

The Holy Spirit and Christian Unity

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[0 : 00] So page 1176, Ephesians chapter 4, starting at verse 1. I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you are 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.

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. 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 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.

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

[2 : 21] Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 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.

Good morning, everyone. Do take a seat. If you weren't here last week, you joined us in the middle of a two-week little mini-series looking at a couple of Christian doctrines of what the Bible teaches on a couple of themes.

Last week we thought about the Holy Spirit. This week we're thinking about the subject of Christian unity. And like last week, you should find a little handout inserted inside the service sheets which will show you where we're going and which I hope you'll find useful.

Before we begin, though, shall I lead us in prayer? Amen. We've just prayed, speak, O Lord. But Father, we know that you have spoken and speak every time the Bible is opened.

And the real question is whether we will listen. And we pray, therefore, this morning that we would indeed listen with soft hearts and then live out the glorious unity that you have won for us in the Lord Jesus.

[3 : 47] And we ask it for his name's sake. Amen. The Christian Church doesn't feature very much in the media these days.

But sadly, when it does, more often than not, the story concerns divisions between Christians. The Church of England, in particular, contains within it a whole range of different and often contradictory views on sexuality, gender, the nature of the Church's mission, and the gospel message which it is to proclaim.

Perhaps the most high-profile recent occasion when these divisions came to the surface in the media was this February when the General Synod of the Church of England voted down a report concerning human sexuality.

Afterwards, the two archbishops issued a statement that acknowledged differences but said this. All of us, without exception, are loved and called in Christ.

To deal with that disagreement and to find ways forward, we need a radical new Christian inclusion in the Church. The way forward needs to be about celebration of our belonging to Christ.

[4 : 59] All of us, without exception, without exclusion. Do you see what the statement was saying? Disagreement is a problem, and so what we need is radical inclusion.

To include, in fact, to celebrate, it said, everybody, regardless of their beliefs and behavior. The statement even suggested that all of those involved in the disagreement belong to Christ, no matter what they believed.

I spoke to one member of General Synod afterwards who said the conclusion he was left with was that for the archbishops, the gospel is now unity. The thing we need to strive for above all else is to be united.

And the chief sin, the one thing we must avoid, is ever to divide or exclude others. And it all sounds very reasonable, doesn't it?

Especially in our modern world, where tolerance has seemingly become the chief virtue, and dogmatic or divisive convictions, the chief sin. But is that how the Bible views unity?

[6 : 09] That's our subject this morning. Who should and shouldn't we unite with? What does it look like to be united? And how is unity achieved? We've got two main headings.

And the first is the source of unity. The source of unity. Unity. And the key thing to grasp is that unity is something which God accomplishes. Unity is something God accomplishes.

And he does so both through Jesus' work in the past and the work of the gospel in the present. Let me explain. So first of all, the past. And just turn with me, if you would, to John chapter 11 on page 108.

Page 108. Page 108. Page 108. In the Bible. Some of our passages we'll be looking at this morning on the handout. Others will need to turn to. Page 108. 3. John 11. And verse 49.

John 11. 49. The apostle John is writing and we're told this. He says, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to the Jewish council, You know nothing at all.

[7 : 15] Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish. He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation.

And not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. Now, Caiaphas isn't usually someone we want to imitate, but inspired by the Holy Spirit, his theology here is spot on.

And do you see what he's saying? Jesus would die to gather into one, to unite the scattered children of God from every nation. Jesus' death is what would, or we can say, what has united God's people.

It's an idea that Paul develops in his letter to the Ephesians. If we turn back to Ephesians where we were for our Bible reading, so just flick on to page 1175.

Page 1175. As you may know, unity is a big theme in Ephesians. In chapter 1, verse 10, Paul explains that God's big plan for his creation is to unite all things in Christ.

[8 : 25] And Paul says this in verse 15 of chapter 2, Ephesians 2, 15. Have a look. Paul explains that Jesus' purpose was that he would create in himself one new man in place of the two, that's Jew and Gentile, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

So once again, notice that it's through the cross, Jesus' death, that Jesus created one new man, or a united people.

