

## All responsible for the unity and growth of church

### Ephesians 4:1-16 *Rev Dr Jos Strengholt*

How can we live together in peace and unity in a community where people are very different? In families this is often a problem. In our countries this is hard. And in churches we do not find it easy. What is the secret of strong unity among people?

Often in dictatorships, there is this strange idea that if only all people think alike and act alike, all problems of disunity and disharmony will be solved. Even in some churches this seems to be the attitude of the leaders. I do not believe this for a second. If only, because people do not allow themselves to be shaped into the same format anyhow.

#### **1 Need for unity**

True, when people join an organization, they have to adopt the rules and habits of those clubs. The same is true for being part of a church. In Ephesians 4, St Paul gives us some ground rules for church life. This was needed in Ephesus because of disagreements in theology and lifestyles between different groups of believers. The unity of the believers was under pressure.

'Live a life worthy of the calling you received', Paul opens the chapter with. This word "calling" is like the invitation to a banquet. If we are invited to a banquet of famous and important people, we will think carefully about what we wear and our behaviour. Therefore, we should adopt a pattern of conduct that corresponds to the importance and magnitude of the invitation.

How do we live a life worthy of our invitation? The apostle Paul points to four aspects of Christian morality. Be humble, be gentle, be patient, and bear with each other in love. These characteristics are urgent. Not only because they are good in themselves, and they reflect how Jesus Christ lived. They are also urgent for the target Paul has in mind for the believers. In verse 3 he says: 'Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.'

Unity is the goal Paul has in mind, and unity only comes through being bonded together in peace. How can Christians attain peace among themselves for guaranteeing their unity? Peace is the outcome of humility, gentleness, patience, loving each other.

Humility is a basic value in community life, be that in work, in church, in your family. It enables us to see the value of the other person. For a Christian it should not hard to be humble. God is our creator. Jesus our example. And then look

in the mirror... Small, imperfect people...

Gentleness and patience are that precious ability to not lose your temper and to not take revenge, even if someone else does not treat you well. And why should we. We know our own weaknesses. We should be sooo forgiving for other.

And love, well, that attitude to others conquers many problems in community life. It is the undefeatable center of all flourishing communities, in families, churches, even in society. Love for people is like the grease that makes the motor of communities run smooth.

It is totally unacceptable for Christians to not be united and to have fights and quarrels. Paul underlines the reason why we should be united. He mentions seven areas of factual spiritual unity, in vers 4:

There is one body – the body of Christ

One Sprit of God

One hope that we all share

One Lord Jesus Christ

One faith – we all trust in God, we all believe in Him.

One Baptism – we have been baptized to become participants in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

There is one God and Father of us all, over us all and working through us all.

We enjoy this faith – together. How in the world is it possible that Christians are not united! Well, as I said, unity needs to be defended and strengthened by our peaceful bond – which is the result of our common humility, gentleness, patience, and love. If that is lacking, unity will be lacking, or even destroyed.

By having the same faith and the same Spirit, says St John Chrysostom,

...all find themselves brought together in the Church — old and young, poor and rich, adult and child, husband and wife: people of either sex and of every condition become one and the same, more closely united than the parts of a single body, for the unity of souls is more intimate and more perfect than that of any natural substance.

Important to note: this unity is not oppressive. It is not external and mechanical; it does not mean believers become cogs in the wheel of church. It is not superimposed, but it is the result of the power of the indwelling Jesus Christ. He is our peace, Paul said in Ephesus 2:14. Jesus Christ makes us one. And we have to strengthen this mystical unity with him and each other, by

our practical daily life. John Chrysostom:

This is a bond which does not restrict us, which unites us closely to one another and does not overwhelm us: it expands our heart and gives us greater joy than we could ever have if we were unattached to each other.' ("Hom. on Eph, 9, ad loc".)

Especially in times of need and problems, this unity of believers is so wholesome and sweet. When some people cannot walk, the others carry them...

## **2 Serving in the church**

After Paul has spoken about this urgent need for unity, because we share one Father, one Son, one Spirit, one faith, one hope, one baptism, one body of Christ, he begins the next sentence, verse 7, with 'but'. 'But to each of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.' And he then explains that God had given people with different abilities to the church. He mentions apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers. And he could have mentioned many other gifts to the church. Paul focuses now on the diversity in church.

The unity he speaks of, as the ideal for all believers, is not the same as uniformity. God relates to all in a unique manner. Christians are not assembly line products, each being similar. No-one can be replaced by another in Gods plan.

