

Ephesians 4:1-16 What makes for church unity?

I was looking at Google maps the other day and I reckon that there are quite a lot of churches I could walk to from here. I counted 7 Anglican churches I could walk to within half an hour. 5 Uniting churches. 4 Catholic churches. 3 Presbyterian churches. A Baptist church and a Brethren church.....and I've probably missed out a bunch as well. What does that mean for church unity?

And then within churches themselves there are different congregations. We've got 3. St Hillaries has 5. St John 's has 4. What does that mean for church unity?

You see churches that are united are better witnesses, they are better learners, they are better at growing, they are better at praying ,they are better structurally and more importantly they are acting like God wants because they are 'maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.'

So far in the Ephesian letter Paul has celebrated all that God has done for the Christians in Ephesus. Blessed them and chosen them. Broken down the dividing wall.....doesn't matter whether you were a Jew or Gentile, you could belong. Paul has prayed for them to know God's power. Paul has celebrated the grace of God that brings peace with God and peace with each other. Paul has celebrated the work of the gospel and prayed that they might know God's power through the Holy Spirit. It was God's wisdom to build the church. And the church is to bring God glory, 3:21. So after all God has done, Paul now comes to a 'therefore' – see that in 4:1.....when you see a therefore ask what it is there for....like the therefore in Romans 12. After all that God has done for the Ephesian Christians, now this is what they have to do. He'll go onto talk about purity and family life. But the first thing he wants the Ephesian Christians to do is to work for unity in the church; to strive for unity in the church. To make every effort, verse 3 – it's urgent – every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit.

So how? How does Paul want us to work for unity in the church? And the first is by working on our character. You know churches sometimes get a bit too keen on trying to work on business principles. You know we start getting all our KPI's organised – Key Performance Indicators. We start doing SWOT analysis – Strengths Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats. We look at projects and Customers and Culture and operations and markets. Now I'm sure that there are things we can learn from business. But it's not where the bible starts when thinking of church unity. Paul starts with our character.

We are 'to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called.' What does that look like – look at verse 2, 'with all humility'. We are not to be proud, but humble. You know in the Greek world humility was always a negative word – like a synonym for weakness. Humility doesn't mean weakness – it means thinking of yourself rightly. It means not being self assertive – it means thinking of others before yourself. Likewise the next word – 'gentleness – again doesn't mean weakness – it means strength under control. It means not asserting or forcing our own rights or preferences. Third word is 'patience'. Being long suffering towards aggravating people. There are always aggravating people in churches – because not everyone is like me – well that demands patience. Fourth word – bearing with one another – that sense of mutual tolerance....I mean Christians are not always easy to get on with – we need to bear with one another. And the fifth word is really the summary – in love – seeking the welfare of others. Love which is patient and kind and forbearing and self sacrificial. Love like Christ has loved us.

The first place to work on church unity is by working on our character – not creating a whole bunch of business structures. For if we are humble and gentle and patient and bearing with and loving, surely that will work towards our church unity. Why not make it your aim every week to talk to someone over tea and coffee who is not like you before you talk to a friend. Why not consider what one of the other congregations

in our church might want before you assert your own wishes – say at our Christmas services? Why not make sure you pray every week for that person that annoys you the most? The first place to work for our unity is by working on our character – it will take effort as Paul says.

When I was hunting through Google maps for local churches I came across a Christadelphian church down in Canterbury. I remember when at a previous church one of the young adults started dating a Christadelphian and they asked me to go and sort through the theological differences – Christadelphians do not believe in the Trinity and they do not believe that Jesus is God.

And when we are thinking of church unity, we are not thinking of unity at any cost. Or unity with the lowest common denominator. There is a theological basis for our unity that Paul spells out in verses 4 to 6. Making sure our theology is right will work towards our unity.

Did you notice the very Trinitarian theology. One Spirit, One Lord, One God and Father. Our identity is that we are a church, one body through the work of the one Spirit. It was the Spirit's power as Paul has been talking about that has brought us to faith and brought us together. Our testimony is the same whether we grew up as Christians or came to faith later in life. There is one Lord Jesus in whom we believe. There is one faith by which we trust in him and his saving death and resurrection. And there is one baptism that is a response to that and incorporates us into the church.

As an aside I think this passage rules out getting baptised twice. I mean don't worry if that has happened to you – but there is only one baptism necessary.

And if there is one identity and one testimony then we are part of one family. One God and Father of us all who completely permeates Christians and the Christian church.

You know my brother is quite different from me – he is a storeman for Myer – and when he has parties they are different from mine. There is more beer than wine. There is more rock music than jazz. There's more KFC than Antipasto. There are more people I don't relate to than do.... does that mean I don't go – no – he's my brother. Does that mean I don't meet up with him – no - he's part of my family.

And you know we are part of the same family here – as different as we are. And we should make every effort to see our church family. Every effort to participate with our church family. Every effort to meet together as a church family. For God is one and we are to be one.

Which leads me to our diversity, which is part of our unity. I love that bit in life of Brian where Brian is going 'we're all individuals' - and the people go yes we're all individual's – you're all different' 'yes we're all different.' ...it's funnier watching it.