So the source of unity is Jesus' death on the cross in history. God has accomplished unity in the past. The same gospel which saves us, also at the same time unites us.

By dying for his people, Jesus has brought them together. He doesn't just save us as individuals, but brings us into a family. Think for a moment about the British Lions rugby team.

During the Six Nations, English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish rugby players take lumps out of each other. But when the Lions tour begins in a couple of weeks, they'll wear the same shirt. They'll be united by a common identity in being from the British Isles, an identity that trumps their other differences.

[9 : 47] And it's like that with Christians. We may come from different countries and backgrounds. But if we're trusting in Christ, then we are united. Not by geography, but by our identity as God's people.

By the death of Jesus, which has brought us together in him. You see, if I'm united with Christ, and you also are, then we're automatically joined to one another.

And what a wonderful thing that is. That through the cross, we're united with Christian believers from all over the world.

That Jesus has brought us into a people that transcends distinctions of class, ethnicity, and personality. Our unity is a very precious thing.

The cross has united God's people. But God's work doesn't finish there. Because the unity that he has made possible in the past through Jesus' death, he brings into reality in individuals' lives in the present through gospel proclamation.

[10 : 51] Gospel proclamation is the instrument through which Jesus brings all those for whom he died into his united family. Have a look at John 17 and verse 20 on the handout.

Jesus is praying the night before he dies. And he says to his father, I do not ask for these, the apostles, these only, the apostles he's just been praying for, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.

Now this is a much used verse when it comes to unity. And yet also, I think, a much misused verse. Clearly, the unity of Christians was very important to Jesus. He prays for it here just before he dies.

I ask that they may all be one, he says. But who is he praying for? Who does he want to be one, to be united? Well, it's not everyone who claims to be a Christian, regardless of what they believe, is it?

No, it's those, notice, who will believe in me through their word. That is the word of the apostles that he's just been praying for. The word that we find, of course, in the New Testament.

[12 : 00] In other words, the visible unity that we're to maintain as Christians is to reflect the invisible unity that Jesus has won at the cross, and which he brings into being through the apostolic message, the gospel.

True unity, the unity Jesus prayed for, is a unity which derives from a common faith in the gospel message found in the New Testament. And so it's gospel proclamation which causes individuals to enter into the unity achieved at the cross.

Those who will come to believe in Jesus through the apostles' words. Paul actually makes a similar point in Ephesians 2, 19 and 20, when he explains that the united family that Jesus' death creates is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

Our unity is grounded in shared biblical convictions. And two things flow from all this by way of application. First of all, as we've seen, it's the gospel that creates unity.

The gospel creates unity. That is to say that unity isn't something that we're to try to create, but rather something which has already been accomplished through Jesus' death on the cross, and then brought into being as people respond to the preaching of the gospel.

[13 : 21] Think of a family. Regardless of how alike or unlike their siblings they are, a child becomes a member of a family as soon as they're born.

Unity with a family isn't something that a child has somehow to strive for. Sure, a child can live in a way that's inconsistent with their family membership or unity, but the fact remains that they are united to their family by blood.

From the moment of birth. And it's like that with Christian unity. If we've put our trust in the authentic New Testament gospel, we're united together as God's people by the blood of Jesus from the moment of our spiritual birth.

Unity isn't something we create, but something the gospel has created. And much confusion about unity would disappear if we understood this.

Because it's not our job to create unity. We can't do that. Only God can do that. And he does so through the present proclamation of the gospel message about the work of Christ in the past.

[14 : 31] The wonderful message, if you're new to these things, that Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for our rejection of God and bring us forgiveness. So to focus on unity itself, rather than that which establishes it, is to put the emphasis in the wrong place.

I've worked with students quite a lot down the years, and I've lost count of the number of university Christian unions, which have as their mission statement something like, uniting Christians on campus.

But not only is such a mission statement misleading, in that God's already united Christians on campus, because it's the gospel that unites us. But if that's the CU's aim, it's also liable to lead to attempts to unite with every shade of supposed Christian in the university, thus watering down core biblical convictions, rather than focusing on proclaiming the gospel message, which creates genuine unity.

So the gospel creates unity. And this necessarily rules out various other common approaches to unity. For example, unity isn't established through denominations.

