

## “One Lord”

### The Eighth in a Series of Sermons on Ephesians

*Texts: Ephesians 4:1-6; Deuteronomy 6:1-15*

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I grew up in churches in which the pastor would often declare “we have no creed but Christ” without noticing that his own assertion was a creed. In the first six verses of Ephesians 4, we find an apostolic creed—“one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all”—a creed possibly used in Christian worship, and certainly used to identify those doctrines held in common by Christians in the apostolic churches, such as the church in Ephesus. It is not an accident that this creed appears in that section of Ephesians in which is Paul stressing the importance of Christian unity. Christians may have a common experience of the risen Christ’s presence in our midst through word and sacrament, but it is our common confession of faith which serves as our collective testimony to the truth of God’s work in our midst. When we confess our faith together as one body with the words, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one Father of all,” we are confessing that God has made us one before the eyes of the watching world.

We return to our series on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, and we pick up where we left off with the opening verses of Ephesians 4. It has been a number of weeks since we worked our way through the first half of this epistle, so I would like to spend the first part of our time doing a brief recap of the opening chapters, before turning to Paul’s discussion of Christian unity in Ephesians 4:1-6.

Not only would a brief recap of the first three chapters of Ephesians be helpful to get us all up to speed after our hiatus, it is also vital, because as we move into the second half of Ephesians and turn to the so-called “application” section of this letter (chapters 4-6) we need to keep in mind what is being applied in these verses—the doctrine set forth by Paul in the first three chapters.

Paul’s call for unity in Ephesians 4 makes little sense without considering how it is that Jesus redeemed us from our sin, and how (prior to God saving us) we were dead in sin and enslaved to the sinful desires with which we were born. Jews and Gentiles had been divided before the coming of Christ, but now in Christ, whatever racial and cultural differences existed between them are no longer to divide God’s people. Christ tore down the barrier wall by reconciling both groups to God through the cross. The two peoples (Jew and Gentile) have been made one.

When the apostle commands us to no longer live as the Gentiles do—focusing upon ourselves and upon the gratification of our own lusts—we need to know that God already sees us as raised with Christ and seated with him in heavenly places. We are to live our lives on earth by always keeping in mind our heavenly citizenship. When Paul tells us to walk in love, we must to keep before us the electing love of Christ, which is the basis for God’s decree to save sinners who truly deserve his wrath. The only way we can ever hope to walk in love, is to consider Christ’s prior love for us.

When Paul speaks of the duties of husbands and wives in Ephesians 5, and informs us that marriage is a picture to us of Christ’s relationship to his church, Paul’s assertion is grounded in the fact that both husbands and wives are redeemed by the blood of Christ. When Paul speaks of the responsibilities of parents and children and then of slaves and masters, we must keep before us Jesus’ humble obedience to the law of God as the suffering servant, which earns for us a justifying righteousness. In Christ’s humiliation, we see true humility.

When Paul directs us to put on the full armor of God in Ephesians 6, we must understand how it is that Jesus' death on the cross takes away the guilt of our sin and how he has defeated death and the grave through his resurrection. The only way to overcome the deceptive scheming of the devil, is to know the power of the gospel and to be fully confident in Christ's complete and total victory over our defeated foe.

In order to live the Christian life as described in the last three chapters of Ephesians, we must have the kind of hope Paul describes in Ephesians 1:18-20. Paul prays that *"you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come."* Without such hope, and without a firm knowledge of what God has done for us in Christ, we cannot possibly walk in a manner worthy of our calling. If we think like godless Gentiles, we'll act like godless Gentiles. If we know the power of God's resurrection power in Christ, and think about what that means for us as God's people, living the Christian life becomes a sacred joy, not an intolerable burden.

It always helps to keep the big picture in mind. This is what Paul does in Ephesians 1:3-14, when he speaks of the glorious Trinitarian panorama of redemption—the box top to the puzzle. God chose us in Christ, sent Christ to redeem us from our sins, and then sent the Holy Spirit who calls us to faith in Christ through the preaching of the gospel. Redemption decreed by the Father. Redemption accomplished by Christ. Redemption applied by the Holy Spirit. In this we see the key distinctive of the Reformed understanding of the gospel. God directs his saving grace directly to those individuals whom he intends to save. God does not merely make salvation "possible" for any who want it—none do. God saves those specific individuals he has known by name from all eternity. And all of this stems from God's love in Christ, a theme we have seen repeatedly throughout the opening chapters of Ephesians.

