

Ephesians 4:1-6

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[0 : 00] It's good to see you all again. We've been diving into some of Paul's letters, haven't we, on Sunday evenings. And tonight we're in this chapter in Ephesians 4, particularly the first six verses of the chapter, chapter 4 of Ephesians.

Please keep that open in front of you. And the main message that I want us to hear tonight is the message on being together, being united when we're separated, being one whole church when we're spread very thinly, aren't we, tonight?

Because it would be a great shame, wouldn't it, to start getting comfortable with this situation. After quite a while, it is possible, isn't it, that we're sort of getting into the groove of this, how this works on a Sunday.

Hey, we're used to the routine a little bit, aren't we? It is possible that we are getting into the groove of it. If you're not getting into the groove of it, maybe have you at least entertain the thought that it could be like this for a while.

Just think if church life was like this from now on, could we get comfortable with it? No more rotas. No more rushing out on a Sunday morning, feeling embarrassed when you're late.

[1 : 23] No more church. No more run of the mill pains of church life together.

Not being able to mute the preacher at will. Rubbing each other up the wrong way. No more arguments. Could we get used to this? Of course, the answer is no.

We couldn't and we shouldn't. Paul speaks to us here on being together when we're apart. I've got two main headings for you tonight with some smaller points in the first heading.

Paul urges us, number one, to be eager to stay together. Be eager to stay together. Do you see his command? He urges the church to walk in a way worthy of the calling of the gospel.

And verse three, to be eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. He means that to be people in the previous verses like humility and gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love.

[2 : 37] But focus with me tonight on the word eager. He doesn't just say maintain unity, does he? But be eager to do that.

So even when the normal ways we do that are hindered at the moment, we should still want to do that. We should be eager to do it. We shouldn't be getting comfortable with this.

This is a really ideal time, isn't it? To rethink and to reassess how much we value the church family that we're part of and our church unity.

To value being together physically. When we're forced to be apart. Absence should make the heart grow fonder or more eager.

The Smiths with God's people. I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord together to worship God. How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity.

[3 : 45] As for the saints in the land and believers, they are the excellent ones in whom is all of my delight. Psalm 16. The eagerness for unity, the eagerness for togetherness.

It's all over the Bible, isn't it? And especially in the letter to the Ephesians. Paul has a massive agenda in Ephesians to bring home the Trinitarian mission. The mission of God, the Father, God, the Son, God, the Holy Spirit.

In uniting himself with his people through Jesus Christ for his glory. There's quite a lot of evidence to show that this letter was circulated amongst lots of different churches.

Disparate church groups. The plan of unity is all over the letter. Chapter 1, verse 10. In the fullness of time, all things are to be united in Jesus Christ to the praise of his glory.

All things are going to be united under Jesus Christ. And that will be seen most wonderfully in his church, in his people. Who are, he calls, chapter 1, verse 22, his body.

[4 : 54] The fullness of him who fills all. He calls us fellow citizens and fellow members of the household of God. Not in different households, but in one household.

Members of the commonwealth of Israel. Members of the same body. One man, he calls us. We're members of one another, says in chapter 4.

One flesh. So, he's not saying tonight, is he, we need to create this unity. Make it up. Form it. Hear the meaning there. Be eager to maintain the unity. You can only maintain something that you've already got. Something that you've already been given.

Listen. The unity and the oneness of the people of Jesus Christ, the church, the world over, is not a man-made thing. And then in our passage tonight that we're going to focus on, the first few verses of chapter 4, Paul kind of goes into machine gun mode on unity.

[6 : 03] He pulls the trigger on unity. Listen. Listen. There is one body. One spirit. One call. One Lord. One faith.

One baptism. One God. One Father of us all. Do we get the message? We are one tonight. So, let us not get comfortable with this.

The command to unity comes from a declaration of what is true of us, what is real about us, of what we already are as God's people.

And this eagerness to keep it flows out from that unity of what it already is. Maintain what you've already got. Guard what you are.

