

**God's New Community**  
**Genuine Unity and Diversity**  
**Ephesians chapter 4:1-16**  
**November 28<sup>th</sup> 2021**  
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**Understanding Ourselves**

If you have grown up in the West, what you believe and how you behave has been shaped by two rivers. The first influence, wholly positive, is the Bible, the Word of God. The Scriptures have had an immense effect on the way we think and behave. For example the fact that we value every human life, whether young or old, well or sick—comes from “made in image of God” genesis chapter 1. For example the way we have valued the sanctity of marriage—the bond between one man and one woman for life, Genesis chapter 2. Even our view of a what a hero should look like, “The Bible replaced the classical idea of a hero as a world conqueror and the medieval idea of the hero as a courageous knight with the idea of a hero as someone who sacrifices himself for the good of others.” Think of Oscar Schindler in Schindler’s List, who risked his life for the Jews. All of these wonderful positives have come from the Bible

But we who have grown up in the West have also been deeply influenced by a man-made river called “The Enlightenment” from the 1600s onwards, which has not had such a positive influence on the way we think or behave. “The Enlightenment” especially, has encouraged us to be selfish and self-centred and to think “me” and “my desires” rather than “we” and “community.”

You can perhaps best observe this individualism by spending time with non-Western people who are often much more community focussed. When non-westerners make decisions about what to do, they think “how will my behaviour impact the community I live in?” Suppose you have been invited to a wedding. A westerner may think “I’ve already made plans for that day, I won’t be able to go.” Whereas a non-westerner may think “I will cancel my personal plans because I don’t want to let the community down. I will sacrifice what I want, to fit into the plans of the wider community.”

What’s this got to do with Ephesians chapter 4 I hear someone ask! Well very much. Because in this chapter Paul instructs us how to behave in the church. And he encourages us to think “church community” rather than think “me.”

He encourages us to view our local church as a human body, where Jesus is the head, the brain which directs the body and ourselves as parts of that body, perhaps a hand, a foot, an eye, an ear, all connected to each other, all moving in unison, all serving one another. You may have left your umbrella or your hat at home this morning (hopefully not your coat), but none of us left a finger or a foot at home, did we?! Because all our body parts move together as one!

This deep connection with others is not what “The Enlightenment” which we have absorbed with our mother’s milk, has taught us to care much about.

And so, you and I are to be warned at the start of this sermon: what God has to say to us, through the apostle Paul by his Holy Spirit, may fall on reluctant ears and resistant hearts! May the Lord soften our hearts by his Spirit today!

If you have been with us on our journey through Ephesians, you will know that chapters 1-3 are mainly teachings and prayers. Paul has been telling us the wonderful things God has done for us through the Lord Jesus Christ. Chosen us, welcomed us into his family, revealed his great plans for the history of the world, and he has been telling us how he prays for his Christian friends.

But now, in the last three chapters of his letter, Paul turns to how we are to live in the light of God's grace to us, "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." Paraphrased, "I am now going to explain to you how a Christian is to behave, in the church, in the world, in marriage, as parents, and in the work place." Christianity makes a big difference to life, you see. It is not a set of doctrines believed in the mind, it is a relationship with the Lord which touches every aspect of our day to day lives. And that's what we have in the rest of this lovely letter: practical Christian living. And, how interesting this is, Paul starts with how we are to behave in the church. The church comes first in his thinking.

I wonder how important God's people are to you and to me? When we plan our free time and our weekends, how important do we rank our brothers and sisters in Christ? When we plan our finances? As Paul works out what it means to live out the Christian life, he lists church first, he does the same in his letter to the Romans, starting at chapter 12. Paul teaches three great truths about the church which we all need to heed:

- We are one body
- We have different roles
- We grow together

### **(1) We are one body**

The most frequently used illustration for the church in the New Testament is the human body with Jesus Christ as the head, or more accurately, the mind who guides and directs his people who are the hands, the feet, the ears and the eyes. It's a very powerful image, isn't it? Every part playing its own unique role, but all connected together. "From him (that is from Jesus Christ, the mind, the head, the brain) the whole body joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." (verse 16)

When Toy-story first came out, we bought a Woody and a Buzz light year and a Potato head for our kids. They loved taking Mr Potato Head apart and then putting him back together! Many parts, one whole. Every day we have in our own bodies a living example of how God has designed the church! As our brains direct our arms and legs to get dressed, eat breakfast, jump in the car for work, and so on, we are given a wonderful illustration of the church. Jesus the head and brain, you and I each different parts, all playing their individual roles, but doing that all together in unison. One body, many parts! Let's start with the One Body aspect. In verses 4- 6 Paul lists seven truths which bind all the

parts, every Christian in the local church together:

1. One body—there is only one body of Christ, that is not only true about the church around the world, but about the local church too. There are not two Manor Park Churches, younger people over here and older people over there; or middle class people over here and working class people over there (don't you hate such labels?) No there is One body, one Manor Park Church.
2. One Spirit—the same divine Holy Spirit lives in each of us.
3. One hope—we are all going to the same destination! Indeed some have already made it there!
4. One Lord—we worship the same Lord Jesus Christ
5. One faith—Paul is referring to the doctrines, the truths of the Gospel, on which we are all agreed.
6. One baptism—no matter what particular views we take, all Christians believe—or should believe—that we should be baptised
7. One God and Father who is over all and in all and through all.