The big picture panorama of salvation in chapter one is the basis for Paul's remarkable assertion about the grace of God in Ephesians 2:4-10. *"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."* We are saved by grace, through faith, to become God's workmanship, so that we live lives of gratitude before God, as well live as a testimony to our neighbors of the mercies of Christ. What does a life of gratitude look like? Paul will tell us in Ephesians 4-6.

In Ephesians 2:11-3:13, Paul speaks of how God's eternal purposes are worked out in redemptive history, bringing Jew and Gentile together in one church and under one head—who is Christ. God has called Paul to preach the mystery revealed in the gospel. Although foretold by the prophets, it was not until the coming of Jesus Christ that God's purposes for the Gentiles are made known. Although Paul is in chains when he writes this epistle, he knows that it is only in the gospel that we find "the unsearchable riches of Christ." If we do not know what those riches are, living the Christian life is like a series of broken New Year's resolutions. You try real hard for a while, but you soon lose interest when you realize you can't keep even one of your own resolutions. This is all the more difficult to do when it comes to the commandments of God.

We should also take note of the fact that at the end of chapter three, Paul concludes with a prayer for all those reading (or hearing) this epistle—*“that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to 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, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”* If we don’t keep in mind Paul’s discussion of the love of God in Christ as the background for the second half of Ephesians, we risk turning this section into a series of demands we cannot fulfill. But if we see in this section of Ephesians the perfect obedience of Christ, which has been imputed to us through faith, this section of Ephesians becomes a wonderful guide as to how to joyfully express our gratitude for all that God has done for us in Christ.

**I**n Ephesians 4, we find what one commentator describes as the “constitution of the church”<sup>1</sup> as Paul describes the way in which Christ incorporates us into the one body of Christ (the church), and then builds us up in love so that every part of Christ’s body functions as it ought.

One thing which should strike us as we turn to the application section of Ephesians is Paul’s stress upon a Christian’s conduct as a member of the church—Christ’s body. While Paul speaks to individual Christians and their need to live out their faith in Christ, he does so in the context of the individual Christian’s membership in Christ’s body, the church. While it is commonly held throughout evangelical circles that God is solely concerned with our personal salvation—hence the language of accepting Jesus as my “personal Lord and Savior,” Paul, on the other hand, speaks of the Christian life not in experimental terms (my own private religious life) or private terms (me and Jesus in communion with one another), but in terms of how Christians are to relate to other Christians within the body of Christ. In Christ, together we are God’s new society and possess a common bond which often transcends all earthly institutions, even that of our own families.

I think Paul would be genuinely shocked to hear someone profess faith in Christ, who is not also a member of a church. To be a Christian is to be part of Christ’s body. Christ’s body is manifest in the local church. Christ’s church is identified by the gospel it preaches, the way it administers the sacraments, and by whether or not, it disciplines its erring members. While there are indeed times in life when we are between churches, the New Testament has no category for people who are professing Christians yet who do not seek to be members of a local church. In fact, Paul’s discussion of the Christian life (and sanctification) takes place in the context of his doctrine of the church (ecclesiology). Christ sanctifies his people through their relationship to one another, because together we are all members of his body.

As we turn to our text (the first six verses of Ephesians 4), we are immediately reminded of Paul’s personal circumstances at the time he composes this letter. *“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord.”* In Ephesians 3:1, Paul spoke of being a prisoner on behalf of the Gentiles. Now Paul speaks of being a prisoner “for the Lord.” This is but another way of saying Paul has devoted himself to the Lord’s service. He’s not asking his readers to feel sorry for him, but because he is paying the price for preaching the gospel, Paul is affirming his right (and indeed the authority) to be heard.<sup>2</sup> Paul knows the

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<sup>1</sup> Barth, Ephesians 4-6, 425.

