Walking Together

Believers demonstrate the truth of the gospel by being unified in their actions.

College football season is underway again in the United States. Many fans have renewed hopes for their team’s prospects to have a winning season, secure a postseason bowl invitation, or perhaps even qualify for the national championship game. My wife and I are fans of college football—with an added twist. While we thoroughly enjoy lounging together on the sofa to watch the games on TV, we would much prefer being in the bleachers at the stadium. That is in no small way because when we go to the stadium, we are treated not to one but rather to two great shows. There is the football game, of course; but we also delight in watching the marching band perform during halftime. The music and precision marching is a wonderful thing to behold.

It dawned on me as I reflected about this session’s theme—Christian unity in the church—that a football game and a marching band performance illustrate two potential approaches to understanding what church unity looks like. The marching band, for example, exemplifies what I would refer to as uniformity of action or the unity of overall sameness. Band members wear identical uniforms, step to the same cadence, and perform the same precise moves and turns as the members in front of or beside them.

Players on the football team wear identical uniforms too, although some players may have slightly different equipment (a bigger faceguard, extra padding or braces, different shoe type). More significantly, various players develop different skill sets and perform different functions in the game: the quarterback, offensive line players, receivers, defensive linebackers, and kickers, to name a few. These various kinds of players maintain a unity of purpose—to win the game—but they contribute in different ways. When the apostle Paul urged the Ephesians to “keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3), I believe he had in mind not uniformity but rather unity of purpose. That purpose is to live worthy of the gospel.
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 4:1-10

When Paul wrote the Letter to the Ephesians, some of the recipients had been followers of Jesus for several years. Paul evangelized and ministered in Ephesus around AD 54 and wrote the epistle some six or seven years later. So he had a reasonable expectation that there would be a certain level of maturity and stability among most believers in the congregation. Indeed, Paul addressed no behavioral or doctrinal crisis situations in the epistle but rather urged the recipients of the letter to keep on growing in their walk with the Lord and their life in the church.

As we explore Ephesians 4:1-10 in this session, several features merit consideration as integral to the background of these verses. First, we need to keep in mind Paul’s personal situation when he wrote the epistle: he was a prisoner being held under house arrest by the Roman government. Paul mentioned this fact again in 4:1 after having mentioned it previously in 3:1. Paul’s willingness to endure suffering on behalf of the gospel (and for the benefit of Gentile believers) added solemnity and urgency to his appeals for faithful Christian living even in difficult circumstances.

Second, we can better appreciate Paul’s exhortations about holy living by keeping in mind the pagan cultural influences in first-century Ephesus. Ephesus was a major cosmopolitan city in the vast Roman Empire, famous in no small way for its Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Some of the recipients of Paul’s letter probably had once worshiped at this pagan sanctuary. Paul exhorted them as followers of Christ to reject all pagan worship and allegiance to worldly influences. These believers would face daily pressures and temptations from the dominant culture.

Third, we do well to keep in the forefront of our thinking Paul’s teachings on the church expounded in chapters 1–3. The apostle declared the fresh truth revealed in the gospel that Jewish and Gentile believers alike were one redeemed family in Christ. Christians were called to demonstrate this reality in their attitudes and relationships in the church.

Fourth, Paul continued to urge believers to embrace the centrality and authority of the Scriptures as their guide for Christian living. In time, the Scriptures would consist not only of the Old Testament but also the Gospels and epistles such as the one Paul wrote to the Ephesian believers.

Fifth, we should keep in mind Paul’s central emphasis on the supremacy of Jesus Christ. Christ is the One toward whom all Scripture points and is the One in whom redemption and life eternal come to believers. In Christ alone believers receive both salvation and purpose for living.
EXPLORE THE TEXT

WALKING WORTHY (Eph. 4:1-3)

Paul’s first concern was to call on the recipients of his letter to demonstrate Christlike attitudes and behavior. Having been rescued from sin through Christ, believers are changed forever to glorify God in their daily living.

