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Community: Where Everyone Gets to Play Ephesians 4:1-16

Have you ever thought about the fact that *God is his own community*? I realize that sounds strange, but think of it this way. There are three distinct yet co-equal divine persons in the Godhead. God is triune. For some people the idea of the Trinity is downright spooky: “You mean that in heaven it’s like Zeus and Poseidon and Hermes all ruling the earth at the same time?” No! We’re not talking about the absurd notion of multiple gods as we find in the mythology of the ancient Greek pantheon. There are not three gods. There is only one God. But he exists eternally as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

My aim here isn’t to talk about the Trinity or to defend the notion of triunity in God, but simply to point out to you that the Father lives in eternal and intimate fellowship with the Son, and the Son with the Father, and the Father with the Spirit, and the Spirit with the Father, and the Son with the Spirit and the Spirit with the Son. *They love each other and enjoy each other and seek the glory of each other. God is his own community. God does not exist in isolation. God never has been and never will be lonely.*

The reason this is important for us to remember is that we have been created in God’s image. Being in the image of God means a lot of things: it means that, like God, we have minds and can think, and we have wills and can choose; it means we have a conscience; we are moral beings with a sense of right and wrong; it also means we exercise dominion and lordship over the creation entrusted to our care.

But it also means that *we have been created to live in community one with another*. God never created a single human being with the intent that he or she should live in isolation from others. Whether you are single or married, God never intended nor did he create you in order that you should live separately from the community and fellowship of the people of God, the local church.

As I said in my first message on this subject, when you were converted to faith in Christ, you not only were given a new individual identity, you were also given *a new corporate identity*. You are not only a new creation personally and individually, you are a living member of a new creation corporately, the body of Christ. *You not only were placed by faith in Christ; you were also placed by the Spirit into the body of Christ, the church.*

In my earlier message, several weeks ago, I pointed out why community is an act of war. We talked about the enemies that you confront and against which you wage war when you choose to pursue community in the local church.

Today I want us to look briefly at what community actually looks like; what are its features; what does it achieve; what does it require of us. And there’s no better place to do that than here in Ephesians 4:1-16.

What Authentic Community Looks Like, Feels Like, and Does

I have five things to say to you about community from this remarkable paragraph in Ephesians 4.

(1) In order to understand my **first** point, we need to revisit for just a moment what we mean here at Bridgeway when we say that we are a *gospel-centered* church. You’ve heard me say this a hundred times, but it bears repeating. The gospel is not simply about how you get saved. The gospel is not simply for unbelievers. The gospel is also about how you get sanctified. The gospel is for believers. In fact, everything we are and do as Christians throughout the course of our lives on earth and in the church is grounded in and flows out of and is shaped by the gospel. And that especially includes our fellowship with one another in community.

Why do I say this? Well, I could prove it countless ways from countless biblical texts, but let's look at how Paul says it here in Ephesians 4.

I direct your attention to the word **"therefore"** (v. 1a). What this simple word means is that everything Paul is going to say in chapters 4-6 flows out of what he's already said in chapters 1-3.

Let me illustrate it this way. All of you know how children at around the age of two or three begin to respond to everything told to them by their parents. Sadly, in many cases it extends even into their teenaged years! When given a command or when told to do something, they respond with the simple word: "Why?" And all too often we as parents answer them by saying: "Because I said so!"

That's not very helpful and it rarely satisfies the curiosity of a child. What you need to understand is that God is not doing that here in Ephesians 4. He doesn't issue this list of exhortations and then, when we ask Why?, respond with an authoritative: "Because I said so!"

That word "therefore" tells us that everything he is about to command and call for in his people has a reason; its grounded in something real and substantial. There is a rock-solid spiritual foundation for every one of these exhortations. For example:

"Walk in a manner worthy" of your calling (4:1) **because** God "has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" (1:3).

Let "humility" characterize your interactions with one another (4:2) **because** God "chose us" in Christ before the foundation of the world (1:4).

Be "gentle" and "patient" with one another (4:2). Why, God? **Because** I have "predestined" you "for adoptions as sons through Jesus Christ" (1:5).

"Bear with one another in love" (4:2). Why, God? **Because** in Christ "we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses" (1:5).

We could continue by pointing to each of these commands about how we are to live in community with one another, then asking Why?, and then yet again appeal to what God has done for us in the gospel of Christ: you received the Holy Spirit when you believed and are now sealed and indwelt by him to empower you for godly living (1:11-14). God, in his mercy, caused you to come alive and saved you apart from any work you might perform. God has refashioned believing Jews and Gentiles into "one new man" (2:15), by which he means the church, the body of Christ, where ethnic identity is irrelevant and the only thing that matters is trusting Jesus. And on and on we could give reasons why we should do the things commanded in Ephesians 4.

