the affirmation that I am small, but that God is large and great. I am insufficient but God is powerfully sufficient.

"The true way to be humble is not to stoop until you are smaller than yourself, but to stand at your real height against [God's] higher nature that will show you what the real smallness of your greatness is." [Phillips Brooks]

- ✓ The humble person does not think less of himself than he is; he has an accurate understanding of his position and gifting (**Rom. 12:3**). He just doesn't think of himself (as priority) because he serves...
- ✓ Humility was a quality despised by the Greeks — they considered it a "derogatory term suggesting low-mindedness and groveling servility." It was a quality that could not be commended.
- ✓ Yet Scripture exalts humility — and that the proud are brought down by God —

- Prov. 15:25 The LORD will tear down the house of the proud...
- 16:5 Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD; Assuredly, he will not be unpunished.

- ✓ How does humility influence our relationships with others?
  - A humble person is more interested in the interests of others than himself (Phil. 2:3-4)
  - A humble person is uninterested in grabbing honor for himself (Phil. 2:5ff).
- ✓ Humility will enhance unity, while pride will hinder unity. (That's why pride is not a "private" sin — it destroys public unity, community, and harmony.)

Humility "is the antidote for the self-love that poisons relationships." [MacArthur]

- ✓ A second attitude that produces community —

### • Be GENTLE with One Another (v. 2)

- ✓ The word **gentle** is often translated **meek**. And "meek" has a bad reputation. Many suppose it to mean "weak" and "mild." The opposite is true.
- ✓ **Meek** means power under control. It is a thoroughbred controlled by bit and bridle. It is dragster under the control of a deft hand on the clutch and steering wheel. In Biblical terms, it is a believer under the power and control of the Holy Spirit — quietly submitting to direction of God.
- ✓ **Gentleness** is the opposite of self-assertiveness and self-interest. The gentle person is not argumentative and not defensive, particularly against the Lord. He will not fight for his "rights."
- ✓ The gentle man is "always angry at the right time and never angry at the wrong time." A gentle person is willing to suffer injury instead of inflicting it.
- ✓ This word often is used about our relationships with others; gentleness is the kind of response that should be given to others who sin against us (**Gal. 6:1-2**). We have no hostility, but are under control. The gentle person is willing to suffer the burdens that the sins of others inflict on him. He waives his own rights in consideration of others. He is like our gentle King (**Mt. 12:20; 21:5**).
- ✓ Sin is inconvenient. Whether an inconsiderate driver, an ungracious word untimely spoken, an intentionally inflicted offense, or something deliberately taken, there is a cost to sin. A gentle person is one who responds in a manner conducive to reconciliation and restoration (**1 Pt. 3:1-4**).
- ✓ That gentleness will be a gift of grace to others and preserve the unity of Christ in the body.

### • Be PATIENT with One Another (v. 2)

- ✓ This word refers to "a long holding out of the mind before it gives room to action or passion."
- ✓ A patient man is steadfast — not giving in, enduring even when there is a long delay.
- ✓ It's one thing to have to wait for an anticipated package or a check from IRS. How about waiting for the repentance of a sinner? How long will you wait before avenging a wrong? How long will you endure suffering without complaining or becoming bitter? That's biblical patience.
- ✓ We will be helped to be patient when we remember that the spiritual life is progressive.

Transformation is not instantaneous but incremental. Sometimes there are even long periods of time before repentance or restoration will take place.

- Noah had to build an ark for 120 years, hearing insults and rebuke while waiting for repentance
- Jeremiah was told to preach and promised that no one would repent (Jer. 1:5-19)
- Isaiah was told the nation would not listen to him (Is. 6:9-12)
- Aristotle said that the greatest virtue was a refusal to tolerate any insult and to be ready to strike back; God says that He is “patient with all men” (1 Thess. 5:14).
- ✓ As you consider the slowness of others to change, are you patient in thought and prayer? Are you willing to persist in keeping and maintaining and pursuing a relationship when it is not reciprocated? The more we do that, the more our unity will be preserved.

- Be **TOLERANT** of One Another (v. 2)

- ✓ When we see the word **tolerance** we should not think of worldly definition that approves any kind of behavior — the “virtue” of people who don’t believe in anything (Chesterton).
  - The word is used 10x by Paul —
    - ... of tolerating persecution (1 Cor. 4:12; 2 Thess. 1:4)
    - ... of others tolerating Paul’s preaching (2 Cor. 11:1, 4)
    - ... of tolerating each other to the point of forgiveness (Col. 3:13)
    - ... of “tolerating” sound doctrine / teaching (2 Tim. 4:3)
  - The word means to endure and “hold up” or “put up” with difficult behavior — when others are both an irritation and when they sin against us.
  - The word is also a present tense, which means this is to be the regular activity of the believer.
  - And notice that he says **for one another** — implying that we all need this extended towards us — I not only need to practice it, but I need others to practice this with me as well...

“Bearing with others means fully accepting them in their uniqueness, including their weaknesses and faults, and allowing them worth and space...[It is bearing] with others without expectation of reward so that their concerns weigh more heavily than one’s own desires for personal fulfillment and peace of mind.” [Lincoln]

- ✓ How is this **tolerance** demonstrated? It is demonstrated **in** (or, “with”) **love** — i.e., we commit our will and affections to the needs of the other believer regardless of the cost to ourselves.
  - It is possible to bite the lip and just “endure...” But here he says that it is done **in love** — with affection so that we do not harbor bitterness.
  - The way to cultivate this kind of love (which is admittedly not natural) is to be grounded in the love of Christ (**3:17, 19**). We cannot love others fully until we’ve known Christ’s gracious love.
- ✓ When a relationship is marked by love, then not only will endurance result, but also forgiveness (4:32; 1 Pt. 4:8; Col. 3:13) — because we have been loved and forgiven by Christ.

### 3. Keep the Unity in COMMUNITY Contexts (chs. 4-6)

- In what kinds of relationships does this work? Your homework this week is to read chs. 4-6 and observe that these principles are for...
  - ✓ Church relationships (4:25-32; 5:15-21)
  - ✓ Marriages (5:22-33)
  - ✓ Homes — parents and children (6:1-4)
  - ✓ Work and community — even slaves and masters! (6:5-9)
- These principles and practices are appropriate for every context and every relationship. Every relationship you have will be benefitted by your efforts to preserve unity, including church.
- Unity isn't accidental. It's the result of purposeful, intentional, diligent efforts to preserve God's gift.
- And it starts with you and me, *being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*.

#### CONCLUSION:

GBC has long had a reputation (usually) for being friendly and welcoming. That unity and community is no accident — it is the result of people working hard to be mutually joyful in each other. That happens as we seek each other out after church, and text each other during the week and confess and forgive sin and do humbling tasks for each other. It takes intentional work — as our ministry grows and expands, as we enfold a new pastor and new members into our body, our goal this year is to **preserve unity**.

“We are all one in Christ. Every tribe, tongue, language, people, background, or however else you want to classify people — the truest thing about us is not where we were born, what color our skin is, what language we grew up talking, how much money we have, how much education we have, or how many people in the culture respect us. The truest things about you and me are that we were desperate sinners and that Jesus died for us. By faith, we as believers are united to him. These are the truths we get to affirm as we partake of the Lord's Supper. “As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes” (v. 26).” [Jim Hamilton, *A Biblical Answer for Racial Unity*.]