

Why do you think Paul starts this section of his letter to Ephesus by calling attention to the fact that he is a prisoner? *“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.”* I think the answer is that he wants them to feel the truth he is sharing with them is worth it. Walking worthy of our Christian calling is worth being imprisoned and even worth dying for.

Writing from prison undoubtedly means that what he writes is dangerous. It’s not a nice, middle-class way to solve our problems and be comfortable. Real, radical Christianity is risky and unpopular and dangerous. Jesus gave many warnings that following him was safe in the long run but dangerous in the short run. For example, he said, *“But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. And so you will bear testimony to me”* (Luke 21:12-13).

There is something very powerful about a testimony from prison when one’s life is at stake. That’s the power Paul wants to put behind these words. The power we feel when we hear Richard Wurmbrand tell us of Tahir Iqbal, a Muslim convert to Christianity who was imprisoned December 7, 1990, in Lahore, Pakistan, and died in prison July 19, 1992. He was a paraplegic and confined to a wheelchair. When asked about the possibility of being hanged he said, “I will kiss my rope, but I will never deny my faith.”

That kind of talk from prison is like a stiff winter wind in the face of our drowsy, consumer-soaked, self-gratifying kind of Christianity. It wakes us up and makes us dress spiritually for the winter battles. That’s what Paul wants to happen when we read his testimony from prison. He pleads with the church to walk worthy of our calling. Specifically, the walking he wants to emphasize is that we, *“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace”* (v. 3). We walk unworthily of our calling in Christ if we disregard the unity of the body and don’t expend any effort to safeguard what Christ died to

obtain for us. Paul pleads, “*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*” to keep the precious unity given by the Spirit of God and obtained with the blood of Christ.

This is Paul’s prison burden for the church at Ephesus. If we have any empathy for a suffering saint, it should move us to say, “Yes, Paul! That is utterly crucial. How then, brother Paul, shall we do this?” His answer is found in verse 2. The lifestyle that will preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace includes humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love. So, he says as plainly as he can that a life worthy of our calling which leads to unity of Spirit looks like this: “*Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.*” If you are humble, you will be gentle, and if you are patient, you will be forbearing in love. And if you are forbearing in love, you will be a peacemaker and a unity preserver. So be diligent and eager to be a humble and patient person by the power of Christ.

But beware of a common cultural mistake here. Humble does not mean wishy-washy when it comes to truth. Forbearing does not mean saying: truth doesn’t matter. It is a great mistake to confuse humility with uncertainty. But many today do indeed confuse them. They think that the only humble lifestyle is the uncertain, vague, unsure type of demeanor. Is that what Paul meant? Is the only way to preserve the unity of the Spirit to be vague and unsure in your grasp of truth? Paul sure didn’t seem that way. I think G.K. Chesterton put his finger on our problem 90 years ago in a little book titled *Orthodoxy*:

“What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled upon the organ of conviction; where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about *himself*, but undoubting about the *truth*; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that he does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert—himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt—Divine Reason” (G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 55).

I think Chesterton is right because in a few verses Paul goes on to say he doesn't want Christians to be infants any longer tossed by the waves and blown about by winds of teaching, but to "*reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ*" (4:13). The humility that leads to unity is not uncertainty, doubt, vagueness, or confusion. It is the demeanor that says: I am not the center of the universe; truth is the center and I submit to the truth and go where it leads. I am not king; God is my King. My will is not the law; God's Word is the law. I don't tell God how many faiths are acceptable to him; God tells me. I don't define the foundation of the unity of the Spirit; God does.

That is what Paul does in verses 4–6. He gives the objective ground in reality for the subjective experience of unity that we are to pursue. The unity of the Spirit that we should be so diligently seeking is based on an objective unity outside ourselves that we have had nothing to do with creating or defining. It is there, and we are humbly to recognize it and submit to it and rejoice in it and live in it: *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all* (vv. 4-6).

