That they may be one series: Study 4 unity in the church (ephesians 4:1-16)

## BEFORE THE LESSON

Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians from prison (3:1, 4:1, 6:19,20). It is possible that he wrote it from Rome during his house arrest recorded in Acts 28. This letter is unique among Paul’s letters in that it does not address a particular problem in a particular church, but is rather addressed to believers that Paul has only heard news of – “ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord” (1:15). Also, Ephesians is addressed to a broad audience and deals with foundational Christian principles. For these reasons, many believe Ephesians was a circular letter to be read widely by many believers in many settings, and not a letter sent only to one particular church. Some of the earliest copies of this letter are missing the words “in Ephesus’’ and in some circles in the early church it was known as the “Letter to the Laodiceans.” If Paul had written it only to the church in Ephesus, he would likely have included many personal references, since he spent almost three years establishing the church in this city (Acts 19). This letter was probably written in the early A.D. 60’s in close proximity to the writing of the letters of Colossians and Philemon, and it could be the letter that Paul refers to in Colossians 4:16, which he says they should soon receive “from Laodicea”.

## STARTING THE LESSON

In chapters 1-3 of Ephesians, Paul proclaims that God the Father has “blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ”. As believers in Christ, we have been adopted into God’s family, redeemed through His blood, forgiven of our sins, sealed by the Holy Spirit, called into community in which we are the body and Christ is the Head, and all man-made divisions have been destroyed so that through Jesus everyone has access to the Father by one Spirit. These are the great doctrines of the church revealed in Christ. Now in chapters 4-6, Paul gives his audience a roadmap to breathe life into these doctrines in their everyday lives. As he encourages them in Ephesians 4:1, “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling to which you have received”.

## starter question

**TIPS TO SHARE WITH LEADERS**

As you prepare for this lesson, spend time in prayer for each member of your group, asking the Lord to give you insight and discernment into this passage so as to comfort and challenge your group to live in a way that pleases the Lord.

Strive to create an atmosphere of openness by sharing personal stories of how the Lord is working in your life and affirming group members when they share personal stories from their own lives.

* What would you consider a high point in your week? What was a low point? What did you learn from these experiences? What was the Lord teaching you?
* In the midst of relational conflict, do you tend to want to “take flight” or “stand and fight?” When was the last time you tried to function as a peacemaker? How did that work out for you and the others involved?

## Opening PrAyer

Dear Heavenly Father, I pray that you would clear our minds of the distractions of this day and help us to focus on your love for us and your purposes in our lives, and in this world. Help us to hear and be in step with the leading of your Holy Spirit now and in the week to come. Thank you for sending your Son, Jesus, to restore our relationship with you and to give us the blessed hope of eternal life in Your Kingdom. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

## Discussion questions

**Ephesians 4:1-16 (NIV)**

1 As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. **2**Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. **3**Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. **4**There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; **5**one Lord, one faith, one baptism; **6**one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

### Question 1

* How is Paul’s current situation of being imprisoned related to his calling (read Acts 9:15,16)? Should we expect conflict as we pursue our calling? (see Phil. 1:29,30 and 2 Tim. 3:12)

When Jesus issued his call to Paul in the city of Damascus, he prepared him for the journey ahead when he alerted Paul that he would have to “suffer much for My Name’s sake” as he shared the gospel and established Christian churches in Jewish and Gentile communities around the Mediterranean. Paul also warned his fellow believers that we too would experience resistance from the darkness in this world when we strive to live godly lives in pursuit of a close relationship with Jesus.

### Question 2

**7**But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. **8**This is why it[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+4%3A1-16&version=KJV;NIV;NKJV#fen-NIV-29281a)] says:

“When he ascended on high,  
    he took many captives  
    and gave gifts to his people.”[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+4%3A1-16&version=KJV;NIV;NKJV#fen-NIV-29281b)]

**9**(What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? **10**He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) **11**So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, **12**to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up **13**until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

**14**Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. **15**Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. **16**From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

* How do the qualities in verses two and three promote unity? How does viewing God as our father add to our unity?

Paul exhorts believers to have a selfless and tolerant disposition in our relationships with others in the Christian community. This involves the key qualities of gentleness, patience, humility, and bearing with one another in love. These qualities are repeated throughout the New Testament and are fundamental to preserving unity in the Body of Christ. (see Phil.2:1-4, Col.3:12-14) Finally, to have the same father is to be part of the same family, which Paul says that we are.

### Question 3

* The history of the Christian church is littered with divisiveness and splits. What exhortations to believers does Paul give in this passage to help preserve unity in the church? How can we “make every effort” to stay unified as the Body of Christ?

*Jesus told His disciples that the watching world would know that you are Mine by the love that you have for one another. In His prayer in John 17:20-21, Jesus prays “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.” Unity in the Christian community is a high priority for Jesus and Paul. Paul says we should “make every effort” to preserve this unity and set aside our pride to lift up our brothers and sisters.*

### Question 4

* How has God resourced the church to fulfill his purposes on this earth? How is Jesus’ “ascending and descending” in verses 8-10 related to Philippians 2:5-11? Once Jesus defeated His enemies and ascended to heaven, what did he do with His power?