Every true believer holds these truths in common. We are automatically one! It's not a unity we have created, it's a unity God has created.....but, says Paul, it's a unity that we must maintain, because Satan does not want God's people to be unity for in unity is great blessing, Psalm 133. So to keep this unity, Paul tells us what to do in verses 2 & 4:

1. Be completely humble— Humility comes from seeing myself as God sees me—I am a sinner like everyone else—and any gifts I may possess have come from God, so I have nothing to boast about. Proud people always cause divisions, because they put themselves above others; but humble people promote peace.
2. Be gentle or meek. A Christian friend of mine called me this week. He had found himself in an intense family dispute, where everyone was blaming him —what did he do? He didn't fight back, he just absorbed the insults and walked away. That's meekness. Meekness is not weakness, it's the quality that does not fight fire with fire, but absorbs an insult without retaliation, and walks away if necessary.
3. Be patient or long-suffering, to put up with someone's weaknesses or foibles week after week, month after month, or even year after year, not giving up with them.
4. Bearing one another in love. These qualities overlap one another. Putting up with one another, where necessary.
5. Keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. It's actually very strong in the Greek—make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit. Do nothing to damage the unity of the church. No gossip, no arguing, no slander. Do everything that maintains the bond of peace.

An elderly sister in Christ, up North, who has now gone to glory used to put it this way. She was a straight-speaking Yorkshire lady brought up on a farm, who used to say, "Walk softly in the fold." There are lots of lambs around, don't trouble them, don't tread on their toes, don't be a bull in a china

shop, “Walk softly in the fold.” She was right. We are all one, so let us do everything in our power to maintain that unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

## (2) We have different gifts

But we all have different gifts. A body is one, yes, but it is made up of many different parts. There is unity here, but there is also true diversity. We’re not all the same. A hand, an eye, a leg, a toe, an ear. In 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12, Paul lists some of the gifts of the body. Everyone in the church has a different role to play, a different work to do.

Some have the ability to teach, some to serve, some to lead, some to encourage others, some to give money, some to show mercy, some have gifts of administration, and so on.

Here in Ephesians Paul focuses on four leadership gifts, two which were necessary in the early phases of the church but have now gone from the church—apostle and prophet—and two which will always be necessary—evangelists and pastor-teaches.

In verse 11-12 Paul focuses here in Ephesians on the men whose calling is to stir up the spiritual gifts of others, to prepare others to serve with the gifts God has given to them.

In verses 8-10 Paul, quotes from Psalm 68 which conjures up the image of ancient warrior kings, who after a great victory, would come back to their capital cities with all the booty of war and give out gifts to the population.

Well, after Jesus was victorious over enemy death through his resurrection, he ascended to heaven from where he poured out spiritual gifts on the church, by his Spirit, who he sent on the day of Pentecost!

Coming from heaven, which we remember at Christmas time, and then returning to heaven at his ascension, Jesus has filled the whole universe!

Your body may be one, it moves all together at one and the same time, it is connected all together but it is nevertheless made up of different parts each playing their own role, each serving the whole:

- the legs and feet help the body to walk
- the eyes help it to see,
- the ears help it to hear,
- the hands help it to pick things up and to eat

And so it is with the church, all one, but made up of different parts, with different functions, and it is the responsibility of evangelists and pastor-teachers to help the church work out what gifts they’ve been given, and to equip them to serve.

So may I ask you, what is your gift? What are you? An eye, a hand, a foot? A helper, an encourager, a speaker, a leader? And are you using that gift? If not, then the body at MPC is going to limp, or it's not going to see, or it's not going to hear, and so on. Each of us need to find our gifts and use them! I wonder if you could explore that in home groups this week.

### (3) We grow together

And when we are all working together, using the gifts God has given to us, we will grow into spiritual maturity, verses 11-16. None of us can grow on our own! Think about it! Can a thumb grow disconnected from the body? No it dies! Can a hand separated from a body grow? No it dies!

And so it is with each one of us. Without being connected to other Christians we cannot grow.

In my 30 years as a church pastor I have come across believers here and there—fortunately not many—who have very little to do with a local church—sometimes this is out of ignorance, they don't know they need to be plugged into a church, sometimes it is deliberate—they think they are above their brothers and sisters. Whatever the reason they're trying to make it on their own. And this is what I have found:

Either, how can I put this delicately and without offence? I discover that they are Christian weirdos! Unbalanced in their thinking, ungracious in their character and self-centred in their lifestyle. They are not becoming more like Jesus at all.

Or, I find that they are unstable. All over the place. Running in one direction or the other.

When you and I are thoroughly connected to our brothers and sisters in Christ we stabilise and grow, verses 14-16.

So let me ask you. How plugged into this local church are you? Are you totally committed to your local home group every week? Have you carved out that morning or evening and allow nothing to interfere with it? Have you done the same with Sunday mornings—that's when we go to church as a family.

When our kids were little they had numerous invitations to friends parties on a Sunday morning, and many opportunities to play sport. But we taught them that God and his people always come first.

Or perhaps you feel very weak, blown here and there, insecure, uncertain, perhaps you don't feel you are growing. What's the reason? Ask yourself. Don't blame the church! Ask yourself how plugged into God's people are you. How connected, how involved, how stuck in? We grow into spiritual stability and maturity in the body of Christ.

What is God saying to you, to me this morning. And more importantly, how are we going to respond to God's Word in faith and obedience?