

Text: Ephesians 4:1-6

Title: “Walking the Avenue with Others”

Do you remember the little children’s rhyme with hand signals? “This is the church. This is the people. Open inside and there’s all the people.” Is this (the building) the church, or is this (the people) the church?” Well, we are the church and God has so created and configured the church to become the AVENUE by which believers grow into the fullness of the life of Christ. We learn that in Ephesians 4. So let’s stand together and read the first sixteen verses responsively. You’ll see the verses on the screens. I’ll read a portion then Bruce will lead you to read responsively. **Read Ephesians 4:1-16.**

As you’re seated go ahead and open your Bibles to the passage we have just read. We’re in a series from Ephesians 4 called “The Avenue” where again we see that God has so created and configured the church to become the AVENUE by which believers grow into the fullness of the life of Christ. Whatever else you may think church ought to be, whatever else you may expect from church, this is the main thing ... to bring you/us into the fullness of the life of Christ.

“THE AVENUE” GRAPHIC: Now to obey the Lord in this we have developed a process we call “The Avenue.” There’s a discernible path ... an identifiable process ... an avenue that we walk along that will result in our maturing in our faith. Our objective is for all of us to be intentional about our growth toward knowing, following and sharing Jesus Christ. The first intersection along The Avenue is “I Am a Guest.” As I said last week, it all starts from the first contact we have with people when they click on our website or drive on to our parking lot and walk into our buildings. We want them (you) to encounter Christ. The next intersection along The Avenue is “I Am a Member.” In this part of the process we want people know Christ by becoming a member of the family of God through personal salvation and by becoming a member of the Body of Christ through baptism and/or church membership.

Now back to our text. Paul starts with...

Ephesians 4:1 - As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

And after we are challenged to live a life worthy of the calling, the salvation, the new life, we have in Christ we are immediately challenged to do that connected to the church. In fact, the words for “calling” and for “church” are related. The word “church” means “the called out ones.” We are called to Christ and called to a community in Christ called the church. And those relationships in the church become a big part of the process of our spiritual growth. We’re moving along this avenue, this path, this walk, together. Yes, we enjoy our personal relationship to the Lord. We read our Bibles and pray and feel His presence. But this life is lived out in community and in connection with other believers. There’s no way we can walk worthy of this high calling on our own. That’s why God puts into a body ... the Church. And in the church He intends for there to be unity ... oneness. Perhaps you picked that up as we read through our text and it’s what we will focus on today.

Christ obtained this oneness, this unity, for us and we have two responsibilities in that regard.

1. WE STRIVE TO ATTAIN TO THIS UNITY.

That's clear from the way Paul talks about the church. In v.11 he said that God gives pastoral leaders to the church...

Ephesians 4:12 - to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

Ephesians 4:13 - until we all reach (attain to) 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.

This is why church membership is so important, and why our church makes such a big deal about it. Your connection to a local church is crucial to your growth as a believer. And I'm not just talking about having your name on the rolls. I'm talking about active participation in the church. I'm not just talking about showing up a Sunday or two a month. I'm talking about weekly engagement in relationships in the church. Why? If you have any desire at all to grow into what Paul calls here "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" God intends for that to happen through your connection to the church. You really have no life disconnected from the Body of Christ.

ILLUSTRATION – Over the weekend Nan and I had a little excitement at our house. I walked out the front door to put some mail in the mailbox, and as I did, a big gecko lizard ran in the house and up the wall of our entry way. Nan said, "I will not go to sleep knowing that that critter is running around my house." The problem is that the ceiling in our entryway is very tall and the gecko had run to the very top corner, out of the reach of anything I had to swat him. So we had to get him to come down somehow. Nan went into our grandkids play room and grabbed an arm full of stuffed animals, and we started to throw them up at the gecko to get him to come down far enough for me to swat him with the broom. Finally after several minutes of target practice, the critter decided he needed to move. He ran down the wall far enough for me to crush him with one mighty blow of my broom! His body fell to the floor in two pieces ... the body and his tail. I looked carefully and the tail kept wiggling for several minutes. I thought maybe the tail would grow another body. But, lo, it finally stopped moving. Why? A part of the body cannot live disconnected from the body.

Now, we'll talk more about this next week, but for now, what is this unity we are striving to reach or attain? We strive to attain this unity...

THROUGH OUR FAITH IN CHRIST – The goal is that we all reach "unity in the faith" or "unity of the faith." Here we are talking about our FAITH IN Christ ... our confidence in Christ. This starts when we first put our trust in Him for the gift of eternal life. But then we grow together in our confidence in Christ to live the life we are called to live. But this is more

than just our personal trust in Christ. Notice Paul calls it the “unity of *the* faith.” There is a body of beliefs that are passed to us that we are to learn and grow up in together. So we strive for this unity through our faith in Christ but also...

THROUGH OUR KNOWLEDGE OF CHRIST – So our goal is “unity (oneness)... in the knowledge of the Son of God.” We’re not talking about just a casual acquaintance with someone. This is deep, full, knowledge of someone. These are our convictions about Christ ... who He is in us and who we are in Him.

