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The Truth About Our Life in Christ

A Study in the Book of Ephesians

One in the Spirit

Ephesians 4:1-6

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There are many glorious truths about the universal church of Jesus Christ. One of those truths is the magnificent way that the church of Jesus Christ around the world is so gloriously unified in Christ. In the next couple of months people from this local church in Lincoln, Nebraska will make contact with people in the church of Jesus Christ in Ecuador, in Thailand, in Laos, in Vietnam, in India, in Spain, and in Mexico. In each one of those places they will come in contact with people who are one with us in Christ.

When we talk about “in Christ” today, let me again redefine what that means. We are not talking about people who attend church. We’re not talking about people who call themselves Christians. But we’re talking about those who have trusted in Jesus Christ and His death on the cross alone for their salvation. Every person who does that is “in Christ” and a recipient of the blessings that we’ve studied in Ephesians chapters 1, 2 and 3. And we have this magnificent bond with them in Christ.

It would be a wondrous thing if, when somebody trusted Jesus Christ as Savior, that God would turn them a bright green color. I think it would open up our eyes to this wonderful truth of the universal church of Jesus Christ. Imagine what it would be like to walk through the mall and see all these green people. You would understand that you have this common bond in Christ with them. You’d go to school and to the marketplace, and even watch events on television where you would see these people who were green. It would be a visual reminder that we are one together in a way that we probably don’t comprehend right now. But the reality is that God has not opted to turn us green. Still, we must come to grips with the theological truth that we are one in a way that is really quite magnificent.

Theologically, and in reality we are one unified church. The problem is in practical terms we often don’t live like it. In fact, what typically characterizes the church is division—both in a local church and among fellow churches. If you talk to the average person on the street, they may tell you one of the reasons they don’t attend church is because Christians don’t get along with one another and churches don’t get along with each other. And in their mind that’s a big put-off. Why is there such a big gap between what is theologically true and what is practiced in daily life?

Paul wants to talk about that in Ephesians 4—how theologically we are one, and how we live that out in real life. Chapter 4 opens with “I, therefore...” We know whenever we see that word “therefore” it is in reference to something that has preceded it. I think in this case it is chapters 1, 2 and 3. The last passage of chapter 3 was a summary of the first three chapters, so certainly he’s making a reference to all the way back. Given what we’ve studied about our position in Christ and our glorious riches in Christ, he’s going to now teach us how we respond to that.

“I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord...” We saw this in chapter 3, verse 1 where Paul referred to himself as a prisoner of Christ. We know that he’s a prisoner in Rome, but ultimately he’s a prisoner of Jesus Christ. It is worth noting that in chapter 3 Paul says he is a

prisoner of Christ, and in chapter 4 he says a prisoner of the Lord. One thing you might find interesting is that in the book of Ephesians, Paul refers to the name or the title *Lord* 26 times. But 20 of those times are in chapters 4, 5 and 6. The reason for that is when Paul talks about our riches in Christ and our salvation in Christ, he typically uses the name Christ, which is a reference to the Messiah—the Savior. But now, when he’s talking about our response to that, and the way we live out our lives in light of what’s true of our position in Christ, he switches and talks more about Jesus as Lord, which is a reminder of our responsibility to submit to Him. He is the master; He’s in charge, and we submit our lives to that. There is a change from chapters 1, 2 and 3, which is a discussion about what is true—the facts of our Christian life. There is only one command in all of chapters 1, 2 and 3, and that’s the command to remember. So the emphasis in those chapters is really on knowing what is true and how we are to remember that.

But now, starting in chapter 4, we’re beginning to get the commands. In light of what we know to be true, this is how we are to live. Here is the first of those commands: “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat {*a strong word meaning I beg or plead with*} you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called.” Notice the double emphasis on the calling: “the calling with which you have been called.” There is a reminder that takes us back to chapters 1, 2 and 3 of the magnificent calling that we have in Christ, which we’ve discussed now for several weeks. We are reminded that we don’t have this calling because we earned it, or deserved it, or because we’re special. We have this calling simply because we’re recipients of God’s grace, so there is no place for arrogance or pride. We need to celebrate these riches in Christ by “walking worthy of that calling.”

