

E Pluribus Unum

Ephesians 4:1-7

On February 26, 2015 a picture of a black and blue dress was posted to the social networking site Tumblr, and immediately was the cause of great division. The initial thousands of viewers did not see the dress as black and blue but as gold and white. Later on the dress was tweeted out with over ten million responding on Twitter with starkly different perceptions of the same image. Some were adamant that the dress was black and blue, while others were equally as adamant that, no, the dress was gold and white. At the end we were all amazed at how we all could look at the same thing and yet come away with drastically different conclusions.

At no point is this more true than when it comes to the subject of government and politics. Some of us look at our government and say it needs to be bigger, while others of us look at the same government and say, no, it needs to be smaller. Many of us look at the voting process and think it all boils down to protecting life in the womb. Others of us say it must also be about protecting and prospering the marginalized outside the womb. While still others of us say, no, it's all about the economy silly. An over-simplification I know, (and I haven't begun to touch the surface of the differences) but we all get the point that politics is a huge lightning rod inciting division in our nation.

I felt this early on in my life. I vividly remember sitting at my grandfather's table in his home in Roanoke as a little boy and watching him and his brother have epic battles over politics. His brother was a wealthy owner of a funeral home. In fact, he tried to get me to take over the business. I'm *dead* serious. I remember my grandfather's brother being a passionate republican, while my grandfather was staunchly democrat. They would go back and forth on President Ronald Reagan with one saying he was the best thing for our country, while the other concluded he was the worst. Their arguments were so intense I was sure it was going to cause a major rift in our family.

Since those epic debates at my grandfather's table the political division and polarization has only increased. In fact, a recent Pew study revealed that the gap between the views of Republicans and Democrats on fundamental issues has increased from 15 percent to 36 percent between 1994 and 2017. Ed Stetzer notes, "Sadly Christians of varying religious traditions, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds have often followed their non-Christian friends deep into these political divisions. Thus, even as the country slowly entrenches itself along political, cultural, and economic lines, professing Christians are often on the front lines of these divisions." —Ed Stetzer, *Christians in the Age of Outrage* What Stetzer asserts is disturbing: Christians are not just getting swept away by the culture of tribalism and partisanship, we are at the forefront of the divide! It's a sad fact that for many followers of Jesus, we have allowed MSNBC, Fox News and CNN to disciple us more than Jesus.

An Urgent Plea

It's in the middle of this sad divide, the church of Jesus Christ needs to really steep in the words of Ephesians 4:1-7. It's here where Paul opens up by saying that he *urges* us to walk in unity. The Greek word for *urge* is *parakaleo*, which means to call to one's side. It's Paul doing this (give the gesture for come here). Paul is doing to us what

parents do to their distracted children when they really want to get their attention. It is as if Paul is saying, *I know you're about to go to the voting booth and maybe distracted by the political process, but come here. I know you're really disturbed by the racial trauma happening in our country, but come here. I know that recent social media post by another Christian really upset you, but come here.* Paul is not calling us to be apathetic about these matters, but he wants us to not let them derail us from the call to Christian unity.

UNITY IS NOT UNIFORMITY - EPHESIANS 4:1-2

Paul is going to teach us three things about unity. The first thing he wants us to know is unity is not uniformity. We know this in two ways. First, I want you to look at the words Paul uses in verse 2...these words have to do with how we relate to one another. These words don't just imply sin, but they point to a community of people where there is a diversity of thought. You don't need to be patient with people who see it the way you see it. Why would you need to bear with people who hold the same views you do? And gentleness is primarily seen where there is disagreement, so why be gentle when there is generally agreement? See the implied diversity here? But secondly, let's not forget the audience. If you read up on the founding of the church in Ephesus in Acts 19 and 20, you'll see that it was a church made up of Jews and Gentiles. It's a multiethnic church. Think these people aren't profoundly different?

One of our many aspirations as a church is to become multiethnic, like most of the churches Paul planted. In fact, recent data says we are right around 19% minority, and it's only growing. Now while the idea of this is exciting, the reality can be what Rick McKinley calls, a beautiful mess. Think of it- ethnically different people in the same space are going to bring incredibly different perspectives, and the key is how do we walk in unity and not uniformity, refusing to clone each other in our image? Not only is there ethnic diversity at our church, but there's probably some theological diversity. Like there's some of you in our church that when it comes to certain gifts of the Spirit you are cessationist, others of you are open but cautious, others are Pentecostal and still others have no idea what I just said. And we are all in church together. And no doubt there's political diversity. Some of you love President Trump. Others of you are NEVER TRUMPERS. And still others of you will go to the voting booth this year holding your nose because you are disappointed with the two candidates we are offered. And there's probably other groups I'm missing. And we are all in the same church. What would Paul say to us? Remember, you are on the same team. What unites us- Jesus- far outpaces what divides us.