In verses 4, 5, and 6. You'll notice as I read that list of things that we're united in, he uses the word one a lot, doesn't he?

[7 : 04] About seven or eight times, depending on how you read it. There are seven or eight different aspects, different facets of the diamond of the unity of the church.

Ephesians 4, verse 4, 5, and 6 is probably one of the most intense and significant places in the whole of the Bible on the togetherness of the church.

The wholeness of the church. I want you tonight to try and digest the ones. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, etc.

There's a lot to digest. So I hope that some categories will help in that. The first category he speaks about is a unity in the spirit.

A spiritual unity. Be eager to stay together because you are together in one Holy Spirit. Look at verse 4 again.

[8 : 02] There is one body and one spirit. He's talking there about the Holy Spirit. It's got a capital S, hasn't it? The Holy Spirit unites every believer into the one body of Jesus Christ.

So the unity we have tonight, first of all, is a spiritual unity. It's not a geographical unity. It's not where you are that joins you to Jesus.

It's not a chronological unity. It's not when you are that matters. It's not linguistic. You don't have to have the same language.

It's not cultural. There is a unanimity that is given by the Holy Spirit, which transcends where you are and when you are.

The true united nations of the world are God's people joined by the Holy Spirit. We are separated by time, separated by space, but together.

[9 : 07] Not by the power of the Internet tonight, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. I am united in one body with you tonight, just as much now, while we're apart, as much now as when we're together.

We are united with brothers and sisters all around the world that we've never met before. Just as we are united with a family that we know really well.

It doesn't depend on space or on time. It's a unity that we can't see in a sense, isn't it? It's a mystical union with Jesus and his church, a spiritual union.

The Holy Spirit makes us one in Jesus Christ, his body. And it comes into our lives and it causes us to be born again. That's Jesus, his language. And so we're given a new nature.

We're given the same likeness, the same spiritual DNA. We're born into one family, one household with, verse six, one father over us all.

[10 : 17] Jesus uses the picture of a vine and branches, doesn't he? In John chapter 15, we're joined together in one vine as different branches.

The one vine, Jesus Christ. And the life of that vine lives us. John Calvin said that the Holy Spirit is the bond.

It's the glue by which Jesus Christ unites us to himself. So it doesn't matter tonight, does it? In one sense, whether you're in Australia or America, Hanwell or Greenford, whether you're in Drayton Green or Ealing Common, we have this unity wrought by the Holy Spirit.

Unity in the one spirit. Then there's another category that he speaks about in these verses. Unity in the spirit and then unity in one summons.

One summons. Verse four again. Just as you were called to the one hope or summoned is a good word to the one hope.

[11 : 28] When was it? When did the Holy Spirit join us together in this way? Well, we. Call of the spirit through the message of the gospel, the good news about Jesus.

Just as God's word went out at the beginning of creation and brought everything together. God's word in the gospel goes out and it brings and forms his people together.

He summons them together. We're united by the one call of Jesus into our lives. It's like the shepherd and the sheep image that Jesus gives, isn't it?

The sheep hear the summons of the shepherd. He calls his own sheep by name, Jesus says, and they all respond. All of the sheep look up and listen, don't they?

And they say, did you hear that? And they say, yes, we heard it. It was the shepherd. We're all defined by hearing and receiving the calling of the shepherd.

[12 : 34] It's a nation that sits metaphorically opened and received and RSVP'd on every mantelpiece of every Christian home tonight.

And so as well, there is a united aspiration of hope in that summons. We are united in our expectations of the future and are looking forward together of a united destiny with one inheritance, sharing together in one new creation.

Our goals are the same tonight. Our aims are the same to bring Jesus praise. And we've all been summoned by the summons of one Lord in one faith, verse 5.

As we're summoned, we acknowledge Jesus has summons his call to be true. We've received one faith. And his word that he's given.

It's not just that we all say the same creed on a Sunday morning, is it? But that we inwardly all embrace his word to be true.

[13 : 52] We trust in it. And he is one Lord over us. His lordship over us unites us all as his one possession, as his people.