<sup>2</sup> Barth, Ephesians 4-6, 426.

gospel is as always a threat to the powers that be. He knows that his imprisonment is part of God's greater purposes for the spread of the gospel.

Having proclaimed the love of Christ for sinners, Paul now urges us to “*walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.*” In what follows, Paul will tell us how to walk in a manner worthy of our calling. Through the preaching of the gospel, God has called to faith in Jesus Christ. We are publicly identified with Christ through our profession of faith, through our baptism, and through our membership in Christ's church. Therefore, we are to walk (a metaphor for how we live) in such a way that in all our conduct we reflect the person and work of that same Savior who sovereignly made us alive when we were formerly dead in sin. While we all struggle with sin, we must not live in indifference to sin.

The way we walk in a manner worthy of our calling, is to walk “*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.*” The proof that Paul's discussion of how we are to walk (as part of our sanctification) is to be worked out in the context of the church is clear when Paul stresses that we must be humble and patient, and that we are bear with one another in love, as well as strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit. Paul doesn't speak of the importance of a quiet time (although personal Bible study and prayer is a wonderful thing). Paul doesn't tell us to seek mountain top experiences. Instead, Paul tells us act in a particular way toward others in the church and in our families and workplace.

If you know Paul's epistles, you know that Paul is not given to abstract theory. Paul sees our faith in Christ as having consequences for every aspect of our daily existence as Christians. The consequences are framed here in terms of how we relate to our brothers and sisters in Christ. When we stress Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior it is easy to lose sight of the fact that God saves us as individuals, but then adds us to Christ's church. Whose burdens are we to bear? Not our own. With whom must we seek unity? Our brothers and sisters in Christ, who, like each of us, are sinners, with all of the sins and faults that go with it. It is easy to have unity if we see our Christian faith as primarily concerned with our own experience, our own individual salvation, and our personal church which has one member. Paul, however, won't let us consider the Christian life as a life of isolation. The Christian life is to be lived in the church and in the daily grind of life. Unity with fellow sinners requires an attitude of humility, as well as a fair bit of effort. Unity as requires a constant focus upon the cross of Christ.

In verses 4-6, we come to an early Christian creed which may have been recited (or perhaps, even sung) in the churches. “*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, who is over all and through all and in all.*” There are a number of things here of which we should take note.

First, Creeds such as this one are found throughout Paul's epistles—1 Corinthians 8:6 comes to mind. “*Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.*” As we saw in our Old Testament lesson (Deuteronomy 6:1-15), the people of Israel confessed their faith in YHWH through the words of the famous *Shema*—a creed. “*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*” We use creeds in our worship because this reflects apostolic practice, and our creeds are drawn directly from biblical passages such as these, although they were primarily framed to refute error.

Second, Paul obviously stresses the word “one” throughout this entire creed. Each time he is amplifying

and emphasizing the point that God is one, his purpose is one, and there is only one Savior and one gospel. One body. One Spirit. One hope. One Lord. One faith. One baptism. One God and Father. But in affirming one God, Paul is also making his case as to why unity among believers is so important. As God is one, we are to be one. For those of you who are interested in such things, this is the reason why the ancient creeds of the church (i.e. the Nicene Creed) emphasize this very point. “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty.”<sup>3</sup>

Third, each of the elements of this creed point us to essential aspects of Christian doctrine. One body refers to the fact that there is only one body of Christ (one church). Our confession that there is one Spirit, indicates that the Holy Spirit is not only equal with the Father, but it is the Holy Spirit who unites us to the one body of Christ. As Paul states in 1 Corinthians 12:13, “*For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.*” Not only is this a powerful reminder of the corporate nature of salvation (different individuals are justified, and then made one), it is because the work of the Spirit through baptism that we must strive for unity. The arm should not be in the business of cutting off the leg, or waging war on the ear—especially when Christ is the head of his body.

The confession of one hope is a reference to the hope of the gospel—namely through Christ’s cross and resurrection, our salvation extends beyond the present, beyond our death, beyond the resurrection at the end of the age, to eternity itself. There is only one Lord—Jesus Christ, into whom we are baptized, and who is the object of our faith—that one to whom we look (and in whom we trust) to save us from our sins.

