

# Making Every Effort to Keep the Unity of the Spirit

Ephesians 4:1-6 on May 25, 2025

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*Please read Ephesians 4:1-6 before going further in this transcript.*

Our church talks about the topic of unity fairly often. And we're going to talk about it again today. And this won't be the last time we'll talk about it, there will be more sermons on unity in the future. Why? Because unity is vital to our church's health, and to our church's witness, as well as to our own personal spiritual maturity. In Philippians 3:1, the Apostle Paul writes, "...It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you." So today it's no trouble for me to preach the same things to you again. You see, I shared a message from Ephesians 4 back in 2021, and this morning I'm preaching on it again. Regularly talking about the topic of unity is a safeguard for us, for our church, and for our own personal faith.

Psalm 133:1 says, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!" Now, "Living together in unity" doesn't mean that we won't have a diversity of perspectives and opinions. The fact is, there are many different points of view among us, which is why unity is so challenging. For example, we have different political views: some of us are Republicans, some of us are Democrats, some are Independents, and still others are simply uninterested in politics. We also have different opinions about our church's current budget shortfall: some of us think we should increase our giving, some of us think we should decrease our spending, and still others think we should simply pray and just wait and see how things progress. Some of us have different opinions about the paint on the back wall of our Sanctuary. A number of us really like it, but some of us don't. And a few of us are asking, "we painted?" Being unified as a church doesn't mean uniformity - that we'll always agree on everything. In fact, the true power and beauty of God-honoring unity, is the very fact that we can disagree about so many secondary things, and yet still enjoy genuine unity in Christ. The genuineness of this God-honoring unity is perhaps best demonstrated on occasions when we willingly set aside our personal preferences, for the sake of our corporate unity. For example, throughout our summer of combined services, we'll all have the opportunity to honor our fellow believers by making allowances for one another's song preferences. With all of this in mind, I'd like to share a story by a guy named Dave Wilson.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is an edited version of the April 27, 1997 original. It was also used in a sermon by Pastor Fred Martin on February 4, 2001.

One day I was walking in San Francisco along the Golden Gate Bridge when I saw a man in distress, looking like he was about to jump. So I struck up a conversation with him and told him that God loved him. A tear came to his eye, and I asked him, "Are you a Christian, a Jew, a Hindu, or what?" He said, "I'm a Christian." I said, "Me too!" "What denomination?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me too!" "Northern Conservative Baptist, or Northern Liberal Baptist?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "How wonderful, me too!" "Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist or Northern Conservative Reformed Baptist?" He said, "Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist." I said, "Remarkable, me too!" "Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region or Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Well praise the Lord!" "Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region of 1879 or Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region of 1912." I said, "Die heretic!" and I pushed him off the bridge!

Now, obviously, this is just a silly fictional story, but, it does illustrate the importance of "majoring on the majors, and minoring on the minors." As important as it is for us to hold firmly to correct doctrine, it's also important for us to practice humility and love when it comes to secondary issues which could unnecessarily divide us. Friend, if we allow matters of personal opinion, and personal preference, to cause division, then we do a disservice to the unity which God desires in His Church.

### **Making every effort to keep unity...**

#### **1) Begins by remembering that its source is "of the Spirit."**

Ephesians 4:3 urges us to "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." The fact is, unity does require a lot of effort. However, we need to be crystal clear that our effort doesn't provide the unity, our effort serves to preserve the unity. This phrase in verse 3, "Make every effort to *keep*," can also be translated... be eager "to *maintain*" (ESV) or being diligent "to *preserve*" (NASB). Therefore, KEEP, MAINTAIN, and PRESERVE are all telling us the same thing: the unity we need already exists, even before Scripture exhorts us to keep it.<sup>2</sup> The unity "of the Spirit" has already been provided through the cross of Christ. (*If we had more time we could go back to Ephesians 2 and read about how Christ has destroyed the dividing wall of hostility, and provided peace through His*

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<sup>2</sup> Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, p. 279, footnote #31.

body.<sup>3</sup>) Unity in the church is built entirely upon what Christ has done on the cross. This is great news! We don't have to be intimidated, by the humanly impossible task, of creating unity in our church, because it's already been provided for us, through Christ!