Being members together of the Church of England or another denomination doesn't guarantee genuine unity with others from that denomination. Bishops often like to say that they're the focus of unity in a diocese.

[15 : 56] But do we see that biblical unity comes from a shared faith in a common gospel? And if that is lacking, any unity is only apparent, merely institutional or worldly.

It's for this reason that some Anglican evangelical churches have had to break communion with their bishops in recent years when those bishops have denied the core truths of the gospel or the Bible's supreme authority in telling us how we ought to live.

In fact, because unity doesn't come from denominations, we may often find greater unity with people from denominations other than our own. Because unity isn't a matter of working or meeting or being organized together, but about how we relate to Christ.

And therefore, neither is unity created by partnership. It doesn't arise from joint events or services. Unity is an invisible, objective reality, one at the cross, not something that we create through superficial partnerships.

If a church down the road asks us to join in an ecumenical unity service or to team up for some kind of mission week, it wouldn't be right to do so if that expression of unity didn't reflect a genuine gospel unity with those people.

[17 : 15] Nor can unity be created by consensus, by the idea that we take the majority view or the middle ground among Christians or a lowest common denominator view that tries to keep everyone happy, regardless of what the Bible has to say about a subject.

That idea is sadly very common in the Church of England, which loves to talk about the mind of the church as something that evolves and which so often seeks to create apparent unity by striking a balance between those who hold to the Bible on the one hand and those who in practice prefer something more culturally acceptable.

Nor indeed is the idea of unity in diversity, popular in some circles, the answer. This view celebrates doctrinal differences between Christians and says that unity comes from us all walking together with good disagreement to allow mutual flourishing, to use current buzzwords.

But it is of course a nonsense because there isn't any actual unity. And yet it is I guess the approach of the archbishops in that statement I mentioned at the beginning.

Seeking unity by celebrating our differences of opinion and including and accepting one another as Christians despite them. This kind of approach can be common also in individual churches.

[18 : 33] It leads to churches deliberately appointing onto their staff teams or PCCs people representing a range of backgrounds or views to best represent diversity rather than appointing leaders who will best uphold the gospel message that brings true unity.

Nor finally is experience the test of unity. We haven't got time to expand on this but it's shared doctrine, not shared experiences, that define authentic Christians.

So the gospel creates unity. But notice secondly and more briefly by way of application that the gospel creates division also.

The gospel creates division. Jesus says in Luke 12, Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.

Jesus divides people. This may seem surprising but it follows on actually, doesn't it, from our first application. Because if the gospel unites some, then it must also divide others.

[19 : 42] In 1 Corinthians 1.18, Paul writes that the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing. But to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

For some, the gospel is folly. For others, it is the power of God for salvation. The gospel divides people. So contrary to the common idea that all unity is inherently good and all division bad, there's both right and wrong unity and right and wrong division.

If the cross isn't central and the scriptures aren't supreme, there's no unity in the New Testament sense. If people reject the apostles' teaching in the New Testament, if the Bible isn't their supreme and sufficient authority, they show themselves not to be part of the group Jesus prayed for in John 17 and whose unity he sought.

Regardless of whether they're in the same denomination as us or a bishop or call themselves an evangelical even, the gospel creates division. So we've thought about the basis of Christian unity.

Unity has been accomplished through the cross and is brought into being through gospel proclamation. But what does this mean for our practice? After all, we do need to know whom to work with and how to express the unity and the division that the gospel creates.

[21 : 07] So secondly, over the page on the handout, let's consider the outworking of unity, the outworking of unity. And look on with me, please, over the page to Ephesians chapter 4, page 1176, Ephesians 4.

This is the passage that was read to us earlier and I'll read from verse 1. I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, Paul writes, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. 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. These verses form a turning point in Ephesians.

So far, Paul has explained God's great plan to unite all things under Christ and then explained how Jesus has achieved that unity through the cross. But at the beginning of chapter 4, Paul turns from explaining how we've been united to how we're to live out that unity.

[22 : 19] Have a look at verse 3. He says that we're to be eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. And just notice the language that Paul uses here.