What does Paul mean by “walking worthy of that calling”? The word *worthy* is the Greek word from which we get our English word *axiom*. It’s a word that means “to balance out.” When he says to “walk worthy of our calling” he’s telling us to think about the truth that we’ve learned in chapters 1, 2 and 3, and imagine that we have a giant scale. Take those riches in Christ and our position in Christ and put them on one side of the scale. To walk worthy of that is to balance that out with a life that is lived consistent with that—a life that is worthy of what we learned about our riches in Christ. Based on what we’ve learned, Paul is saying, “Live up to that. Live like it’s true in your everyday life.” This morning and in the following message we will talk about this concept of unity. Then Paul will shift to a discussion of purity—all within the context of walking worthy of our calling.

What does Paul have to say about unity? In verse 2, Paul lists out five character qualities that are necessary to be a unified people. But before we discuss those, I want to skip to verses 4, 5 and 6. These verses are the theological basis—the truth about our oneness in Christ. We need to come to grips with this theological truth in order to motivate us to take these character qualities seriously in our own life. So I’m mixing up the order of how we read this for that reason.

Nothing new is introduced in verses 4, 5 and 6, but Paul is going back and grabbing things we talked about in the first three chapters, and here he is pulling them together. What you have are seven “one statements” – such as “one Lord, one faith, one baptism...” There are seven of these “one statements” and typically in the Bible the number seven is used for perfection. Maybe, in some way here, there is even a reminder of the perfection in terms of the unity of the body of Christ that’s true theologically. Even though it doesn’t work itself out in practice often, theologically or positionally we are in perfect unity as the universal church of Jesus Christ.

These seven “one statements” are organized around the three persons of the Trinity: the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. Now that shouldn’t surprise us, because there’s been a significant emphasis on the Trinity in chapters 1, 2 and 3. Paul has often referred to the role of the Father, the role of the Son, and the role of the Spirit. We see that over and over again in the first three chapters. So now when we come into this discussion about unity, we’re reminded that the Trinity is a model of unity. Jesus said this Himself in John 17:11. When He was praying for the disciples, He said, “Father, . . .that the disciples might be one as We are one,” referring to His relationship with the Father and the Spirit. As the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit—three persons, one God) dwell together in unity, so should the church of Jesus Christ dwell together in unity.

Verse 4 says: “There is one body and one Spirit.” Paul begins with this discussion about the Spirit of God and how there is one Spirit dwelling in every believer, and that one Spirit then brings us together as one body. Now we know from chapter 1, that every person who is in Christ has the Holy Spirit within him or her. The Holy Spirit is given as a seal (a guarantee) of the fulfillment of our redemption. The Holy Spirit is the One who grants us access into the presence of God. The Holy Spirit is the One who brings us together to be the dwelling place of God. (We learned all of that in the first couple of chapters of Ephesians.) This means that you, as a believer in Christ, have the same Spirit in you that I have in me, and it’s the same Spirit that a believer in India or a believer in Thailand or in anyplace else, has. And because we’re united by the same Spirit, we come together to become one people.

Imagine what it would be like to have three bosses at your place of employment who want three different things done, and they each want things done differently. You would constantly be divided by different people telling you to do different things all the time. That would be a nightmare. Some of you are thinking, *You should hear my situation*. Imagine what it would be like if all of us, as believers in Christ, were controlled by a different Spirit. What if your Spirit took you one way, another person’s Spirit directed him another way, someone else’s Spirit took her a different way, and someone’s Spirit in Vietnam led that person another way? Paul is saying here that is not the case. Since God is an everywhere present God, each one of us is indwelt by the same Spirit. Therefore if we’re sensitive to voice of the Spirit, we should all be on the same page. The Spirit of God is not schizophrenic. He is one and He is of one mind, which gives us a common bond. We should be unified!

