

South Woods: A Tree Growing Together
Ephesians 4:1-6
August 31, 2025

I don't talk about my time in seminary often, for a number of reasons. However, I do think it's applicable today because of what I spent the *majority* of my time writing on. And not *just* because of the topic, but because of that project's origin.

Early in that degree program, a professor told our cohort this, "Write for the church you serve, not someone else's."

Since the degree was in Applied Theology, that counsel made a lot of sense. Because though whatever I wrote on would certainly be theological, the aim was for it to be theology *applied*. And this particular professor had narrowed that even further, encouraging us not to write theology that could be applied just *anywhere*, but to and for the church you're a part of.

And so, with that professor's words ringing in my ears, I began to consider how I might write with South Woods in mind. And what I decided to do was to narrow in on some element of our church's life that I considered to be a strength, and then *connect* that strength to the broader mission of the church.¹

And the strength I chose was one I'd observed for nearly a decade: local church unity. After growing up with a few conflict-ridden church experiences, South Woods had shown me that oneness was actually possible. Further, it was something I'd benefitted from repeatedly.

So, with *that* in mind—a theology of the church that wasn't merely abstract, but actually quite personal—I decided to dive headlong into reading and writing on local church unity.

Now, I say all *that* to say this. If you were to ask me, "What's the *most* important thing to grasp concerning the New Testament's teaching on local church unity?" I'd say this: We do *not* create it. We just *maintain* it.

You say, "That's it?" That's it. It's a simple distinction, but a vital one. And it's a distinction we find quite clearly in our text today, in Ephesians 4. Note first:

1. Walk Worthy of Your Calling (v. 1)

As I prepared this week, I read this sentence from Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "You must not start in chapter 4 of the Epistle to the Ephesians."² I agree. And yet, here we are.

You can imagine, of course, *why* he writes that. Because Ephesians 4:1 begins, **I therefore**. It's quite clear that Ephesians 4 is built on Ephesians 1, 2, and 3.

So, we better review a bit. Now, if I had an entire year of your undivided time, I *still* could not exhaust all that Paul's said thus far. But since we've done a little South Woods' history in this series, let me tell you about this church's 25th Anniversary back in 2012. Tom Nettles was here. He preached on Revelation, as I recall. Andy Davis was here as well. And Andy actually preached from Ephesians. Chris and I talked about this sermon just a week or so ago.

And in that sermon Andy said that the fall of man was like a fragmentation grenade. More specifically, he emphasized that sin not *only* separated humanity from God, it *also* separated humanity one from another. That's *some* of what we read about in Ephesians 2. That is, it's not *merely* that **you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked** (Eph. 2:1), it's also that there was a **dividing wall of hostility** among humanity (Eph. 2:14).

¹ Because much of the program was focused on missiology.

² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity*, 37.

So, though in the beginning God made us to enjoy perfect fellowship both with Him and with one another, Genesis 3 brought about separation, splintering, and swords. Andy called it fragmentation.

But that's not *all* he said in that sermon. Because Ephesians does not leave us *there*, in that hopelessness. Andy went on to say that Jesus is actually "in the process of gathering together that which has been blown to bits." How do we know *that*? Ephesians 1:7–10, that gloriously long sentence where Paul writes of the redemption that has been lavished upon us, **in all wisdom and insight, making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him.**

In one sense, that long sentence in Ephesians 1 tells us what the letter is about; and in one sense, it's that God in mercy is uniting all things in His beloved Son. Those who have been far off—far from promises, far from hope—have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:13). And for those who have been far from one *another*, divided by walls of hostility, Paul writes, **He Himself is our peace** (Eph. 2:14).

In the first few chapters of this letter, Paul explains these truths. But Paul doesn't merely *explain* these glorious, cosmic realities, he also prays that God's people might grasp them. He does not cease to pray that the Lord might enlighten the eyes of their hearts, so that they might **know what is the hope to which he has called** them, that they might know **the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints**, and **what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe** (Eph. 1:18–19).

Further, Paul prays that God's people might grasp these realities, not just intellectually, but in our inner being (Eph. 3:16). He prays that, by the Spirit in our inner man, we might **comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge** (Eph. 3:19). And that's actually how Ephesians 3 ends, *right* before the text we'll consider today.

Paul's explained much of what God has done in Christ. And he's prayed that we might grasp it, in the inner person. And then, and *only* then, he says *this* in chapter 4:1: **I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.**

So, we might ask, "What does *that* mean? What might it mean to walk in a manner worthy of what God has done for us in His Son?"

