

Ephesians 4:1-16
 August 5, 2018
 E Pluribus Unum
 Out of the Many, One

“There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

One. One. One. One. One. One. One.

In those three verses I just repeated, the word “one” appears seven times. St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is all about the Church; and because it is all about the Church, it is all about being one. We heard of one big aspect of this two weeks ago: in Ephesians 3, we heard that Jesus is the Savior of all nations. While the world makes all sorts of prejudicial distinctions and divisions, in Christ we are all one. Now, in chapter 4, we hear of all that the Lord does to make and keep us united, one, as the Church— the body of Christ.

It begins: “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

You have been called into the Church: the Holy Spirit has called you by the Gospel, enlightened you with His gifts, sanctified and kept you in the true faith. But you are not alone in that, for the Holy Spirit likewise calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the entire Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. On the one hand, Christianity is intensely personal: not only do we declare that Jesus died for the sins of the world, but we also declare that Jesus died for you personally. But since you are now part of the Church, it’s not just between you and Jesus. Therefore, the manner worthy of your calling is humility and gentleness toward one another, with patience, bearing with one another in love.

Humility and gentleness pair up to say, “I am here for forgiveness, but I am not the only one here. Therefore, I surrender my personal preferences for the good of the group.” Patience and “bearing with one another” say, “We are all here because we are all sinners in need of forgiveness. Some may do distracting things, but they are my family in Christ. I will bear with them, even as I try not to be a distraction to others.” Humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love: all of these maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

The text continues with the seven “ones” to declare the unity of the Spirit that we have: “There is one body and one Spirit- just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call -- one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

There is one body—there is one Church. That Church is made up of all who believe in Jesus Christ. That Church does not bear the name of “Lutheran” or “Baptist” or “Roman Catholic.” Do not misunderstand: we hold firmly to our doctrine here, because we believe that it purely confesses our one Lord, Jesus Christ. However, we also condemn the false teaching that “only Lutherans are going to heaven.” People are not saved by the name on a church sign; they are saved because, by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, they trust that Jesus has died for their sins.

There is one Spirit who gathers us in. You are not in the Church by your own spirit's efforts. You are part of the body of Christ because the one, Holy, Spirit—God Himself—has gathered you in, and continues to keep you alive in the body of Christ. If each of us were saved by our own efforts, there'd be something to the idea that "We each have our own path to God. You have your way and I have mine." But the path to God is the same for all: the one Spirit delivers the forgiveness Christ has won.

There is one hope: the hope of eternal life for Jesus' sake. We are not like a university class, where we're together to learn for a while before we go our separate ways to achieve separate dreams. We are together in the Spirit now, so that we might be together in heaven forever. That is our hope. For Jesus' sake, that is our certain hope.

There is one Lord—Jesus Christ. He is the only-begotten Son of God. He is the only virgin-born son. He is the One who has lived a sinless life. He is the One who has made the one sacrifice for your sin. He is the One who is risen and who sits at the right hand of God. Jesus alone is the Savior of the world. There is no salvation apart from Him—but He offers that salvation to all.

There is one faith. The Christian faith is one faith, not a general concept from God with a lot of options we can pick and choose. That there is one faith is very good, because it leaves no room for doubt. The Lord doesn't contradict Himself: what He says is certain.

There is one baptism: it is the baptism of water and the Word, "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." By it, Jesus joins you to His death and resurrection. By it, He washes away your sins. By it, He adopts you into the family of God at the cost of His own precious blood. By Baptism, then, you are part of the body of Christ. You are united with all Christians, part of the one, holy, Christian and apostolic Church.

There is one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. The teaching of one God is quite ordinary to us, but perplexing to others. The ancient Greeks had a whole panoply of gods who were up to all sorts of mischief, often playing tricks and undermining one another. Our present culture likes to teach that there are all sorts of gods, all sorts of ways to heaven, and that all religions are equally true; although by saying that all religions are equally true, society actually argues that no religion is true. But our Lord will have none of that: there is one true God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—who has created us, redeemed us and sanctified us. Salvation is found in Him alone, nowhere else. This is a blessing of unity, too: you do not have to wonder if your God is big enough among gods to get the work done and get you to heaven. The answer is yes, He is. The answer is—for Jesus' sake—yes, He will.

One. One. One. One. One. One. One. Thus St. Paul describes the Christian faith in such a way as to emphasize how the Gospel unites us. It breaks down barriers: barriers between sinful man and righteous God, barriers between Jew and Gentile. Jesus has come to restore what was broken and divided by sin, and He has done so by dying for our sin on the cross. The message of the Gospel makes us one in Christ, for He has joined us to Himself.

St. Paul doesn't stop by reciting the content of what we believe: he goes on to declare how it becomes yours. Christ gives gifts to men, he writes. This salvation is yours because the price has been paid. Once. For all.

You know, too, where He gives these gifts—in His Word and Sacraments. And in this text, he speaks of one more gift: the office of preacher. Sometimes known as apostle, prophet, evangelist, or pastor and teacher, God calls certain men into the Office of the Holy Ministry to serve the Church. How? Pastors equip the saints.