One of Paul’s favorite metaphors to use is the metaphor of the body. He talks about the fact that a body has fingers, hands, legs, toes, eyes, ears, and all these different members. But those members come together and function together to form one body, in order for that body to carry out various tasks. Perhaps the most well-known passage describing that is in 1 Corinthians 12. But when people think about 1 Corinthians 12, they tend to focus on the gifts of the Spirit. I think that is missing the point of that chapter. The focal point of 1 Corinthians 12 is not the gifts of the Spirit, but instead the Spirit of the gifts. When you read that chapter you’ll notice that what is emphasized is not so much the gifts, but it is the Spirit of God that dwells within us which makes us one body. It allows us to function together as one body because we all share one common Spirit. Theologically that is true. Every person who is in Christ has the same Spirit of God within him or her.

Secondly, he says: “...just as also you were called in one hope of your calling.” Again, here is the emphasis on the calling. We talked about the hope of His calling and what it means to be chosen by God, adopted, redeemed, forgiven of our sins, and seated with Christ

in the heavenlies. All these things we've talked about which relate to our calling are so encouraging to us and fill our life with hope, and we understand the ultimate fulfillment of that. There's every reason for hope. But we don't share different hopes because we share different doctrines. Instead, we share one hope together because we have one Lord (a reference to Jesus Christ as Savior) one faith (one belief in this common doctrine concerning Jesus Christ) and one baptism (an identification with Jesus Christ). So, in a sense, Paul is defining what he means by one hope. Because we have one Savior, one faith and one baptism, we're all in Christ together in the same way. It's not possible to have trusted Jesus Christ as Savior and have a different set of riches or a different doctrinal truth. What's true of a believer in Lincoln, Nebraska is true of a believer in Russia or China or anyplace else. Ephesians 1, 2, and 3—the hope of that calling—is the same. Therefore we're united in the Spirit, and we're united in the Son as our common Savior and hope of this calling.

Thirdly, in verse 6, we're united "in one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all." That's a reference back to chapter 3:14-15 and the truth of God the Father being the ultimate source of everything. If everything is flowing out of one common source, then there is unity. It's not multiple sources, but one source. Let's put all that together to understand what Paul is saying theologically. There is one Father who's the source of all. There's one Savior who is the source of our common hope. And there is one Spirit that dwells within us all which binds us together. We are unified as the church of Jesus Christ in a magnificent way which no other organization or family or community is.

What brings us together in a unified way as the church of Jesus Christ is not dependent on what church building you attend. It's not dependent upon what your denomination is or what country you live in. It's dependent upon our "in Christness." (Sorry, but I had to make up a word there.) That's really what he's talking about—it is our "in Christness" that unites us together as the people of God. Every person who has trusted Jesus Christ as Savior is united together in one Father, one Son, one Spirit—and God expects us to live like it. We have no theological grounds to pick and choose who we're going to be united with in the family of God. Paul is saying that this isn't just applied to a local church getting along with each other. It's the church of Jesus Christ—one Father, one Son, one Spirit.

The question is: How does this work itself out in practical terms? One of the things we have to understand is that there are essential doctrines that are very clearly taught in the Scriptures that we have to affirm if we are in Christ. We have to affirm the deity of Christ, that Jesus Christ was God in the flesh who died on the cross for the sins of the world, was buried, rose from the dead, and is coming again. You cannot deny that and be in Christ. There are certain core essential teachings that must be held to be in Christ. But outside of those core essentials, there are some secondary doctrines where we don't always agree. These secondary issues concern areas where the Bible isn't nearly as clear. We study and we apply our principles of interpretation, but the reality is that sometimes we come up with different interpretations. We are to be united at the core on the essentials, but we understand that there is room for differences, and yet we can still be united as the people of God.