We are all different – and that does not make unity impossible. It actually strengthens our unity, if we use our differences well. We have to use our good gifts for the benefit of all. You are you as God made you – do not try to become like all the others! But use your heart, your power, your mind, to love God and to strengthen the community of God's people.

Some in our midst are good at teaching, others at leadership, others at helping, or whatever. But whatever gift God has given you, whatever abilities you have, for the sake of the growth and the unity of the church, use your gifts! Do not just sit back.

God gave people gifts, see verse 12, 'to equip the saints for ministry for building up the body of Christ'. Not just clergy but all people in church have a role to play in spiritual labour for the sake of the unity and the growth of the church. The special role of leaders in church is to make sure all people involve themselves in this work of God. They should coach all people into meaningful ministry for the church and for society.

All of us here in church need to be equipped. This word 'equipped' was the same Greek word that was used for setting broken limbs in surgery, or for bringing opposing factions together to form a coalition government.

God wants to bring together what is disunited by the service off all in church. He wants to heal

families, churches, broken relationships, to make our community as Christians reflect the unity of God himself.

The task of leadership in church is to equip all people for ministry that builds up the body of Christ, the church – and this work will never end. Paul stresses the goal of God with our church in verse 13:

...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.

That is a complicated sentence. Let me break it up in three parts.

1. Until we all attain to the unity of the faith. This was the goal Paul spoke about. He does not want fights, disunity, problems between members of the church. He wants all people with their different gifts, to add to the unity through their humble, patient, gentle, loving lifestyle.
2. Until we all attain to the knowledge of the Son of God. This refers not only to the object of faith — which is basically the acceptance of Christ as true God and true man — but also to a vital and loving relationship with him. All of us in church should experience this!
3. Mature manhood and the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ – this means Paul envisions the church as the body of Christ to grow truly strong and mature, looking like Christ in its common life more and more. And this is also the goal for each member personally.

God wants you to be this strong mature Christian, who truly knows Jesus Christ in theology and in a living relationship. And he wants you to be this person in a united Church. Where all people minister to each other in an attitude of humility and love.

## **3 Focus on Jesus Christ**

This is only one way to avoid being blown around by the latest religious fashion and to avoid being seduced by the arguments of clever men who do not have the mind of Christ. We are surrounded by many teachings and theologies that in my mind are very unhealthy and that do not help us to be better united with each other and with our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is a good measuring rod for what teachings you hear among Christians: does this strengthen the unity of all believers? Does it help the community of Christians to grow in more love for Jesus Christ?

What we need is solid Biblical teaching, with-

out extremes, but with a focus on unity through humility and love, and on knowing Jesus Christ as he is presented in the Bible, knowing him in Holy Communion, and knowing him in our personal prayers.

Jesus Christ is the head of the body, of the Church, and our unity and growth depend completely on to what extent we are connected with Him. This unity and growth depends on all of you. On each person individually. No one can be missed. A body is only healthy and efficient when every part is thoroughly coordinated.

Paul says that the Church is like that; and the Church can be like that only when Christ is really served and obeyed as the head and when every member is moving under his control, just as every part of a healthy body is obedient to the brain.

The only thing which can keep the individual Christian solid in the faith and secure against seduction, the only thing which can keep the Church healthy and efficient, is an intimate connection with Jesus Christ who is the head and the directing mind of the body. (William Barclay, Ephesians, p. 150-1)

This unity and growth is not something that is attained by a sort of spiritual softness and by denying differences. Sometimes we must speak against what we see happen in church and among believers. The apostle Paul underlines that in the church, we have to speak the truth. We can never stop talking about the basis facts of our faith – one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one faith, one hope, one baptism. When people distract

from this, or when they add to this, the damage themselves and the unity of the Church. This must be confronted. There is absolute truth, and we speak it.

But this must be done in love. Love is our motivation. Love for the others in church, love for our heavenly Father, love for the Holy Spirit, love for our Lord Jesus Christ.

A disciple of Christ will never treat anyone badly. Error he will call error, but the person in error he will correct with kindness. Otherwise he will not be able to help him grow as a follower of Christ. We must learn to live together, to understand one another, to be forgiving, to be brotherly, and sisterly.

### **Conclusion**

What a fantastic goal God has with us! He wants us to grow as mature Christians to be more like Jesus Christ in our lifestyle; He wants us to know Jesus Christ. But this can only be attained in the community of the believers, together.

And in order to enjoy this community and to make it grow, God calls all of us to serving in church, his body. And most important, he desires us to be humble, gentle, patient, loving each other. That creates the atmosphere of peace that we need for this body of our Lord to grow in harmony, in unity. That creates the environment for all of us to get to know our Lord better and better.

Amen