Jesus promised the disciples that it was better for Him to return to heaven because he would send the Holy Spirit to live inside of each believer. Throuigh the Holy Spirit, each believer is also “apportioned” one or more spiritual gifts. (vs7). Jesus first had to “descend” to this earth in His incarnation and “humble Himself to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil.2:5-8) to bring salvation to humankind, and then once He was exalted, he sent the Holy Spirit as a “down payment” for our future heavenly inheritance (1:14,15). As believers, filled with Holy Spirit, we have each also been resourced with spiritual gifts to build one another up in the Body of Christ. Jesus uses His power and exalted position in heaven to “fill the whole universe” through the Holy Spirit who indwells each believer.

### Question 5

* What is the job of church leaders (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastor, teachers)? How would it impact the unity of the church if every member viewed their leaders as “gifts from God?” (See Heb. 13:17)

Church leaders are “gifted” by God for the purpose of “preparing God’s people for works of service” (v. 12). This not only involves encouraging believers to be outward-focused and a blessing to others in this world, both in the church and outside of the church, but also to make sure they are maturing in their faith and “knowledge of the Son of God.” A complaining and grumbling attitude toward our leaders is a great threat to unity in the church. The Scriptures encourage us to respect our leaders and pray for them. (Heb.13:17)

### Question 6

* Every believer in the Body of Christ has received a spiritual gift from Jesus. As we look at parallel passages about spiritual gifts (Romans 12:4-8, 1 Peter 4:8-11, 1 Corinthians 12), the list of gifts is expanded to include gifts of healing, miraculous powers, service, financial giving, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, administration, exhortation, leadership, showing mercy, and exhortation. Although the list is not exhaustive, each gift is to be used for the common good to serve others. What do you think your spiritual gifts might be? How are you currently using them to build up the Body of Christ?

It is a worthwhile spiritual exercise to meditate on how God has “gifted” me to serve His people in the Body of Christ. It is often stated in most churches that 20% of the members do 80% of the work in the church. This is not God’s design. His vision for His church is that everyone plays a part and experiences the joy of serving in the name of Jesus. As Paul quotes Jesus in Acts 20:35 as he encourages the Ephesian elders, “It is more blessed to give than to receive”.

### Question 7

* As believers are equipped, prepared or discipled by the “gifted” leaders for works of service, why is it also important for a mature church to “reach unity in the faith and knowledge of the Son of God?” Why is it important to have a balance between right living and right thinking and to embrace both the words of Jesus and the works of Jesus?

In the Great Commission, Jesus tells His disciples to, “Go therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matt.28:19,20) Jesus commissions the church to go into the world, uphold His teachings, and model His commandments to heal the sick and help the poor. We need to be faithful both to the words of Jesus and to the works of Jesus.

### Question 8

* What is the danger of stagnating in our understanding of God’s truth contained in the Scriptures and remaining in a state of protracted infancy concerning the basics of our faith?

*In 1 Pet.3:15, Peter encourages believers, “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect…” We should always have a deep and growing understanding of God’s word so we can articulate our faith to a lost and hurting world. In this world of competing ideas, it is important for the believer to be grounded in God’s word. (2 Tim.3:15,16)*

### Question 9

* Are you more likely to “speak the truth” or “in love” try to keep the peace at any price? What do you need to learn to strike a balance in how you approach the relationships in your life?

How we communicate with one another is of utmost importance in the Christian community. We should care enough about one another to speak into each other’s lives, but this should be done with gentleness and humility. We should not be a community of “apathetic bystanders” that witness injustice or harm to others and refuse to get involved. But as we “speak up” is should be done in love guided by the truth of the gospel. As John Stott, the great Christian writer, once said, “Truth becomes hard if it is not softened by love; love becomes soft if it is not strengthened by truth. The apostle calls us to hold the two together…There is no other route than this to a fully mature Christian unity.” (Stott, God’s New Society, pg.172)

### Question 10

* Paul proclaims that a healthy church is a growing church that “in all things is growing up into him who is the head, that is, Christ.” (vs 15) For the Body of Christ to function properly, he states that it should “grow and build itself up in love, as each part does its work.” (vs.16) Why is it so important that each believer contribute and exercise their spiritual gifts for the purpose of strengthening the church? What happens if someone is “left out” or made to feel “unwanted” or “unnecessary?”

An important value in the Vineyard Church is that “every one gets to play.” God can use anyone in any situation to bring encouragement, healing, or a prophetic word from the Lord. We all need to be vigilant in our anticipation of what the Lord is doing in each situation. The Scriptures state boldly that “God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble.” (1 Pet.5:5) Paul encourages the Corinthian believers in 1 Cor. 12:24-26, “But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.”

## Prayer ministry

* Begin your prayer time by inviting the Holy Spirit to come and lead and guide your group through prophetic words, pictures, or encouragement from the Scriptures. Allow a period of silence and encourage your group members to have a receptive posture by kneeling or opening up their hands to the Lord. If you have new people in the group who are unfamiliar with the Vineyard Prayer Model, take some time to introduce them to the value we place on making time to listen and hear from the Lord in prayer.
* After several minutes have passed, ask if anyone has heard from the Lord regarding how to direct our prayer time. If there are very specific prophetic words that apply to people in the group, you can choose to pray as a group for those people who want prayer. Sometimes it is wise to break up into groups of two or three which gives more people the opportunity to pray. At other times it may be wise to separate into groups along gender lines. You can mix it up from week to week as the Lord leads and with input from the other group members.

**Note: This study was prepared as an act of service by Jim Vagnier.**