

Unity Through Diversity (Eph 4:1-16)

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[0 : 00] You know, a while ago, Donelda and myself brought along with us to church a couple of French guys.

And they were here on holiday. We have French relatives who live back in Paris. And so they suggested to these young French guys that they should come and get a free meal off us and come and stay with us.

And so that's exactly what they did. They were both just completed med school. One was a Jew and the other one was a Catholic.

And so it was a really interesting combination. And while I were there, we had some very interesting conversations about ethical and theological issues.

They're both pretty liberal, really, in their views. Liberal when it came to abortion. And certainly didn't know much about theology. After church, we took them to church.

[1 : 08] And after church, I asked them what they thought. And one of them had never been to church. That was, I think, was the Catholic guy. The other guy, the Jewish guy, I think he had been to church, to a Protestant church.

So they had really limited experience of what a Protestant church was all about. Naturally, they said they liked it. They had to say that because I was the pastor.

And so they weren't going to say that. They hated every minute of it because they were actually living at my place. So I thought, oh, I'll put them on the spot.

So I asked them what they liked about it. And I think, you know, whenever you get someone to come to church and that, you ask them, how do you like church?

They'd probably say they liked it. But always put them on the spot a little bit, you know, and ask them, what did you like about it? You know, I think it's really, really important. And then you get to know what they really feel. Well, they thought it was a church.

[2 : 10] These two guys thought it was a friendly place to be at. Many, for example, made an effort to talk to these two French guys. They were also surprised by the number of ethnicities at church and how we all related.

You know, we're at Howick very multicultural. I think there's nearly 30 ethnicities at our church. And, you know, we are very multicultural.

And they also liked the joy and the enthusiasm of the singing. They said we sang songs as if we meant what we sung, which was really nice.

And I thought it was pretty cool that they felt and saw these things happening within the life of Howick Baptist Church. For these, in some ways, are the very things that Paul talks about in the first three chapters of the book of Ephesians.

You see, the first three chapters of Ephesians really speak about some of the great doctrines of the faith. You know, things like predestination or election.

[3 : 20] God's sovereignty and those sorts of things. But they also speak about God's plan for the church. And I think that's Paul's emphasis in the book of Ephesians, about God's plan for his church.

And, you know, we just need to flick back in your Bibles to the first chapter of Ephesians in verse 10 of chapter 1. And we read about God's plan. It says, as a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things to him, things in heaven and things on earth.

So that's God's plan for the church. And it's incredible to think that we, the church, are part of God's wonderful plan.

That God has made the church the centre of his world. At the heart, and the church is at the heart of that plan.

And, you know, if you want to do a study of the history of the world, study it in the light of God's church. And to see how God's people have behaved within his world.

[4 : 34] It's wonderful. In chapter 2, verses 15 and 16, Paul says that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

You see, that verse really says that God, the church is at the centre of God's plan for this world. And so for these Frenchmen who had come to church for the first time, or come to the service, Protestant servant, what they saw was a testament to the gospel. It was a taste of God's glorious plan to unite all things to himself.

They saw people of different ethnicities, one in Christ. You know, when we get to heaven, who will be in heaven?

Will there just be Chinese? Will there just be English? Or will there be people of every tribe, every tongue, every nation? It's people from every tribe, every tongue, every nation. And so coming to Howick was like coming to heaven in one sense, because there were people of every tribe, every tongue, every nation.

[5 : 52] Well, not quite every tribe, not quite every tongue. And so Paul has been laying out that plan for God's church. The blessings we have in Christ, the new humanity he has created in Christ, of how the church is now the temple and the dwelling place of God.

Just think about that. We are the temple and the dwelling place of God. Imagine that. God dwells with his people. God dwells here in your midst.

God dwells here in Christ.

And how do we function in this new humanity or within this new community that God has created? How do we show the world as a church the outworkings of the gospel?

You know, you're a fine little group here, but how do we show the world at large the outworkings of the gospel? What does this new community look like in practice?

[7 : 23] So in the next three chapters, from chapter four on, we see how we apply these doctrines or we apply these truths to our lives and to the life of the church, that we might show the world God's wonderful plan of salvation.

So here in these 16 verses, we see four things that should characterize the church. Four things that should characterize.

The first is love. The second is unity. The third is diversity. And the fourth is maturity. So I just want to look at those four points just really briefly this morning. This afternoon.

I've had a big day today, I tell you. Firstly, love. Verses one to three. You know, for the second time, Paul calls himself a prisoner for Christ.

A prisoner for Christ. A prisoner because of his loyalty to the gospel. The fact that Paul is an apostle and a prisoner for the Lord gives him authority for what he wants to say.

[8 : 33] He is a prisoner for Christ. It's quite amazing, really, isn't it? Do you call yourself a prisoner for Christ? Are you working for Christ?

And Paul is saying here, because of his great plan of salvation, because of God's great plan for his church, I want you to walk in a manner worthy of your calling.

To work according to your calling. I want you to uphold, he's saying, the glorious name of our Lord and Saviour. I want you as a church to live in accordance to the glorious plan that I have set out for you in the first three chapters.

You see, this new humanity that God is calling into being has major characteristics. It is to be one people.

It is to be a single family of God. We are to be united. And secondly, we are to be a holy calling, a holy people.

[9 : 36] We are to be distinct from the secular world that we live in. We are to be set apart. We are to be a peculiar people. We are to be a people that lives differently than the world that we live in.

That's what being a holy person is, to be set apart, to be distinct. And, you know, sometimes I think in the church that we're always wanting to thinking about how we can be relevant, how we can be relevant.

You know, one of the things that I think we should do is how do we be, how are we distinct from the world that we live in? How can we be distinct from the world we live in? How can we be a holy people?

How can we be a peculiar people? What makes us different from the world, from the people we work with? That's what a holy person is.

That's what living according to God's calling is all about. And then we're to live in unity, in harmony with one another. And so love is to characterize the life of the church.

[10:46] Now remember last week, did you preach from Ephesians 3 last week? You didn't? That's the week before. Okay. Well, the week before, Paul prayed that we are to be rooted and grounded in love.

To be rooted and grounded in love. If we have not love, we're nothing. We're like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Remember, he talks about how we have to become more, somehow we have to know the depth and the height and the breadth of God's great love, Jesus' great love for us.

And of course, where do we get love from? We get love from God because God is love. And the one who abides in love abides in God.

You know, it's interesting that rather than talk about the structure of the church that he could have talked about, Paul here begins with the moral qualities of the church that really make up love.

Now, you know, my sister, she died around 25 years ago or 30 years ago of cancer. She had five children and her and her husband worked in a Christian camping scene.

[12:14] They were in charge of the Moyes Point camp up at Mangawai Heads for many years. Margaret and Hugh, that's my sister, didn't have a lot of possessions.

Margaret was not your classical mother. In fact, sometimes she would go around to her house and her house would be like a tip. You know, it would be a real mess. She probably had not read many parenting books, although she used to read a hang of a lot.

And she probably hadn't been to any parenting seminars either. But she loved God. She loved her family. And all her children.

And all her children today are walking with the Lord. Love covered a multitude of sins. There was no sort of structure to her life.

But what characterised her life was a love for God and a love for people. And I think that's what Paul is talking about here.

[13:19] Paul is first and foremost concerned with our attitudes and actions in this community. Not about structure. Not about whether we have a deacon's court or whatever. He says, with all humility and gentleness.

Now, humility and loneliness were almost frowned upon in the ancient world. And it seems like that in sections of our society today.

The Greeks, for example, never saw humility as something you admired in another person. They saw it as something that you might expect from a slave or you might expect from someone lesser in our society.

And it was not until Jesus came and showed true humility that humility was seen as a virtue. Jesus who humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on the cross.

And here Paul is speaking about lowliness of mind, of the humble recognition of the worth and the value of other people. You know, in Philippians 2, 3, and 4, Paul said this.

[14:26] He said, do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

You see, humility is essential to unity. Pride lurks behind all discord. It's humility and gentleness that we see in our Saviour who welcomes sinners to himself.

Who shows grace to the undeserving. He was the one who cooked breakfast for Peter after Peter had denied him three times. He welcomes him back into the fold.

Humility and gentleness are the marks of this new community. They are to be the marks of PCBC as well.

Of every church. You know, it sometimes worries me when I listen to people who actually show no grace within the church. Who just meant on winning arguments in order to show their superiority.

[15:33] Is humility and gentleness something you are known for in your church? Or in your family? Or in your workplace?

Then there is patience and forbearance. These two marks go together as well. You know, patience is long-suffering to aggravating people.

Do you know aggravating people? Paul says we are to be patient to aggravating people. And forbearance is sort of a mutual tolerance.

Again, these qualities are seen in our Lord. I think of how Jesus is incredibly patient with me. You know, I sin time and time again. And time and time again he forgives me. And finally, love here is the final quality which embraces these other four qualities.

[16:35] It's the crown and sum of all the virtues. Love that covers a multitude of sins. Love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

A love that never fails. And Paul says these we should have that we might be eager to maintain the unity of the spirit and the bond of peace.

This leads me on to my second characteristic of the church. Christian unity arises from our unity, the unity of God.

Verses 3 to 6. Christian unity arises from our unity of God. Now look at these verses. There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to one hope that belongs to your call.

One Lord, one faith, one baptism. One God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. You know, the basis of our unity is the unity of the Godhead.

[17:46] The unity of the Godhead. There is one spirit, one Lord, one God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The unity we are asked to preserve is not something that we have to create.

But rather that has been given to us by God and asked to protect. Paul is saying here there is one body because there is one spirit.

It is by the one spirit that we are all baptised into the one body. It is because all of us have been born of the Holy Spirit that we become interconnected in the body of Christ.

That we can have unity. There is one hope, one faith, one baptism. Because there is only one Lord for the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is the object of our faith. He is the object of our hope and baptism. We have been buried with Christ in baptism. It is Jesus Christ that we have believed and our hope is at Jesus coming again.

[18:55] But there is also only one God and Father who is above all and through all and in all. That is, God is our Heavenly Father, the Father of the family of God and who embraces us all and makes us one.

God is one. There can be only one Christian family. Only one Christian faith. Only one hope. Only one baptism.

Because there is only one God. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The unity of the church is indestructible.

Because it stems from our unity of God. The unity of God. Well, of course, that raises some questions, doesn't it? Why is there so much disunity in church?

In general. Why are there so many denominations in church? Around churches. Why don't we see eye to eye with one another? And I guess the best answer that I have to that is, that I can give, is what commentator John Stott.

[20:08] I don't know whether any of you have read John Stott. Suggested. And it's from a human family. He said, imagine Mr. and Mrs. Smith. They have three boys, Tom, Dick and Harry.

Pretty original names. They are one family. Marriage and parenthood have united them. But in the course of time, the Smith family disintegrates.

Mum and dad quarrel and go off their separate ways. The three boys have an argument and they go off their separate ways. They don't want to even talk to each other or see each other. So they shift to different parts of the world.

Dick goes even further. He changes his name. Their relationship have been severed. And yet while communication may have broken down, while relationships have been severed, they are still one family, aren't they?

Dick and Harry and Tom are still brothers even though they don't talk to each other. Mr. and Mrs. Smith are still their mum and dad even though their relationship is not that hot.

[21:18] And I think the church can seem a bit like the Smith family at times. We have denominational differences that prevent us from even talking sometimes. Even within the local church, we have these petty differences that go on in the church and hinder our unity.

Does this mean we should give up and say, well, things are too hard to deal with. I don't want to have unity. No, we should be diligent, says Paul, to preserve the unity of the spirit and the bond of peace.

PCBC should make every effort to preserve unity and seek peace with each other. And the word eager here in the Greek means to spare no effort.

To seek unity. You know, there's much I could really say about this, but it's not about not holding on to the truth, but learning to speak the truth in love.

Endeavouring to maintain the unity of spirit that arises from our unity with God. That God is one. And so we move to number three.

[22 : 35] Christian unity is enriched by the diversity of our gifts. Christian unity is enriched by the diversity of our gifts. Verses seven to ten.

You know, verse seven really changes. This is a note. From unity of God being over all and in all and through all. It now goes to this grace was given to each one of you.

This grace was given to each one of you. Paul goes on from all of us to each of us. You see the difference? Verse seven says that it is Christ's grace to us that bestows these gifts to us.

And note, grace was given to each of us, it says. Each of us has been given a measure of grace. And here Paul is talking about gifts.

Each of us has been given gifts or talents or abilities to serve the church. 1 Corinthians 12, 4-6 says this. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit.

[23 : 41] And there are varieties of service, but the same Lord. And there are varieties of activities, but it's the same God who empowers them all and everyone. And we see in verse seven here that they are for our common good.

In other words, each of us has been empowered to behave and act in a way that builds up the whole body. That contributes to the body. Each of us using their gifts.

Each of us using our talents in such a way to enhance, to enrich the whole body. You know, I love the fact that we can do this in the church.