In other words, all of Ephesians 1-3 is gospel! It is all about what God has graciously done in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to reconcile you and me to himself forever.

What this means is that the pursuit of community and the responsibilities that come with it is *the only proper response to the saving love of God in Jesus*. Or to turn that around, if you have been a recipient of the saving grace of God in Christ, if you have experienced the forgiveness of your sins, if you have been justified by faith alone in Christ alone, if the Holy Spirit now dwells within you, *the only appropriate and expected reaction is to give yourself to other Christians in the building up of the body of Christ*.

In light of all this, because of everything God graciously gave you and Christ died and rose to obtain for you, live in unity and peace and fellowship and mutual encouragement with other Christians so that together you might be built up and grow up into mature men and women whose lives reflect the glory and greatness of God.

I kid you not, all that is wrapped up in that single word "therefore"!

Again, living in community with other Christians, serving and being served by other Christians, is the natural, expected, inescapable consequence of having been made a recipient of the saving grace of God in Christ! What does that say about people who steadfastly refuse to pursue community with other Christians?

The same point could be made by looking at the phrase in v. 1 where Paul says we are to walk “in a manner worthy” of our calling. This word “worthy” points to the standard or measure or criterion to which our lives are expected to conform (see Phil. 1:27; Col. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:12). The world says you should embrace a radical freedom in which you can do whatever you want without regard for anyone else or anything else aside from your own fleshly desires. But that’s not what God says to us in his Word. We have a standard to which we are called. We have moral and spiritual guidelines that govern our behavior. Our “calling” is not to give ourselves to sinful self-indulgence but to a lifestyle that magnifies Jesus.

But note well. When Paul speaks of living a life “worthy” of our calling, he is *not* saying that we *become* worthy of being called but that, having been called, we are to live in a way that *reflects* the glory, beauty, holiness, and great privilege of being a child of God.

And that “walk”, that way of life, is in intimate, covenantal relationship with others in the body of Christ. ***You simply can’t walk worthy of the calling of Christ on your life independently of others who have similarly been called. You simply can’t walk worthy of the calling of Christ on your life if you choose to live cut off from the body of Christ and from the community of a local church.***

(2) **Second**, if you had the power and freedom to create Christian community, what would it look like? How would you want other followers of Jesus to act in relationship one to another? What would the ideal Christian community, the ideal local church, look like and feel like?

Think of it this way. Imagine you gather with a dozen or so other believers in a community group or perhaps for dinner, and no one walks into the room with a sense of entitlement. No one comes demanding their rights. No one comes pushing their own agenda. No one shows up talking only about themselves or demanding the attention or praise of the others.

Instead, they come genuinely seeking the best interests of everyone else present. They are concerned only with what you need and how they can best serve you. Regardless of how you treat them, they respond with gentleness and kindness and understanding. Their words aren’t sharp and cutting but reassuring and truthful.

And when someone loses their temper or speaks out of turn or becomes critical in a destructive way, the others patiently make allowances and hold their tongues and look for an opportunity to bring correction in a loving and tender manner.

And the remarkable thing is that it’s not just that everyone “tolerates” everyone else or merely “endures” the irritating behavior of a few; they actually bear up patiently under it in such a way that the offending part both sees his/her sin and yet feels valued and loved by the others.

As if that weren’t enough, there is among those in the group a deep and genuine sense of unity that can’t be explained simply by pointing to all the things they have in common, such as cheering for the same university football team or driving the same make of car or working in the same place of employment. No, there is a spiritual unity that brings an experience of peace and joy that surpasses anything else you’ve known.

If that were true of your circle of community at Bridgeway, I dare say your heart would rejoice and your spirit would enlarge and your gratitude would deepen and you would find yourself coming alive in a way that you had never before experienced.

Well, this is precisely what Paul calls for in vv. 2-3. This is precisely what he means when he speaks of humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, and an eagerness to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. That, dear friend, is biblical community.

(3) My **third** point is simply that this sort of unity that we experience in community, as precious as it is, *does not come at any price* (contrary to much thought in the body of Christ). Community is crucially important, but *not at the expense of the fundamental truths of the gospel*. What are those elements of Christianity on which our unity is based? Paul proceeds in vv. 4-6 to list seven of them. Observe the Trinitarian structure of Paul's argument.