They do the work of the ministry. They build up the body of Christ. They do these things by preaching the Word, by rightly dividing the Word of truth, and by administering the Lord's Sacraments according to His Word. That Word unites us in faith and knowledge of the Son of God. It gives us spiritual maturity as we grow in that faith and knowledge. It further unites us to Christ, our Savior. That is the work of the pastor: it is why our Lutheran Confessions teach that "It is taught among us that nobody should publicly teach or preach or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call." Lest we be misunderstood, this does not mean that the pastor adds some special power to the Word: pastors are a sinful bunch, in need of forgiveness, like everybody else. Nor does it mean that you are forbidden from sharing the Gospel with those around you: quite the contrary! However, when the Church comes together, it is given to the pastor to preside over the service, the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments.

So now we have eight "ones." One office proclaims the Christian faith, which Paul has described with seven ones before it: one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, etc. The point of all of these ones is that we are united in Christ. What good news: for the sake of Jesus, we are no longer strangers and enemies, aliens and foreigners. We are one. One. One. One. One. One. One.

You can see the temptation coming, can't you? If the Lord graciously proclaims to us unity in Christ, the temptation for sinners—even with the best of intentions—is going to be "many." Many. Many. Many. Many. Many.

I've already mentioned one "many" already: it is the world's insistence that there are many ways to heaven, that Jesus is just one of the many. The Christian Church does a relatively good job of standing firm against this, of saying, "There is One Savior, and His name is Jesus Christ. He has died for the sins of all; and whoever believes in Him will be saved." In that confession of faith, Christians are quite good at being united, at speaking with one voice.

However, among Christians, there are a couple of places where it's tempting to lose the God-given "one" and opt for a manmade "many."

One of those is the truth of one faith—that there is one truth proclaimed by God in His Word. This is a sticky one. You may, in fact, not like my words; but I pray that you would weigh them carefully to see if they are true. While there is one Church, we see all sorts of Christian denominations with all sorts of teachings; and if we are honest, we must admit that all of them cannot be right. Either Baptism is a means of grace or just a symbol: either it is for infants or it is not. Either Jesus' body and blood are present in Holy Communion or they are not. Either one has free will or one does not have free will. All of these are disagreements among Christian churches today, and all of them have far-reaching consequences and ramifications. But whenever Christians hold doctrines that contradict each other, only one of them can be right. This is true because the Christian faith is one faith, not a general concept from God with a lot of options we can pick and choose. Again, this is good: the one faith is given to unite us in confessing the same thing.

Painful though it may be to acknowledge, the reason that there are so many different denominations is not because God has so many different facets or provides different plans of salvation: it's because people—often with the best of intentions—misinterpret Scripture in a way that doesn't agree with others, and thus a new church body forms. The large number of denominations today doesn't testify to a **godly** diversity, but indicates the many different ways in which man has interpreted the Bible in an attempt to find the one true faith.

The popular route among Christians today is to ignore the differences. So we hear that “we need to set aside disagreements and work together”. This argument has especially been popular for the last century or so: in one famous case, a new denomination was begun in the United States with the purpose of uniting all denominations back into one church; unfortunately, one of its earliest orders of business was to split over a disagreement. That’s just a handy illustration of the problem: unity through compromise is the way of man. Once that way is begun, it will only lead to more compromise in pursuit of unity; and each time, more of the Word will be lost. This is not the way of God who has given us one faith that we might be united.

As Christians, we want to search the Scriptures and hold fast to what they say. Unpopular though it may be, this is far better. That is what our Lutheran Confessions do: against misinterpretations of Scripture, they lay down what the Word of God says. Believing this to be a confession of the true faith, we hold fast to it. This will strike some as arrogant, and our response is one we speak in love: “It is what we believe to be true on the basis of Scripture. It proclaims salvation in Christ alone. It preserves the Good News of our Savior. If we are right, then no wonder we hold fast to it. If we are wrong, then please show us from Scripture how we are wrong. We are willing to be corrected.”

That is the confession of our Church. And let it be repeated: this is not to say that only Lutherans are going to heaven. But it is also honest to say that not every Christian’s differing doctrine can be correct and pleasing to God. If we adopt the idea that contradictory doctrines are both true, then unity will fail: for we will be like “children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.”

That is why we speak the truth in love about the one faith God gives: it unites His people in His Word. Pure doctrine is not a barrier to Christian unity: it is the basis for Christian unity. Thus, we hold fast to it, even as we say to all our brothers and sisters in Christ, “Come, let us reason together.” And we look forward to heaven, where the Church—whose unity is now often hidden—is seen in the glory of Christ, singing praise around His throne.

We’ve barely scratched the surface of our epistle lesson, and there is certainly more to be said. This is a passage that has been used, many times, to advance a variety of manmade teachings. It can be so disheartening. But do not lose sight of the Good News that this text proclaims: because Christ has died for you, you are one. You are united together into the Church, the body of Christ, with Christ as your Head.

You are united in that body with all who trust in Him. To unite you and keep you one with Him, He continues to grant you forgiveness and life. For your salvation, “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” By His work, you are united with Christ, for through Him you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen