

## A United Community

August 19th, 2012

Ephesians 4:1-6, 4:31-5:2

*"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, <sup>2</sup>with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup>eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup>There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—<sup>5</sup>one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup>one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."*

One of the best books I've read in the last year is *The Meaning of Marriage* by Tim Keller. In it, he talks about the diminishing value of the relationship of marriage in our society. He attributes this diminishing value to a change in perception about marriage, as it has moved from a covenant relationship (a durable, binding relationship that involves self-giving, commitment, perseverance, where the relationship takes precedence over the needs of the individual) to a consumer relationship (like the relationship you have with your grocer, where your needs are more important than the relationship). He writes:

*"Sociologists argue that in contemporary Western society the marketplace has become so dominant that the consumer model increasingly characterizes most relationships that historically were covenantal, including marriage. Today we stay connected to people only as long as they are meeting our particular needs at an acceptable cost to us. When we cease to make a profit -- that is, when the relationship appears to require more love and affirmation from us than we are getting back -- then we "cut our losses" and drop the relationship."*

That's the consumer mentality in action. Keller says that the consumer model has come to characterize most relationships that historically were covenantal. And I thought to myself, "Is the church one of those relationships?" If you're a patron of ShopRite and you find better prices at Bottom Dollar, you'll end your relationship with ShopRite. Most of us would quickly agree with that. And most of us (in our Bible-believing church) would agree that if you wanted out of the

marriage relationship because your needs and desires could be fulfilled by someone who had better "goods", that this is wrong.

But what about your relationship to the local church? Is it more like the relationship you have with a spouse, or like the relationship you have with your grocer? The answer to that question has great significance for the matter at hand today, which is the covenant commitment of protecting the unity of the church. I'd like to show you today that the vision of church life described in the New Testament gives strong evidence to conceiving the church as a covenant relationship, not a consumer one. Our failures in unity (which are really failures of love) often stem from our relating to the church with the consumer mindset instead of the covenant mindset.

## **The Basis of Church Unity**

The burden of this passage in Ephesians 4 is that the people of God would be united. It's a call to (as our church covenant affirms) protect, maintain, preserve the unity of the church, and an articulation of some specific virtues to pursue that. We'll get to this call in a few minutes, but I first want to briefly draw your attention to the ground, or basis, of this unity that we're to pursue. Notice that we're not called to create unity, but maintain it: "...eager to *maintain* the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." The call to pursue unity is built on the oneness of God, and of the salvation He has wrought for us in Christ:

*"<sup>4</sup>There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—<sup>5</sup>one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup>one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."*

In Christ we have been raised from death to life, we have been changed from enemies into beloved children, we have gone from without hope in this world to the sure and certain hope of a weight of glory beyond all comparison, from alienation and separation to peace with God. That

experience inevitably produces a bond (v.3) with those who have experienced that same grace.

Last year the president of Desiring God came to our house for dinner, a perfect stranger, and we had the most amazing three hours with him, talking about our stories and how God had worked and was working in our lives. What rich fellowship we experienced! How did that happen? Not by trying hard relationally to like each other, but through a common vision of God and His glory and His salvation that had captured our souls.

This is what Paul is reminding us of in verses 4–6. He's giving the objective ground for the subjective experience of unity that we are to pursue. Praise God, that church unity is not a fragile or ultimately vulnerable thing. It is a fixed reality, based on the oneness of God and His salvation in Christ. Our task is to walk worthily of them. As important as good relational, peacemaking, disciplines are for the church, the *ultimate* way to protect church unity is to press in to know and love and worship and praise God more and more.

### **The Practice of Unity**

However, that should not diminish the fact that we are called to act in such a way as to protect and preserve and maintain that unity. That's clear in this text. The objective reality is not intended to make us passive or indifferent to the subjective experience of that unity. Paul says we're to be "eager (being diligent, make every effort, do your best...) to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." We're to put this unity into practice in our daily life together; that's what I want to talk about in the rest of our time.

The vision laid out in these verses for how to put unity into practice is a big reason why I want to suggest that we think of our relationship to the

church as much more like a covenant, rather than a consumer relationship. Let me explain what I mean:

*"<sup>2</sup>with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,"*

*"<sup>31</sup>Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. <sup>32</sup>Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."*

What does practicing church unity (walking in a manner worthy of our calling) look like? It looks like humility and gentleness as we relate to others, patiently bearing with others, getting rid of all bitterness and anger and malice that you might have towards others and putting on kind, tenderhearted forgiveness. And you're to make every effort, to be diligent, to walk this out. It sounds like we're going to have to *work* at this, which implies that it's going to be a struggle, that you might not always feel these virtues and they might not come naturally, and the cost might oftentimes feel like it's outweighing the benefit. But strive, Paul says; labor, do your best, to live it out.

### **Implication: Church Life is Messy and Hard**

Think about what this call implies about life in the Church: it's going to be hard! The need for gentleness and tenderheartedness implies that you'll be near people who you might be inclined to be harsh with, people who are a little tough to love. The need for humility means you're likely to bump up against people who you're tempted to look down upon, or people who aren't particularly impressed with you. The need for forgiveness means you're going to be sinned against, and the need for forbearance means you're going to be among people who just irritate you and rub you the wrong way.