And remember that Heidelberg Catechism says that I belong, body and soul, to my faithful saviour, Jesus Christ. So we're all under his authority.

He is owner and sovereign of us all. We're all stamped with the mark of his ownership. The Holy Spirit. We're all branded, if you like, by the same mark.

So you can, this evening, separate us physically. But you can't break us apart. His name, his brand, remains on us whenever and wherever we are.

And the more absolute his claim over us, the more united we are, isn't it? The more absolute his lordship over us, the more together we are brought.

[15 : 01] Jesus claims not just my body, not just my soul, but all of me. And so when his lordship extends to all of me, there is nothing that is about me that is not also united together with my fellow servants under his lordship.

It's a lordship that brings unity and love and joy together. So it's a spiritual unity. It is answering the summons of the lord in one faith.

But thirdly, Paul also mentions another kind of unity, a reality. Look at verse five.

One lord, one faith, one baptism. One baptism. That's one of the two sacraments, isn't it, of the church? You know, the good thing about this spiritual union that we have tonight together is that nothing on earth can separate it.

It's an invisible union, which visible and physical things can't touch. It's kind of like a husband and a wife, really.

[16 : 13] And maybe for a while, the husband or the wife has to go away from the home, maybe on business or something or even just the everyday commute into London. And when the husband or the husband or the wife leaves the house at 6 a.m.

Or whatever. Do they cease to be man and wife for the time that they're physically apart? Does physical separation break their union?

And in a similar way, that is the way that the nature of this spiritual, invisible union works that we have by the Holy Spirit with God and each other.

But the challenge is, isn't it, that it's quite difficult for us to see that union because it's invisible. We can't discern it.

That's the same with a husband and wife. If you see a husband or a wife on the tube going to work, there's nothing about them that is different, is there? That you think, oh, he's definitely married.

[17 : 15] Until you put a sign with him, until you see his or her wedding ring, until you place a visible sign to point to a hidden reality, a hidden union.

The wedding ring tells people something that they wouldn't be able to see normally anyway easily. But I am married to Emma.

And the same unity that we have together with God in the church. The invisible union by the Holy Spirit is given a visible sign and a seal.

A sacramental accompaniment, a union that is sacramental in the kindness of God. Now, he doesn't have to do that at all. Having the sign doesn't make us more or less united.

You can be married without having a ring, actually, can't you? But God knows that we find the invisible union very difficult to discern.

[18 : 22] So the visible sign is given by God to help us in sacraments. Paul mentioned baptism. We've got the Lord's Supper as well, haven't we?

So when someone is baptized or we take the Lord's Supper together, they are visible signs that God gives us to help us to understand the invisible union that we have with Jesus and each other. They're covenantal signs, aren't they? We're bound together by the promises of God and given signs to show that we're all under the same contract, if you like.

So think about the unity that you already have and be eager to maintain it. That is what Paul is saying. But the second big point tonight, slightly shorter point, is where the problem is, isn't it?

Be eager to be together even when you're apart. Even when you're apart. Because at the moment, there is a very particular and very, very extraordinary challenge in the church today.

[19 : 37] It's that in the providence of God, the visible signs of our invisible spiritual union have been diminished.

Not removed altogether. But lessened. Significantly. And heard this morning. Tonight should have been the night that we met together around the Lord's table and enjoyed the Lord's Supper together.

Sunday, the third of May in the evening. This Wednesday, we've got an online prayer meeting, but we should have been meeting together in the lounge to pray physically together.

And what I can see behind this iPad are stacks and stacks of empty chairs at the back of church. You are not here, are you? We are not here together. Some of you who are married might take off your wedding ring occasionally for certain jobs.

[20 : 44] Maybe if you're, I don't know, clearing the drains or something like that. The wedding ring comes off for a time, doesn't it? Maybe when you were washing up. It's a bit like the wedding ring has come off for a time.