He doesn't tell us to unite with other Christians. As we've seen, we're already united. That's something the gospel has accomplished as he explained in chapter 2. No, our job rather is to maintain or keep the unity of the spirit in light of the fact that as verse 4 says, we're one body.

A body which, notice, shares one faith in verse 5. So we're to keep visibly the invisible unity that's already been created.

one of the great themes of Ephesians is to be who you are, to live out the calling and status that we have as Christians. And Paul is saying that because we are united, we're to be united, to live out that unity.

And notice he says that we're to do that in the bond of peace. In other words, and I think this is surprising, our part when it comes to unity is less about who we do and don't work with, it's not an institutional thing, and more about how we relate to those we are united with.

[23 : 41] Which is why Paul begins chapter 4 by telling the Ephesians to conduct themselves with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love. Unity is relational and spiritual, not institutional.

Like a healthy family, we're to demonstrate our unity by loving one another. We're to live at peace with one another, not gossiping or envying, not competing with each other, but serving and building one another up.

According to Ephesians, that's how we demonstrate our unity, through loving relationships. And it may just be, I guess, that one or two of us here at Grace Church need to patch up relationships to express our unity here.

It's through bad relationships that Satan loves to divide churches. But of course, this doesn't come easily to sinful people like us who are naturally self-centered and individualistic and easily fall out.

So notice what will cause us to live out our unity as we go on in chapter 4. Just look on to verse 11 this time. We're told that he, Jesus, gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers or pastor teachers, it's really one group, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.

[25 : 12] Did you notice what will lead to the unity of verse 13? It all comes from the exercising of word ministry in verse 11. Those people mentioned in verse 11, apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor teachers, are all ministers of God's word.

The apostles and prophets laid the foundation and the role of evangelists and pastor teachers is to pass on that foundational truth today. And as they do so, verse 12, all of God's people will be equipped for service, leading to unity in verse 13.

So what's necessary if we want to express our unity? unity? Well, it's faithful Bible teaching which will bring us unity in mind as it teaches us and unity in behavior as it changes us.

In other words, the same word which we saw creates our unity or brings it into being also maintains it. If we want to be enabled to live out our unity as a church, we need to keep the preaching of the word central.

Far from being divisive, as some people would suggest, a focus on the word will aid unity as that word brings us to a common mind. In summary then, if God's part is to create unity through the gospel, our part is to maintain it by the way we relate to each other.

[26 : 37] And the Bible will enable that to happen as it brings each of us closer to Jesus and therefore closer to each other. And once again, I want to focus on two implications of this.

First, we're to maintain gospel unity. Just have a look at 1 Corinthians 1 and verse 10 on the handout. Paul writes, I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.

You may know that the Corinthian church was riddled with bad divisions. they were united in Christ, but they weren't expressing that unity, preferring to fall out with each other and divide into cliques.

So Paul wrote to tell them to stop it. And once again, notice the solution at the end of verse 10. The Corinthians were to be united in the same mind and the same judgment.

Couldn't be further from the archbishop's statement, could it? There's no papering over the cracks here or celebration of difference. No, true Christian unity comes from a unity of mind marked by common convictions from God's word.

[27 : 56] We get the same idea in Paul's letters to the Philippians where he urges the church in Philippi to be of the same mind, to agree in the Lord and to contend as one man for the faith of the gospel.

See, again and again we see that doctrine matters. It's right belief which leads to right behaviour. Unity in mind which leads to unity in practice.

So we're to maintain gospel unity. Now it's worth saying that we will of course disagree on some things. That's inevitable. We'll have different opinions on secondary theological issues like baptism and church government perhaps.

But those things don't destroy the unity that we share in the gospel. Richard Baxter, the Puritan, put it helpfully when he wrote in necessary things unity, in doubtful things liberty, in all things charity.

Yes, there are some things we must unite over, core gospel truths. But on doubtful things, those things which aren't essential to salvation, we're free to disagree.

[29 : 06] Although of course we want to try and work out what the Bible is saying on those things. And in all things we need to treat each other charitably, maintaining our unity by treating each other with love and respect even when we disagree on secondary issues.