I'm not *entirely* sure what Paul says *next* is the *first* thing that comes to mind, at least for many of us. Verse 2: **with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.**

2. Eager to Maintain the Unity of the Spirit (vv. 2–6)

To explain what it means to walk worthy of the calling to which we've been called, Paul *begins* by talking about character qualities, in particular those qualities that one needs when relating to other people in the body of Christ. We'll look at each one later in the sermon. But note *first* that all of them lead to what's instructed in verse 3, an eagerness to **maintain the unity of the Spirit.**

We discussed this unity of the Spirit briefly when we looked at Acts 2 a couple weeks ago. At Pentecost, the Spirit of God had come upon the people of God. They'd believed the gospel when Peter proclaimed it. But they hadn't then run off to follow Jesus on their own. Instead, they were devoted to fellowship—to spending time with one another, to serving one another, breaking bread

together, and having all things in common.³ The life of that community in Acts 2 is something of a description of the unity the Spirit of God had brought about.

Acts describes that unity—that fellowship—in a narrative. Ephesians explains it in theological terms. Back in chapter 2, after Paul had spoken of a wall of hostility, and Christ Himself being our peace, he then elaborated upon *that* by saying that Jesus created **in Himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace** (Eph. 2:15). Some of the good news of the gospel is that Christ has brought about a new humanity. And though mankind was once at odds—with God and with one another—we now **both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God** (Eph. 2:19).

Now it'd be hard to read *those* verses, this letter, or really *any* of the New Testament and arrive at the conclusion that *we* did anything to bring all this about. Again, the unity the New Testament describes is, verse 3, **the unity of the Spirit**. If we were to read Acts, we could watch it unfold—from Jerusalem in Acts 2, to Samaria in Acts 8, to the Gentiles in Acts 10, and even in Acts 19 to the Ephesians.⁴ No one unites like the Spirit of God. He makes oneness *possible*. He creates it.

But verse 3 is *also* clear concerning our response to what God has done, how we might walk worthy of the calling to which we've been called. That is, we're to be **eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit**.

To be *eager* to maintain unity means this is something we're to endeavor toward, to be diligent to do,⁵ and something we're to *continually* do.⁶ So, what might that mean? We know what it means to do maintenance on a car, or on an HVAC unit, but what might it mean to maintain unity in a local church, practically?

When I was thinking so much on local church unity back in seminary, my advisor encouraged me to sort this “maintenance” of local church unity into a few categories that were hopefully less abstract, categories that aimed at application.⁷

The first category is *theological* unity. Maintaining theological unity means we don't sacrifice truth in a local church in order to achieve some pseudo-oneness. By the way, I bring up these categories, not *only* to make this practical, but because they're in the text. In verse 5 Paul will refer to the **one faith** of the church. And if we looked a couple chapters prior, we'd note that God builds His church on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets (Eph. 2:20). The truths that unite God's people aren't up for debate.

Of course, maintaining this aspect of unity occasionally means correcting falsehoods. Keep in mind that the Judaizers in the letter to the Galatians affirmed the deity of Christ, as well as His death and resurrection. And *yet* they taught heresy concerning how we might be justified by faith. In the face of that, Paul didn't say, “No big deal.” He said, “Anathema, let them be accursed” (Gal. 1:9). So, yes, sometimes maintaining theological unity means correcting falsehoods.

But *most* of the time it just means teaching the Word of God faithfully. The church in Acts 2 was devoted to the Apostles' teaching. Last week we considered the blessed one in Psalm 1, the one

³ That passage was the first time “fellowship” is used in the Scriptures, which is an expression of the unity the Spirit created.

⁴ Remember Ephesus and the mob's violent opposition to the gospel? A crowd in an amphitheater chanting for two hours praise to the idol Artemis? In the middle of all that, with little cultural pressure to believe what Paul spoke, God planted a church. By the Spirit, He brought a people together.

⁵ NASB

⁶ It's a present participle, the verb tense communicating ongoing action. John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, BST, 153.

⁷ I'm not speaking of the universal church here. Stott even asserts that it's the local church Paul is addressing primarily in *The Message of Ephesians*, 154.

that meditates on and delights in the law of the Lord. Teaching the word of God is one way we help maintain theological unity.

Occasionally, maintaining this could mean actually teaching theology. That's one of the reasons we slowly walk through books like Sproul's *Essential Truths*. This is one of the reasons we teach through our doctrinal statement in the prospective members' class. Some would say that spelling out these doctrinal particulars promotes *division*. We'd argue that clarity actually preserves and maintains unity.

Now, with each of these categories, I'll ask: what happens if we *don't* maintain this aspect of local church unity? Maybe at first there's a slow drift, where someone starts saying that this or that part of the Bible isn't something we need to emphasize. But the drift almost never stops there. Eventually other passages are watered down. And that drifting inevitably leads to abandoning the gospel itself. And when a "church" does that, it's no longer a church.