We aren't able to see and enjoy the signs that God gives, are we? we're not able to baptize ourselves at home if we become a christian in this time we're not able to give ourselves the lord's supper at home those things are given only as things to do together physically the spiritual oneness is shown actually in the oneness of the physical signs it's the point the sharing of one bread and the sharing of one cup together and gathering together physically and as we do those things it speaks to us precisely about togetherness but we can't do those things and we shouldn't try to they are the signs of unity to be it's kind of like isn't it buying a kfc family bucket and treating it treating it like a meal for one which is not a good idea anyway is it or even better it is like buying a wedding cake and then going home and eating it in private one piece for you one piece for me kind of thing the food that is precisely designed to celebrate union it's not just any old food is it the lord's supper eaten with others it's kind of like bridget jones way of doing sacraments so the physical things the things which god has given to us are specially designed to make the invisible unity visible tonight have been diminished massively we can't do those things we can't do those things and coffee together we can't even put out the chairs together but i think tonight that gives us a great

opportunity we have an opportunity to rethink and revalue the things that we normally can do together because those things point to and make visible invisible realities that we receive by faith it was never just about the signs was it it was never just about being in church it was never just about simply looking at the visible without those visible things being expressions of the invisible of the meeting with all of god's people around the throne in heaven being joined together by the holy spirit it was never enough to just enjoy the ceremony of it all the sermon and the readings on their own was it it was never enough to be part of committees that could meet up and to organize stuff but those things are real and have their place and are effective and valuable when they're heard and seen and eaten and touched and swallowed and done by faith in the ministry of the holy spirit forming us together in christ like paul said this morning isn't it to appropriate all that jesus christ has done for us the passover lamb and perhaps just perhaps we don't know do we but perhaps for a time those things have been removed or lessened to give us the chance to think about how we how we should be receiving those things normally we ought to be receiving those things not just as physical nice things to do but things springs of something glorious and invisible spiritual glories of union with the lord jesus

and with each other that as we see a baptism or as we pass the cup down the road and as we share the bread our senses should be flooded with the truth that we are one one in spiritual union under one lord and under one summons and in one faith and do you remember that verse that paul uses in uh one corinthians chapter one he says christ sent me not to baptize but to preach the gospel and sometimes i've wondered is paul saying that baptism doesn't really matter and he's not saying that at all but why does he say that i think it's because he recognizes that simply baptizing people isn't enough people the physical signs and seals of of the gospel and of unity with jesus and each other is is not enough they have to be given along with the word and received by faith in that word with with the summons of the lord jesus if that wasn't the case then the elders would be out wouldn't they with super soap is just baptizing everybody and we'd have done with it but the gospel the good news about jesus not baptism is the power of god for the salvation of those who believe and baptism and the lord's supper are wonderful ways that god gives us to receive um as as aids to faith in that good news about jesus but without faith they are useless i don't think we have to panic tonight um i remember that my engagement ring sometimes on the windowsill when she was washing up and i didn't think at that time mom and dad are not married anymore this situation doesn't mean that jesus is destroying the union that we have with him and i'm not saying that because we can't receive the sacraments tonight that we're separated from christ not at all the sacramental physical elements of our union is is more difficult at the moment for sure and the wedding ring is off for for a time at least but those physical visible things god gives us in his church are not the cause of the union but the signs and the helps that we get and to to receive that union by faith the wedding ring isn't the cause of the marriage the sign of it we'll meet again won't we but we still need to feel the separation of this in the things that we can't do in the sacramental life of the church but you know the problem isn't just being together when we're apart this is an opportunity this is a challenge to think about being together actually when we're together have we gotten into the habit of treating physical meetings treating god's sacraments trivially treating them frivolously thinking that there's nothing more to it than what we see with our eyes or taking for granted the physical privileges the means of grace that we have as a church when we come together and not receiving them with faith with an eye on the invisible blessing we have that they all point to well perhaps for a time god is teaching us that absence makes the heart grow fonder and we should be more eager to meet again and more eager to use the means of grace that god has given to us and to express and to see again and feel and touch and taste what is still true of us tonight the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace one body one spirit one call one lord one faith one baptism one god and one father of us all that we are one amen