God the Holy Spirit: one body, one Spirit, one hope – 4:4

- “one body” – This is a reference to the church, the one “body” of Christ (Col. 3:15; 1 Cor. 12:13).
- “one Spirit” – An obvious reference to the Holy Spirit.
- “one hope” – Paul's point is that we have all been called by God unto one hope; we all share one common expectation of what being called by God will bring us in the future consummation (and what is that hope? Cf. Eph. 1:9-10; 5:5; etc.).

God the Son: one Lord, one faith, one baptism – 4:5

- “one Lord” – It is a stunning theological reality that the title used exclusively in the OT of Yahweh (“Lord”) is now so freely applied by Paul and other NT writers to Jesus! What are the doctrinal, and particularly Christological, implications of this?
- “one faith” – This refers not to our subjective experience of faith or believing but to the *objective content* of what is believed. See 4:13 (also Col. 1:23; 2:7; Jude 3). There is not one “faith” for Jewish believers and another for Gentile believers, or one faith for Caucasian Christians and another faith for African-American Christians; or one faith for male believers and another for those who are female. We are all bound by one body of revealed truth. Paul has in mind those essential truths revealed in the gospel to which we are all called and the essence of which we should all believe and defend and enjoy.
- “one baptism” – The reference is most likely to water baptism, the public rite by which we make open confession of the one faith and the one Lord. “This baptism is one, not because it has a single form or is administered on only one occasion, but because it is the initiation into Christ, into the one body, which all have undergone and as such is a unifying factor” (240).

God the Father: over all, through all, in all – 4:6

This is an exalted affirmation (cf. 1 Cor. 8:6) both of God's transcendence (he is “over all”) and his pervasive immanence (he is “through all” and “in all”). Who or what is the “all”? Some say it is masculine in gender, hence = believers in the church. More likely, though, in view of 1:10,22,23; 3:9; 4:10, Paul has in mind the whole of the cosmos, everything that is that has been created by this one God.

(4) **Fourth**, our unity does not eliminate the diversity among us or pour everyone into a singular mold. God does not want us all to look alike and talk alike as if we were clones one of another. *God does not want you to be an exact replica of another Christian. We were not all mass produced in some heavenly factory, so that we roll out on the conveyor belt of the local church identical to everyone else.*

As John Stott has said, “the unity of the church, far from being boringly monotonous, is exciting in its diversity. This is not just because of our different cultures, temperaments and personalities (which, though true, is not Paul's point here), but because of the different gifts which Christ distributes for the enrichment of our common life” (155). And to insure that this won't happen God has distributed to each of us different spiritual gifts to equip us to serve and build up one another. This is Paul's point in vv. 7-10.

Let's look only at v. 7 and especially at the phrase, ***“but grace was given to each one of us.”*** He's not talking about saving grace. He's not talking here about the grace that forgives us our sins. He's talking about ***spiritual gifts***, divine power to enable us to minister and serve in the body. And this was given “to each one of us,” not just to the ordained clergy or Elders or worship leaders or children's ministry workers. “Each” and every believer has received an impartation of “grace” to enable each and every believer to minister.

My aim today isn't to explain vv. 8-10 which are notoriously difficult, but to point us to the way in which our spiritual gifting is to be utilized in the community of the local church for its building up. Neither is it my intention to talk about the nature of the gifts in v. 11. I spent a lengthy series in 1 Corinthians 12-14 doing precisely that and I encourage you to visit the podcast if you are interested. The only thing that concerns us today is the **purpose** of spiritual gifts, and that brings us to the fifth point I wish to make.

(5) **Fifth**, spiritual gifts are given to each believer so that each believer might be equipped to minister to the body for its growth in grace.

What Paul appears to be saying is that the gifted people of v. 11 have been given to equip the saints for the work of ministry. That is to say, ***all believers are the ones who do the work of ministry, having been equipped to do so by other gifted people in the body.*** This will then contribute to the building up of the body of Christ. On this view, v. 12 is simply reiterating what both v. 7 and v. 16 assert, namely, that all believers, and not just a select few with special gifts, have received grace for ministry.

Don't overlook that word translated “equip” (v. 12). It means to complete, restore, repair (see the cognate verb form in 1 Thess. 3:10; Gal. 6:1; 1 Cor. 1:10; 2 Cor. 13:11; Rom. 9:22; cf. also Heb. 13:21; 1 Pt. 5:10). It can even have the force of repairing or setting a broken bone, i.e., mending that which has been damaged.

The point is that ***all of us are in some sense broken.*** We are fallen. We go astray. We are easily deceived. We hurt. We suffer damage, both spiritually and relationally. We all stand in need of the spiritual care that only other believers can supply as they make us of the “grace” that Christ gave to each one.