However, where disagreement involves issues of primary importance, issues which perhaps concern the completed work of Christ on the cross or the completed word of Christ in scripture, the way Jesus saves us and the way he exercises his lordship over us, the situation is different.

And that leads us on to our final point of application. We're to maintain gospel division. Not only to maintain gospel unity, but also to maintain gospel division.

Now this is counter-cultural, but it is the repeated teaching of the New Testament. So turn with me please to page 1145, page 1145 and the end of Paul's letter to the Romans.

page 1145. And just have a look down with me when you get there to Romans chapter 16 and verse 17.

[30 : 21] Romans 16, 17. And Paul writes to the Roman Christians, I appeal to you brothers to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught.

Avoid them. Or look on the handout, sorry, before we get to that, notice we're to avoid those, to separate ourselves from those whose doctrine is contrary to what we've been taught, contrary to the Bible.

And if you have a look on the handout, you'll see that we get a similar idea in Titus 3.10. Paul writes, as for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him.

Or look at 2 Timothy 3.5, talking about false teachers. Avoid such people, Paul says. And it's not just Paul who insists on this.

Have a look at 2 John, verses 10 and 11. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

[31 : 33] Strong language, isn't it? Engaging in false unity makes us complicit in false teaching, John says. Whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works if he brings a teaching that isn't the apostolic teaching.

You see, the New Testament is clear that where there's no actual gospel unity, maintaining artificial unity is not an option. We're to maintain gospel division.

John Stott wrote this. He said, the shepherds of Christ's flock have a double duty, to feed the sheep by teaching the truth and to protect them from wolves by warning of error.

This emphasis is unpopular today, he wrote. We are frequently told always to be positive in our teaching and never negative. But those who say this have either not read the New Testament or having read it, they disagree with it.

For the Lord Jesus and his apostles refuted error themselves and urged us to do the same. You see, the biblical command to silence false teaching is just as important as upholding sound doctrine.

[32 : 44] In fact, it's part of what it looks like to uphold sound doctrine. The apostles had no hesitation in pointing out error and if error was commonplace back then, we should expect it also to be so today.

So that faithful Church of England vicar who's asked to participate in a diocesan initiative with a church down the road may be right to refuse to participate even if he's viewed as divisive.

Because being divisive is sometimes right and unity is sometimes wrong. to undertake gospel ministry with those who hold a different understanding of the gospel or the authority of scripture is to give an impression of a unity that doesn't actually exist.

And notice finally that it's a unity that displeases Jesus himself. Just have a look at that last verse on the handout from Revelation 2 and verse 14.

Jesus is speaking to the church in Pergamum. It's a church which we're going pretty well in many ways. But Jesus has a word of rebuke in his letter to them. He says, but I have a few things against you.

[33 : 53] You have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam. He rebukes them for tolerating a form of false teaching. The church in Thyatira is rebuked for a similar thing a few verses later.

If we unite with those who teach a different gospel, whatever label they may give themselves, if we fail to divide from false teachers, will incur Jesus' displeasure.

So we've seen that the gospel unites. Wonderfully, it brings us into a united family of believers from different backgrounds, races, and classes through the blood of Christ.

But the gospel also divides, and our responsibility is both to maintain our precious unity and, where necessary, to preserve gospel division. let's pray that we'd have the courage and the discernment to do both.

Shall I lead us in prayer? And then I think we might have two or three minutes for people to ask questions if they want to. Jude writes this at the beginning of his letter.

[34 : 58] He says, Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.

Father, we thank you so much for the salvation that we share with so many different people, that we are united in the gospel with Christian believers from all over the world, from all backgrounds and classes and ethnicities.

We praise you for that precious unity, and we pray that you would help us to live that out here at Grace Church Dulwich. Help us in the way that we relate to each other, in the way that we're quick to forgive one another and to love one another, to be those who live as Christian brothers and sisters united in the gospel.

But we pray too that like Jude, we would have the courage and the conviction to also to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to us. We pray that you would help us, even when it's unpopular, even when we're criticised for doing so, to stand for the gospel and to divide from those who would teach a different message.

Give us wisdom to know when we need to do that and grace in how we do it, but give us too the courage to be able to do so. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

[36 : 11] Amen.