

## **Undivided Church Ephesians 4:1-16**

Church history has often been marred with stories of deep and violent division in the church. One of those stories is the division between a group of people known as the “Anabaptists” and the official state church in several countries of central Europe during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Anabaptists were Christians who opposed the state church’s practice of infant baptism. They believed that baptism was only valid when the candidate confessed his or her faith in Christ and wanted to be baptized. So they would re-baptize people who had already been baptized as infants. Thus they were called “Anabaptists,” which means "one who baptizes again."

They were heavily persecuted by the state church because of this – both Protestants and Roman Catholics. Their persecutors had governing authority in state so they were able to use torture and execution to try to curb the growth of the Anabaptist movement. The preferred method of execution by some was drowning, because this was known as the “third baptism” and was seen as a fitting end for Anabaptists. Others were burned at the stake, and others were tortured and executed in various ways. It makes me think about our baptismal service last Sunday night – what we did would have been grounds for arrest in those countries and it would have been done at the hands of those who were supposed to be part of the church. Hard to believe...

But even though things aren’t like that anymore, it’s easy to see that there’s still bitter tension today and widespread division between churches and inside of churches. We aren’t killing each other, but there’s plenty of bitterness, anger and division to go around. Within every local church body there’s the possibility for conflict and division to spring up and stifle the church – even right here at East Lincoln. We all carry around the remnants of our natural selves and sometimes that natural self rises to the surface and strikes. We get annoyed or frustrated or angry with someone and it’s easy to cut them down. It’s easy to distance ourselves from others. It’s easy to exclude. It’s easy to slander. It’s easy to feel bitter and hold a grudge. It’s easy to think, “I don’t need you.”

If I’m honest with myself I have to admit there are times when I feel like doing these things – and there are even times when actually I do them... Because of my natural self, sin is ready to pounce... and all of us share that same characteristic. So conflict and division is very possible right here at East Lincoln and is probably happening right now in hidden ways. Division at any level hinders the strength

and growth of a church. Whether it's slander behind the scenes or an argument in public, it has a crippling effect. So it's vital that we each, as followers of Christ, do our part in our own lives to stop it from happening.

The people in the church at Ephesus were dealing with the same thing and in their case it was a little more up front and volatile because of the division that existed between Jews and Gentiles. Because of what Christ had done, Jews and Gentiles were now united together in the same church, but that didn't mean there wasn't any more tension and conflict. Old walls of hostility don't just disappear overnight and Paul knew that if Jews and Gentiles were going to survive and thrive together in the same church, the tension had to be dealt with head on. And that's what he does in Ephesians chapter 4.

Paul wrote a lot in the first 3 chapters about the spiritual realities that Christ accomplished for Gentiles – bringing them from being far from God to being included in the household of God and united with Jewish believers. And they needed to know that reality in their heads, but they also needed to put it into practice. So Paul shifts gears in chapter 4 and begins to address very practical issues. Today we will see how he tells them to treat one another and how Christ intended for the church to function – in spite of all the differences that could divide them. What he says is exactly what we need to see today to test our own lives and see if we are walking in a manner worthy of the gospel.

Read Ephesians 4:1-6.

*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.*

You can see how much Paul was emphasizing the unity of the church. Pointing back to the spiritual realities of their unity in Christ that he wrote of in the first 3 chapters, he calls them to walk in a manner worthy of that calling and then he hits their natural tendency for division head on. Rather than being arrogant and insisting on their own way; they were to practice humility toward others. Rather than being harsh and standing up for their way; they were to practice gentleness. Rather than getting fed up with the Jews and losing their temper; they were to practice patience. Rather than creating factions and distancing themselves from the Jews; they were to bear with them in love. And rather than protecting their own

self interests; they were to be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

They had different issues on the outside, but on the inside they dealt with the same things we do when there's relational tension, so Paul's words are just as relevant for us today. When you look at how you respond to the people here in church do you see humility and gentleness? Patience? Do you bear with people in love – especially those who are difficult for you? Are you eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace? These are the things that are worthy of our calling.

In verses 4-6 Paul reminds them there isn't a Gentile church and a Jewish church – there is one church... one body, one Spirit... they were called to one hope... there is one Lord, one faith (Christianity)... one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. There's no basis for segregation in Christ's church – none whatsoever. Christ has made us all one who are born of the Spirit. So in those areas where segregation would appear, they must live in a manner worthy of their calling and fight for unity. And we must too. It's easy to divide and exclude and create factions within the church that are more comfortable or preferable to us, but that's not how the real church of Jesus Christ works. In the end that weakens his church. So we must always seek to be moving in the direction of greater oneness and unity, not away from it.

But that doesn't mean we are to abandon our individuality. We are to function together as one body, but within that body there are many differences – and that's good. That's how Christ created things to be. And that's what Paul writes about next.

Read Ephesians 4:7-13.

