

# **We Are the Church**

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09/06/20

## We Are the Church Part Two: Unity

As you can see, we are now streaming our services from the church sanctuary! If you are watching this at 10am on Sunday morning, we are LIVE! What you are seeing is happening at the same time in the sanctuary! This is sort of a big deal, because it's the first time we've live-streamed our worship (so today is sort of a dress rehearsal, too). Even if you are watching this at a later time, you'll notice that what you are seeing is different than what you've been used to over the last several months. By our county health guidelines, we are currently allowed to have up to fifty people in the same room at one time; so we will be having you join us in the sanctuary soon. But we all met together last Thursday evening to rehearse and prepare for this, and I have to tell you it brought tears to my eyes, hearing voices and singing again in this building.

Today we are in part two of a new sermon series entitled, "We Are the Church." In this time when a great deal of attention is given to how many can be allowed to meet in our building, we are looking at some of what the Bible tells us about the church – things that are true whether we are able to meet in worship or not. We want to affirm what makes a great church. You might remember that last week we began by looking at some main descriptions or analogies that the Bible uses to describe the church, all of which have to do with our relationship to God in Christ and to each other. So we concluded by saying that the church is all about *relation*, not *location*. What makes us the church is our relationship to Christ and each other, not our location of meeting together.

So the next thing we want to look at is extremely important, and that's our unity. And, our unity is especially evident when we *cannot* meet together in the same room.

We are talking about *biblical unity* – that's a much different thing than just having union with one another. Union is just being together. You can be together in the same place, and still not have unity.

If you take two cats and tie their tails together and throw them over a clothesline, you will have union – but I can guarantee you will *not* have unity!

To understand what unity is, we are going to look at a passage from the Apostle Paul's letter to the church that met in the city of Ephesus. The entire book is a powerful statement on what it means to be the church, so I would strongly encourage you to read all of it, because it will give you much greater insight into unity. You won't find anything in Ephesians about church carpet or pew colors or styles of worship music; but you will find things that are way more important to our unity. Unity is vital to the church. Disunity is the devil's playground. As soon as believers quit focusing on their unity in Christ and start focusing on themselves or circumstances or politics or pandemics or posts on social media,

the devil is winning and the church loses. It is imperative that we understand and practice unity.

So let me read to you the passage that we are going to look at this morning. It is Ephesians 4:1-7. Paul writes:

“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.” (Ephesians 4:1-7, niv)

Let's make sure we understand from this passage the emphasis, challenge, and command to us to prioritize unity in our church (and in any church). The Bible is very, very clear; if we don't have unity, we don't have a church. If you think about the different examples of the church that we looked at last week, they *all* require unity! So let's make sure we don't miss the point here. Because if we – West Valley Church – can learn and practice what it really means to maintain this unity, then there won't be anything we *can't* do for Christ – Christ will be able to do everything he wants to through us – so that others in our community will be introduced to him and come to faith in him.

So first, Paul BEGS us to have unity; he starts out with...

## 1. The *plea* for unity.

Paul *pleads* – begs – the church to live in true unity and to be one. He urges them to live a life worthy of the calling they've received from Christ himself. Here's what he means by that: Christ gave up his life to save you; he paid the highest price he could pay to save you. If he gave his very life for you, the least you and I can do is maintain our unity in and under him.

Paul reminds the readers that he is in prison, and he does that to show how very important and serious our unity in Christ is; Paul is unified with them while he's in jail and forbidden from meeting together with them. Then he gets even more practical. Paul points out some important things to us. First, in his plea for unity, Paul talks about...

### - the *walk* of unity.

What he means by this is that we demonstrate our unity by the way we live our lives. If Christ is our priority, like we say he is, then our lives will demonstrate that *with each other*. Your primary calling in life comes from being a follower of Christ. That means that the Christian life is about who you live it for and *how* you are living. Following Jesus in this life takes priority over everything else. Listen – others who are not Christians will determine whether or not they will follow Jesus by two things in our lives: the consistency with which we live for Jesus, and by the quality of our unity with each other (John 13:35). Did you hear that? Not by how often we meet together (although being together becomes another

means to express this). But others will decide if they are going to follow Jesus by the consistency with which we live for Jesus and by the quality of our unity with each other.