VERSE 1

Therefore I, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to live worthy of the calling you have received,

The term therefore marks a transition in the epistle from a theological emphasis to a focus on living in accordance with one’s faith in Christ (see also Rom. 12:1; Col. 3:12). As one whose own destiny and purpose had been transformed by God’s saving grace, Paul spoke from experience and with authority. The first-person pronoun I is emphatic, meaning “I myself.” Further, Paul reminded the Ephesian believers of his situation. He was the prisoner in the Lord, incarcerated not for wrongdoing but for faithfully fulfilling his ministry as an apostle and preacher of the gospel. In fact, his imprisonment validated the genuineness of his obedience to Christ and demonstrated his Christlike love for the believers in Ephesus.

In light of those factors, Paul urged the recipients of his letter to live worthy of the calling they had received as God’s redeemed people. The Greek term rendered live literally means “walk.” Paul (and other New Testament writers) used the term as a word picture for daily living. When a person walks, he or she typically moves forward step by step toward a goal or destination. Thus, walking as a figure of speech for living pictures daily life as active, not passive. Believers live each day with God-given purpose because they have a new destination.

To challenge the Ephesian believers to live in a worthy manner implies that there is an unworthy manner of living. The unworthy life was the way believers had lived before they became followers of Christ. In Christ they were called (and empowered) to live a new life—not just in heaven in the future but also in the present as they faced the daily pressures and temptations of their surrounding culture.

VERSE 2

with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,
Paul began his description of worthy living not by outlining a list of do’s and don’ts but rather by urging believers to embrace qualities or attitudes that are examples of the fruit of the Spirit’s presence in them (see Gal. 5:22-23).

**Humility** refers to thinking soberly about oneself. It is the opposite of arrogance or haughtiness. It involves refusing to consider oneself better than others or more deserving of honor and material wealth. The ancient Greco-Roman world placed little value on humility as a quality. (Today’s secular-materialist culture is hardly different!) Believers, however, are called to have the same attitude as Jesus Christ, who “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8).

**Gentleness** (“meekness,” KJV) refers not to weakness but to the quality of being self-disciplined, refusing to assert one’s own importance. Using a different form of the same Greek word, Jesus characterized Himself as being “lowly and humble in heart” (Matt. 11:29). Thus, when we as believers seek to become gentler, we are desiring to be more Christlike.

**Patience** (“longsuffering,” KJV) refers to the willingness to endure aggravation, if not suffering, without lashing out in retaliation (see Jas. 5:10). It is the opposite of being short-tempered. Paul’s emphasis throughout this list was on qualities that are important for good interpersonal relationships.

The phrase **bearing with one another** extends the quality of patience in the sense of not overreacting to the faults or weaknesses of others. We as believers are saved forever in Christ, but we do not become perfect at the moment of conversion. Sanctification is a lifelong work of the Spirit in all of us. Just as Christ was patient with His first disciples, we too are called to bear with one another in the church.

**Love** (Greek, *agape*) is the fruit of the Spirit that energizes all other Christian qualities. Previously, Paul prayed that the recipients of his letter would be “rooted and firmly established in love” (Eph. 3:17). In Colossians 3:14, he stated that love serves as “the perfect bond of unity.” The use of guilt, fear, and coercion has no place in the church. True unity is built on humble, patient, self-giving love for one another.

**VERSE 3**

**making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.**

Paul affirmed that believers who grow in the preceding spiritual qualities would be better equipped to work toward the theological unity he had expounded in Ephesians 2. The atoning work of Christ on the cross had broken down the barriers between Jews and Gentiles. Still, believers and churches would need to continually embrace that reality in their daily actions.
Thus, Paul urged the Ephesian believers to strive to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. On one hand, Christian unity is strictly a work of the Spirit; it is a gift God gives His people, as is the peace that “surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7). On the other hand, believers must strive to keep God-given unity. The Greek verb rendered making every effort suggests urgency. It means “spare no effort in” or “give diligence to” maintaining Christian unity among families and churches.