So it’s in the proper functioning of the church that we will *all* reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of Christ ... all of us having our minds and hearts focused on growing together in Christ. If you don’t desire that growth ... if you don’t hunger for maturity and fullness in Christ ... then you have every grounds to doubt if you are really saved. So we are to strive to attain to this unity. But we’re called upon to do something else.

2. WE STRIVE TO MAINTAIN THE UNITY.

Now we’re going to backtrack here. What we are striving to attain we must also maintain. What we are striving to reach we must also keep.

Ephesians 4:3 - Make every effort to keep (maintain) the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Now it’s important to understand that we don’t create the unity. We strive to *attain* to and *maintain* something that was *obtained* for us by Christ. So we don’t create unity around our preferences or style or anything else. Christ obtained this unity when He died on the Cross.

Ephesians 2:15b-16 - His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two (speaking of Jews and Gentiles), thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

Christ broke down all the barriers that could possibly separate believers in the church ... all of them. So how do we *maintain* what Christ *obtained* for us by His death? We do it...

THROUGH OUR LOVE FOR EACH OTHER

Now v.2 shows us two waves of the love that flows among us. **The first wave is our inward attitude of humility and gentleness.**

Ephesians 4:2a - Be completely humble and gentle...

BE HUMBLE – Someone has said that humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is simply not thinking of yourself at all. Stop to think about how a lack of humility can destroy unity. If I’m

all about asserting myself, my needs, my preferences and my opinions then I will never be inclined to think about what is best for others in the church. Be humble, but also...

BE GENTLE - This quality gentleness means strength under control.

ILLUSTRATION – I got an insight into this word one year when we went to the FW Rodeo out at Will Rogers. First we saw the bronc riding competition where a cowboy gets on a wild horse that has never been trained. His goal is to stay on it for 8 seconds. Most of the time the cowboys lose to the enormous strength of those wild horses. Later in the rodeo came the cutting horse completion. Here you have horses that are just as strong, just as powerful, just as massive as the wild broncs, but with one big difference. They are under the control of rider. All it takes is a gentle nudge of the cowboy's knee or a slight tug on the reins, and the horse responds. In fact, they're so trained that the rider doesn't have to do a thing. The horse knows how to respond. That's the picture of gentleness.

So you see, this first wave of humility and gentleness flows out my understanding of Christ. He is great and I am not. So I must lowly in my relations with others. He is Lord and I am not. So He controls my spirit that might otherwise be harsh with someone. Again, this has to do with our inward attitude toward ourselves.

The second wave of love has to do with our outward attitude of patience and forbearance.

Ephesians 4:2 - Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

BE PATIENT - The person who is patient is one who when hurt or injured by another is not provoked ... doesn't blaze up in anger. Remember this is the outward attitude that comes from the inward attitude of humility and gentleness. So if we don't feel that we are entitled to be treated a particular way (humility) and our emotions are under the control of Christ (gentleness), then we won't explode when people don't treat us the way we think we should be treated. My thought is, "God is great. I'm not. So I'm not going to blow up with people who don't treat me like I'm great."

Now this patience is shown by "bearing with one another in love" (v.2). This is also called "forbearance." It really means to "endure" one another. Yes, sometimes that's what we have to do. None of us are perfect, but we are all a work in progress. And as hard as we try to be loving and considerate and selfless and joyful, we'll all miss the mark sometimes. That's why we need to bear with and endure one another ... in love. This is the love that allowed Jesus to hang on the cross dying for we who did Him such harm by our sin.

So one way we maintain, guard and keep the unity of the Spirit is through our love for each other ... the inward attitude of humility and gentleness and the outward attitude of patience and forbearance.

Again, v.3 says it is the “unity of the Spirit.” It is a unity that was obtained for us by Christ and that flows from the Holy Spirit who dwells within us.

Note: This is not peace at any price. The Bible is clear what to do when persons in the Body harm the peace and the unity.

Titus 3:10 - Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him.

Romans 16:17 - Watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.

So we are accountable to one another for this. But we do so with humility and gentleness and patience and forbearing love.

So we maintain and keep the unity of the Spirit through our love for each other, but we also do it through...

THE CONFESSION OF OUR UNITY

This unity is an amazing gift. In vv.4-6 the word “one” is used seven times ... the seven “ones.” This is our confession of what we believe about this unity based upon Scripture.

Ephesians 4:4-6 - There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

What we have in common is far greater than what we don't have in common. “**One body**” is the Body of Christ to which we all as believers belong. There is “**one Spirit**” who placed us into that Body. We all have “**one hope**,” one future inheritance to which we are all called. There is “**one Lord**” whom we serve, Jesus Christ. There is “**one faith**” by which we called upon the Lord to save us. And when that happened we all entered the visible body of Christ through “**one baptism**.” And we have “**one God and Father**.” He is over all ... every one of us. He works through all of us and He is in all of us who are saved in Christ.

It is this unity that we attain to (reach for) through our faith in Christ and knowledge of Christ. It is this unity that we maintain and protect through our common love and confession.