Then, in Paul's plea for us to walk in unity, he gives us...

- **the *ways* of unity.**

If you and I are going to walk the walk of unity, then Paul says these four character qualities are essential to maintaining unity, and the first is that we would be humble. The meaning of this word is actually, "a thankful sense of dependence upon God." In other words, humility means that we recognize that we depend on God for everything. The moment we begin depending on ourselves, we begin to isolate and dislocate ourselves from the church. When I isolate myself by relying on myself instead of God, I immediately set myself up against you; I no longer need God or you. When we think we are self-reliant, we no longer need each other. So if you don't think you need the other believers in your church and you don't love them or listen to them or treat them with the respect that Jesus says they deserve, then you are *not* living in the way of unity. Be humble.

Next, Paul says that the practice of those in unity is to "be gentle." The word Paul uses for "gentle" means "an unresisting, uncomplaining disposition of mind that enables us to bear – without irritation – the faults of others." Jesus is the best example of this kind of gentleness. If anyone has a reason to be irritated with us, Jesus does. But instead, he is gentle with us. And we are to be together like he is to us.

The next practice of unity in Paul's plea is for patience. Patience in relationships is an enduring attitude that outlasts any pain we might cause each other. Saint Augustine is credited as saying, "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things: charity." Let's be unified in the essentials, let's grant one another freedom in the non-essentials (like politics and pandemics), and *at all times continue to love each other*.

The last practice that Paul mentions is that we would "bear with one another in love." This means that we go on loving and respecting each other, despite each other's faults and weaknesses and differences. This also means that when there's conflict with each other, we work to make it right. If one person in our church attacks or offends another, the person offended forgives, and the person who attacked must humbly apologize and seek forgiveness. There is no room for grudges or unresolved division in the church.

The last part of Paul's plea for unity is that we would do...

- **the *work* of unity.**

We have a responsibility to be unity-keepers. We are told to *make every effort* to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. That means *it is work*. Every ounce of your energy and effort should be toward the number one priority of carrying out this unity. To sow disunity, or to nurse a grudge or disunity in your heart, grieves the Holy Spirit. Unity doesn't mean we will always agree, but we will always love each other and respect each other and seek the best for each other instead of ourselves.

For example, you might be a Democrat, and someone else in the church is a Republican. Or you might think this virus is a hoax or conspiracy, and someone else feels it is a genuine health threat to society. *But your commitment to unity comes before any other disagreement.* Sometimes that takes hard work, but *those issues are not important* compared to our unity; we are commanded to do the work to maintain unity.

If we worked as hard at this as God commands us to in Scripture, this church would be unstoppable. That's because second is...

## 2. The power of unity.

The unity that should characterize us powerfully permeates all that we have, all that we are, and all that we do. Because of the powerful presence of God's Holy Spirit, we have ALL the important things in common. With that in mind, Paul gives us the "seven ones" – seven things that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we have as a church and that make us powerful for his Kingdom. We have:

- One **Body**: This is the church, as we said last week. We are connected to the head, which is Christ, and we do what HE tells us to do.
- We have one **Spirit**: This is, of course, the Holy Spirit – God's very own righteous presence in our lives and in our unity. We are alive, having had the Spirit breathed into us by God.
- One **Hope**: This is the sure and certain future that God has promised us. He promises to do great things through our church in *this* life, and he promises us heaven forever. We all share in and work toward that unified hope.
- One **Lord**: This is Jesus; we all share in him and he shares all things with us. We have a common commitment and allegiance to the Lord above all other things.
- One **Faith**: This means the faith we have in Jesus; faith to believe who he is, that he did what he said he did for us, and that he will do what he says he will do.
- One **Baptism**: This is interesting; it's understood in three different ways, but all important: first is water baptism; meaning that we've obeyed Jesus' command to be baptized in water to show the world what Jesus has done for us (I hope you've been baptized, Christian). Second is that we are baptized into Jesus' suffering; that we are willing to practice self-denial, to love our enemies, and to even be persecuted, just like Jesus did. Third, "one baptism" refers to being baptized in the Holy Spirit; that we are completely surrendered to, and allowing ourselves to be completely filled with, the Holy Spirit. We immerse ourselves completely in God – he fills us to the full and makes us righteous by the Holy Spirit, and we obey Jesus in all things, even if it means we will suffer for it.
- Lastly, we have one **God and Father**. God is sovereign and supreme, his power permeates the true church, and his Spirit lives in his people. We have the entire Trinity of God among us!

