

# *Wading River Congregational Church*

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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**Ephesians 4:1-16**

*"One Body"*

Paul has told the Ephesian Christians that they are part of God's great plan to reconcile, to re-unite, "all things in heaven and earth under Christ." By virtue of their faith in Christ, they are now part of his Church, which Paul calls "the body of Christ." The Church is now God's "pilot program" to show the world, and the powers of evil, how he will reunite the world and what that will look like.

Now if we find the idea of the Church as a "model community" an unrealistic view of a very human community, that probably says a lot about the modern condition of the Church, and about our culture! Really: how can this church, or any other church, or all churches, become what Paul claims we should be: an example to the world?

### 1) *Worthy Of Our Calling*

Paul will talk at length about the values and virtues of the Church. He begins by reminding the community and its members that they should "*live a life worthy of their calling.*" What does that mean? To remember that they are privileged and blessed that God has brought them to faith, that Jesus has died for them, that the Spirit has come into their lives and community. They are now part of God's family, and they should behave as such. Rather than give them a list of rules (although he will do more of that later), Paul gives them the over-arching principle: *live as*

*someone worthy of the name "Christian" which you now bear!*

He gives examples: be humble, be gentle, be patient, be forbearing, because God loves you and the Spirit has placed the love of Christ in your hearts. Now these are not the virtues of the Greco-Roman world of the 1<sup>st</sup> C., or of American culture in the 21<sup>st</sup>. In a culture that was built on honor, humility was for slaves. While gentleness and kindness might be good for a father with his children, these were not the virtues adults practiced with one another.

No more so with us: humility, now as then, is seen as weakness. We prize toughness, and pride in being #1! In the home, at work, in sports, in politics, weakness is despised, toughness is honored; humility is nowhere to be seen. We don't care about reconciliation, we care about winning! Forbearing with other people is something we supposedly prize as "tolerance," but our culture's version of that is far removed from the loving respect the New Testament talks about.

### 2) *Unity*

Second in Paul's admonitions for a "model community" is to recognize the unity we have in Christ, and strive to maintain and extend it. There is "*one body... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one Spirit, one God and Father*

*of us all.*" These are the basis of our common life. Unity in the Church is God's demonstration to the world of his program of reconciliation. Unity in the Church reflects the unity of the Trinity: as there is "one God, one Lord, one Spirit," there is "*one body of Christ, his Church.*"

Now in our day, that's perhaps easier to grasp if you are a Roman Catholic than, say, a Congregationalist. All Catholics learn that they are members of the Body of Christ, which is the Church Universal. So all Catholics in all places and times together make up the Body of Christ. Autonomous Congregationalists, and many other Protestants, of course have little sense of this. We hardly acknowledge the existence or the faith of other churches!

Now while Paul may have "all churches of the 1<sup>st</sup> century" in mind when he speaks of "one body," he probably also means that each local community of believers is in itself the "body of Christ" in that place. That's something we Protestants ought to be in a better position to grasp. We are meant to be a united community in which every part has a role, but where our common life as a "body" is a prime value. Put another way, we ought to learn that there are no "Lone Ranger" Christians; we are called into the community of the church. True, we must each hear the call to faith in Christ and respond to it, but that is also a call to become a part of the Christian community - that is, a local church.

Once in it, we have to defend and extend its unity. Our basic unity as disciples of Jesus, as people of faith in whom the Spirit dwells, has to be grasped, respected, valued, protected. We are much too easily divided into warring bands who have no sense of being joined one to another in "one body." American Protestantism has fragmented into hundreds of denominations and thousands of "independent" churches. We could

perhaps explain or defend the existence of Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, Mennonites, Pentecostals; how can we justify 10 kinds of Presbyterians and over 60 different kinds of Baptists? But of course! We would rather fight and win than conciliate and unite!

