

The Healthy Body
Ephesians 4: 1-7; 11-16

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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We're in the second half of our look what Scripture says about Christ's people, the church. Last week we looked at images of the church such as a household and a living temple. Today we're picking up Paul's favorite picture of the church: interconnected members of the very body of Christ. To begin, how about some news from the front?

Every January, I gather with the pastors of our largest EPC churches for 3 days of sharing, brainstorming, prayer and fun. These guys are crazy talented, deeply committed, beautifully consecrated and highly aware of their fallibilities. The topic on everyone's mind was, "After Covid, how do we rebuild the church? Will the people who haven't been to church in two years ever come back?" Really good questions. But we actually started our discussions with a deeper question. "How are you doing after leading through nearly two years of pandemic issues, racial tensions, political turmoil, and national polarization?" Now I've read national articles about how many once unified churches have been breaking apart over these very electric issues. People who agree on core doctrines about Christ, who've known each other for years, look at each other with suspicion. Many have just stopped talking to each other. Yes, I read about it, but I'm not sure I really believed it was happening. It is.

Many of our pastors reported how much vitriol they've had poured on them. They have members on the one hand who say, "I can't believe you're telling us to wear masks. Don't you know that infringes on our civil liberties?" And those on the other hand sniping, "I can't believe you're not strictly enforcing the masking rule. Don't you know how irresponsible that is!" They've got people who snark, "Why aren't you telling people to get vaccinated?" Right after others say, "Why aren't you telling people that vaccine mandates are totalitarian overreach?" But these topics were lighthearted compared to the issue of race. A crazy number of our best pastors have reported that people in their congregations have accused them of being critical race theorists *and* white supremacists—after the same sermon! One pastor said, I got called something I've never been called in my whole life, a word in my family that was the most evil thing you could say. They called me a *liberal!* The tension in congregations grew so strong that several of our

finest pastors seriously considered leaving ministry altogether. It's been a rough stretch.

But on other news from the front, I was fascinated by what we heard from our Discover First dinner last week. We had 28 potential new members seated at tables with elders and deacons. We asked the question we always ask about what makes a church great, and what makes for a great church experience. The collective answers always include things like “great worship, robust outreach, faithful teaching, good programs for kids.” All those answers emerged. But most consistently every group said, “Connection. Love. Fellowship. Unity.” Hearts long for the community of a body of Christ that loves one another. For the bonds that come from loving Jesus together and authentically. I was so encouraged. People yearn to find a unity in union with Christ. We want to bond on issues more eternal than politics, deeper than skin color, and more urgent even than a pandemic. The reality that by and large we have *not* fallen out with each other over the issues of the day has drawn people to our worship.

This is the heart of what Paul is after in Ephesians 4. “With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bear with one another in love. Be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Love requires intentionality. You have to plan to love others actively. Then you have to do it. That requires patience. People are exasperating. And these days, people are cray cray. We're all under so much tension. We're told contradictory “facts.” We feel so urgently passionate. But unity requires lots of patience. A fellowship that matters requires us to be downright *eager* to maintain harmony. The priority of peace becomes a kind of bond, or guard, that makes me shut my mouth before I say something ugly. Peace binds me to listen to other points of view. Peace as priority one chains me to gentleness and blocks me from nastiness.

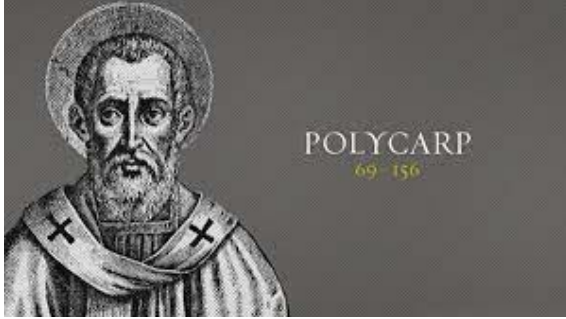
That's fine. Almost all of us can control ourselves for a few hours on Sunday morning. We can create fake peace just by being reasonably polite. But that's not what we're talking about. How do we nurture a fellowship that is authentic in its unity? We've got to sink roots into the deepest reality. We've got to press more deeply into Christ Jesus, with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength. When we each do that, we discover—oh, look, you're there too. You're in Christ with me. We are joined to each other by the depth of our being joined to him.

That's why Paul moves next to seven declarations of oneness. He names seven realities that every Christian shares. These are irreducible facts, apart from which one is not partaking of real Christianity. 1) There is *one body*. All those

who are genuinely in Christ are connected just as each parts of your one body are all fully and truly part of your body. 2) There is *one Spirit* who flows between us. We believe in Christ because the Spirit has been poured into our hearts. Without the Holy Spirit, one is not in Christ, not part of the church. With the Holy Spirit in my individual heart I discover that I am eternally connected to everyone else who has this Holy Spirit. 3) We were called to *one hope*. That one hope ignites us with the realization that everything turns on 4) the *one Lord*, Jesus Christ. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. That's the very core and heartbeat of life. 5) We who entrust ourselves fully to Jesus share *one faith* in him. 6) Faith propels us into Jesus, and this active belief is expressed through one sign. Our spiritual immersion in Jesus is signified by baptism. And there is only *one baptism*, the baptism of Jesus, the Son of God immersing himself in our humanity, dying under the waters of death and rising as new creation. 7) When we are joined to Jesus we discover that everything is pointing towards the *one Father*, who with the Son and the Spirit is the Triune God of grace who is over all, through all, in all.

