

Home Group Leaders Discussion Guide

Ephesians 4:1-6

We turn a corner in the letter to the Ephesians as we hit what we call Chapter 4. You may recall from earlier discussion guides that the point was emphasized that *“the indicative precedes the imperative”*. We can think of chapters 1-3 as the “indicative”...i.e. Paul was establishing a foundation of facts, truths, reality, that he would later (chapters 4-6) build upon. Or to put it another way, in the first 3 chapters Paul was outlining right beliefs, doctrines (orthodoxy), and now he is moving into right response and practice (orthopraxis). Again, we’ll see the mood of the verbs shift from indicative to imperative (commands)...but these only make sense when built upon the foundation of sound theology that Paul has laid out in chapters 1-3.

We can accurately say that 4:1, namely the exhortation to *“live a life worthy of the calling you have received”* (NIV) governs the whole rest of the letter. Basically, Paul simply expands upon what that means and looks like throughout the rest of the letter. Chapters 1-3 can also be considered a summary of what we have been called/invited to. So, in essence, Paul is now saying, “And here’s the proper way to respond to such a calling/invitation.”

As a quick reminder, we have been called into the family of God, invited into the Kingdom of God, summoned into a new humanity, to administer the reign of Jesus in the world, empowered to do so by the Holy Spirit. (That’s a super-quick summary of chapters 1-3.)

It is important to notice that the first issue Paul brings forth as a matter of top priority if we are to rightly and consistently respond to this calling is the topic of unity. Simply put, if we do not live in a unified manner, we do damage to the Gospel message, and bring disrepute to the name of Jesus.

Also important to notice is that we do not create unity...Jesus already did that (and it was beyond our ability to create in the first place)...but we are called to keep it, to maintain it, to guard it. (And history would show that we haven’t done a particularly good job at it.) Paul wisely addressed HOW unity is kept—through being humble, gentle, patient, bearing with one another in love.

Notice the emphasis Paul gives: Be completely humble....(verse 2); Make every effort...(verse 3)—though I’m using the NIV, the point is captured in most other versions/translations as well. These are not optional endeavors. These are not postures or attitudes that we can give half-hearted effort to, or only give attention to sometimes. These are MUSTS...ALWAYS!

Notice also the list in verse 2 (humble, gentle, patient, bearing with one another in love)...these are all virtues that combat the primary vice—the mother of all other sins, some might say—of pride, egotism, selfishness. What gets in the way of unity? I do. You do. The self does.

Please allow me to share from commentator Klyne Snodgrass: *“The ego is the main problem in relations, for therein lies the origin of feelings of inferiority and arrogance, of envy and greed, of*

prejudice and defensiveness, and of intolerance and abuse. As William Temple noted, pride is always the root of spiritual failure. The solution is in a sense of God's grace, for grace prevents the ego from inflating its own significance....Humility too frequently is misunderstood as passivity and antithetical to success, but this is a distortion. Humility is not about drive, energy, or ability, but about valuing. It is an awareness that all we are and have is from God. The humble person refuses to value self above others or to assign more privilege or importance to self than to others. Humility is essential for good relations and avoiding sin...Egotism, on the other hand, is an idolatry of the self, the failure to realize that God is the pattern for life, not us...Disunity originates in pride...How can unity be established? It does not need to be established, for it already exists, given by God. It needs to be valued and maintained. Christ is not divided. The community is not the source of its own existence; Christ is. He is the unity of the church, for the church only exists in him."

The unity we are called to is modeled after the Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit. They are tightly connected and enraptured with one another, always, constantly, consistently, permanently. Not sometimes, or when they feel like it. The Church is called/invited to participate in that Divine Community. There is no room for ego, pride, arrogance, rudeness, indifference, selfishness, harshness, coldness, snobbery, discord, envy, prejudice, strife, let alone classism, racism, or sexism.

All the “oneness” that Paul mentions in verses 4-6—one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father—harkens back to Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John 17. *“I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You. May they also be in Us **so that the world may believe** that You have sent Me. I have given them the glory that You gave Me, that they may be one as We are one: I in them and You in Me. May they be brought to complete unity **to let the world know** that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me.”* (John 17:20-23) It is important to understand that our effectiveness in our mission of spreading the Gospel and making disciples, according to Jesus, is contingent upon our unity.

Back to Klyne Snodgrass for a moment: *“Christians do not need to agree on everything to have unity; we need to live the unity of a common commitment to Christ...The mission of the church is at stake. Unity and mission belong together...The mission of the church is crippled by the division among various groups. Unless we evidence unity, our witness does not deserve to be heard.”*

Those are strong words. Unity is a fine concept...until we actually have to do/live it. Unity is really just a manifestation of Love. As we love God and love others, we maintain the unity Christ created. It is significant to note that as Paul begins his exploration of that right response/behavior is in light of right belief, he immediately goes to our connection with one another. The Christian faith is not an individual sport. (Life is not an individual sport, truth be told.) But we are conditioned by a false narrative that says life is about the individual. Nothing could be further from the truth. As we connect to Jesus we immediately find that He connects us with others. This is by design and intention. We can only become all that He wants for us through connection with one another. The rest of this letter will flesh this out more.

- Q. Paul's exhortations in verses 2-3 are clearly easier said than done. How can we cultivate humility, gentleness, patience, love for one another? What are some practices we can do that will help us grow in those areas? (Think personally/individually, as well as communally.)**
- Q. What makes unity so challenging? (Again, think both on a personal/individual level as well as a communal/systemic level.)**
- Q. How have you added to disunity by the elevation of self?**
- Q. What are some examples of unity that you have seen/observed?**
- Q. What are some examples of disunity amongst the body of Christ? What are the causes behind them? (How, perhaps, have you participated in that disunity?)**
- Q. When it comes to qualities/virtues like humility, gentleness, patience, etc. who is someone that inspires you?**
- Q. When Paul wrote Ephesians, the greatest threat to unity was the prejudice and tension between Jewish believers and Gentile believers. (It was not the only threat...but it was the primary and most specific/acute threat that dominated most of the New Testament.) That particular tension/prejudice isn't a huge threat for us today. What "us vs. them" do you think is our primary threat to the unity of the church today?**
- Q. If we think of chapters 1-3 as Paul offering a true narrative in a world full of false narratives, then we can think of chapters 4-6 as Paul outlining what consistently living into that narrative looks like, or perhaps what evidence/fruit he would look for in someone that claims to buy into the narrative of Jesus. What false narratives do you observe Christians/the Church struggling with (or perhaps you struggle with) and what results do you observe from holding onto those false narratives?**