Sometimes people get nervous when you start talking about the church coming together and becoming a unified body. But again, you cannot dismiss this and say that it's not true and just pick and choose who you're going to be united with. Paul is very clear that we have a common Savior, a common Spirit, and a common Father, and we do have to deal with this theological truth. One of the fears that people have is that the church will come together on the lowest common denominator, and that truth and doctrine will get thrown out as we all

mix together. That was the attempt with organizations such as the World Council of Churches—an idea of throwing out truth and all coming together as churches. But that’s not what we’re talking about at all. In fact, I would make the case that when we seek to be unified with fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, that it doesn’t lower the bar of truth, but rather raises the bar of truth. The most dangerous thing we can do is to isolate ourselves and believe that we’re the only ones who understand God’s truth and therefore we pull away and isolate ourselves. There’s no check and balance in that, and we basically become a law unto ourselves.

An example of that would be cults. One of the things that a cult leader will do is pull people out from contact with others and completely isolate them. He then becomes a law unto himself. He says, “I’m the only one who can interpret Scripture. I’m the only one who can teach truth.” And he begins to control them in that way. I think the more isolated you become from the body of Christ, the greater the risk for devaluing truth, because there’s no check and balance in that. The way to ultimately raise the bar of truth is to seek to be unified with the body of Christ. Together we provide a check and balance that goes back to the authority of the Scriptures and what we are basing our beliefs on.

I have a group of Senior Pastor friends in the city that I meet with on a monthly basis. We’ve met for several years now and we’ve become very good friends. We are absolutely committed to the essentials—the core doctrines—the fundamentals of our faith. But we do have some disagreements on some of the secondary issues. We can still be united and challenge one another. For example, one of my friends in that group is Stu Kerns—a man I greatly respect. I consider Stu a very godly man, and I have no doubt that he is very committed to the essentials of the faith. As a matter of fact, I had Stu speak here a year and a half ago at our Thanksgiving Eve service. But Stu is a Presbyterian, and I am a Berean. We are absolutely united at the core, but we do have some differences. We immerse our people in baptism; they sprinkle theirs. They baptize babies, and I don’t see that in the Bible. He has a different view of the timing end events of the Kingdom, the Millennium, the Rapture, and the Tribulation. But what happens when we come together and unite around the core is that we challenge one another. I know that Stu has as much of a commitment to the authority of the Scripture as I do. That causes me to ask the question: If he is as committed to the Bible as I am, then how does he support his views—which means how do I support my views? We challenge one another, and in the process we have to say, “Is this based on tradition, or is it based on the teaching of the Word?” It then causes us to be far more intense in the study of the Scriptures to understand and defend our positions. When that happens, the bar isn’t lowered, but the bar is raised. We provide a check and balance that goes beyond our traditions and back to the Bible for how we support what we believe.

I have another friend in England who is a pastor, and he also preached here in our church several years ago. We are absolutely united at the core, but we do have some differences in these secondary doctrines. When we would get together we would open up the Bible and he would say, “How do you get that? How do you defend that belief?” And I would ask him, “How do you defend yours?” We would challenge one another to see if what we believe is based on our traditions or based on an interpretation of the Scriptures. The bar of truth was not lowered. The bar of truth was raised, because there was a check and balance in that process.

Let me give you one more example of even someone here in this church with whom I just had a discussion a couple weeks ago. He would have a very different view of the events

of Genesis 1 and the creation story than I would. I believe that God created in six literal 24-hour days. He believes that those days are just figurative and that actually it was a much longer period of time, with some principles of evolution involved in the process. But he does believe that God is the originator of life and God did create man in His image. Ultimately we would end up in the same spot, but we have quite a bit of difference here in between. Now there's a tendency to say, "Man, throw the bum out. He's a heretic." But he's not a heretic. As a matter of fact, he is clearly in Christ. He has every bit as much of a commitment to the authority of the Bible as I do, and I know he loves God as much as I do. He has clearly demonstrated a passion to serve God, even on the mission field in a very difficult part of the world. I have no question that he loves God and is serving Him. What we understand is that we are united at the core, but we have some differences. But in those differences we challenge one another to go back to the Bible and defend what we believe, which raises the bar of truth. We don't just abandon it and say it doesn't matter. But rather we challenge one another, based on our mutual belief in the authority of the Scriptures.

