

# One

Ephesians 4:4-6 | Bryce Beale | Jan. 7, 2018

When God invented man, he crafted him in his own image. Yet we might add that, in a lesser sense, the whole universe was fashioned in his image.

By this I simply mean that we find traces and shadows of our Creator everywhere in what he has made, as though his fingerprints were clearly impressed in each surface. Wherever you gaze, you feel that you have just missed God, and now you look upon the evidence of his recent presence.

You just missed some being who pulled the sun from his creative forge and by his power placed it in our galaxy's center. The fingerprint of his power is legible on that flaming ball. As Paul affirms, this attribute of God's power, invisible to the eye, becomes visible in what has been made. And so we stand before the sun as though we had arrived just after God's departure, and we see his work still hot from the hearth.

Or we discover that a tadpole has a built-in system for hearing underwater, but that the frog it will become has a system suited to hear sounds through the air. How does it change the way it hears? Right about the time the tadpole is developing its front legs, it goes deaf for forty-eight hours, during which time a quarter of the tadpole's brain rewires itself for hearing in the air. In the week that follows the froglet grows tympanic membranes on its head, like our own eardrums, which the rewired brain knows how to use well for hearing outside the water.<sup>1</sup>

We feel that we have looked at the tadpole a second too late to see the wise God who created this masterpiece. He was just here! See the fingerprint of his wisdom implanted on the soft head of this amphibian.

But these near-sightings of the divine are not confined to the physical sciences. We see them equally well in the social sciences, in the interactions of mankind.

Why are many of the most moving features of life in this world the concerted effort of multiple persons as though they were one? Our favorite songs are beautiful because each member of the band works in harmony with the others. Our favorite sports team satisfies us most when the players move the ball in one flawlessly coordinated effort. And when we see a military fighting as one man, or a business bustling with one aim, we know that there is something right about it.

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<sup>1</sup> Seth S. Horowitz, *The Universal Sense: How Hearing Shapes the Mind* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury USA, 2012), 66-72.

Because on every unity of persons is impressed the fingerprint of a God who is three in one.

The Trinity casts its shadow over the earth, and in its shade we find a million little unities, as though God were just here in every place, painting a visible semblance of his own beauty.

The disunity in the world is attributable to the Fall and to sin; the unity is attributable to God.

And so when God takes a people for himself and seeks to undo the effects of the Fall and sin among them, as he is doing among us through the work of Jesus Christ, it is as though he takes up a masterpiece he had made which was set on the ground and covered in layers of dust, a painting meant to reflect in its perfect proportions the absolute unity of his own Trinitarian being, and begins to blow the dust away.

The work of art beneath, now peaking through the dust, is what we call the church. It is a unity fashioned after the unity of God himself, and when men see it, when we see it in ourselves, we sense that God himself was just here, for this is certainly his work.

Paul perhaps suggests as much and certainly says more in our text for today, Ephesians 4:4-6.

#### **EPHESIANS 4:4-6**

The point of the apostle is that the church of God has every reason to be many in one, to be, like God, a unity of persons. In fact, the Trinity is in the passage: in verse 4, the Spirit, and in verse 5 the Lord, and in verse 6 the Father. The Trinity is the ultimate “why” behind our unity as Christians.

Yet Paul’s focus is not primarily here.

We know that it is right to be as one because God is one, but Paul supplies us with other reasons too. What those reasons are, as found in these three verses, will take up the next half hour of our time.

Our goal this morning is to understand why we must, as Christians, live in unity with each other. May God help us to do so.

### **One future**

With this in mind, look to verse 4.

“There is,” it says, “one body and one Spirit.”

Of course this is not the first time Paul has likened the church, the people of God in this age, to a body. In the first chapter of this letter we

read that God gave Jesus “as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”<sup>2</sup> And in his first letter to the Corinthians, he spends much of chapter 12 explaining that “you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

But why? Why compare us to a body? Why not compare us to a rock or a piece of parchment or something else?

For this reason: a body is composed of many parts, but those parts are not divided against each other. They cannot be. Why? Because they are all animated and guided by one mind or, we might say, one spirit. Your body is your outer self, and there are many parts—hands, feet, ears—all functioning in unison to perform whatever your inner man, your spirit, wishes to accomplish. Without your spirit, your body would immediately cease to move; your spirit animates the many parts, so that they move together to accomplish a particular task.