Look at verse 7, 'to each of us was given grace – not saving grace – but a gift – according to the measure of Christ's gift.' We all have different personalities and experiences and abilities – all differently gifted for God. Jesus rose from the dead and ascended on high – that's when he poured out the spirit and gave us gifts. But before he ascended, he descended to the lower parts of the earth – I think that just means – he came to the earth – to the broken earth – he came even to the cross. It actually cost Christ a lot to give us gifts. Our differences are part of Christ's generosity.

Ask yourself, 'Am I doing what God has made me to do – or am I neglecting my gift? Am I delighted in who God made me to be or am I envious of other's gifts. Do I love what God has made me?

And God in his wisdom has not just gifted us all generally, but God has gifted leaders in the church differently and the people differently as well. So verse 11, some leaders are apostles, some prophets, some evangelists and some pastor teachers – the last two go together. Apostles were the small group of eyewitnesses to Jesus in the first century – probably not any of them left – although missionaries and church planters are a bit like that. Some prophets – again I don't think there are biblical style prophets these days who can say, 'thus says the Lord' otherwise we'd be adding their words to scripture – although we do have special biblical expositors like Don Carson who are a bit like this. There are evangelists – that's special evangelists – I mean we are all to be ready to give an account of our faith – this is specialist evangelists – John Dixon or Billy Graham types. And then Pastor teachers – shepherds that feed the flock – I guess that's me.

Again as an aside I am though different from other pastor teachers nearby – I am different from Alison Taylor and different from Mike Flynn and different from Stephen Hale.

But the diverse leaders roles are verse 12, not to do all the work of ministry – but to 'equip the saints – the people of the church – Christians – for the work of ministry.

What are you supposed to be working on – the building up of the church, verse 12 – in other words – add people to the church. Work on the unity of the church – work on educating people- faith and knowledge. And work towards maturity.

Modern churches like ours often have various staff members, and we do do a bunch of ministry. But the ministry is actually your job as well as ours.

Which leads me to the next key to our unity and that is our growth towards maturity. Imagine if we were a church of toddlers. I remember taking Stefi to the super market as a toddler and when I wasn't looking she pulled a tomato off the pile and just started eating it – then there was the classic throw a tantrum on the floor when I wouldn't buy a cherry ripe....I mean imagine if we were a church of toddlers – all battling to get our own way and assert our independence.

No, we are to be working towards maturity, verse 13. Verse 14, no longer children tossed to and fro. If we all get excited by every new teaching or idea that comes along then we'll divide not be unified. We'd become a fad driven church. If we're forever following laughing for Christ or 40 days of purpose or the New King James bible or WWJD or the prayer of Jabez or emergent church or, herald of hope or something – I mean some of them I quite like – but we must not be tossed to and fro.

How do we counter that.....verse 15, 'Speaking the truth in Love. It's about teaching in love. Teaching without love is harsh and intellectual. Love without teaching is wussy and mushy – both together. Like we do in home groups here – loving one another practically and at the same time studying the scriptures with some rigour. Another aside – it's pretty hard to speak the truth in love in an email – we need to speak the truth in love face to face in sermons, home groups, in discipleship in one on ones.

And that maturity has a focus. The focus is always Christ., verse 15, 'we must grow up in every way – lots of different ways – into him who is the head, into Christ. Christ is our focus, Christ is our aim, Christ is the head of our church. Christ is the one through whom we pray to the Father. Christ is the one who sends the gifts of the Spirit.

You know what would make our church unified? If we were all focused on growing up into maturity in Christ. If we were passionate about Christ, if we loved Christ, if we understood what Christ has done, if we adored Christ, if we held fast to Christ....we would be unified together and a great witness to Camberwell.

And lastly, our maturity relies on our participation. Imagine being a footy team where everyone trained but no one wanted to play..... verse 16, 'as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.' – we must participate – we must be players. We must be working properly.

How can you participate at St Marks?

1. Be in a home group
2. Lead a home group
3. Lead the singing
4. Play an instrument
5. Learn to play drums or bass and then play for church....please....
6. Meet one on one with someone
7. Do business alpha with James
8. Be a welcomer
9. Have people for lunch
10. Be on vestry
11. Be a warden
12. Help with 5-6 youth group
13. Help with 7-12 youth group
14. Disciple a young adult
15. Visit someone in need
16. Create a prayer ministry
17. Join play group
18. Join a coffee beans group
19. Help nick with men's ministry
20. Help Gordon with advertising
21. Get involved in RE
22. Get involved in Mustard
23. Help a school board
24. Be on synod
25. Go to ecumenical events
26. Build some links to other churches
27. Get another thing going like our combined service with Don Carson.
28. Help organise the church camp in February
29. Organise some church social events
30. Help with some IT
31. DO power point or sound
32. Get some working bees together on gardens and buildings
33. Renovate Mark's place

What makes for church unity? Our character – work on it. Our theology – know and grow in it. Our diversity, use your gifts. Our maturity – speak the truth in love, get passionate about Jesus and participate in the life of our church.