

Unity in the Body of Christ – Lessons from Ephesians Chapter 4

As Christians unite around Jesus Christ and engage in His work together, doing it His way, the church will be better equipped and focused to reach the world with the Great Commission and achieve God's plan and purpose for our generation.

Understanding the context

The New Testament epistle, or book, of Ephesians was written by the Apostle Paul to the church community that he and his Christian colleagues had planted in the Graeco-Roman city of Ephesus around 62 AD.

Ephesus was the commercial, political and religious centre of what was then called Western Asia and is now part of Turkey. At the time the epistle was sent it had a population of roughly a quarter of a million; this figure was in constant flux because Ephesus was located at the crossroads of the Roman Empire.

For more than seven hundred years people from other parts of the empire had flocked to Ephesus to pay homage to the fertility goddess Artemis (her Greek name) or Diana (her Latin title). The Temple of Diana was four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens and was identified as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Ephesian merchants sold miniatures of the Temple of Diana to pilgrims and tourists. Income from these sales enriched the city and gave employment to the artisans.

As the Gospel spread, collisions with the existing religious systems were inevitable. The ancient pagan cults were no match for the message of Jesus Christ and great numbers of followers of Diana became Christians (read the full account in Acts 19). Many were set free from the power of occult. Social barriers among them were dismantled. The power of sin was broken, giving them hope beyond their political, social and economic circumstances. So many were converted to Christ that, on one occasion, a great bonfire took place, in which books and other artefacts of the occult were destroyed. The church in Ephesus went on to become the strongest church in the first century.

Inevitably, forces opposed to the growing Christian community were bound to react. The proclamation of the Gospel was first denounced in the synagogue, by followers of the Jewish religion who refused to recognise Jesus as the Messiah. So, for two years, the work continued in a nearby hall. The flash point came when the shrine artisans lost so much business that they went on strike, led by one Demetrius, who led crowds of angry people into the city's 24,000 seat arena. As the stands filled, Scripture tells us that most people did not even know why they were there, but they clamoured on Diana's behalf when stirred up to do so. By the end of the day, the opposition fell silent and the preaching of the Gospel expanded. From across the entire region people heard the message of salvation. The church grew progressively stronger. As Paul travelled he kept in touch with the congregations he helped plant. Often arrested by his enemies, he did not cease to proclaim the message. In chains, he wrote to the church in Ephesus, declaring the greatness of the salvation they enjoyed. (Because of his incarceration he was sometimes

forced to use the services of an *amanuensis*, or scribe, to take down his words.)

Over time, the church in Ephesus became a mature congregation, a multicultural church with a sophisticated understanding of the depth of the message they had embraced. Chapters 1-3 of Paul's letter describes in vivid detail our calling as believers, the privileges and blessings that are ours to enjoy in Christ, our new relationship with God and His purpose and plan for us, as individuals and as part of the broader Christian community. We often focus on the "weeds", the minutiae of our day-to-day lives and struggles; God sees the future and acts in line with His "bigger picture".

Most of the epistles written by Paul (and others, such as Peter and John) are about issues faced by their recipients. However, for the Ephesian church, it is not until Chapter 4 that we start to get some hints as to what was going on. The first matter addressed is "unity" within the local community of faith.

The Ephesian Christians lived in an environment conflicted by a panoply of gods, a vast array of religions, differing social histories and schools of philosophical thought. Jewish converts to Christianity often separated themselves from Gentile (or non-Jewish) converts, because the latter had not come to Christ through adherence to Moses and the Laws contained in the Old Testament, and tried to introduce legalism that was foreign to those from Graeco-Roman or local cultural backgrounds. Masters and slaves were difficult to unite. There was incredible spiritual opposition. The church needed to know how to handle the emerging differences and live the life God had called to practice.

Chapters 4-6 therefore provide advice and instructions as to practical outworking of the Christian faith. This was where the "rubber hit the road". As a prisoner of the Roman authorities Paul was not in position to demand compliance. His life was on a knife edge. But world evangelism and the Body of Christ were never about Paul; they were about Christ. Christianity should never be about its leaders, denominations or styles. "Christ is all and in all" (Colossians 3:11).

Identifying the threats

All of the above is relevant to understanding the plea for unity contained in Chapter 4 of Ephesians.

During his last visit to the city, Paul warned that false prophets (including some from their own midst) would arise like "wolves" to destroy the church (Ac 20:29-31). They would attempt to break it up, or bring its members into their own folds. The biggest enemies of the Ephesian church were not persecution, the followers of Diana, political opposition, or heresy, but "white ants". Scientists tell us that the most dangerous animals are the smallest, including invisible disease-carrying microbes, anopheles mosquitoes, other minute insects and the like. It is the same in the church. The principal enemies are not political systems or atheistic social theories, but small viruses that enter the community and wreak havoc.

