

The Body of Christ Must Maintain Unity

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

by Michael G. Lilienthal

Dear congregation, members of the body of Christ,

Think of those different words we use for “church.” We’re called a “congregation.” Literally a congregation is a collection of individual pieces, an assembly of separate entities all brought together, called together, and congregated into one place. And we’re called “members.” Members are body parts, so this term signifies our relationship in the body of Christ.

Paul therefore urges us in this relationship: “I...urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” “Walk” means our walk of life, our conduct, our behavior, our attitude, our action throughout all our life. And this must be “worthy of the calling.”

When we talk about the “call,” we usually mean the divine call God extends to men through congregations to be their pastors, but this isn’t the only sort of “call” we speak of, as Paul reminds us here. He speaks to everyday Christians, the types that are found seated in the sanctuary each Sunday: each member of the congregation is in fact called to do what Paul urges here. The Greek word for “congregation,” in fact, proves this: it is ἐκκλησία, “those who have been called.” This word designates those who were called together to congregate in a town square or marketplace, to hear some news, or to be charged with some action. Christians were all called together to congregate in

churches, to hear the Good News of God's Son, and to be charged with maintaining the unity of the body which was called.

Think of the Christian Church as a body: its head is Christ, who directs it, leads it, and gives it life. Primarily, therefore, the body must remain connected to Christ, for when the head is separated from the body, the body dies. But the body must also remain united within itself. If different parts of the body were fighting against one another, it couldn't survive. Or if one foot wanted to go one way while another went a different way, the body would stumble and fall. Therefore we are urged by Paul to maintain unity within the body itself, which he urges us in as "a prisoner for the Lord." Even though Paul's faithfulness to this doctrine and life put him in prison, he urges us down the same path. Whatever we ourselves suffer for our work in maintaining the unity and the bond of peace in the church must be worth it. Our concern is not for our personal well-being, but for the well-being of our fellow Christians.

But on our own we cannot do this. Our task is given to us by our Lord. Once we recognize our unity to him, then all the rest of this will follow.

I. For It Has One Lord

Notice the three trios listed in verses 4-6. In the Greek, there's no verb; it's not a complete sentence, just bullet points strung together, emphasizing the repetition of "one," then the repetition of "all." When read as such a list, with these words emphasized, it becomes like a poetic mantra:

One body
and one Spirit,
just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call;

one Lord
 one faith,
 one baptism
 one God and Father of all, who is over all
 and through all
 and in all

We can read this almost like a reversal of the common ordering of the Trinity: Spirit-Lord-Father. Look at each trio in order:

First: “One body-one Spirit-called to the one hope.” In the Third Article of the Creed (“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints,”) we confess: “I believe that...the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; just as He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith” (*Luther’s Small Catechism*, ELS Catechism 2001, 17).

What is our one hope? That we are saved by Jesus’ merits, that he has won for us salvation by his death on the cross. How do we receive this? We are called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, who is the one and only Spirit of God. Where are we gathered to? Into the one body of Christ: there is only one. This body, which is the Church, the invisible church which consists of all believers, past and present, into which we come by faith, is truly one, singular body. Paul does something interesting in this trio: Think of how we typically think of human beings: we say that a human being has both body and soul. The Greeks would typically divide it into even a third part: spirit. The **body** is the physical part of a person’s being, the **soul** is the part that is most real, that outlives the body, and the **spirit** is the part that directs the body

and the soul, that makes it alive and makes it move. So Paul speaks of the “one body” which is the Church, and then immediately makes mention of the “one Spirit,” the Holy Spirit, which moves that body, directs it, and makes it alive. The “one hope,” of course, is the hope of our eternal life, which we receive when our souls come into heaven, and this is the life, the hope which is given to our souls by the one Spirit.

This is the first thing which unites the Christian Church.

Second: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” Because Jesus performed the work of our salvation, we call him “Lord,” however, it is appropriate that this comes after the trio centering in the Spirit, for “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). The Holy Spirit therefore moves us to faith in Jesus, making us able to call him “Lord,” and only we who are members of his Church are able to call him “Lord” in faith. The “one faith” referred to is not the faith in our hearts, the faith which believes; it is the faith which is believed, the sum of all truth – that which we believe in. We speak of the Christian faith, the doctrines of Christian belief, all which, of course, have their ultimate focus in that same “one Lord”: Jesus Christ. That is our “one faith.” The “one baptism” is the sacrament which seals us in Christ, which gives us believing hearts in that one faith.

This is the second thing which unites the Christian Church.

Third: “one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” This trio is a little different, for we have three prepositional phrases underneath the heading of “one God and Father of all.” Just as only those who have been enlightened by the Spirit can call Jesus “Lord,” so only those same are able to call God “Father,” as

Paul says, “You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by [which Spirit] we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Rom. 8:15), and in another place, “For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith” (Gal. 3:26). Therefore when this says “Father of all,” “all” means “all Christians,” “all who have been called.” And this Father is “over all” the members of Christ, governing, guiding, watching, protecting; and he is “through all” those same members, working his will through us, so that our task is really his task and we are his tools; and he is “in all” of us, strengthening us, sanctifying us, keeping us in faith – and he has only been able to come so close to us because we were made a fit dwelling place for him by his Son, who paid the price for our sins; for otherwise we would be a filthy, disgusting place unfit for even a fugitive or criminal to live, let alone a king or God.