If the mind or spirit senses right now an itch on your nose, what will happen? You will begin to lift your hand so that you can scratch it with the fingernail on one of your fingers. Immediately a number of muscles are engaged, no two doing exactly the same thing—but together, they perform one action.

And while your right hand lifts up to your nose, notice that your left hand does not intercede. It is guided by the same spirit. Imagine if you contained two spirits instead of one; and imagine that one of your spirits governed only your left hand. Your left hand might one day become jealous of how often the right hand gets the glory, and decide that it would assign itself the tasks your other spirit wished to assign elsewhere.

Your jealous left hand might cover up your mouth mid-conversation, envious of your mouth’s prerogative to speak. No, no more speaking. You will only sign from now on, and only with your left hand. Well, that would be quite inconvenient, since the left hand is not designed to communicate as well as the mouth is—and if only one spirit governed the whole, it would have the mouth communicate. But if two, then the body is divided against itself.

And that body cannot stand—it cannot stand because the left hand is jealous also of the feet. Why should they support all of your weight? Until you can perform a single-handed handstand, you must sit, orders of the left hand.

It is a humorous picture, but sadly not an uncommon one.

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<sup>2</sup> Vv. 22-23 (ESV).

The Apostle John encountered a left hand like this in the body of Christ. “I have written something to the church,” he said, “but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority.”<sup>3</sup> The apostolic mouth opens, and the left hand quickly covers it.

We see the same tragedy repeated among ourselves when we are set against each other, when there is tension, or hostility, between any two believers.

In the early 1980’s, one prominent pastor found himself in the middle of two tense sides in his church. Some members were passionate about domestic ministries, like local outreach and care of the poor; others had a passion for the lost nations. And this pastor had himself begun to see the need of the nations and to preach the same from the pulpit. And so, the members more engaged in domestic ministries began to feel that they were being undervalued, their work demeaned and diminished, since there was a new emphasis on international outreach. One hand felt that it needed to fight against the other.

In 1984, by God’s grace, this pastor preached one sermon that eased the tension in a remarkable way. What did he say? He simply pointed out that when we go to the nations, we cannot give them what we do not have. If we are strong in our domestic ministries, in caring for the needy and sharing the gospel with our neighbors, then we are ready to reach the nations—we simply relocate what we are doing, with some adaptations, to a new culture. So those passionate about reaching the nations are really passionate about domestic ministries in another context. And, on the other hand, those passionate about domestic ministries are really passionate about the same things missionaries are passionate about, only in their own local context.<sup>4</sup>

The two hands are not arm wrestling, but working together. They just hadn’t realized it, because they were different hands. On the one, the thumb is on the left, and on the other the thumb is on the right; but both thumbs are guided by one spirit to do the same thing. They have the same goal.

We as believers are not two bodies wrestling with each other, nor are we one body with two spirits conflicted within itself. We are one body with one Spirit, the Spirit of the living God. And therefore, we all move in the same direction. We all have the same future.

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<sup>3</sup> 3 Jn. 9.

<sup>4</sup> John Piper, “The Relationship Between Diversified Domestic Ministries and Frontier Missions,” <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-relationship-between-diversified-domestic-ministries-and-frontier-missions> (Nov. 18, 1984; accessed Jan. 7, 2018).

This is stated in an ultimate sense at the end of verse 4: “just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call.”

In other words, we may have separate passions, our thumbs may be opposite each other; some are eyes, some are ears; some are gifted in this way, some in that. But we are all moving in the same direction. The Spirit of God is guiding us to our eternal home, a world, as Edwards has written, of unclogged love.

And whatever you are passionate about in the kingdom of God at present, whether it be teaching Sunday school or reaching the nations or one-on-one discipleship or caring for the homeless or defending the faith, it is helped and not hurt by the fact that others are passionate about other things. Several friends have taught me this lesson well this year by way of example. If all were passionate in the exact same way as me, we would have no church. We might have a missions agency, or a small group, or a Sunday school class; but we would not have a church, and we would all be the losers for it.

We are not competitors in an arena, but coworkers in a workshop; we have different tasks, but we are all pilgrims progressing by the power of the Holy Spirit toward our hope, eternal life, that we might all hear in reference to whatever talents we were given, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

So then, we are united because we are moving in the same direction, toward one end, one future.