The local church seeks to eagerly maintain theological unity.

Now, I just mentioned the new/prospective members' class. With *that* in mind, the second category is what we might call *visible* unity.⁸ This *could* be the category that needs the most explanation. But, simply, the *visible* aspect of unity speaks of the church we can actually *see*. Is that the building? Of course not. The church we can *see* is a people—a people we know and covenant together with.

How might we maintain *this* aspect of local church unity? Well, not unlike the early church, we maintain this aspect of unity by seeking clarity concerning who belongs to God's people. We're not trying to be unnecessarily divisive. We're preserving unity. The New Testament wasn't afraid to say that some people were part of the church, and others were *not* (1 Thess. 4:11-12; Matthew 18; 1 Cor. 5:12-13; 1 Tim. 3:7). So, membership classes, interviews, covenant signings, etc. are not because we don't have anything else to do. It's because we think it reflects biblical realities, and because we're seeking to maintain unity.⁹

Why? Because it's not *just* particular truths that unite us, it's a person's belief and trust in the One that spoke those truths, and the Spirit of God indwelling that person. It's the unity **of the Spirit**. So, practically, our membership process helps make sure this *continues* to be the case. We never can know these things perfectly, but *long* before I was ever around, this church has tried to take these things seriously.

Believer's baptism helps maintain this aspect of church unity as well. Verse 5 seems to speak to this, when Paul writes that there's **one Lord, one faith, one baptism**. We might say the ordinances communicate visibly the ones that are unified in the gospel. Children who've yet to believe, this is why you pass the Lord's Supper plate without partaking. So, while we desire that you believe the gospel, and pray to that end, trusting the Christ of the gospel precedes the observance of the Supper. And it does so for a reason.

We might ask the same question of this aspect. What happens if we *don't* maintain this aspect of local church unity? What happens if we just say "Come on down the aisle. We've never met before. But *surely* you're a Christian. Join the church!" I'm not trying to be unnecessarily combative, but you all know the fruit of that kind of practice. And the effects of that on our witness to the world are legion.

The third category is what we might call *organizational* unity. Now, maybe we don't like the sound of that one, at least initially, because in our mind the church *isn't* an organization. However, it

⁸ Generally, invisible church language isn't all that helpful for this topic. Or at least it's not all that applicable. Yes, there is more than we can see. But the emphasis in a Baptist or Free Church ecclesiology is on the visible church.

⁹ In those membership interviews, we're not asking someone to tell us the names of the 144,000 in Revelation, we're asking those prospective members what the gospel is and how Christ has transformed them.

might be more correct to say that the church is not *merely* an organization. Because there are organized aspects of any local church. And that doesn't necessarily mean it's *not* a living body. In fact, it's not one *or* the other. I like to call the local church an "organized organism."

So, what's the *primary* organized reality we find in the local church throughout the Scriptures? Leadership. In the New Testament, the local church has leaders, leaders *they've* chosen (Acts 6; Acts 14), leaders they've chosen based on observed qualifications (1 Tim. 3; Titus 1).

So, while this Sunday morning series—with its emphasis on trees, planting, streams of water, etc.—has mostly focused on the organic realities of the church, we'll begin this Wednesday talking about *some* of the organizational realities—church's leaders, etc.¹⁰ Because this too is an aspect of local church unity we're to maintain.

And by that, I mean the *local* church maintains this. In my mind, if you want to sow division, have someone *outside* the local church choose the leaders you're to submit to. Because, in my mind, the only people that can ensure that their own leaders meet the qualifications written down in the Bible is the congregation itself—those that *know* the leaders they nominate and approve.

So, what happens if we—as God's people—*aren't* eager to maintain *this* aspect of local church unity? All we have to do is look at Acts 6. They were disorganized. And because of that, roles were confused, and conflict ensued.¹¹ I'd bet many of us could each tell a story where a church ended up knee-deep in dissension because it had not maintained the organizational aspect of local church unity.

There's the *theological* aspect of local church unity, the *visible* aspect, and the *organizational* aspect of it. *All* of these are to be eagerly maintained. The final category I'll mention today is that of *relational* unity. This is probably the *easiest* to see in a plain reading of Scripture. We saw much of this in Acts 2 a couple weeks ago. The fellowship described *there* is fruit of the unity God had just created by His Spirit.

There we see that the unity He brings about is, without question, intended to be *relational*. This is quite clear in the verse immediately preceding Paul's instruction to maintain unity. Hear verse 2 again: **with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.**

Those aren't things you do on your own, or to yourself. They have to do with how you relate to one another. And these characteristics—maybe we'd say this "fruit of the Spirit"—actually help us maintain *all* four aspects of unity we just mentioned.¹² Because each category actually presupposes a people that spend time together, living among and relating to one another. So, it's not *only* that we're instructed to maintain unity, in this list Paul also lays out "how" we might.