This is the third thing which unites the Christian Church. Notice what Paul has said so far: he urges us “to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” then he demonstrates to us the profound unity of God himself. If God is united, undivided even though there are three Persons to his Godhead, then how can he allow his Church to be divided, even though there be a diversity among all her members? But you see, this becomes the point: There are three distinct Persons, each separate from the other, and yet in the most perfect unity that can be conceived of with one another, united this way in fact *because* of their diversity. The Father governs all; and the Son is begotten of the Father, therefore serving as Mediator for the people of his body, speaking to the Father on their behalf and gaining for us forgiveness; and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, bringing with him that purchased and granted forgiveness, making those in whom he dwells holy before God as the Son has claimed them.

This diversity-unity of the Godhead demonstrates to us how the Church should be: diverse in gifts and abilities, with those diversities used by God to strengthen the unity of that Church.

II. So It Must Work to Grow

All in Christ's Church were given grace: "grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift." This unites us. We are all equally saved. We are all equally blessed with the Good News; all because "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to" Jesus (Matt. 28:18). Being exalted, he was able to send to us the Holy Spirit with his grace, and additionally with gifts for the building up of the Church. Some of these gifts Paul lists: "And he gave the apostles," the twelve who were sent out by Jesus first to proclaim the Good News, "the prophets," those who were given special revelations from God to strengthen the message of the Gospel, "the evangelists," those who took the Good News out to new audiences, new places, much like missionaries today, "the shepherds and teachers," pastors. You see, this is a trickling down: God gave these men to his church at large, all for the same purpose, which Paul says is "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." The apostles equipped those who became New Testament prophets, and these two groups equipped the evangelists, and those three groups equipped the shepherds and teachers. Those shepherds and teachers then equipped all the saints – and here's a key for reading your Bibles: whenever you read the word "saint," replace it in your mind with "member of the Church," and especially when you see that word "saint," think, "This means me."

So think about these pastors: they equip the saints, but it is God at work in these men equipping the saints. These two are doing that work. God through other men equipped still more men to do that same work. This should be seen as an ongoing process, a domino effect that goes on and on and on. Your pastor was equipped and taught for his work by men who were equipped and taught for that work, over and over again back into the time of the apostles, and the work that your pastor is equipped and taught for is to equip and teach you for your work: what is your work?

To equip and teach one another for one another's work, and so on and so forth, all "until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God," which he describes as attaining "to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 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. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 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"

Remember that this Church is a body. Bodies grow. From a tiny baby in the womb of its mother, a body grows and is nourished from that complete dependency and vulnerability until it is born. An infant is still completely helpless, so that it might be swayed by anything that comes along. You've heard, "Kids are impressionable"? That's true doctrinally. When we are children in our faith, we are impressionable. The doctrines men and Satan invent are like the wind, tossing us about into uncertain shores

or shipwreck. And they are very good at sounding true: using the Bible, even, and rational arguments that make sense to us. If we are unequipped, we will be easily swayed by these winds.

So Paul wishes us all to grow into “mature manhood.” We as a church have not finished growing, notice, “until we all” have reached maturity. You yourself may be mature in your faith, but is your neighbor? Then your work is not done. I, your pastor, work to equip you “for the work of ministry.” This is not the office of the public ministry, but “ministry” means service to one another. I equip you saints to minister to one another, to be servants to one another, to equip one another.

You may think you’re done, because you know something about Christ, you have faith in him as your Savior, but to “know only something about Christ, God’s Son, is not enough, it is not the full oneness with our fellow saints, not full-grown manhood. We must apprehend all that our faith and our knowledge are able to understand” (Lenski 537). Many Christians are afraid to grow up, thinking they don’t have time, or they don’t need any more; on the other hand, many infant Christians believe they are full-grown, and so put themselves in danger and begin trusting in a false doctrine, believing it is true. This should scare you. This should make you infinitely desperate, “eager” to help your fellow Christians. Do you encourage Christian unity, founded in the center which is Christ? or by your griping and complaining, or by your carelessness and indifference, passing along on the other side like the priest and the Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan, do you pick at the seams, tearing tiny holes in the fabric of this body? This is why Paul concludes the way he does: our duty is “speaking the truth

in love” to one another, so that we may “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” We must strive to get this body into perfect harmony and alignment with its head. If any part is not matched up, we stumble. Build up your brothers and sisters, therefore. Encourage them to hear the Word, to be nourished by the Gospel.

But you know this is impossible for you to do. You’re not a pastor. You’re not theologically trained. You’re the chief of sinners! How can you dare to try to teach others? The truth is you are theologically trained. You have Christ teaching you. Paul ends this section: “from [Christ] 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.” Notice: “the whole body...makes the body grow.” This is the body’s work. This is your work. But how is this done? “From [Christ].” The head gives life and direction to the body. The head empowers the body. You are empowered and equipped by Christ – through the work of others like your pastor – so that Christ can empower and equip even others *through you*.

This faith, this truth, this unity we have received as a gift of God’s grace. Our one God was united in the task of bringing us salvation. He therefore earnestly works to bring us into unity with himself, and with one another in love. He will work through you. You are saved, so you can be full of love and concern for your fellow members, that they may remain in that same salvation, united to God and to you.

Amen.