*But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.<sup>8</sup> Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men."<sup>9</sup> (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth?<sup>10</sup> He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)<sup>11</sup> And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,<sup>12</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,<sup>13</sup> until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,*

In verses 8-10 Paul makes his argument for why he thinks that the ascended Christ gives spiritual gifts to each person in the church. And then in verse 11 he begins to

explain what these gifts look like and how they are to work together. He mentions the apostles, the prophets, and the evangelists – these all have something in common. They are the ones who initially go into a city to preach the gospel and establish a church. They each have a little different role and are wired differently for the task Christ has called them to do, but they work together to get a church started. We typically call these kinds of people “missionaries,” though sometimes we acknowledge “evangelists” as well.

Paul also mentions the shepherds and teachers who are those from within the church who are appointed to care for and teach the people in that church family – we call them pastors and elders. I’m obviously referred to as a “pastor,” so is Randy. Last week we appointed Tim as an elder and we have several other elders as well. Generally speaking our roles are the same – Christ gave us gifts to shepherd and teach and care for the people of East Lincoln. And Paul says that all of these: apostles, prophets, evangelists, and I think especially shepherds and teachers are given to the church for the purpose of “equipping *the saints* to do the work of the ministry.”

So all of a sudden, that puts all of us who are in the church family into the playing field. It’s not just pastors and elders that do the work of ministry; it’s everyone. And I think we’re so blessed here at East Lincoln because so many of you are involved in ministry and doing your part to build up the body of Christ. You’ve moved beyond just being ministered to, and have your skin in the game and that’s where you really start to grow and find fulfillment in the church. And that’s where the church becomes healthy and strong. That’s what we did last weekend at Hope aLive and if you were a part of it you could see how awesome it is when we’re all working together. We’re looking at doing the same thing this fall on Helping Hands Day.

Paul writes in verse 13 that the saints are to do the work of the ministry so that everyone in the church attains to “*the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*” So this is what we’re aiming for.

- “The unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God” refers to Christian beliefs – God wants us all to be biblically grounded, to understand the teachings of our faith and especially who Christ is and what the gospel is all about. The elders are to equip the saints to do the work of ministry so that this happens.
- “Mature manhood” refers to spiritual maturity. We all start out as spiritual infants and progress to being spiritual children, spiritual young adults, and

spiritual parents. It's similar to the progression of human development. We are not supposed to remain as spiritual infants; we are supposed to grow into maturity – into mature manhood. The elders are working right now on defining what that looks like and how we can encourage all of you to grow and get involved in that process where you're at. It will be you, doing the work of ministry that will help others grow into mature manhood.

- “The measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” – as Christ was fully mature in every way, we too are seeking that kind of maturity. In Rom. 8:29 Paul says that God is conforming us to the image of Christ. We are to become like Christ in every area of our lives: biblical knowledge, relational maturity, character. We have a measuring wall at home where every year we keep track of our height. You know who's the tallest? Me. You know who's second? Not Amy anymore! Sophia! Sophia has reached the measure of the stature of the height of Amy, but that doesn't mean she's as mature as Amy in every way – there's much more to us than just our physical height. There's also our emotions, our social skills, our knowledge, our character. There is one man who stands at the top of all these – completely mature in every area and that is who we are becoming like.

So it is the church together, with all the saints equipped to do the work of ministry that we make progress toward that goal. And Paul finishes with two visual images to illustrate the importance of this.

Read Ephesians 4:14-16

*so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. <sup>15</sup> Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, <sup>16</sup> from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

So he uses the image of a fishing boat in the Mediterranean Sea getting tossed back and forth by the wind and waves to help us see why we need to work together to build up the body of Christ. Without this we'll be like that boat when it comes to different teachings, philosophies and false doctrines that are often being taught by different men and women who claim to be Christian authors and teachers. Gifted and popular speakers can capture your heart and attention and get you to believe all kinds of things. They know how to make what they say sound good so that they suck people in. The church family is supposed to protect people from that. The

church is supposed to be a stabilizing agent to keep people from veering off course. And when we're all equipped for ministry and doing our part, that's what happens.

The second image Paul uses is a body. He says the church is to be like a strong and healthy body, standing firm together under Christ. He likens us to all the different body parts that work together – each doing his or her own part to equip and strengthen the body of Christ.

This was Paul's vision of what the church is to look like, how people are to respond to one another, and what people are supposed to do. It was a vision that the people Paul was writing to needed to see in order to fight for unity with all their differences. It gave them something to strive for. And it gives us something to strive for as well.

Do you find yourself responding to certain people in the church in ways that will divide? Remember what Christ has done so that would no longer be so – he died to tear down every wall of division in his church. So respond to those people *“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.*

Do you find yourself just coming to be fed and to enjoy the blessings of being part of the church? I'm glad, but it may be time for you to consider what your part is in doing the work of the ministry. What gifts has Christ given you to build up the body of Christ? How do you fit in? You are needed too for us to function together as a body and accomplish the mission Christ has called us to do.