When we are committed to these seven "ones" we have true, biblical unity. That's where our power is. Nothing else is as important as these.

There is a story of a man who went to an asylum for the criminally insane. He was a bit surprised to find that there were only three guards to take care of a hundred inmates. He

asked one of the guards, "Aren't you afraid that the inmates will unify, overpower you, and escape?" The guard said, "No, not at all – lunatics never unite."

We have a choice my friends: be the church – be Christians who are united, or be lunatics. Christians unite; lunatics don't. Don't be a lunatic! There is power in our unity, our commitment to oneness in Christ.

And then last, Paul explains...

### 3. The *polity* of unity.

"Polity" means the practices of an organization or community that enables it to function effectively and in healthy ways. Paul points out how God wants this done among us, writing about how God has given each of us different spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are supernatural abilities that we use *in service to others*. God gives certain spiritual gifts or abilities to every believer. Spiritual gifts are not for ourselves or our own benefit; they are intended to benefit others. In fact, they are given to us specifically to grow the church; they are given to each of us either to introduce people to Jesus, or to build up other believers. That's it; only those two things. (Our Core classes help you figure out what yours might be.) We are unified by each of us putting our gifts into practice, and the church grows through more people coming to faith in Christ and by each of us serving each other. Our common unity is found in our diversity of spiritual gifts; as we each use them, our entire church grows and is healthy. I use mine for you, you use yours for me, and we all use them to introduce others to Jesus. We live in service to others.

A major problem in churches today is that people's commitment to their church is infected with a kind of conditional, consumer-driven loyalty that has produced an army of spiritual hitch-hikers. Here's what I mean by that: you've seen hitchhikers, right? The hitchhiker's attitude is this: "*You* buy the car, you pay for repairs and upkeep and insurance, you buy the gas, and *I will* ride with you. But if you play a radio station I don't like, or talk too much or get too personal, or don't drive the way or the route I want, then I'm out; you are on your own and I'm leaving the car, and I'll stick my thumb out and find another ride."

It's the same way that many so-called Christians act today: "*You* pray and get involved. You go to the meetings and serve on the committees or Leadership Team. You clean the church, you work with the kids, you volunteer to take care of the building, you give the money and you pay the bills and pay for the ministries. *I will* come along for the ride. But if you do something I don't like – you don't sing the music I like, you don't have the ministries I want, you stay closed when I think you should be open – if things don't suit me, I'll complain and bail out – my thumb will be up for a ride with another church who does things the way *I* want. *That*, my friends, is *not* unity.

Listen folks, unity means we are in this ride together. Our unity is when each of us does our part in the way each of us can do it, putting into practice the gifts we've been given for the betterment of each other.

Unity is who we are. Paul *pleads* with us for this unity, reminds us of the *power* of our unity, and points out the *polity* of our unity is that each of us uses what God has given us to serve each other and those who don't know Jesus yet.

If you want a great church, don't complain about it or anyone in it. Don't be self-focused or self-reliant. I plead with you: be unified to your church. Allow the power of our unity and practice the polity of our unity so that we will grow. And you can do this whether we are all in the same room or not!

That's why Paul said in the next section of that passage that, if we are unified,

“Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”  
(Ephesians 4:14-16, niv)

*Pray*

“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” (Ephesians 3:20-21, niv)