Alongside this text in Ephesians, let's place another one that addresses the issue of love and unity in the church. It was written to a church, as

you may remember from our study of it a couple of years ago, that was very fractured and divided:

*"<sup>4</sup>Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant  
<sup>5</sup>or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it  
does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup>Love bears all  
things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."*

Again, do you see what this description of love presuppose about the conditions in which love is necessary? It's a call to hang in there and persevere with a covenant-like commitment. Why would you need to be patient if there were not flaws and sins in the other person that were falling short of your expectations for them? Why would you need to say that love is not irritable unless other people were doing or saying things that were irritating to you? Why would you say that love keeps no record of wrongs unless other people were going to wrong you? Why would you say that love endures if the first time someone lets you down, you could cut your losses and bail on the relationship?

This passage is read at weddings all the time, but it wasn't written to a newlywed couple beginning their journey of marriage together. It was written to a church; a messy, frustrating, irritating, immature, fractured church that needed to learn how to walk in love. That's why I'm convinced that the vision for church life is more like a marriage relationship than the relationship you have with your grocer. The vision laid out in these texts suggest that life in the church is going to be hard, to the point that we need the virtues Paul describes here, because he knows full well that sometimes the people in the church aren't going to be easy to love. Consumers don't have a need for these virtues, because when a relationship is that costly, it's time to move on.

But the expectation for the church is that when this happens (and it will, if you press into church life), that is not the time to remove your love, but the time when love is tested and shown to truly be love or not.

<sup>32</sup>"If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For

even sinners love those who love them." Real love -- which is vital for church unity -- is love that endures, that suffers long, that seeks the good of those who annoy you and let you down and irritate and frustrate you and have hurt you, love that perseveres even when the other person isn't very lovable! That sounds like *covenant* love to me.

### **The Church: God's Workroom**

And God means for this messy experience of trying to live with and love hard, frustrating people to be God's workroom in which He is molding and fashioning us into the image of Jesus. If walking in a manner worthy of the calling is humility, patience, etc. how will you grow in these traits without difficult people pushing your buttons? Have you noticed that it's pretty easy to be humble, patient and gentle when you're not around other people?

But being around people -- messy, flawed, broken people -- pushes on your selfishness and lack of love, because it demands so much of you that is contrary to what our flesh wants. But God is using those people -- the difficult, annoying, sinful people -- to go to work on you. It's as if we're a bunch of little rocks that God has put into a bag, and He's shaking us up so that we collide with each other. Sometimes sparks fly but through the ministry of the gospel in those hard times, God is gradually making you into a beautiful, smooth gemstone. He's making you like Jesus; He's working love into your heart.

But what happens a lot of the time -- and it's a heavy burden on my heart -- when things start to get messy, when you're not too happy about some things, just at the point where we're getting to real church life where there's actually starting to be a need for some of these virtues, we drop the relationship and look elsewhere. And I wonder how much growth is lost -- for the individual, and for the church as a whole -- when instead of saying, "I'm not going anywhere, but this needs to change," and digging in and practicing biblical, covenant-like

love, we stay silent, observe things for awhile, and then look elsewhere when our needs and desires (often legitimate ones!) aren't fulfilled.

## **"As Christ Has Loved You"**

This is where it's so crucial to return over and over again to the basis of unity that we talked about earlier. Paul is calling the believers in Ephesus -- and in Pitman -- to the hard, wearying, daily-dying work of maintaining unity, of bearing with one another in love. Do you notice how he fills this exhortation with reminders of the spectacular love of God for unlovable people like you and me?

It's a call to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called (cf. 2:1-10). It's forgiving "as God in Christ forgave you". It's imitating God "as beloved children". It's walking in love, "as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us". At Calvary, love incarnate looked at the ugliness of your sin, your profound unlovability because of your heinous rebellion against a God of infinite wisdom and goodness and beauty, and rather than jump ship and let you suffer in hell, stayed put and was slaughtered in your behalf. He saw you in your unlovability and loved you unto death.

Jesus is humble towards you, He is gentle towards you, He is patient with you, He bears with you in love. By His blood He has made peace with you who once were alienated, hostile in mind and doing evil deeds. In delivering up His beloved Son to suffer in your place, He put away all His wrath and anger towards you, and is kind, tenderhearted and forgiving towards you. Nothing can separate you from His love. His self-giving love is the foundation and fuel for yours:

*"<sup>11</sup>Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup>No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us."*

*"<sup>34</sup>A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. <sup>35</sup>By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

This is why we have a church covenant. Jesus has loved us with a covenant love, and He calls us to love each other with the very love that He has for us. Being made alive in Christ, forgiven of our sin, adopted into God's family (all of which is the fruit of the New Covenant, fulfilled in Christ's shed blood) produces certain requirements and responsibilities in the way we relate to everyone else in the New Covenant community.

It's a hard, but glorious calling. It's call to daily dying, but in our dying we are walking on the way to life: "<sup>39</sup>Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." One day we'll worship Him in glory together, perfected in love and unity. For the glory of Jesus, and for the good of His broken, but beautiful, Bride, let's love today with a view towards that great day.