Permit me exemplify what I mean. I recall meeting a group of Romanian Christians in Munich during the Olympic Games in that city in 1972. For the first time, Eastern bloc governments had agreed to allow tourists (as distinct

from teams, coaches and officials) to visit the West, to observe the games. After a group of us shared that we prayed for the church behind the Iron Curtain, we were surprised by their response: "We know where we stand, either we are followers of Christ, or we are not. In fact, we pray for you, in the West, because there are so many factors that erode you morally, so many temptations to compromise your faith and values".

It is often the little things that undermine. The Christian community in Ephesus faced threats of disunity, the churn of false doctrine and the danger of being morally hollowed out without realising it. Some felt rudderless in the face of spurious doctrine; they had no answers to false teachers (the New Testament did not even exist at this point); others were carried away without realizing it. The challenge was to recognise the very real threats, submit to the leadership God had placed in church, strive for unity and adopt attitudes to make the Christian life and community work and support the weak among them.

Let's look more closely at verse 14 of Chapter 4.

Members of the church in Ephesus felt and acted as though they had no anchors; they were like ships tossed at sea. The Mediterranean Sea was central to governance and communication in the Roman Empire. Roads linked Italica in the far west with the remnants of the old Persian and Greek Empires in the east and stretched far away to the north to Gaul and throughout the southern half of Britannia; others snaked across the deserts of north Africa. However overland journeys were tedious and dangerous, due to conflicts, brigands and other threats. It was often easier to travel by sea.

However, in winter the Mediterranean is treacherous. I lived in Beirut for several years and my abiding memory of the Mediterranean during the winter months was how rough it became, with high waves driven by strong winds crashing over the Corniche along the water's edge and causing flooding in lower lying places. Sailors often refused to travel during winter. The Apostle Paul was shipwrecked several times.

Ships today have stabilisers, but even then can be tossed like toys in dangerous weather. I recall crossing the Irish Sea from Ireland to Holyhead, in Wales, with my family in winter, during a force 10 gale. Rogue waves crashed with sickening thuds against the side of the vessel. Nearly everyone was sea sick. Those who were not ill lay prone on the deck and the ferry lurched from side to side; up and down with the waves; on top on the mountain one second, in the depths the next. The ferry that followed listed at 46 degrees, trucks and cars on the parking level were damaged, people were removed with broken limbs and an official enquiry was launched. The ferries had stabilisers. By comparison, ships in the first century were small, flimsy affairs. Every winter fortunes were lost; archaeologists and fortune hunters are still retrieving wealth from the sea bed.

The Ephesian church, like many Christian communities of the era, faced tremendous winds that buffeted its members. Lives were shipwrecked. (Read some of the other letters, such as Colossians, and consider the waves and winds of doctrine that made people dizzy and swept them away, first in this direction, and then in the other.) They were "carried about" (the Greek suggests a violent swinging). People today are out to shipwreck the faith of

Christians. If we are not strong, it is easy to be tossed dizzyingly, out of control. God wants you to have stability.

Paul uses a second analogy in Ephesians 4, one related to gambling. He describes enemies of the Christian faith “lying in wait to deceive” (from the Greek concept of *kubia*, or playing with dice, gambling). There are cunning people and false agendas at work in our societies, waiting to catch us off-guard by manipulating the dice, so to speak. It is easy to be trapped, unable to discern what is going on. If you are not watching, they will play tricks with your eyes. Happily, the Holy Spirit is available and waiting to come alongside to advise and guide us.

The church in Ephesus ended up with a reputation for standing up to false doctrine (Rev 2:3, 6). The tragedy was that, in the process, they left their first love for Christ; they became so caught up in the issues of the day that they lost the spontaneity and authenticity of genuine Christian believers. How can we prevent that? By recognising and submitting to leadership placed in the Body of Christ by Jesus Christ the head, by learning, engaging, cooperating and being open to God and focussed on Him. This does not stop winds blowing, or waves crashing against our lives, but it ensures us that we will be able to navigate safely and with stability.

Recognising God-given ministries to countervail the elements and provide leadership

Children are easily led. Jesus said that he would not leave the church as orphans, or without guidance, stumbling, second-guessing, making up the rules as we go, changing values and relativities to meet the circumstances. He has equipped the church with gifts of leadership, whose objectives are to recognise winds of false doctrine and deceitful ploys of the enemy, teach, train, identify areas of service, develop, release, encourage, correct and task us, while working together to construct the Body of Christ.