First, **humility** is essential to gospel unity. As you well know, hubris is at the root of much discord. So, if you think of a conflict, it's almost certain you'll find evidence of pride. Humility, on the other hand, thinks of "self" less. And when a *community* of people are willing to do that, each considering the other more important than their "self," relational unity can be maintained.¹³ **Gentleness** does the same thing. Rather than "fits of anger," enmity, or jealousy, we're to be meek in the way we relate to others in the church. And we do so in order to maintain relational unity.

After that pair of "fruit," Paul lists another: **patience**. Paul's a realist. He knows that if churches spend as much time with one another as Acts 2 describes, and if we're still fighting

¹⁰ By the way, later in Ephesians 4 Paul will speak of pastors/shepherds.

¹¹ Local churches express their unity by an agreed-upon and submitted-to, *local* leadership.

¹² In fact, John Stott calls these the five foundation stones of Christian unity, 149.

¹³ Paul says something similar in his letter to the Philippians: **complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.**

indwelling sin as he describes elsewhere in the New Testament, then we're going to need a little thing called patience. This is yet another way we might maintain unity in the body.

The final clause directs us as well, describing both the challenge of maintaining unity and its motive, that is, in the local church we're **bearing with one another in love**. Later in this same chapter Paul will write that we're to be **kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you** (Eph. 4:32).

So, maybe you say, "Yes, I see how humility, gentleness, and patience help maintain unity. Of course it does. But where might we find this humility, gentleness, patience, and the strength to bear with one another in love." It's right in that verse I just read. We do unto others as it's been done unto us, by God Himself. You won't find a quality, an aspect of fruit, that Jesus Himself didn't embody, and didn't embody on your behalf.

So, when we're eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit **in the bond of peace**, but still ask, "how?" we remember what Paul just wrote: He Himself is our peace.

He brought it about. He made it possible. And what He's created we're to maintain. And we do so . . .

3. **Because of Who God is** (vv. 4–6)

Not to return to Galatians unnecessarily, but maybe you recall that Peter's conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel. But that *wasn't* because Peter was like the Judaizers, misunderstanding the doctrine of justification by faith in an intellectual sense. It was because he wouldn't eat with those whom God justified. To walk out of step with the gospel *was* to deny by his life what Christ had brought about. To say it another way, Paul believed that when the gospel unites and division remains, that division actually contradicts the gospel message.

And that's, in part, because it doesn't reflect the character of God. Which is what verses 4-6 go on to detail. See if you hear the word "one" once or twice. Verse 4: **There is 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**. As Paul implores the Ephesians to seek "oneness," he lists these seven "oneness" realities.

And the thread that runs through them all is the oneness of God. For example, there is one body *because* there is one Spirit. Paul explains elsewhere, **in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body** (1 Cor. 12:13). The people of God, in this sense, mirror the nature of God. One Spirit. One body.

Paul goes on in verse 4, **just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call**. If we think Paul isn't *still* talking about walking worthy of our calling, that clause reiterates it. There is *one* body and *one* spirit—*just as* you were *called* to the one hope.

On Wednesday nights we've discussed how a future hope affects our life *now*. This past Wednesday night we discussed how that affects our life within the church. Ephesians 4 agrees with that emphasis. There is one hope that belongs to our calling. That one hope reorients us so that we might live with one another rightly.

In verse 5 Paul writes that there's **one Lord**, almost certainly speaking of the Lord Jesus Christ. In another letter, Paul asks the church at Corinth one of the great rhetorical questions in the New Testament. When that local church was wrestling through issues of quarreling and tribalism, the Apostle asked them this: **Is Christ divided?** (1 Cor. 1:13).

Verse 5 goes on: **one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all**. "Over all" speaks to the Father's sovereignty. He's working **all things according to the counsel of His will** (Eph. 1:11).

“Through all” details that further, speaking to His controlling and sustaining all things.¹⁴
And, finally, “in all” speaks of God’s sovereign indwelling.

Which connects us back to what the whole passage has been about. What is it that we’re to maintain? The unity **of the Spirit**.

Conclusion

We didn’t create *that*. We maintain it.

And not just in abstract, theoretical terms, but in personal, practical ones.

Because by His Spirit, He’s created unity among His people at South Woods. He’s made us one. So, might we—with humility, gentleness, and patience—be diligent to preserve what He’s made possible. Because there’s one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

¹⁴ See Curtis Vaughan, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 87.