Interestingly, Paul used this Greek term rendered unity only twice in all of his writings, both times in Ephesians (see also 4:13). The word literally means “oneness,” a situation in which multiple people relate to one another in the bond of peace. Selfish assertiveness and resentment of others can do severe damage to a church’s unity. However, by consistently demonstrating the qualities mentioned in 4:2, Christians can preserve and even solidify the unity God has given the church.

LIVING UNIFIED (Eph. 4:4-6)

Because every believer shares in the same hope found in Jesus, we are to live in unity. The relationship among the Persons of the Trinity is the standard for how believers are to relate to one another.

VERSE 4

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope at your calling—

The spiritual realities that unite believers can and should transcend their differences of background and temperament. As Paul developed further the nature and meaning of Christian unity (oneness), he listed seven examples of oneness. He framed the list around the greatest example of true unity—the unity of the Triune Godhead. There is only one God, yet the one God has existed eternally in the perfect bond of unity in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The unity of the Godhead is the primary example that shows believers how they are to live in relationship with God and with one another.
The phrase **one body** is a reference to the church as the body of Christ (1:23). As Paul stated previously, Jewish and Gentile believers are part of one and the same family. All who believe in Christ are, in principle, united in one body, the body of Christ.

The phrase **one Spirit** refers to the Holy Spirit. (Interestingly, Paul referred to the Persons of the Trinity in a reverse order from the typical order of Father, Son, and Spirit.) The church is made alive and energized by one and the same Spirit, the Spirit who indwells each believer at conversion (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:13). Thus, the one Spirit is the Divine Agent through whom the one body of believers around the world and throughout time exists.

The phrase **one hope at your calling** points to the one confident expectation that all Christians possess regarding the life to come. When we as believers responded to the gospel call in repentance and faith, we were forgiven of our sins and given a new life. Beyond that, moreover, we were also given the hope of an eternal inheritance. Paul had stated previously in Ephesians that “in [Christ] we have also received an inheritance” (1:11) and that the Spirit “is the down payment of our inheritance” (1:14). Whatever our ethnic or social backgrounds, we will all share the same glorious future!

**VERSE 5**

**one Lord, one faith, one baptism,**

The phrase **one Lord** points to the second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ the Son of God. He is the One in whom believers believe. Paul wrote in Romans 10:12, “There is no distinction between Jew and Greek, because the same Lord of all richly blesses all who call on him.” Whether Christians are rich or poor, male or female, famous or unknown, old or young, we are all bound by our loyalty to the same Lord. We bow before Him; neither personal ambition nor partisanship should be allowed to destroy our unity.

The phrase **one faith** can be understood in two ways. Paul may have meant the personal experience of trust in which every true Christian responds in faith to Jesus Christ for salvation. An alternative view is that Paul had in mind the body of objective truths that comprise the gospel message. In my judgment, the first option seems more likely in this context.

The phrase **one baptism** can also be understood in two ways. It can refer to the ritual of water baptism to which Jesus submitted and later instructed His followers to practice as a sign of obedient discipleship (see Matt. 3:15; 28:19). On the other hand, it can refer to the spiritual baptism (immersion) in which the believer is brought into the body of Christ upon conversion (see Rom. 6:3). In this case, Paul may have had both understandings in mind: the new believer is immersed into Christ’s body (His death, burial, and resurrection) and then gives witness to that spiritual reality in the obedient act of water baptism.
EXPLORATION

VERSE 6

one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

With the phrase one God and Father of all, Paul completed the trinitarian framework of the church’s unity. Christians do not believe in three gods, as critics sometimes charge. The Spirit, the Son, and the Father are three eternal Persons of the one Godhead. To be sure, many of the Ephesian believers were converted from pagan backgrounds in which multiple separate deities were thought to exist and were worshiped in the various pagan temples around the city. When they became followers of Christ, however, they affirmed the reality that only one true God exists. This God is the One whom Jesus taught His followers to address in prayer as “our Father” (Matt. 6:9).