Have you ever thought about what would happen if we held the "Bible Conference of all Bible Conferences" and we were able to bring back the great preachers and teachers of church history over the last 2000 years? Imagine what that conference would be like. We would have the apostle Paul, Martin Luther, the Wesley brothers, Jonathan Edwards, John Calvin, D. L. Moody, Charles Hadden Spurgeon, and all these great teachers. Maybe we would top it off with C. S. Lewis or Billy Graham. If we assigned them the topic of the essentials of the Christian faith, they would all speak in complete unity. But if we assigned the topic of some of these secondary issues, put on your seat belt, because it would be absolutely alive! These great preachers are "all over the page"— they have all kinds of differing opinions on these secondary issues. It's interesting to me that we don't hesitate to quote these people. We sing their hymns and we embrace them as some of the great heroes of the faith. But we never stop and think about how diverse their beliefs were on many of these secondary doctrinal issues. Many churches wouldn't even let these men stand and preach if they were alive today. And in my mind, that is a tragedy.

The reality is we cannot just dismiss the fact that every person who has trusted Jesus Christ as Savior is in Christ. We are united with those who are in Christ, because we have the same Father, the same Son, the same Spirit, and God expects us to live that way. Therefore, we have to deal with these differences. We can't just isolate ourselves and say, "Too bad for you folks." We are one body.

Then the question arises: If this is true, how do we pull this off? How do we really make this happen? That's what Paul talks about in verse 2. There are five character qualities necessary to live out this unity, even though we have this diversity as we challenge one another. By the way, when you think about the diversity in some of these doctrines, I'm reminded of something Mr. Wiersbe told me one time: "1 Corinthians says we know *in part*, therefore we ought to live like it." That's what we are talking about here. The fact is there are certain core doctrines that we are absolutely united in. But it's also true that we don't have all the answers on all these other secondary doctrines, and we need to live like it. That's a part of these qualities listed here in verse two.

He begins with the quality of *humility*. Humility means lowliness of mind. It basically means that we are willing to think of others as more important than ourselves. It's the opposite of pride and arrogance. Pride or arrogance says, "I have all the answers. I have everything figured out and it's my way or no way." Humility says, "You know, there are

certain things we're absolutely united on. But there are other things that I'm not sure I can be that dogmatic about." So in humility we respond to these things.

You might be interested to know that the Romans did not consider humility to be a positive trait. They considered it to be a trait that described the slave or servant, and considered it a very negative thing. They believed the positive trait was to be self-sufficient—to be somewhat prideful, arrogant, to stand strong and to stand your ground. The Greeks felt the same way about it. They felt that humility was a negative term, and they didn't think it was an attribute that you attach to someone in a positive way. So Paul was fairly radical in saying that humility should mark the Christian. He was saying that because we are a called-out people and recipients of God's grace, there's no reason to be proud and arrogant, but rather we are to respond with humility.

That's better defined by the second term, which is *gentleness*. You'll notice it's humility and gentleness, comma. That punctuation is put in there as a way of saying, "These are two terms which fit together—one helps define the other." Gentleness is the idea of strength under control. It's the idea that someone is very strong, and we learn that it's the Spirit of God that strengthens our inner man through these truths from chapters 1, 2 and 3. That strength doesn't turn into arrogance or pride, but rather it's brought under control.