## One past

But we are also united by our past. See now verse 5: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

It was not always this way. In a gathering of this size, we prove without exception the prophet’s words, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way.”<sup>5</sup>

For each of us without a single exemption were at that time separate from Christ. Paul is particularly intent in his day to emphasize God’s fresh work of bringing non-Jews into the people of God; yet all of us, whether Jew or Gentile, were in fact far from God, our sins having made a separation between us and him.

We did not have one Lord, but many—ourselves the chief among them all. We took no orders from the Spirit of Christ; our decisions were made, even if we tried to hide the fact, for the sake of our other desires. We came to church not because we had one Lord, Jesus Christ, but

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<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 53:6a.

because we proved obedient to our desire for approval, our desire to justify ourselves before God and men by our own merit. We bowed before God in our bodies, but in our heart we were bowing before the Baals and Asheroth of ourselves and our world. Every decision was rooted in the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the boastful pride of life; and if a command of Christ contradicted one of these, we contradicted him.

We hated each other and were hated by each other, because having so many lords, one or the other of mine was sure to rub against one or the other of yours. Our relationships were cold, were never more than the relationship between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R in and after World War II. We would help each other against a common enemy and for a common goal, but our hearts were not together. How many friends outside of Christ discarded you when you were no longer useful to them?

We pretended friendliness in order to preserve our own interests, like Americans did with the Soviets. But we built bombs on the side, just to be safe.

And we were destined for a doom worse than a nuclear holocaust; our hateful relationships with men and women were only a reflection of our hateful relationship with God, and there is no keeping his wrath at bay by weaponry. His patience alone restrained him.

Perhaps I am describing some of you even now. You cannot seem to get close to anyone for long, or close to God; and though you are surrounded by people, by friends, you know yourself to be entirely alone.

It does not have to be this way.

For there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." When our lords are many, our friends cannot be; but if your Lord is one, is the gentle Savior Jesus Christ, the friend of sinners, the kind man with the easy yoke, then your hesitations and apprehensions can be relieved like sore muscles under the hand of a skilled masseuse.

If you believe in the one faith, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news that Christ has come to absorb the wrath of God for us, that we might turn from our other lords and lusts and be washed by an inner baptism to purge away all our sins against God, if you bend the knee before the one Lord, believe the one faith, and are washed by the one inner cleansing of Christ's blood, you will be saved.

When a man or woman stands in the baptistery to tell the story of their renewal in Christ, and when they are plunged beneath the water and brought up again, they show that already their other lords have been washed away. And we who know Christ all know this baptism, we have

all known the release from sins that is redemption; most of us have undergone water baptism too, and this unites us.

What happy freedom, what blessed unity!

This is a confusing world, you know, and I do not know how it could be more confusing than it is now. The easy movement of bodies from one country to another, and the easy movement of information over the internet and airwaves, has resulted in globalization. Put simply, information can reach us today not just from the door down the street, as in ages past, but from a house in Hong Kong in a matter of seconds. In 2007, the average person received 174 newspapers worth of information every day.<sup>6</sup>

After the two World Wars, the attitude of the West has been that we cannot know anything with certainty. We are all skeptics; there are so many ideas, so many opinions, how could we ever sort through them all and find the truth? We are all confused—at least we know that much.

To ears dry as the desert in this wasteland, how pleasant it is to hear that word: “one...one...one.” No, not many faiths in many diverse things. Not many paths to God, not many ways to be made right before God. One gospel, one set of facts to believe, one cross on one Calvary, one man suffering there, one sacrifice for the sins of his people.

So yes, we Christians cannot seem to agree on many peripheral issues—end times, church structure, and even, ironically, how and when to baptize someone. Like those in Paul’s day, some eat meat, some refrain; some observe certain days, and others do not. In these cases we do not agree, but we are still united—why? Paul explains in the matter of meat sacrificed to idols: “Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.” Not that these are unimportant, but these matters are not gospel matters. Still we have one faith, passed on to us in Scripture.

We are not one with those who differ with us on central gospel matters. Of them Paul tells the Galatians, “If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.”<sup>7</sup> If the gospel is off, if they do not adhere to the one faith, they are not brothers but are accursed. If they confuse the way we are made right with God—if they, like those Paul wrote of in his day, advocate a salvation by works, rather than by faith alone, then we are not one with them. This is a central issue.