Paul made four affirmations about God, each of which point to Him as the One who called into existence the one family of which He is the Father. The united family made up of God’s redeemed people is God-created, God-controlled, God-sustained, and God-filled, as Paul’s descriptions make clear.

First, this God is the God of all. As the Creator, He is fatherly in His attitude toward all human beings. All people are ultimately accountable to the one God whether or not they acknowledge Him. Moreover, God is Father in truth to those who become His children through faith in Jesus Christ.

Second, God is above all. He is sovereign over all people and all things. In His redeemed people (the church) He continues to reveal His multifaceted wisdom and display His eternal glory (Eph. 3:10,21).

Third, God is through all. He sustains His universe. He holds all things together for His own purposes. Within the family of which He is the Father, God works through believers so that we are empowered to accomplish His purposes.

Fourth, God is in all. The apostle had previously prayed that the recipients of his letter would understand the magnitude of Christ’s dwelling in their hearts through faith (3:17). The more they embraced this truth the more they would be “filled with all the fullness of God” (3:19). The one Father has thus created the one family. He rules it, sustains it, and fills all its members.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Why is it crucial for believers to demonstrate their faith by living in unity with one another? Are there ever any circumstances that justify disunity in a congregation? Why or why not? What actions might you take to help strengthen your church congregation’s unity?
ENJOYING VICTORY (Eph. 4:7-10)

Paul introduced the idea of believers receiving gifts from God with the illustration of a military victory parade. He drew from Psalm 68 to remind believers of a victory parade to Mount Zion, where Christ the conquering King distributes gifts to His followers.

VERSE 7

Now grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.

As illustrated in the opening paragraphs of this session (see p. 70), unity does not require complete uniformity. To say it another way, believers can experience genuine oneness without everyone being the same in every respect. As followers of Christ, we are called to keep the unity that the Spirit has given us; we do so by continually growing in and showing the unifying qualities mentioned in Ephesians 4:2. Those qualities are given theological moorings in the seven doctrinal “ones” listed in 4:4-6.

Still, this unity of heart (the qualities) and unity of belief (the “ones”) do not blot out our unique personalities, nationalities, abilities, or life situations. Moreover, we as believers receive a variety of spiritual gifts and take on a variety of responsibilities in our church congregations. In fact, to speak of the church as a body is to acknowledge that there is diversity held together by unity. Just as a physical body has a variety of parts joined together into a greater, interconnected whole, so it is with the church (see 1 Cor. 12:12).

In Ephesians 4:7, Paul introduced his teaching on the diversity of gifted leaders God has provided for the church. He began by observing that grace was given to each one of us. Every believer equally experiences God’s amazing grace in salvation. In this verse, Paul likely was referring not to saving grace but to the grace of spiritual giftedness—what we might call serving grace. If spiritual gifts come to us strictly as a demonstration of grace, then there is no place for believers to feel either prideful or deficient. No believer is without at least one spiritual gift, and every believer’s gift is important for the body of Christ to function as God intends.

Gifts are given according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Christ gives spiritual gifts to His people without stinting, but He gives to them based on what He in His wisdom knows to be the best distribution of gifts: “A manifestation of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). Although Paul did not use the same term for spiritual gift in Ephesians that he used in the discussion contained in 1 Corinthians 12, he clearly had the same reality in mind. We know this based on his use of the Greek term rendered grace (Greek, charis [KAH riss]).
VERSE 8

For it says: When he ascended on high, he took the captives captive; he gave gifts to people.