One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one Father. This is the objective foundation of any ecclesiastical effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit. It is not a fragile or vulnerable coalition. It rests on the oneness of God, the oneness of faith, the oneness of baptism, and the oneness of the body. Those things are one, no matter what you or I do to separate them. They are fixed realities. Our task is to walk worthily of them.

I am so relieved that Scripture says we must bear with one another. This frees me from the hypocritical need to think I am or anyone else in the church is perfect. Perfect people don't need to be borne with or forgiven (Colossians 3:13). Paul is not naïve. He knows that there are a few people at Ken Mawr who are grumpy or critical or unreliable or finicky. He knows Ken Mawr's pastor has gaping holes in the fabric of his overcoat of love. So, his counsel here is not how perfect people can live together in unity, but how ordinary,

imperfect Presbyterians can maintain the unity of the Spirit, namely, by *“bearing with one another in love.”*

Now the follow up question I want to ask this morning is: What does this have to do with our church’s mission? What does it have to do with the task of our church to feed the hungry, heal the sick, house the homeless, and evangelize the unreached people groups of the world? The answer is that since there is only one God (the Father of all who believe), and only one Lord (the Lord Jesus Christ), and only one Spirit (the Holy Spirit poured out from the Father and the Son), and only one faith (faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior), and only one baptism (into Christ in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and only one body (the body of Christ with Jesus as the head)—since there is only one God and one faith, we must take the news of this God and this faith to the nations. *“For there is no other name under heaven,”* Peter said, before the Sanhedrin, *“given to humankind by which we must be saved”* (Acts 4:12). Other religions and other lords cannot save.

You might think that this part of Ephesians is only about *church unity*, not about mission. But think again. The issue at Ephesus was the issue of whether Gentiles could be full fellow heirs with Jews in the body of Christ. The answer was that Christ reconciled both in ONE body to God through the cross (2:16). Both have access in ONE Spirit to the Father (2:18). Those who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ and made into ONE new humanity (2:15). So, the issue of unity for Paul is created by the mission of the church to those who were far off—the Gentiles, the nations—far off spiritually and far off culturally and sometimes geographically.

In other words, the uniqueness of Christ—the fact that there is only one Christ, only one God, only one faith—is the foundation for MISSION outside the church and the foundation of UNITY inside the church.

If there were many true gods, and many Saviors, and many valid faiths, and many baptismal entrances into many genuine bodies of redeemed people, there would be little need for doing mission the way Paul saw the need. But there is

only one God and one Lord and one faith and one baptism. Therefore, this salvation truth must be proclaimed to all creation—to all peoples.

If you believe this, you risk being called arrogant, intolerant, or ignorant. You will be opposed by influential people like British theologian John Hick. When he was living Hick argued that different religions are “equals, though they each may have different emphases.” He said Christianity is but one partner in the quest for salvation. We are not to seek one religion, but rather we look to the day when “the ecumenical spirit which has so largely transformed Christianity will increasingly affect relations between the world faiths.” He liked to quote from the Hindu Bhagavad Gita, iv, 11, “However men may approach me, even so do I accept them; for, on all sides, whatever path they may choose is mine.”

Yet, the truth that there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, is true inside the church and outside the church. It is the foundation for UNITY inside and the foundation for MISSION outside. Since there is one Lord, we should diligently maintain the unity of the Spirit under his unifying lordship. And since there is one Lord among all the religions of the world, we should be diligent to spread the good news to world religions and tribal religions and to atheists.

The particularity, the singularity, and the uniqueness of Jesus as the world’s only hope has never been very popular. But we must believe it with our eyes wide open and so count the cost. There is one Lord in all the universe with whom every one of us must deal. This is the God-Man Jesus Christ who lived and died and rose once for all 2,000 years ago in Jerusalem.

Knowing him alone leads us to trust in God’s amazing grace and to live forever in God’s never-ending love. He alone gives both unity and mission to the church, and because of him we can “Bear with One Another in Love.” Amen.

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