And within our churches, we also create plenty of divisions over things that are not just secondary, but so far down anyone's list of Christian virtues or values that it's amazing we can get so upset about them! The color of the walls, the musical instruments used in worship, the way the pastor dresses, the authority of the boards - and most of all, of course, money! Nothing excites emotions or generates more division in churches than money. In America it is the last "sacred thing" - especially when it's "our money." Lord, deliver us from "the love of money"! Paul says "remember you are members of the one body of Christ." In a body, "*When one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.*"

### 3) *Respect Diversity*

Every part is of course different, and by the work of his Spirit, Christ has distributed different gifts to different parts of his body, so that ears and eyes and mouths and hands and feet are all present. So when all parts work well, the body functions as it should under the direction of the Head, Jesus himself. But how do you maintain unity when people are so different?

By respect. By remembering the "one body." By agreeing that Christ calls each person to do his or her work, and not someone else's. By respecting that some people are given larger gifts than others - but that like the men in the Jesus' "Parable of the Talents," each will be asked to account for his or her use of

what they have been given. By knowing that among Christ's gifts to his body are leaders who are responsible primarily for "the Word" - in the 1<sup>st</sup> century apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.

We could argue all day whether gifts of "apostleship" or "prophecy" are still given today, and if so, how you would recognize them. But we all agree that evangelists and pastor/teachers still have roles. What are they? To proclaim the Word, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, by which God calls people to faith; but also (especially the pastor/teachers) "to prepare God's people for works of service" - or as some older translations put it, "to equip the saints for the work of ministry."

My role and every pastor's role is to teach and train *you* to work, to serve, to minister! The work of the church is to be done by everyone. The New Testament knows nothing of "clergy" and "lay people," certainly not of the idea that "we pay the pastor to do that..." as I was once told about certain actions I was promoting - having people take turns as Scripture readers; having Deacons take part in leading worship. You will probably have noticed churches that in their bulletins or on their signs say "Pastor so-and-so; Ministers, all the people." That's Paul's picture. Remember "minister" is only the Latin word for "servant," and not for some authority figure in a church!

Do we respect one another's gifts and callings? Do we use what we have well? In *Romans 12*, Paul reminds those Christians that the Spirit's gifts include serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, and even "showing mercy." Each of us has something to contribute to the life of the body of Christ.

#### 4) *Work Toward Maturity*

So Paul's final theme in this section is, of course, do your own part. If you will do that with the strength God provides, you will help the church grow. And its growth will lead to a condition he calls *maturity*.

That is a state of a community, and of the individuals who are part of it, where there is stability, truth, love, and a growing unity of faith and knowledge. It is a community where wisdom and discernment are deep enough that no-one is set off in a panic by the latest news, or led astray by weird ideas. Paul likens immature people to infants - perhaps better minors, not yet adults - or to small boats tossed around by wind and waves.

Maturity is marked by stability, for individuals, and for churches. But it is not stagnant; it is alive with growth and interdependence. Everybody knows their part and performs it; everyone knows their tune and plays it. Maturity is an orchestral symphony. Maturity is fruitfulness, it is ripeness, it is what a tree was planted for. And to get to maturity, believers and churches have to "grow up," with all that that implies.

We have to get over childlike tantrums, or adolescent demands. You've heard the question many times, "Where are the grown-ups?" We have to take responsibility for our own actions, our own gifts, our own money, our own work. We must make sure our lives contribute to the common good, not to just to our own good. In the church, when we use our gifts, and do the work of ministry, we discover how we grow from doing it!

What marks a good, mature church? *Unity, stability, growth*. These are the things that show the world what the work of God in people's lives can be. These are the "first-

fruits" of God's great "reconciliation project."

Let me only say, in closing, that of all the churches I have ever been part of, this one has done as well as any in growing towards maturity. Keep up the good works! Respect one another! Be patient, forbearing. Speak the truth lovingly. Use your gifts. Remember whose you are. Live a life worthy of your calling. Grow up into Jesus Christ, our Head.

Let us pray...