When we affirm one faith, we are speaking not of faith as a verb (“I believe”) but as a noun (“The faith”—that body of doctrine which we as Christians must believe). There is only one body of truth, only one gospel revealed to the churches through the preaching of Paul and the apostles. When we affirm our faith, we are affirming that we believe this gospel, revealed in God’s word.

We confess one baptism, because through baptism the Spirit seals us until the day of redemption (as Paul has already stated in Ephesians 1:13-14). While some have tried argue that Paul is referring to Spirit baptism (not water baptism), it is clear from Pentecost on that baptism in water is tied to the gift of the Spirit—water being the visible sign and seal of the invisible work of the Spirit.<sup>4</sup> This is the case throughout the Book of Acts.

Paul’s creed ends with a confession of *one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all*. There is one God, Father of all (“all” is probably a reference to both Jew and Gentile). In Malachi 2:10, the prophet asks, “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?” Paul’s answer to that lament is “yes,” God has created all, and that believing Jews and Gentiles confess that God is one, because he is over all things (transcendent), through all and in all (immanent). When we say that God is transcendent we mean that he cannot be identified with created things. Rather, he created all things. And yet, while we confess that God is greater than creation, we also confess that he is truly present with us (that is, he is immanent). We know that because he tells us in his word, because Jesus Christ is God in human flesh, and because the Spirit indwells us and unites us through faith to the risen and ascended

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce, The Epistle to the Ephesians, 335.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce, The Epistle of Ephesians, 336-337.

Lord Jesus Christ.

**A**s we conclude our time this morning, what should we take with us?

We can summarize Paul's basic message as follows: God has called Paul to faith in Jesus Christ and then commissioned him to preach that message to the Gentiles. The message God revealed to Paul is that the one true God has sent his only Son to save us from our sins, and that through the work of God's Spirit, everything that God has done for us in Jesus Christ becomes ours. We are sealed by the Spirit until the day of redemption. This comes by grace, through faith, and all of it is the gift of God. This message incorporates both Jew and Gentile into one body and gives us a hope which transcends anything which can befall us in this life. Once we embrace this message as individuals—wherein we find all of the riches of our inheritance in Christ—we are united to Christ's church as members of his body. The one God has revealed one gospel, and through one Spirit and one baptism, we are united to the one body of Jesus Christ—his church.

This is the one faith which the early church confessed. This is the same faith we confess each Lord's day. We do this not only as an expression of our own personal faith in Christ, but as our collective testimony to the watching world around us. We confess one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, because this is how God has revealed himself in his word, and at the same time the act of confessing our faith both demonstrates as well as actually strengthens the unity which God has given to us, and which he requires of us as members of Christ's church.

Given Paul's stress upon the singularity of that has been revealed to him (all the stress upon "one"), it is no wonder that Paul's first exhortation in the application section of this letter is that we are to "*walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 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.*" In Ephesians 2:10, Paul has told us that we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works. Here in Ephesians 4, Paul begins to flesh out what those good works actually entail. For Paul this means living out this unity of the faith by demonstrating humility, by being gentle with one another, by being patient with our sinful brothers and sisters, and by bearing with one another in love.

While many of our contemporaries seek to work out their sanctification by gaining a higher and more intense level of Christian experience, Paul directs us away from ourselves and our own navels, to a life of getting along with difficult people, to a life of helping those in need, and to a life of keeping in mind the needs of others. According to Paul, we are to be eager to do this, because doing these things maintains the unity and peace of the church. We are by nature, children of wrath. Yet, God has saved us in Christ. This sovereign act of a gracious God, is now the pattern for us to follow in our dealings with those around us. Striving for unity is simply a demonstration of our gratitude.

What we must understand is that same profession of faith which comes off of our lips (however heartfelt), must also be confessed through our lives—specifically how we relate to others around us. We eagerly do this to keep the unity of the Spirit and peace of the church. Because our church is really Christ's church. We also do this because there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all.

Amen.