The ***ultimate aim*** of these many activities and expressions of service is four-fold. Think of it this way. There is ahead of us something called the ***“unity of the faith”*** (13a). It's a goal toward which we strive. It's the target for which we aim. It is something to which we are moving by God's grace.

There is also, secondly, the ***“knowledge of the Son of God.”*** We are *together* to increase in our understanding and enjoyment of “the unfathomable riches of Christ” (3:8). The many and varied spiritual gifts bestowed upon the church are designed to enable us all, unity, to grow and deepen and expand and increase in our knowledge of Jesus.

Third, we are to grow up into ***“mature manhood.”*** No longer are we to be children, easily misled and weak and immature. There is, fourth and finally, a standard to which we are to attain, and that standard is none other than Jesus himself. ***The point is that the church is progressively being conformed to the perfect image of Jesus in all his fullness.*** You and I have together been placed in the church and granted spiritual gifts to help everyone else in the church increasingly look and talk and act and believe more and more like Jesus himself.

Finally, in vv. 14-16 Paul draws upon vivid imagery to describe the ***results***, both individually and corporately, of the proper use of spiritual gifts and gifted persons in the body of Christ.

The proper use of spiritual gifts can greatly reduce spiritual immaturity in the body, portrayed here by the word translated “children” (v. 14a), a term set in contrast to the “mature man” of v. 13. We are to imitate children in their humility and innocence but not in their ignorance and instability. For Paul “immaturity is evidenced in instability, rootlessness, lack of direction, doctrinal vacillation, and susceptibility to manipulation and error” (Lincoln, 257).

His language is vivid: “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (v. 14b). The picture is of a tiny, storm-tossed, boat entirely at the mercy and whim of waves and wind. Thus there is only confusion and lack of direction, in direct contrast to the clearly stated goal-oriented language of v. 13.

Immaturity is especially evident when believers are easily duped by false teaching and always seem to embrace whatever new theological fad is being promoted. “Every wind of doctrine” is in obvious contrast with the “unity of the faith” in v. 13. In other words, *at the heart of childish immaturity is the lack of theological discernment*. Three phrases then explain what lies behind such threatening teachings:

(1) “by human cunning” – The word translated “cunning” literally referred to the throwing of dice (*kubeia*; from which we derive the English word “cube”). False teaching acts “like a wary and dexterous gambler, . . . winning by dishonesty without being suspected of it” (Eadie, 316). There is nothing divine in this teaching: it is wholly of human origin (cf. Col. 2:8).

(2) “by craftiness” – This refers to the unscrupulous and deceitful way in which false teachers dupe the immature and unsuspecting.

(3) “in deceitful schemes” – The word “schemes” (cf. Eph. 6:11, where it is used of the devil) indicates that there is a method or plan to their action. The word “deceitful” indicates that it is often difficult to detect.

On a more positive note, the proper functioning of spiritually gifted people in the church should result in spiritual growth whereby all are brought into conformity with Jesus, the head of the body (v. 15). The phrase “speaking the truth in love” is designed to contrast with the concluding words of v. 14. In other words, Paul isn’t exhorting us to truthfulness in general or merely that we are to be kind when interacting verbally with one another. Rather he is calling on us to proclaim the doctrinal truth of Christianity, i.e., the “faith” (2:5,13), as over against the “error” of false teachers, and to do so in love.

Paul’s concluding comments in v. 16 are a concentrated focus on both the unity of the one body and *the contribution to the latter’s growth by each individual believer*. The words “from whom” (v. 16a) have as their antecedent Christ, the head, indicating that no growth is possible apart from living, vital, trusting union with him.

The word “joined” uses a word found in Eph. 2:21 where Paul described the church as a building. The second phrase, “held together”, was used often in contexts of reconciliation (see Col. 2:19). Taken together, they “underline forcefully that for the unified growth of the body its members have to be involved in a process of continual mutual adjustment” (Lincoln, 262).

All this is accomplished as a result of what “**every**” joint supplies, not just what the professional or ordained “clergy” supply! The word “joint” may be translated “ligament,” the idea being that each individual believer, through the proper exercise of his/her gift and ministry, provides the necessary connections between the various parts of the body and thereby mediates life and imparts power throughout the entire church. The emphasis on what each and every believer contributes continues: “when *each part* is working properly.”

In this way the various parts of the body all contribute to the building up of the corporate church in love. This climactic stress on the role of love should not be missed. “Love is the lifeblood of this body, and, therefore, the ultimate criterion for the assessment of the Church’s growth will be how far it is characterized by love” (Lincoln, 264).

That, my friend, is biblical community. That is what the church, the body of Christ, looks like, feels like, and does.