Paul teaches us in his letter to the Ephesians that Jesus gave [literally “supplied, furnished”] some to be apostles [“commissioned, sent out, delegated”], some to be prophets [“those who speak out, announce, under inspiration”], some to be evangelists [“bringers of good news”] and some to be pastors [“shepherds, protectors, overseers] and teachers, to prepare [completely equip] God’s people for good works [business, enterprise, undertaking] of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness [completeness; like a ship *full* of sailors, rowers and soldiers, and ready to set sail] of Christ” (Eph 4:11-13).

When this happens the results will be maturity, growth, security and unity and we will know God better. Jesus is building one Body (Eph 4:16). There is one head (there can only be one). Some gods in Paul’s day had numerous heads. I recall visiting ancient underground cisterns in Istanbul, not far from Ephesus, where large blocks of stone hewn in the shape of Medusa lay in the water. Early pagan worshippers would have been confused as to which head to face, which idol to worship. In the Christian life there is only one source of life, one way to God. The word “equip” used here is the same as “repairing” (nets, for example in Mt 4:21). There are other ministries mentioned in the New Testament (cf 1 Cor 12:28 and Rom 12), in addition to those mentioned in this

passage; the purpose of them all is to unite, to connect and build. They have been put in place by Jesus Christ to develop the entire church, to enable us to fulfil the works to which God has called us (read Ephesians 2:10), works that make divine poetry out of our lives and circumstances. Their role is to release and mentor people with abilities to minister (“serve”) and work together under God to ensure that every gift and calling are maximised. For this to happen, unity is paramount. “Can two walk together unless they are agreed?” asked the prophet Amos (Amos 3:3).

What is unity anyway?

Unity is oneness. It is as simple as that.

There are many points of disunity in our society: political division, wealth disparities, ethnic differences, different status suburbs, varying treatment of newcomers. TIME magazine recently ran an article about young Australians clothing themselves with the Australian flag and attacking tourists and migrants from different backgrounds. It was titled “*Get lost mate*”.

Unity is a miracle. For nearly the whole of human history mankind has been divided (cf Gen 11:7). It is not “natural” to be united, to speak with one voice, to have one attitude. (We are called to have the attitude of Christ - read Phil 2:5). Look at the combative nature of our parliamentary system (and consider that many countries do not enjoy democracy); the number of wars being fought at any one time, the widespread breakdown in family values, the level of self-importance and self-centredness that make even smallest baby demand to be the centre of attention and reign in his or her home.

Jesus prayed that we would be united (Jn 17:20-23). We need to protect the miracle of Christian unity when and where we find it. The epistle Paul wrote to the Ephesians states that we have been made alive together; raised up together; are sitting together in heavenly places in Christ; are being built together; are part of one new man; one body; by one Spirit; forming one temple; one dwelling place for God; one household. We are no longer strangers or foreigners, divided along ethnic or gender lines; kept apart by occupational demarcations, masters versus slave relationships, Latin versus Greek speakers (or whatever languages we use). We have one identity, one common citizenship in heaven (Eph 2:19, cf Phil 3:20).

When the Bible exhorts us to “keep the unity”, it means to “keep watch over it”; guard it; expect it to be under attack; value it as precious commodity; as God promises His blessing as a result of such a relationship (Ps 133). Jesus stated that the sign of our authenticity as Christians would be our unity; “they will know you my disciples by your love for one another” (Jn 13:35). It doesn’t really matter if there are differences; no two flowers are alike, no two snowflakes are the same, human DNA is different for every individual. We are not the same, but we are able to complement one another.

Areas of Christian unity

There are seven areas of unity identified in Ephesians 4:3-6.

- *One Body*- the writer looks at the unity of the physical body. Imagine if every part is off doing it own thing. It is inconceivable. We are one, yoked together in Him. We are all connected.

- *One Spirit* – He is our “earnest” (the deposit of God in our lives while we wait for heaven) and seal (we are identified as genuine children of God by his seal of ownership and authenticity in us). We have “access by one Spirit to the Father” (1 Cor 12:13).
- *One hope* – one target, one eternal goal, knowing which gives us determination and conviction in the face of uncertainty and despair.
- *One Lord* – we owe Him our allegiance. But we can only do this with the enabling of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12: 3).
- *One faith* – one way to God, to secure eternal life; one simple faith in Christ, who came into the world to save sinners (1 Tim 1:15).
- *One baptism* – faith is internal, baptism is external. We are baptised into Christ. Physical baptism is our badge.
- *One God & Father of all* – There are three great world religions that emphasise the oneness of God. They are Judaism, Christianity and Islam. “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One” (Deut 6:4). Before they became Christians the ancient Ephesians worshipped many gods. The Greeks mocked and taunted their gods and made up stories depicting the follies of the deities. If the gods came to earth, they did silly things; they acted like people and got into trouble. So the best thing for the gods was to stay in the mountains and not come anywhere near human civilisation. The shocking thing about the Gospel is that God came down to us (Eph 4:8-10). That is what the “incarnation” is all about.

