Pastor David M. Choi

Preserving True Oneness

Calvary Baptist Church of New Haven

May 19, 2019

**Scripture Reading:**

Ephesians 4:4-10

1. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the 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.
2. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.
3. Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)

**Introduction:**

We are continuing in our series on Ephesians, and we are now a little more than half way through the book. What we are trying to capture in this series is a picture of what it looks like for us to be the church, as we respond to Christ by becoming active participants in his ongoing plan for history, while doing so in a manner that is worthy of the cross.

As we heard last week, Paul structures his letter by dividing it into two main parts. The first half [ch.1-3] focuses on what we call *doctrine*, or theology, and the second half [ch.4-6] focuses on what we call *ethics*. By way of reminder, theology deals with God’s character and God’s action in the world, while ethics deals with how we as Christians are supposed to live in light of that reality. So, by giving his letter this particular structure, Paul is not only showing us how theology and ethics are inextricably linked, but more specifically how a proper theology must precede a proper ethics. In other words, Paul is saying if you want to live rightly, and if you want to be the church that follows Christ in a manner that is worthy of him, then you better get your theology straight, because we worship an infinite God who is utterly transcendent and wholly other. Or, as the prophet Isaiah puts it, a God whose ways are not our ways, and a God whose thoughts are not our thoughts.[[1]](#footnote-1)

All of this will be important for us to keep in mind as we move forward in Ephesians, because the temptation now will be to read Paul’s ethics detached from Paul’s theology, or, as Justin Hawkins warned us last Sunday, to be mindless doers without actually thinking through the deeper spiritual *significance*, or the deeper spiritual *implications*, of our church practices and daily Christian living.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In our text today, we return to this theme of church unity and oneness, but it is now given to us in its ethical context.[[3]](#footnote-3) Several weeks ago, I preached a sermon, titled “True Oneness,” where we covered chapter four’s theological antecedent. That is, we did a deep dive into the latter half of the second chapter, where we spent some time thinking through Paul’s starting point for his doctrine of church unity. There we saw how the cosmic Christ brings together estranged sinners through justification, to form what is now the church. And there we saw how Christ strengthens the unity of his church through the ongoing process of sanctification, as his Spirit works within us to intensify our love for Christ and thereby for one another.

After I had finished preaching that sermon, someone came up to me and asked, “When are we going to get part two?” Well, this is it – this is part two. If Paul starts off in chapter two by telling us how Christ initiates the true oneness of his church, then chapter four will be about how we as Christians are now called to partner with the Holy Spirit in his work of maintaining and preserving that true oneness. In other words, chapter four will be about how Christ calls us to steward the community that he has given to us, *this* community that God has placed us in. So, with the rest of our time together, we’ll unpack what Paul now has to say about oneness *preservation*, or community stewardship, *as we learn to deal with the community in front of us*.

**The One Body as Community in Front of You:**

In v.4, Paul says there is *one body and one Spirit*. In saying this, Paul is pointing the Ephesians back to what he had said before in the second chapter. That the one body is composed of people who were once at odds with one another before coming together in Christ; and that this onebody is *Christ’s* body precisely becausethe one Spirit has worked to join such people together.

But we have to ask: why does Paul feel the need to remind them of this? It’s because Paul now anticipates that the Ephesians will want to slip back into their old ways of seeing each other as the enemies they once were rather than the fellow co-heirs of Christ they now are. That is, Paul knows that as life gets messier, and people start to rub elbows, the church will tend to become unsatisfied with one another. And his worry is that instead of bearing with one another in and through the hardships they will resent each other because this isn’t what they thought the church would be like.

And what Paul is teaching us in these verses is that if we are going to maintain the unity of Christ’s body, then we have to deal with the community in front of us, which means we have to accept the community for what it is. In other words, we have to start by accepting the community in all of its unique deficiencies, brokenness, challenges, and so forth.

In Paul’s other letters, like 1 Corinthians, there are clear, visible divides between church members. However, in Ephesians, there are no obvious indications of a breach between community members. It’s because here Paul isn’t trying to put back together a community that has already been divided; instead, Paul is trying to keep a [relatively] united community from becoming divided, by helping them see that divisions don’t always have to occur in eruptive fashion.

Divisions can also occur in slow and subtle fashion, it can happen right under our noses, as Christians drift away from one another. One of the primary ways Paul is saying this can happen is when Christians become more committed to their ideal notions of what the church should be, instead of accepting it for what Christ says it is. Thus, Christians need to deal with the community that’s in front of them, not the community they want it to be, lest they squander Christ’s gift and sow seeds of discord within his body. Having said that, the question is now posed to you: how have you become unsatisfied with the church-community that Christ has placed you in, and how have you come to deal with it? What ideal notions of community have kept you from living into the one Christ has given you?

**Ideal Notions of Church-Community:**

In our modern context, I think one of the main ways in which we see the manifestation of our desires for ideal community is within our consumeristic attitude towards the church, where we treat each other as consumers, as opposed to brothers and sisters in Christ. How do we see this consumeristic faith playing out within our church?

First, there are some folks in here who attend more than one church, or hop around from place to place. Now, I want to be delicate here because I do not think it’s always a bad thing to attend more than one church, nor do I think it is necessarily wrong to check out different churches in order to see which one best meets your spiritual needs.

But having said that, if the main reason is because you are unsatisfied with the community that Christ has given you, that is, if the reason is because one church has something that another church doesn’t – perhaps livelier worship music, better preaching, better games, more attractive people, or whatever – then this would be problematic for the apostle. Why? Well, on the one hand, it’s clear that your church attendance***s*** are being driven by ingratitude. Basically, what you’re saying through your actions is: “I am not content with what Christ has given me in my own church.” And on the other hand, it seems like your primary concern is not with serving the community you’ve been given, but with only seeking to be served. The question you’re bringing with you to church is not “how can I serve others?” but rather “how can others serve *me*?” Now hold that up against what Paul is saying, not to mention the way Christ lived, as the one who came to serve and not to be served, and it’s clear that that is not the faith of one Spirit but the faith of consumerism.

