



The Rule of One Ephesians 4:1-6

This passage is one of the best known statements about church in scripture. It's about the oneness of the body of Christ and much beloved of those, including myself who point to it to show that despite our tendency as humans (and unfortunately as Christians) to be schismatic, we are only offered the Rule of One in relation to church:

one body - the Church
one Spirit - the Holy Spirit
one Lord – the Lord Jesus
one baptism
one God and Father

The whole notion itself is one of those great Trinitarian statements of Ephesians, which then links us as the Church to Father, Son and Spirit.

What was the purpose of saying this. Paul wasn't writing to a world full of the large and formal divisions of the Christian faith but to the local church at Ephesus and all the other local churches that read it; to prevent division. The massive denominational system we have today are perhaps the grotesque consequences of what happens when the words used here in Ephesians are ignored. Hence here are Paul's opening words:

Eph 4:1 1 I urge you, then--I who am a prisoner because I serve the Lord: live a life that measures up to the standard God set when he called you.

We already saw on previous occasions that the church is a God appointed body – the Body of Christ, with Jesus as its head. And it's for His glory and purposes that the church exists. One of my favourite benedictions are the words of the end of chapter 3: *Eph 3: 20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen (NIV).*

We are people called by God to be *ekklesia* – church – a group of people called together for His purposes. If that's the case the words of chapter 4 verse 1 are a logical consequence: *I urge you, live a life that measures up to the standard God set when he called you*

And now we see Paul urging them to live life worthy of their calling. Paul is urging us - passionately pleading. He isn't saying - well isn't it just cute that Jesus loves us, isn't God nice to be our Father. How kind of Him to show us so much grace. Let's just relax and hang loose! No, he's saying; look how much God loves us so let's live and act in a worthy manner! One of the responsibilities of being part of church is that we act responsibly and responsible behaviour is defined clearly for us in letters like Ephesians and generally in God's word.

Here was Paul - a man frustrated - he was chained between Roman guards - he couldn't share the good news with anyone except them and anyone who read his letters. But they could. Paul as a prisoner is saying - you've heard about who God is, who you are, how much God can do. I can't do it - but I urge you to live worthy of your calling. You are the children of God, you are His redeemed - now start living as though you were.

So how do we do that? The following verses are a great statement of what church is. He is addressing the local church as a body here in Ephesians 4, so he speaks about their relationship to one another rather than their personal morality (he deals with that later in the letter).

Be always humble, gentle, and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another. 3 Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together

He focuses on their basic relationships with one another.

- humility and gentleness
- patience - long-suffering
- bearing with one another in love
- keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

I found this reminiscent of what we discovered in Philippians last year. Relationships in the body of Christ are based on agape – putting the needs of others above my own – recognising that it is God who has called us together from our diverse backgrounds. So often the thing that keeps some as spiritual tourists, looking for the church which suits them is that God has called us to be family and family means that rather than things being straightforward, humans make relationships messy.

People have different attitudes to mess. Some can't stand mess and want order. Others are more relaxed about mess. Others just make it. God is a God of order. He doesn't make a mess of things. But he doesn't reject people because of the mess they make of their lives or His church. My experience of Him in my life and in the lives of people I know is that He seems to have the knack of turning our mess to His glory. And He calls us to do the same.

Is that scriptural? Surely it can't be. It is but not in my words. Here's scripture: *Be always humble, gentle, and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another. 3 Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together*

That's what all this means. It's agape – we put the needs of others before ours and we show humility, patience, tolerance, understanding. Why? Because they're only the same as us – therefore we seek to preserve unity in our dealings. It doesn't mean we ignore order and morality. Sometimes we interpret patience and long-suffering in that way. It isn't. It means encouraging others and giving them space and opportunity to get their messes right and to start being like Jesus. And that takes time and mess. In the end, if all fails, there is this thing called church discipline and it happened, and it is scriptural too: *1 Tim 5:20 Rebuke publicly all those who commit sins, so that the rest may be afraid.* In the past, our forefathers were very strict in dealing with people who they considered let the church down – they took their membership away. We're probably the opposite these days and like to play discipline down and I don't think that's wise.