To my Muslim friends God coming to earth would be inconceivable. Islam leaves God far off, unpredictable, unknowable, capricious, incapable of being loved, or of having relationships with people. Christians know God as “Father”. He told us that we see Him we also see the Father. He and the Father are one. He tears down walls between people; He pursues us with a spirit of reconciliation; He offers hope, makes poetry of our lives, fills us with His presence. Our unity is to be modelled on God’s unity. Just as God the Father and the Son are One, we are called to be one. Self-centredness, pride, ambition, negative attitudes, individualism, sulkiness, grumpiness, poor attitudes and lack of forgiveness have no place in this economy. God is our Father; we are His children; the relationship between us as Christians is closer than our family ties. So we need to put aside things that divide us but are not germane to our faith, like wine on the dinner table at a conference I attended in Spain, where foreign missionaries could not sit with local pastors as a consequence of their divergent opinion about what Christians were permitted to touch, taste and handle (Col 2:21).

How is our unity achieved?

We do not achieve unity as Christians just because we say it exists. Ironically, Christians are often divided over whether or not they are united. That does not make sense. There are some clues in Chapter 4, verses 1 and 2.

- *lowliness/humility* – this attitude is the opposite of self-centredness and pride. Our natural ambition is to exalt self ahead of being submitted to the real Head, Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament, lowliness was seen as being slavish, which was not a virtue. Christ made a virtue out of humility. What can be more humbling than the incarnation, the Creator becoming like the created? He emptied Himself of all the glory He shared with the Father from the beginning of time. Lowliness means not thinking more highly of ourselves than we should (Rom 12:3), letting go of pride, knowing ourselves, accepting who we are, rather than who we are not.
- *gentleness/meekness* - meekness is like the attitude of a strong animal that is disciplined and controlled. By nature we are self-important. Australians at the moment are debating whether we should have a Bill of Rights. We present lists of demands. We proclaim that "No one is going to ride roughshod over me". I have rights. Meekness is the opposite of these attitudes. However, it is not weakness; meekness is power and strength under control, like water that sits quietly in a dam but can be harnessed and fed through great turbines to produce hydroelectric power.
- *patience/longsuffering*, - this attitude is the opposite of stubbornness, and resistance; it means being slow to return evil for evil. God is patient with us, so we should have the same attitude towards others. It implies giving, even if we are not hopeful of receiving anything in return.
- *bearing/forbearance* – this characteristic involves bearing with the weaknesses of others, with a right attitude. Only the Holy Spirit is able to produce such strength in us. The natural attitude is: "It is not my problem; they need to get their act together". He can help us change.
- *love* – agape, the love of God motivates and directs us (see Ephesians 3:17). It is not soppy or sentimental, running hot and cold depending on our feelings or circumstances, but strong, determined, capable, rugged and unshakable (Col 3:14). Without the Holy Spirit we find it impossible to love this way. If we have experienced the love of God (Jn 3:16), we need to be able to put that love into action; the Bible says we should be prepared to lay down our lives for one another, in the same way Jesus did for us (1 Jn 3:16) God's love demands a response.
- *endeavouring* – this word means "remaining on guard, protecting, being diligent". Loving and relating to the church and the world in God's way is not an accident of providence, but is very much in our control. We choose to make choices God's way.
- *promoting peace* – peace of God; peace with God.

Making the right choices

If we will engage with the challenges inherent in these verses, we will be able to break down walls and relate to the world in the way Jesus did. The choice is ours. One group engenders division, separates people by attitudes, actions and words, and promotes disunity and churn. The other promotes unity, Christ-likeness and hope. I am optimistic that it is possible to experience the unity that Christ brings. As I have travelled over the years, I have often marvelled at the miraculous, supernatural way in which Christians from all

cultures can come together as one body because of their common relationship with Jesus Christ. I have met men and women for the first time and bonded instantly because of Him.

People construct walls. I have in my possession a piece of the famous Berlin Wall, constructed in 1961 as a barrier between East and West Berlin. It was finally pulled down in 1989 during the spectacular collapse of communism that led to the reunification of Germany. The thing that strikes me about the Berlin Wall is that it is only concrete, poor quality concrete at that. The things that separate Christians are poor quality conglomerates of attitudes, experiences, memories, traditions, opinions and allegiances that should not be enough to separate members of God's family. It is time to tear down the walls. Jesus has "broken the middle wall of partition between us" (Eph 2:14). He has broken down the barriers of hostility. The challenge for each and every one of us is to grasp the opportunity and the promise that the Holy Spirit will give us power to turn Jesus' prayer for unity among His followers into our daily reality.