Does your heart thrill to these seven “ones”? Do you feel the pull of the mystery of how we are joined to Jesus and taken into his plans for redeeming and remaking the world? You're experiencing the unity of the one church of Jesus Christ throughout all times and places. Or do these seven “ones” leave you indifferent? Does Jesus seem no better than any other spiritual path? Do you feel no thirst for this hope of his return? Is worship and fellowship just something nice and vaguely comforting that you can do when you don't have something more interesting planned? You might want to take some time to consider, “Am I in Christ? Is my life immersed in his?” Take your pulse. Does your heart beat as you hear in sync with Paul as he declares, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live...I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2: 20).

Union with Christ is the basis for our unity in the church. To look at the person in the pew next to you and realize, “She is *in Christ*. The Holy Spirit runs through the veins of his soul more surely than his blood courses in his veins. She is a new creation. I will know him into eternity.”



The other day I came across an ancient account of the martyrdom of Polycarp. He was a Christian bishop who had been disciples by the apostle John. He was murdered for his faith when he was an old man, about AD 150. During his trial, the Roman official urged him to deny Christ and be set free. Polycarp replied, “Eighty

and six years have I served him, and he never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?” Polycarp loved the one Lord, the one faith, the one Spirit more than his one earthly life. The account of Polycarp’s martyrdom concludes by noting the names of those who were in power at the time. Polycarp “was taken by Herod, Philip being the high priest, Statius Quadratus being proconsul, but Jesus Christ being King for ever, to whom be glory, honor, majesty, and an everlasting throne, from generation to generation.¹ Here’s who thought they had power at the time, remembered now only for their crime. But all the time Herod, Philip and Quadratus pretended they were in control, Jesus Christ reigned as king. Then, now and forever. That’s what we’re about. We’re not playing at church. We’re not playing at faith. We’re immersed in Jesus who is Lord of all, and that unites us.

Lastly, we highlight how Paul reminds us that pastors and teachers serve not to do the work of the church alone but to equip *all* the members of the church for their work of ministry. That work is building up the body of Christ. That’s our job as members of Christ who are members of a particular local church. We’re all connected to Jesus our Head. We each have the role of being joints and ligaments. We each contribute to holding the body together. We play a connecting part. Whatever our gifts and personalities may be, we need each person doing their unique part to keep this part of Christ’s body growing and healthy.



There’s a wonderful little book called *Rediscover Church: Why the Body of Christ is Essential*. In it, the two authors put boots on the ground for what union with Christ means in the church. In membership, we are each saying, “This is the particular group of Christians I’m inviting into my life to keep me accountable for following

Jesus. I’m asking them to take responsibility for my Christian walk. If I’m

discouraged it's now their responsibility to encourage me. If I stray from the path, it's their responsibility to correct me. On the other hand, I become responsible for the same things in these Christians.” They go on to say,

Membership is a job. Church membership is not a passive thing. It's not just a status. It's not like membership in a country club or a shopper's club. It's a job where you go to work. You need to engage it with your mind and heart. You need to think about making an impact.

Friend, by joining this church, you will become jointly responsible for whether or not this congregation continues to faithfully proclaim the gospel. That means you will become jointly responsible for both what this church teaches and for whether or not its members' lives remain faithful. And one day you will stand before God and give an account for how you fulfilled this responsibility. We need more hands for the harvest, so we hope you'll join us in that work.

...When I talk with new church members, I make a big promise...if they show up consistently (in our church that means corporate worship on Sunday and home group on Wednesday) and seek to care for others, they will get everything they want out of the church. That could be spiritual growth, friendships, Biblical knowledge, or practical help...

If you don't participate regularly, you don't get the formative experience of church...And if you don't seek the good of others, you learn to judge the church for how it fails to meet your needs and how others fail to reach out to you.... Just show up, and ask how you can help.²

I give thanks to God for how unified and loving we have stayed through the last two especially crazy years. I'm grateful to be surrounded with folks who understand that membership in a particular church is how we express our membership in the one body of Christ. We know we have a job to keep loving, to keep unity, to showing up and asking to help. Be of good cheer. People are noticing. And it means everything to them.

¹ The Martyrdom of Polycarp, Anonymous, chps 10 & 21. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0102.htm>.

² Collin Hansen and Jonathan Leeman, *Rediscover Church: Why the Body of Christ is Essential* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021). Download for free: <https://www.9marks.org/rediscover-church-free-download/>.