To this, some of you might reply, “Well, Paul does say we are one body, so it shouldn’t matter which church I go to, or how many I go to for that matter, since we’re all one body in Christ!” To that, I’ll answer with this illustration. In C.S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters*, there is an expert demon, named Screwtape, who is writing to Wormwood, a junior demon in training. Wormwood was given the task of methodically working out the demise of a man who had recently converted to Christianity, making sure he went to hell. In these letters, Screwtape is writing to Wormwood as a mentor, trying to help him accomplish the Christian’s damnation.

And the advice that Screwtape gives to Wormwood will surprise you. He says that if Wormwood can’t keep the Christian from going to church altogether, then the next best thing to do is to make sure the Christian moves from church to church. Screwtape loves this idea because, for him, it’s able to accomplish two things at once: first, damning the Christian, and second dividing the church. Screwtape says the church will be attacked because “it brings people of different classes and psychology together in the kind of unity the Enemy [viz. Christ] desires,” but if we can get him to settle down in a place that suits his own interest then the church will be turned into a club or faction. Moreover, moving from church to church will keep the Christian from becoming a disciple, because he will always be preoccupied with critiquing churches rather than appreciating and learning from them.[[4]](#footnote-4) In this, Lewis illustrates a disturbing portrait of how Satan rejoices over us not only when we don’t go to church, but also when we can’t stick to one church, because it separates what the Spirit has worked to put together in that specific place and time.

Another way we see this sort of consumeristic faith at play, specifically within our own youth group, is when we are more concerned with the activities themselves than the people we’re with. I hear this all the time when students ask me, “What are we doing tonight?” And I can usually distinguish between when students are simply asking from when students are asking mainly because they want to figure out whether or not it’d be worth their time. When we schedule certain activities, I notice that some of you guys just won’t show up, because the activity doesn’t excite you, or because there’s something more exciting going on somewhere else. For some of you, youth group mainly exists as a source of entertainment in order to make you happy, but if something better comes along then you’ll go there.

Consumeristic faith reveals its ugly head in another question I get asked all the time, and this one in particular really gets under my skin: “Hey! Can you come join us for youth group this weekend?” “I’m not sure… Who is going to be there?” When youth group students ask this question, it’s so obvious that the primary motivation is not to be with *God’s people*, the people you’ve been dealt, but simply to be with people *you like*. By asking such questions, what you’re really saying is: “I’ll go if my friends are going, but otherwise I’m not interested.”

Now maybe for some of the older folks in here, you don’t struggle with these specific things as much. Maybe your challenge is with cynicism or judgmentalism. But do you know that the community that Christ has called us to love *is* the community right in front of us? The reason why, among other things, consumerism, cynicism, and judgmentalism are such threats to the oneness of the church, and Calvary in particular, is because they don’t want to deal with the *concrete* community that Christ has called us to love.

However, as Paul says, the one God and Father is over all and through all and in all. In other words, there must be something about this particular community, in all of its brokenness and messiness, that Christ wants to use for your sanctification, for your eternal glory. So, who are you to tell Christ otherwise? You ever consider the fact that being around those people you’re indifferent towards, or those people you don’t necessarily like, is the very thing that Christ is using to grow you more [and more] into the likeness of his own image?

Maintaining the unity of the one body of Christ means we deal with the people that Christ has placed put into our community, that is, as people to be loved and as people to be loved by. After all, didn’t Christ die for them too, just as he did for you and me? When you become so committed to your own ideal notions of what the church should be – or what you can simply get out of it for your own amusement and entertainment – then I would suggest you seriously reexamine whether or not you are indeed seeking after Christ at all – because Christ is where his church is. Hear this admonition from Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial.

God hates this wishful dreaming because it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. Those who dream of this idealized community demand that it be fulfilled by God, by others, and by themselves. They enter the community of Christians with their demands, set up their own law, and judge one another and even God accordingly. They stand adamant, a living reproach to all others in the circle of the community. They act as if they have to create the Christian community, as if their visionary ideal binds the people together… Because God already has laid the only foundation of our community, because God has united us in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ long before we entered into common life with, we enter into that life together with other Christians, not as those who make demands, but as those who thankfully receive. We thank God for what God has done for us. We thank God for giving us other Christians who live by God’s call, forgiveness, and promise. We do not complain about what God does not give us; rather we are thankful for what God does give us daily. And is not what has been given us enough: other believers who will go on living with us through sin and need under the blessing of God’s grace?[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Conclusion:**

The church before us today is indeed the church that Christ has brought and united together. But if we’re being honest, we are not thankful for what God has given us, evinced by our unwillingness to preserve its unity, that is, through our sinful ideals and desires for a community other than the one we’ve been given. Instead, we’ve become better consumers, cynics, and accusers of our Christian brethren rather than stewards and conduits of God’s grace towards one another. And for this, we desperately need to repent, ask Christ for forgiveness, and learn again what it means to count our blessings in gratitude.[[6]](#footnote-6) Calvary, on this day, Christ is asking us to abandon our ideals, and in doing so he is asking us to enter into the messiness of real, broken, and even undesirable community with others, because that is where Christ promises to meet us: the one body of his one Spirit.

1. Isaiah 55:8-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Justin R. Hawkins, “Walk Worthy” (sermon, delivered at Calvary Baptist Church of New Haven, 2019), 3-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Though these specific verses are not themselves ethical injunctions. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 81-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 10-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)