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<sup>6</sup> “How Much Information Is There in the World?” The University of Southern California Press Room, <https://pressroom.usc.edu/how-much-information-is-there-in-the-world/> (Feb. 10, 2011; accessed Jan. 7, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Gal. 1:9.

“Everyone,” writes John, “who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.” We cannot pretend a unity with those who preach a perverted gospel—with Jehovah’s Witnesses, with Mormons, with consistent Roman Catholics who truly hold to the teachings of Rome, for not all do. For these systems of belief have departed from the one faith, and they preach a different gospel.

John is so bold as to say, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.”<sup>8</sup> Do not treat them as believers, as companions, not if they come bearing a false gospel and attempting to propagate that gospel. Do not give the impression to others that they and their belief are no different from you and yours. It does these teachers no service, nor does it honor the message we have been entrusted with. Urge them to repent, but do not take their hand.

The same applies to those who claim to be believers but who live in open sin. They too adhere to a false gospel, one that claims salvation apart from holiness, from God, from the Spirit, from regeneration. Paul says to the Corinthians, “But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.”<sup>9</sup>

Do not reject believers weak in faith, or wrestling with their sin—for that is all of us to some degree. Neither should we reject nominal Christians who are not Christians indeed, for that is all our neighbors. But those bold enough to take religious platitudes upon their lips, to unashamedly proclaim their own attachment to Christ, who are also so bold as to go on in open and unconfessed sin—don’t treat them like they’re ok! If you do, the world will hear from you a false gospel. There is church discipline for individuals like this, so that the purity of our gospel may be preserved as one, one faith in one Lord to whom we submit.

It is this one, clear gospel that joins the true children of God together. One Lord, one faith, one baptism. We share one past, for we have all believed on Jesus Christ and have been saved through his gospel.

## One present

We have one future toward which we move, and we have one past from which we come.

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<sup>8</sup> 2 Jn. 10-11.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor. 5:11.

In verse 6 we find what has been said or suggested already—namely, that we have one present too.

Verse 6: “one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

So here we are, each of us a bag full of diverse desires and preferences, each, as we will see next week, given a different set of spiritual gifts; our family histories are not the same, nor do we all live in one house or enjoy the same styles of food or clothing. We have here some who are members of an older generation, and some members of a younger; some like one style of music, others cannot stand it but have their own style of music they prefer. You may have habits that the person seated next to you cannot understand—if you are married then I hope you are aware of what those habits are.

There is no other single denominator among us that would get us together every Sunday morning and in close association with each other.

But there is one common denominator, one all-consuming passion, one conviction that is core of all others to each of us who are in Christ—and that is God, the one true God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and, through him, now the God and Father of us all.

It is never easy to lead or to be led, especially since we are such a diverse bunch. Why have we not imploded and split? Because we know that one God is over all of us. The shepherds here are as much under the Over-Shepherd as anyone else. Some have more authority than others, but that is a borrowed authority and the one God who is over all commands it be used, not as the world uses power, but differently—for serving the saints.

And here we are with our various activities; why don't some rise up in pride and contend against others who are doing work they think less important or prestigious? Because we know that, whatever our work, it is not we who do it, but our one God who does it through us all. We dare not fight against each other, lest we be found fighting against God himself! He is through all.

And when we really get to know each other, to see what is on the inside of each other, why are we not appalled and ready to disassociate? Because we know that, whatever else we may find within each other, we will also find God, our one God, who is in all of us.

## Conclusion

So may our kingdoms topple, friends, and his kingdom come!

What believer are you upset at right now? What have they done, or not done? I do not say your grievance springs from nothing; I only say it needs now to proceed into nothing. Your God indwells that sister; your Savior has died for that brother, however weak his faith may be. If we served a thousand gods, we could tolerate a thousand factions. But if we bow our heads before the one Potentate of heaven, we must be one church on earth.

Blow the dust of your grievances off of this portrait, that we may see more of the glorify of God shining through. Go reconcile, go ask forgiveness and give it. The Father has never fought the Son; the Son has never been bitter at the Spirit. If we would show this world the God among us, let us do it by a unity that can be explained in no other way than by conformity to the Triune being who lives among us.

Let us remember our one Lord who, on the eve of his suffering for us, expressed to his Father this desire: “that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> John 17:22-23.