That we don't have to be upfront people to be able to, not all of us have to be preachers or teachers, or we don't have to be great speakers, or we don't have to even pretend to know everything.

For example, I get great joy, believe it or not, when I come to church at Baptist, and I see flowers especially arranged at the front of the church because it adds colour and beauty to our worship.

[24 : 52] There's a lady who's gifted at doing that. I couldn't do it. I love the way people serve others their morning tea at church. And then they clean up after.

And they do it so lovingly and kind and they're so generous in their love that benefits the whole church. I love it when that happens. I'm encouraged when I see those who are locking up after church waiting patiently for me because I talk too much.

They're thinking of the common good. We see that the giver of these gifts, the giver of these abilities, is the ascended Christ in verse 8.

But he is also the one that descended into the lower regions of the earth. Verse 9. Now, some have thought that this is a reference to Jesus going to hell. But I think it's a reference to the incarnation when Jesus descended to this earth and he became man and he dwelt amongst us and he died on our behalf.

This Jesus who dies and rises again has ascended to heaven with all power and authority and has power and abilities to equip his church and to carry out his great plan of salvation.

[26 : 11] Jesus is the giver of these gifts. Gifts that equip his church for the task. Christian unity is enriched and blessed by the diversity of these gifts.

Every one of you who knows Christ has these gifts and should be using them. Has these abilities. He has endowed his church with them.

And they don't just have to be musical people or people at the front. They can be people who serve cups of tea. It's my wish that we should be endeavouring to use our gifts, to use our abilities for the common good of the whole church.

That's how unity is enriched. That's how unity happens when we're working together. Fourthly, maturity.

Christian unity demands that we grow in Christian maturity. I think this is really important. Verses 11 to 16. You know, the Lord has given some of his people gifts in order to build up the church in Christian maturity.

[27 : 22] Look at verses 11 and 12. And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds, the teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body

of Christ.

Here, Paul mentions five gifts. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers, and shepherds that Paul says are to equip the saints for the work of ministry.

You know, as we've seen prior, apostles and prophets were foundational to the early church. They were the ones whom the mystery of the gospel and God's wonderful plan for the church was made known to.

Their message, their teachings, are contained in the New Testament. They are foundational for the church. The church is to be built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, as we saw in the previous chapter.

The evangelist is the proclaimer of the apostolic message. Timothy, who was the leader of the church in Ephesus, was asked to do the work of evangelists in 2 Timothy 4.5.

[28 : 32] You know, I think that there are some people in the church whom the Lord has especially gifted as evangelists. Of course, we're all called to witness to the saving grace of Christ.

All of us. Go and make disciples of all nations. But some people are especially gifted. I don't know whether you've noticed that. They seem to lead any Tom, Dick, and Harry that comes into their path.

They're able to do it. They sit next to somebody in the plane and they're walking off and sharing the gospel and praying the prayer with them and so forth. They are gifted. But they not only encourage the church to evangelise, but they also proclaim the gospel effectively.

And then there's pastors and teachers who will teach others who have been evangelised. And the predominant activity of a pastor or teacher or shepherd or elder is to feed the sheep by teaching correct doctrine.

You know, doctrine is so important. It is to seek out the lost sheep. It is to protect the sheep from false doctrine. There's lots of false doctrine around.

[29 : 44] And to equip the people so that they may be sent out and be able to minister and serve the church. Note here, it's not the pastor that does the work of ministry.

It's the pastor that shepherds or teaches or equips the people so they can minister for the building up of the body. And what does Paul mean by the building up of the body?

Paul gives us a contrast in verses 13 and 14. If you look at verse 13. Until we attain the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God to mature manhood to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

That's pretty long words. And it's hard to get your head around. But this is the goal. This is Paul's desire, is that we attain, if we're to attain, Christian maturity.

In Colossians 1, for example, in Colossians 1, 20, 21, Paul says, Him we proclaim, warning every man, teaching every man in all wisdom. Why? That we might present every man or woman mature in Christ.

[30 : 53] And here we see, actually, what Christian maturity in the church looks like. First we see, there is a unity of faith.

If you look, until we attain the unity of the faith. What does that mean? What does that mean? Well, I think it means a unity of Christian belief. A unity of Christian belief.

Or doctrine. You know, that is what we should be striving for. That we should be thinking the same things. Unlike the world that we live in, where relativism reigns.

Where you can believe this, and you can believe that, and we all believe what we want to believe.