Patience and long-suffering work the other way too. If church isn't how we like, do we walk away? I know of people as I'm sure you do who have used resigning their membership as a weapon to show their displeasure. Has God called them to another church? No? Because resignation says that: I am no longer called here, I am no longer called to be under the authority of this leadership, I have no responsibilities in regard of the church family here. Patience and long-suffering means in love we resolve our difficulties with others in the place God has called us and there is an excellent mechanism in Matthew 18 for that – pity most Christians don't use it!

Let's go back to tonight's passage. What was happening in Paul's time was the pressure for schism from various directions. From scripture we know about Judaising – Jewish believers thought Greeks were second-class Christians or not at all because they did not adopt Judaism as part of following Jesus. We also know from 1 Corinthians of those who for whatever reasons divided on leaders they had affinity to Paul, Apollos, Peter. They divided racially, socially and mixed their true beliefs with paganism – one of the massive sins of the OT. The pressure was on to emphasise differences, where God has called us to be one.

Therefore there is the statement *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.* By the Spirit we have all been made part of one body; the Church. That's what unity is - we have the same status. What's the bond of peace? Peace. When Paul usually talks about peace it usually refers to God's peace through Christ. What binds us is a bond of peace - we're all here by grace because we have peace with God.

The emphasis is that if we are Christians, we all got here the same way and none of us has deserved it. What we are in Christ is because of what God has made us, not through our efforts, our race, our views, our past – only by grace. So when we feel tempted to lose patience with the church and with specific people in the

church, remember that we all got here the same way.

Usually we study this passage to emphasise the ecumenical nature of the church. We're all the same really. But the letter is really about who we are in the church not who are in different ones. We got **here** the same way – that's our common bond – and anything we are now is because of God's grace. The church is a body of equals in terms of merit. The only one who isn't equal in the church is Jesus – the Head. That's why Paul says this:

Be always humble, gentle, and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another. 3 Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together

I've called this the Rule of One
one body - the Church
one Spirit - the Holy Spirit
one Lord
one baptism
one God and Father

We're one body – God has called us to it. It is the Spirit that has done all – He creates that unity. There is one Lord – He's the head of the church – what He says goes. You get the message. We are who we are because God has made us that way.

Why one baptism? As you know, baptism was something that characterised the Judaism of that time. The Jews had loads of baptisms and ablutions. There were also some Christian sects emerging that said that you were only a Christian if you were baptised by them. Or that there were extra baptisms for this or that.

I think the purpose of one baptism was an opportunity for Paul to say – there's one, body, one Spirit who joins it together, one Lord who has authority over it and one God whose purposes are served by it. So therefore if you are baptised as a Christian, you're acknowledging that you've been immersed into the church of God – and nothing else. And the outward sign of baptism recognised that – we are part of one and the same thing and nothing else. The baptisms I did the other week didn't make the people Baptists, it showed that they were part of God's universal Church and that the Spirit has made them that. To use the wording of the letter to the Ephesians – it signifies that they have been chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son and sealed by the Spirit. It's the rule of one.

But of course just as in the first century, there are plenty of churches and plenty of baptisms – the very thing Paul was warning against! In 20 centuries, times haven't changed! But the word of God hasn't!

The important thing about the rule of one is that like it or not, if we are in Christ, we are in the same body of Christ that all people who believe the same are in, whichever title they or us would like to place on ourselves. But that calling is just as local as it's universal.

But this isn't a sermon about ecumenism. It's about the local church. We are one in Christ because God has made it that. Baptism exists to signify that. Many of us here come from quite different church backgrounds – baptist, brethren, Anglican, pentecostal. Was it being Baptists that drew us together. For some of us it may well have been as we moved from another Baptist Church and were familiar with the Baptist way. What binds us together? Jesus is our Saviour and Lord – it's our faith in Him.

One of the things I found in my own life and often see it in newcomers to our church is comparison. We find things better or worse here than in other churches. We look at how worship differs. We compare the Pastor's performance. We compare the behaviour of others in the church. We don't like the way the church is run. This is wrong. That's right. But how did we get to be here? The same way everyone else did. How worthy are we to be here. As worthy as anyone else. We were chosen by the father, redeemed by the Son, sealed by the Spirit.

So rather than complain about the differences or say they do it better down the road, let's play our part. *1 I urge you, then--I who am a prisoner because I serve the Lord: live a life that measures up to the standard God set when he called you.*

And that means: *Be always humble, gentle, and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another. 3*
Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together

Preached by Mark Reid
MRBC Felixstowe 5/6/10
© Mark Reid 2010