

Our Church: Unity and Diversity

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, you have promised that your word will not return to you empty, but will accomplish that for which you've purposed it and succeed in the thing for which you sent it.

And we ask you, Lord, to fulfil that promise today. As we hear from your word, we pray that your Holy Spirit would be powerfully at work in each of our lives, that we might understand you better and live your way more and more each day.

We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. Will you please be seated? And you might like to open your Bibles to page 951, Ephesians chapter 4.

It's wonderful to be back with you and to see so many wonderful friends and familiar faces back here at Holy Trinity. I wonder as we begin whether the Hawthorne supporters might raise their hands in the air.

Do you notice the hesitation and reluctance there? It hasn't all been roses, has it, this year? But last year it was an entirely different story. Grand final day in front of a packed MCG of 100,000 people.

[1 : 07] Everything coming together on the right day, at the right time, to win the premiership. And it's incredible, isn't it, when you watch sport of that level, how well-tuned those teams are.

The tall ruckmen tapping the ball down to the midfielders who handball it to one another, then kick it long to the forward leading from the square to receive it right on the chest.

And at the other end, the backs who are matched with their opponents for strength and speed, looking to mark or to spoil any ball that comes into the defensive 50.

Different players with different strengths and different abilities, different body types, working together as a single unit with a common purpose. Well, I realise that football's not everyone's cup of tea, so try this illustration if that didn't work for you.

Imagine a highly skilled orchestra. The conductor raises his baton and the various different instruments come in, playing their own part, but together they produce an incredible harmonious, unified sound.

[2 : 18] And I want to suggest that both of those illustrations demonstrate what we have in Ephesians 4, verses 1-16.

Within God's people there is a unity and diversity, different parts with different roles and different abilities, combining for a common purpose in a unified whole.

We could sum up that passage which we've had read as unity and diversity which leads to maturity.

Now, that passage which was read really forms the start of the second half of the book of Ephesians.

Ephesians, roughly speaking, is divided into two parts. Chapters 1-3 which are largely theological and describe what God has done. And chapters 4-6 which are largely practical, ethical or applied and which urge certain behaviours in response to what God has done.

Now, it's not a strict division. There's application in chapters 1-3 and there's theology in chapters 4-6, but on the whole that's the way the book of Ephesians works. And the transition into the second half of the book is marked in Ephesians 4, chapter 1 with these words.

[3 : 34] As Paul writes this, That's really the heading for the second part of Ephesians.

Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called. What is that calling? Well, that's been spelled out in the first three chapters of Ephesians.

Christian believers have received every spiritual blessing in Christ, have been adopted as children, have been redeemed by Jesus' blood, have had our sins forgiven, have had God's grace lavished on us, have been marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit, have been made alive with Jesus through His resurrection, have been seated with Christ and share His rule over the new creation, have been united with other believers, Jews and Gentiles, to form a new humanity and have access to God

with boldness and confidence through Jesus.

It's exhausting, isn't it? And as you hear that, we're like people sitting and listening to a will being read from some unknown relative in England or elsewhere.

And item after item describes some rich gift that has been left to us. And the question is, what are we going to do with this newfound wealth?

[5 : 07] And Paul says, I beg you, given the riches that you have received, lead a life that is worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

So, you ask, how then do we lead a worthy life? Well, the last three chapters of Ephesians, we'll spell that out in some detail, but already in verses 2 and 3, we get some key performance indicators for a worthy life.

They're not external growth targets, they're not financial goals. Instead, they primarily concern our character. We're to lead the worthy life with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

It's worth us pausing there, isn't it? And thinking, how are we going in each of those areas? Does our character reflect the Christian gospel and the grace that we've received in the Lord Jesus?

Or to put it another way, does our behaviour match our belief? It's easier said than done, isn't it?

Humility, gentleness, patience and love don't come easy.

[6 : 29] In fact, as I was preparing this sermon, my doorbell rang and a very elderly neighbour who lives just across the road arrived there on my doorstep.

Now, I knew from past experience that I was going to be stuck for at least half an hour and that even then it would take four or five attempts of me saying I had to go before I would actually get away.

And I had a busy week with lots to do. I didn't have time for that. And then the words of the passage hit home. Lead a life worthy of the gospel with humility, gentleness, patience and love.