This Greek word was used to describe, for example, a horse that was broken for riding – one that was broken to wear a bridle and have a bit in its mouth. We understand that horse still had significant power, but the power was brought under control. This past week Patti and I were talking to a man about a horse. He was standing there, holding onto the halter of this horse while he was chatting with us. Apparently the horse had other things on his mind, so the horse just flicked his head and the guy flew about two feet across the corral. It is astonishing the power that's in one of those animals, and it's power that has to be brought under control. That is gentleness.

The word was also used to describe a gentle breeze. On a summer day a gentle breeze feels so good to us, but we understand that there's enough power in there to produce a hurricane. This power under control that is described as a gentle breeze is the idea of this word. We find out a lot about ourselves in terms of our humility and our gentleness when people challenge us, treat us unfairly, or do things to us that aren't consistent with unity. How we respond to them tells us a lot about the inner strength that we do or don't have.

When people don't respond to us with humility and gentleness, then the third term comes into play. It's the quality of *patience*. Patience literally means long-tempered. We're familiar with the word short-tempered; and this is the Greek word for long-tempered. It basically means that we don't react. We don't respond angrily, and we don't fly off the hook. We're patient.

The fourth term, which connects with that, is showing *forbearance*—a word that means tolerance and giving people the benefit of the doubt. It means being willing to be mistreated and treated unfairly without reacting in a way that destroys unity. And then the fifth quality goes along with it: *forbearance in love*. It's not an emotion but a commitment of our will to somebody else.

If you take these five qualities and bring them together, it is probably more like the picture than the five of them separately. When you bring the five qualities together, it is

talking about our willingness to die to ourselves in order to maintain the unity of the body. Look at what he says in verse 3: “being diligent *{that means being zealous; doing whatever is necessary}* to preserve *{or guard}* the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Paul says that if you are a person of humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, love—then do whatever is necessary to guard the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. It doesn’t mean that we don’t have differences and it doesn’t mean we can’t address those differences. But it does mean that they are addressed in such a way that unity is preserved and guarded, not destroyed. And there are character qualities that are necessary to pull that off.

Paul is saying that, based on chapters 1, 2 and 3, there is a certain atmosphere or environment in the heavenlies that we are a part of. We’ve talked about what it would be like if we could tune into this spiritual dimension and see who we really are in Christ, and how magnificent that is. Imagine that scene and then imagine people in Christ kind of cloistered in little groups in that environment. They won’t talk with each other; they won’t have anything to do with each other; and there’s bickering and backbiting and fingerpointing. Paul says that just seems incredibly inappropriate for that magnificent environment.

A year and a half ago when our family was in Washington D.C., Ashley and I went to the Holocaust Museum. If you’ve never been there, it’s quite a sobering place. You go to the Lincoln Memorial, the Capitol and all these places where people are pushing and shoving, with kids who are whining and wrestling—you know how all those tourist places are. But when you step into the Holocaust Museum everything just “stops.” Through the lighting, through the music, and mostly just through the sobering content of this place, everything gets very quiet. People stop pushing and shoving and stop talking. There is this quiet atmosphere all the way through the museum. About halfway through, I was captured with the reality that no one was pushing or shoving and there were no kids wrestling in the corner. Everyone was quiet and sober because of the environment and what it was all about. If you stood in that museum, and in one corner there were people laughing and acting up; and in another place kids were wrestling; and in another corner people were yelling at each other, it would seem incredibly inappropriate for that environment.

I think that is what Paul is saying here in Ephesians 4:1-6. If we really capture what was described in chapters 1, 2 and 3—this magnificent truth that is ours in Christ—then for the church not to be unified in a very practical way seems incredibly inappropriate in the atmosphere that God has created for us in the heavenlies.

The reality is we try to excuse this. We try to rationalize it. But we cannot theologically dismiss the fact that every person who is in Christ is united in the Father, in the Son, and in the Spirit, and God expects us to act like it. There can be no excuses—no rationalizations.

Even though we have differences, we do need to learn how to come together and be a unified people. We must do whatever is necessary to guard the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.