When Paul wrote about gifts given “according to the measure of Christ’s gift,” his thoughts went to the ascended Lord Jesus. During His ministry on earth, Jesus had promised that His disciples would receive the gift of the Spirit after He had been glorified (see John 7:39). Paul made an additional connection with this promise by drawing from an Old Testament text, Psalm 68:18. He likely drew from this psalm because it foreshadowed Christ’s victorious resurrection and ascension, followed by Christ’s distribution of spiritual gifts to His people. Some Bible students have pointed out that Psalm 68 was read in Jewish synagogues on the Day of Pentecost, which in the Book of Acts was the day on which the Spirit came in power on believers (see Acts 2:1-4).

In its Old Testament context, Psalm 68 depicts the Lord returning in triumph—either to Jerusalem or to heaven—after overthrowing the enemies of God. As the great conqueror, the Lord was portrayed as receiving gifts from those He had conquered and who now were His subjects.

The words when he ascended on high originally pointed to Israel’s God as the great King returning to His home after victory. The Romans also practiced military parades for generals returning victoriously from war (see 2 Cor. 2:14). Thus, the first recipients of Paul’s letter would have understood Paul’s culturally based illustration.

The words he took the captives captive additionally support the idea of a victory parade. Paul had written previously in Ephesians that with Christ’s resurrection and exaltation to the Father’s right hand, the Lord was revealed as “far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion” (Eph. 1:21). In Ephesians 1:22, Paul declared that God has “subjected everything under [Christ’s] feet,” a description of total victory and sovereignty.

Paul’s words he gave gifts to people require careful consideration. In Psalm 68:18, it is the conquering King who received gifts. That description, however, has been upended by God’s grace. Now the victorious King is the One who gave gifts to people. Paul shifted the emphasis from Christ as the Victor receiving gifts to an emphasis on Christ as the Victor distributing gifts.

Two points may be made to help us understand Paul’s shift. First, when ancient victorious kings received gifts (spoils) from conquered peoples, the kings shared the spoils with the troops. A second possible way of understanding Paul’s emphasis is to realize that Christ has become the Agent or Channel of God’s gifts to His redeemed people. That is, Christ received what He then proceeded to give to those who comprise His body, the church. Christ displayed the Spirit’s empowerment at His baptism and then gave the Spirit to believers on the Day of Pentecost. Acts 2:33 states, “Since he has
been exalted to the right hand of God and has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, he has poured out what you both see and hear.”

VERSE 9

But what does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower parts of the earth?

Paul turned his attention to the words he ascended. How did this phrase in the psalm apply to Christ’s saving work? Paul used it to emphasize the conclusion that an ascent implies a previous descent: he ... descended to the lower parts of the earth (“the lower regions, the earth,” ESV; “the lower, earthly regions,” NIV). The likely meaning of this statement is that Paul was referring to Christ’s incarnation. In taking on human nature, the Son of God descended to the lowest plane, that is, to the earth (Phil. 2:5-8). In an alternate view, some Bible students contend that Christ’s descent referred broadly to His willing acceptance of the servant life that concluded in His humiliation and death on the cross followed by His literal burial in an earthly tomb.

VERSE 10

The one who descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens, to fill all things.

Paul quickly returned his focus to Christ as being the one who ascended. Previously in Ephesians, the apostle had written about Christ’s resurrection and His being seated at the Father’s right hand (2:6), a spiritual reality which believers now share in Him. This is the first (and only) passage in Ephesians, however, to speak directly of Christ’s ascension. His ascension positioned Him far above all the heavens. This phrase referred not so much to a place as to Christ’s being supreme in authority. He is the exalted Lord who has bestowed the Holy Spirit as well as spiritual gifts to His people.

Finally, the ascension of Christ means that He now fills all things. We live in a Christ-filled world. The same Jesus who is the ascended Lord came to earth in human flesh, lived among us, died to atone for our sins, was buried, and then resurrected to ascend in victory to the heavenly throne of God.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read Psalm 68. What connection did Paul make between this psalm and Christ’s victory (of which His ascension was the proof)? How can/will you celebrate Christ’s victory today and throughout the coming week?