And I needed to pause there and then and ask God to continue to grow in me that patience which is needed in response to what he has done for me. And no doubt you can think of numerous examples in your own life of where God needs to continue to grow these characteristics in order to lead a life worthy of the calling.

Well, although those different characteristics are spelled out, the focus in this passage is actually unity. And Paul goes on to fill this out in verses 4 to 6. And he does it by describing the reality of the unity that we believers share.

[7 : 47] The fact that we are united with Christ means that we're united with God's people, the church. I wonder whether as Ralph was reading that reading that you couldn't help but notice the number of times the word one appeared.

It was there seven times in those verses. There is one body and one spirit just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in all.

There's a clear point being made there and that is that Christian believers are united with one another in Christ. We are one body.

We're filled with the same Holy Spirit. We have the same hope that we're looking forward to. We follow and submit to one Lord, Jesus Christ.

We have one faith since the content of our belief is shared. We have one baptism since although we were baptised at different times and in different ways, baptism is about union with Christ, sharing in his death and resurrection.

[9 : 05] And finally, there is one God and Father who rules all things and is present everywhere. That's the God who we worship and follow together. So, our unity, if you like, is a cosmic reality.

As followers of Jesus, we're inextricably linked with other Christians. That's one of the beautiful things about this gathering today where all of the different congregations, that is, a Holy Trinity, come together to express our unity together.

And like it or not, as you look around at this motley crew seated around you, and let me tell you, an even motley crew in churches throughout Melbourne and Australia and the world, you are linked with them and they with you.

We are all part of one body, one family, one church. And although this is a reality, a cosmic reality, notice that we're also urged to make every effort to maintain this unity in verse 3.

There's a sense in which we can't destroy the unity of the church. But in another sense, we can live in a way which denies that reality.

[10:23] We can squabble and argue and fight with one another. We can ignore one another and maintain our little clubs and our cliques within the church. We can divide along party lines and set up rival groups within the church.

And all of those things contradict the reality of the unity which we share. They're out of step with reality because in Christ we are united in one body.

And so we need to live that out. We need to express that by the way we treat one another. And I guess a challenge, another challenge for each of us today as we're gathered is how are we maintaining the unity of the body of Christ?

Are there people around us who we're in conflict with? Rather than fostering that division, we need to make every effort, every effort to reconcile and seek peace.

Do we have fixed groups or cliques within the church which are very comfortable for us but which exclude others and means that we're not as welcoming to newcomers as we should be?

[11:32] Now don't get me wrong, of course we're going to have friendship groups and we're going to have stronger relationships with people in our small groups and in our own congregations.

They're good and right things but if these good and right things mean that we're unwelcoming or dismissive of other parts of this one body, then we need to re-examine whether we're reflecting the unity of the body across the whole church.

In Christ, we are one body. like it or not, we are united with each other as a church and that includes the people that you find it easy to get along with but it also includes the people who you find it more difficult to get along with or who you wouldn't normally have as much to do with. But because we have a relationship with Jesus, we're brothers and sisters together, united in one family, one body, one church.

But, but, note how verse 7 starts, but each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. This centres contrast really, doesn't it, with what has gone before.

It's true that we're one in Christ but at the same time, we each have unique and distinct gifts. This is how John Stott puts it. Although there's one body, one faith and one family, this unity is not to be misconstrued as a lifeless or colourless uniformity.

[13:08] We're not to imagine that every Christian is an exact replica of every other as if we'd all been mass produced in some celestial factory. On the contrary, the unity of the church, far from being boringly monotonous, is exciting in its diversity.

We're different from each other, in case I needed to tell you that. And part of that difference is that Christ has given each of us different gifts.

In verse 8 of Ephesians 4, we have this picture of a victory procession. Jesus, the victorious king, ascends to heaven having conquered sin and death and he shares with his people the spoils of victory.

He gives gifts to his followers. There's a little aside there added by Paul in verses 9 and 10 which often confuses people but all that's being said there is that the Jesus who ascended into heaven is the same Jesus who first descended, that is, came to earth as a human.

And it's important to note that the gifts that Christians have are exactly that, gifts. They're given to us by the conquering Lord Jesus.

[14:23] We haven't earned them. We've got no right to boast in them. But the flip side of that is we have no reason to be ashamed of them. They're gifts that have been given to us, gracious gifts by Jesus.

Nor does Jesus leave any of his followers without gifts. Notice in verse 7 that the words there read each one of us. No one misses out.