That's not what it's like in the church. The church is to seek unity of belief, and this means that we are to study the word of God together.

We are to sanctify and set ourselves apart in the truth, knowing that God's word is truth. That's what we must do.

[32 : 04] That's what Christian, that's what a unity of faith looks like. Secondly, secondly, it says, we are to grow in the knowledge of the Son of God.

And of course, it's as we behold him, that he changes us from one degree of glory to another.

Philippians 3.10, Paul says, You know, knowing Jesus is more than just knowing about him.

Knowing Jesus is more than just knowing. I can know, I know a lot about Richie McCaw, for example, that ex-all black captain. I know a lot about Richie McCaw, but I don't know him personally.

I never met the guy. And you know, sometimes we can be a bit like that with Jesus. Knowing Jesus is more than just knowing about him.

It's about becoming like him. It's about being intimately acquainted with his ways. Knowing his power in your life, sharing in his sufferings and so forth.

[33 : 22] That's what knowing Jesus is about. It's about experiencing him in your life. And I should say, Paul says, We are to do this that we might obtain mature manhood.

And mature manhood is when we become like Christ. When we are filled with the fullness of Christ. And I should say that this is not just an individual goal of Christians, but in the context, Paul is speaking about the church as a whole.

That we should be maturing together. That we should be growing together. And the contrast comes through in verse 14. So that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine.

By human cunning. By craftiness and deceitful schemes. You know, many people in the church seem to run after this fad or this new idea.

Or this new doctrine. If it's not signs and wonders, it's a Toronto blessing. If it's not the Toronto blessing, then it's the church growth movement. If it's not that, then it's something else.

[34 : 39] It's the emergent church movement. One thing after another. And do you know what it shows? It shows Christian immaturity. Immaturity.

The history of the church is littered with people chasing after this new thing or that new thing.

There's nothing new under the sun. Come to the scriptures. It's a sign of immaturity.

It's the devil's way of leading us astray. That is why one of the main tasks of an elder or a pastor is to warn the congregation against any false doctrine. And teachers.

You see, the word of God is to be our authority. 2 Timothy 3.16 All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for doctrine, for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

That the person of God may be complete. Mature. That's the idea there. Equipped for every good work. That's why Paul says in verse 15.

[35 : 45] He says, rather speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is head into Christ. And here Paul is reiterating what he has been saying.

That we have to keep pointing people to Jesus. We have to keep teaching the truth in love with a view that those who we're speaking to may get to know Jesus more.

Sometimes I think we're quick to correct people's behaviour. It makes us feel better and more righteous. Or we're correct people because without showing them Jesus and his mercy and his grace.

You know, Jesus met Levi, the tax collector, in his own home. He built relationship with Levi and Levi repents and follows Jesus.

Zacchaeus was the same. Finally, we get to verse 16. And here we see what happens when the church is running properly.

[36 : 49] When every person is equipped. When every person is trained. When every person is playing their part. Look what happens. From whom the whole body joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped.

When each part is working properly. Makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. It's great. That's the goal. Where the body grows together.

Where it builds itself up in love. Friends. Are you playing your part in the life of this church?

Love, unity, diversity, maturity are to characterise the life of this church. Each of us playing our part. Each of us working together. Each of us using our gifts.

Using our talents. Using our abilities. Growing together in Christian maturity. That is the goal.

Growing more like Christ. Like-minded.

[37 : 54] Striving together to know Jesus and becoming like him. Stable and mature. You know, this is the goal of the Christian church.

And I pray that it might happen here just as it might happen in HBC. Let's pray. Let's pray. Sorry I've taken so long.

Lord Jesus, we just thank you for Paul's advice and the amazing passage. This is. It's just so much in it.

And it's hard to talk about it succinctly. And yet, Lord, we just thank you for the things that even we've learnt tonight.

We thank you for your grace to us and for your mercy that you should just give us abilities and gifts and talents to use to build one another up.

[38 : 56] Lord, I just thank you for the love that you give each one of us. A love that comes because we abide in you. And Lord, I pray that we might maintain and preserve the unity of the Spirit.

That we might maintain unity within this church. And that we might strive together. And Lord, that we might have a unity of belief. That we might strive to become more and more like you.

Until we become mature. That we won't be tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine. But we might work together. Building one another up in love.

That you might be glorified. Lord, we want that to happen. In Jesus' name. Amen.