Some years ago I remember seeing the movie, *42*, on the great Jackie Robinson, the first black man to integrate Major League Baseball. There's one scene that brought tears to my eyes. It's the scene where the Brooklyn Dodgers are playing the Cincinnati Reds. It's in the 1940s and the racist things being said to Jackie are just heartbreaking. He hears them and is crushed. In the middle of all this, Jackie's white teammate, Pee Wee Reese, runs over to him, drapes his arm over Jackie's shoulder and encourages him to hang in there. The visual was so moving, because in that moment, against the backdrop of such diversity, Pee Wee Reese was saying, **SAME TEAM.**

Have your convictions on lesser, non essential items like politics, but remember, SAME TEAM. Vote one way, while others vote another, but remember, in Christ, SAME TEAM. Be righteously angered at racial injustice, but refuse to divide from your ethnically different brothers and sisters in Christ because we are on the SAME TEAM. Let us never forget that we are different, yet united in Christ!

UNITY WITH CHRISTIANS DEMANDS UNION WITH CHRIST - EPHESIANS 4:4-6

Okay, I get it, you say, but practically speaking, what does this look like? How does being on the same team flesh itself out when it comes to unity? Look at Ephesians 4:4-6 with me. To this multiethnic diverse church, Paul reminds them of the union they have with Christ. Just look at all the “one’s”: *One body. One Spirit. One hope. One Lord. One faith. One baptism.* Don’t you see what Paul is doing here? Paul is lifting their eyes upward from the relationship they have with one another, to the relationship they have with Christ. In fact, when he says, *one baptism*, he is dealing with both our identity and union with Christ. Just the other week we celebrated a bunch of baptisms here at our church. When a person is baptized not only are they publicly identifying with him, but they are also saying I am united with him in his death, burial and resurrection. Paul is dealing with this idea of union with Christ. And in context he is saying that unity with Christians demands union with Christ. In other words, if you and God are off, we will be off with other Christians. Or to say it another way, disunity with Christ manifests itself with disunity with other Christians.

This is a point Paul makes very clear in Galatians 5. In this passage Paul is contrasting life in the Spirit with life in the flesh. The flesh is me being in control. It is me breaking fellowship with Christ, and choosing to do things my way. In fact, Paul lists out fifteen marks of life in the flesh. Of those fifteen, eight are relational. Look at what he says: **Now the works of the flesh are evident ... enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy ... (Galatians 5:19-21 ESV)** Paul is helping us to see that sin is never just personal...it doesn’t just impact you; it’s also social, it’s relational. So show me two Christians who are divided, and in just about every case I will show you at least one Christian who has chosen to do life apart from Christ and in the flesh.

If I could invite you into my home for a moment, over our 21 years of marriage, Korie and I have a snarky little saying. I’ll come downstairs, and maybe in a crabby mood. Korie picks up on this and she’ll say something like, “Oooo, wee, someone hasn’t had their time with Jesus this morning”. Not helpful, I know. I do not recommend trying that. But don’t you see the point she’s making? When Korie and I have been off in marriage it’s normally because at least one of us has been off with God. It really is true: Unity with Christians Demands Union with Christ.

This is why for Paul, union with Christ is everything! In fact, if you read his letters he uses the phrase, *in Christ*, over 160 times! He is constantly saying, *you are in Christ; to the saints who are in Christ*. Why is this important? Because if we get union with Christ wrong, we will inevitably miss out on unity with Christians.

What Does Union with Christ Look Like?

If union with Christ is essential to experiencing unity with Christians, then what does union with Christ look like? Well, this is easy. In John 15, Jesus says that we are to *abide* in him. The word *abide* simply means to remain. This idea of abiding in Christ, which is how we experience union with Christ, does violence to the quiet time culture we tend to perpetuate. Listen, quiet times are good, essential even. I have them, and I encourage you to do them as well. I don't know how we grow without doing them daily. But the problem comes when we have our quiet time and that's our only moments of abiding in Christ. That's not good.

It's sort of like how people tend to drink their tea. You have two major approaches to hot tea. Some people are dippers. They dip the tea bag into the hot water, leave it in for a little bit and then take it out. That's the quiet time only approach: Abide in Christ for a little bit and then go on about your business and forget about him the rest of the day. Others of us when it comes to tea, we are steepers. We put the tea bag into the hot water and we leave it in. That's abiding in Christ. When we remain in him, we will best position ourselves with other Christians along the way. Constant union with Christ positions us for unity with other Christians; that's Paul's point.