Everyone who's a follower of Jesus has been given gifts and your gifts are useful and they're needed in the church. Everyone, everyone has been given gifts and that includes you.

Now it's very hard for some of us to grasp this idea. I preached on this passage about eight years ago in a church where I was working and I remember that a woman approached me after the service and said she didn't believe what I was saying about everyone being given gifts.

She didn't think that she had anything useful for which to share with the church. But the Bible is quite clear on this matter, not only here but in 1 Peter 4.10 and Romans 12.6-8 that God gives gifts, Jesus gives gifts to all his people and those gifts are needed by the whole church.

[15 : 44] So our job, all of us, is to help one another to identify what our gifts are and how we can use them to serve the whole. And that's exactly where the argument in the passage goes next.

In this passage there's just five gifts that are mentioned. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. And that's clearly not an exhaustive list of gifts because in the other lists of gifts in the New Testament some 20 odd gifts are mentioned, various gifts.

And even that list may not be completely exhaustive of the gifts that God gives. But the reason that in this passage we've just got these five gifts listed is that they all relate in some way to those who have particular responsibility for leading and for teaching in the church.

And such people like Paul, Wayne, David, Esther, Jonathan, people like me at St Hillary's have a responsibility, verse 12, to equip the saints for the work of ministry.

Church leaders or pastors are required to be equippers and trainers. They're not supposed to do all the work of ministry themselves but to equip the saints, to equip God's people for the work of ministry.

[17 : 07] You see, every single one of us here is involved in full-time ministry. We're all ambassadors for Christ in our neighbourhoods and our workplaces.

And we're all required to minister to one another as we gather at various times on Sunday. But the church leadership, the paid ministry team, whatever you want to call it, have a specific responsibility that through their teaching, their pastoring, their equipping and training, they are to provide you with what you need so that you can use your gifts and skills to serve the rest of the church and to reach out to impact our world.

So we've got unity, God's people united together in Christ and we've also got diversity with these range of different gifts that have been given to us by Jesus.

And the purpose of our unity and our diversity is that we are to move forward in maturity. The saints are equipped for works of ministry, verse 12, for the building up of the body until all of us come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God to maturity to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

We're required to be bodybuilders. Not that we're going for the physique of Arnold Schwarzenegger but really we're going for the physique of Jesus and it's not really physique, is it?

[18 : 40] It's the character of Jesus. Character and understanding is what we're seeking to grow into and it's a corporate vision. We're not just talking about you individually growing spiritually but all of us playing our part so that together we can grow, the whole church can grow.

We've got a responsibility to ensure that those around us with whom we're united in Christ are built up so that the body is built up. That way, as verse 14 goes on to spell out, we're less likely to be blown off track by false teaching which seeks to lead us astray or to give us a different gospel and there's no shortage of that around, is there?

I was visiting someone in the Royal Women's Hospital just last year and as I was walking down Flemington Road because I'd parked my car in completely the wrong spot, as I was walking down and I saw this big billboard confronting me which said the Ten Commandments, the most negative document ever written.

It was part of a campaign run by St Michael's Uniting Church in the city led by Francis McNabb. You might have followed that. He had other billboards like Jesus, Just a Jewish Peasant and he's trying to build what he calls a new faith for the 21st century but he's doing it by jettisoning key distinctives of Christianity, undermining who Jesus is and what he's done and challenges like that to Christianity are going to come constantly from within the church and from without and our goal as a community is to be building each other up in Christ and speaking the truth in love to one another so that we're not blown off track by those sorts of false teachings and when one of us does go off track others have the compassion and the courage to lovingly confront us and speak the truth to us.

As we saw in that grand final last year and as we see as we hear a well-tuned orchestra unity and diversity work together for a common purpose and when they do it's a powerful thing how true that is of the Christian church too speaking the truth in love we must grow up in every way into him who is the head into Christ from whom the whole body joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped as each part is working properly promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

[21 : 28] Let's pray. Heavenly Father thank you for your people gathered here at Holy Trinity Doncaster.

Thank you for the unity that we share in the Lord Jesus. Thank you for the variety and the range of gifts that you have given each one of us and we pray that this unity and diversity would work together to lead us forward in maturity that we would grow more and more to be like the Lord Jesus and that you would protect us from being blown off course by false teaching but that we would grow up to him who is the head to Jesus and we pray in his name.
Amen.