

The Unity of the Faith

Ephesians 4:1-16

This is Reformation Sunday, the day when Protestants remember the grace given to the Church in the Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries. While some of the issues have changed, the driving principle of the Reformation, *semper reformanda*, always reforming, remains. Jesus has an agenda for the Church just as He does for every individual in it.

A Unified Church

The first three chapters of Ephesians are largely indicative: this is who God is, and this is what He has done in Christ. The last three chapters are the imperative *therefore*. Because all of this is true, act this way (4:1). Doing, or obedience, in the Christian life is built on the foundation of being, and that foundation is Christ. Because we are “in Him”, everything follows. When it comes to foundational unity in the Church, we don’t create it, but we do keep it: “endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (v3). The Church is one body made alive by one Holy Spirit who called us with one hope: one Lord, one faith, one baptism (v4). These are unified because the one God and Father of all is above all, through all, and in you all (v5). What does it mean to be unified? How do we know that we are connected to Jesus’ Church? By our Lord, our faith and our baptism (cf. Heb. 10:19-25). When the reformers got kicked out of the Roman Catholic Church, they didn’t get re-baptized. Our profession and connection to Christ doesn’t depend on the person conducting the ceremony any more than our last name depends on the doctor who delivered us. This gives us a truly catholic love for God’s people, the Church (Lk. 9:50).

A Future Unity

If the Church *is* unified, should we forget our denominational distinctives and bring it in for an ecumenical group hug? When Jesus ascended, He took captivity captive, and instead of receiving gifts, He doled them out (v11). Apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers are given to build the Church *until* we arrive at the unity of the faith (vv12-13). We are unified in principle, but there’s another unity, the fullness of Christ, we are growing into. We shouldn’t sacrifice truth for the sake of unity, or reject unity in a sectarian stand for the truth. We can speak the truth in love and be patient (v15). Growing into Christ’s fullness is part of His plan, the perfecting of His bride (cf. Eph. 5:25-27). We do all of this because Scripture commands it, and the Church recognizes Scripture without claiming authority over it. John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the Son of God but doesn’t outrank him (Jn. 3:30). The Reformation recognized Scripture alone, *sola scriptura*, as the highest and only infallible authority for doctrine and practice. It is without error and God-breathed, and we see the faithful measuring the apostles’ teaching and everything else by Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16-17; Acts 17:11; 1 Thess. 5:21; 1 Cor. 10:15). This is how the Church will be reformed and unified—by the Word.

catholic Protestants

So we don’t need to abandon what we believe, but we do need to understand it. What’s important? Responding to Luther and the Reformation, the Council of Trent (1545-63) said, “If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified; in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification . . . let him be anathema” (Canon 9). But Paul says, “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Rom. 3:28). We can recognize the faith of other churches but still be concerned (cf. Ex. 20:4, 32:5; Num. 21:4-9; 2 Kgs. 18:4). A church can be corrupt but not apostate, though it might not be long. John warned the Ephesians about losing their lampstand, which they did (Rev. 2:5). Paul wrote to the church at Rome to warn them about pride: Israel was cut out of the olive tree because of unbelief, they were grafted in and remain by faith, so take care (11:19-21). We should all fear God and be humble regarding ourselves, but be encouraged by what God is doing and what He promises to do—give life to the world (Rom. 11:12, 15). What happens when all the platoons learn there are countless others fighting on their side, and victory is inevitable? Morale changes.

NOTES FOR LITTLE SAINTS

Today's Passage: Ephesians 4:11-16

11 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, 13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, 15 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head— Christ— 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

1. That is a long sentence! After Jesus ascended into heaven, He gave gifts to the church. What are they, and what are they for (verses 11-13)?
2. Without good Bible teaching, what happens to us (verse 14)?
3. There are thousands of Christian churches all over the world that are all part of one body of Christ. If they are part of Jesus' Church just like we are, how should we treat them? What is happening to us all as we continue to grow in our faith (verses 15-16)?
4. Draw a picture of a huge church being built by Christians from all over the world. You might include big cranes lifting towers and spires.

Memory Verse to Recite Next Week:

*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling;
one Lord, one faith, one baptism. --Ephesians 4:4-5*