UNLEASHING UNITY - EPHESIANS 4:2

As we round third and head for home, let's end this message with a lot of Vitamin A- application. How do we really walk in unity with others, especially during election season? Paul gives four practical things we must do to unleash unity in our relationships, the first is humility. The word *humility* means to be low minded, or the esteeming of one's self as small. No, this word is not a call to have low self-esteem, or a lack of confidence. Instead, humility is the proper estimation of oneself when compared to a holy God. The great South African pastor, Andrew Murray once said, "Humility is nothing but the disappearance of self in the vision that God is all." —Andrew Murray, *Humility*

But this is so hard for us, is it not? We are born naturally prideful, self-centered people, and that, more than anything else, gets in the way of unity. In the last several years the two greatest soccer players have been Renaldo and Messi. In an interview, Renaldo said that God had sent him here to teach others to play soccer. Messi quickly responded by saying that he did not recall sending Renaldo here to do that! Oh the pride! And that's us. Our drive to be right, to win arguments, to prove points gets in the way of unity. Our inability to admit weakness and wrong, and to exercise self-control at times by laying down rights, gets in the way of unity.

Nowhere do we feel that more than election season. So how can we practically manifest humility during these political times? In his latest book, *Before You Vote*, David Platt offers some help. He says that all of us should ask the following questions about the opposing party's stances: 1. Are there any concepts of biblical justice we see in the opposing party? 2. Does that political party show any concern for vulnerable individuals and groups? 3. How is that political party trying to promote good and prevent evil? You know it takes humility to point out some good with people and party's you disagree with. But it also takes humility to critique your own tribe. Platt offers these questions we should ask about our own party: 1. Are there any concepts of injustice we see in our party? 2. Does the

political party I support show any lack of concern for any vulnerable individuals and groups? 3. How is my political party failing to promote good and prevent evil?

Gentleness

Paul then says that gentleness is also key in unleashing unity. *Gentleness* simply means power under control, and it is a face of humility. Humility is the inward essence, while gentleness is the outward expression. Gentleness is what humility looks like in public. It's a relational term most clearly seen in how we treat people we disagree with. You see, gentleness honors the humanity of the person on the other side of the issue. Okay, so we disagree on who we will vote for. We disagree on what we think the issues are. Okay. Gentleness says you are more important than the issue. Gentleness is the reminder that people must be big, and issues must be small.

Patience

The Greek word for *patience* is a compound word that means to be long towards anger. Patience is also a relational term assuming this person is working my nerves; it presupposes conflict where a person is doing something I don't like. And when it comes to conflict there are two kinds of people: sharks and turtles. Sharks sense an issue and they attack it. Turtles see conflict on the horizon and withdraw and hide. I mean come on, this whole message has messed with your inner shark or turtle. Some of you are typing that email out to me right now wanting to set me in my place, while others of you when touchy subjects like politics or race come up look for the exits. See, the problem becomes when we get so locked in on the issue that we end up attacking each other; or on the other side just quietly leaving. Neither response is what Paul has in mind here. He wants us to be patient with one another. Don't attack each other and don't be so quick to take your ball and go home. Be patient.

Bearing With

Finally, Paul further unpacks this by saying that we need to be *bearing with* one another in love. This phrase means to endure something unpleasant or difficult. This strikes at the core of our consumeristic culture. Many of us choose relationships because we say this person is so easy. Then something happens, right, and we see things in them we don't like, and we cut the person off, heading for the exits, while making them think everything is good. Sociologist Korie Edwards says one of the challenges of the homogenous church is when you are in an environment where everyone pretty much sees it the same, your biases are never challenged, and your growth is stunted. Instead, what we need is to have people in our lives who really see it differently, bear with them, and in the process what you will discover is true growth. Don't you see? A healthy church is not one where we all see it the same, or where most keep quiet about the issues, but it's when Christ is the main thing, and when it comes to lesser things we give each other the freedom to navigate those, and we bear with one another.

Miles Davis released some of the greatest jazz albums of all time, because he was able to assemble some of the greatest jazz musicians of all time. What was his secret? Miles was known for getting these other worldly musicians together, and would write on slips of paper the basic notes and chords they had to commit to- just a few. Once they

agreed on the main thing, the basic structure, he then encouraged great freedom for them to riff and improvise, and it's here where the magic happened. That was the formula- a commitment to the main thing, and allowing for great freedom with lesser things. This is Paul's great hope for the church at Ephesus, and his great hope for our church.

GOSPEL CONCLUSION: SHOW HOW JESUS MANIFESTS ALL FOUR OF THESE TRAITS.