So our job is to keep the unity, to maintain and preserve the unity that's already there thanks to God's Spirit. Now admittedly, this is still quite a challenge for us, but, it's certainly much easier than trying to provide it out of our own resources. Colossians 1:29 comes to mind, "To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me." So let's set aside any naïve assumptions, that as long as all of us "love Jesus," then it will be super easy to get along. Keeping the unity of the Spirit requires strenuous effort; it requires making every effort.<sup>4</sup>

But what efforts are we actually talking about here? Well, Paul actually already told us, back in verse 2; so we need to back up, and carefully consider two simple, but exceedingly challenging phrases...

**Making every effort to keep unity...**

**2) Calls us to be completely humble and gentle.**

Ephesians 4:2 begins with this first phrase, "Be completely humble and gentle...." Now "humble" and "gentle" could each have their own separate sermon point, but I've kept them together because, in many ways, humility and gentleness are inextricably linked. And both of them are immediately upgraded to the level of "completely," meaning not partly humble, or sort of gentle, but rather completely!

Being humble carries with it the idea of lowliness.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, in our culture today, we tend to view humility in a derogatory way. Many people would suggest that humbling ourselves invites others to disrespect us, and to treat us like some kind of a doormat. However, all throughout Scripture, humility is regarded as a characteristic of godly strength, something pleasing to the Lord. In Matthew 23:11-12 Jesus teaches His followers, "The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (*Friend, there's greatness in humility!*) As each one of us in the church, chooses to humble ourselves and serve one another, we protect and cherish the very unity that God intends. As each one of us makes an intentional effort, not to think too highly of ourselves, we guard

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<sup>3</sup> Read Ephesians 2:14-22. See *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2405 footnote on Ephesians 4:1.

<sup>4</sup> Romans 12:18 comes to mind.

<sup>5</sup> Ταπεινοφροσύνη = "humble attitude, humility, without arrogance... I did my work as the Lord's servant." (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 747). New York: United Bible Societies.)

against the sin of arrogance.<sup>6</sup> Arrogance is the opposite of humility; it's what causes so much of the hurt and damage within relationships, and within churches.<sup>7 8</sup>

Now we've already talked about how humility and gentleness are linked, but that doesn't mean that they're the same thing:

Humility is more about our mindset, how we think of ourselves.

Gentleness is more about our actions, how we treat one another.

Scripture calls us to gentleness; again not "sort of gentle," but completely gentle. Gentleness can be understood as being mild in dealing with one another rather than harsh.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, much like humility, gentleness also tends to get a bad rap. People who are gentle are sometimes perceived as being "meek and weak," as though they are some kind of a softy, who doesn't know how to be tough on people when they need it. However, there is great strength and wisdom in gentleness. For example, Proverbs 25:15 says, "...a GENTLE tongue can break a bone." And Proverbs 15:1 says, "A GENTLE answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." And Galatians 6:1 teaches us, "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person GENTLY."

Gentleness is about how we treat one another; not harshly, but gently. In Galatians 6:1, this gentle tone fits very well with the word "restore." Restore is "used elsewhere in the New Testament for mending nets and bringing factions together."<sup>10 11</sup> Scripture leaves no room for harsh, mean-spirited, or unkind attitudes and actions toward our fellow believers. Gentleness protects us from causing further hurt and divisions, by teaching us the right tone of voice. (*Timing, Tone, and Tact can spare us from a lot of disunity.*) Gentleness shows us how to fellowship together in harmony, like a choir or worship team, all working together to make beautiful music.

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<sup>6</sup> See Proverbs 16:5, 18-19 and Mark 7:20-23, especially the end of verse 22.

<sup>7</sup> See Romans 12:3

<sup>8</sup> In some languages humility is expressed indirectly by [the] phrase..., 'to live without strutting.'" I imagine many of us are picturing a rooster right now; you get the idea.

<sup>9</sup> Πραΰτης = "gentleness of attitude and behavior, in contrast with harshness in one's dealings with others—"gentleness, meekness, mildness." Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 748). New York: United Bible Societies.

<sup>10</sup> *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, 2011, note on Galatians 6:1, p. 1979.

<sup>11</sup> Later on, in this same chapter, Ephesians 4:15 urges Christ-followers toward an atmosphere where we "speak the truth in love." This nicely summarizes how Christ-followers should pursue unity in a loving way, while at the same time being truthful and straightforward about sin.

**Making every effort to keep unity also...**

**3) Calls us to be patient, bearing with one another in love.**

Ephesians 4:2 goes on "...be patient, bearing with one another in love."

As if the first half of verse 2 hasn't already been challenging enough, the second half just seems to "turn up the heat." Humility and gentleness are already both very challenging, but "patient, bearing with"? This might be even more difficult! I sometimes joke with people that I never pray for patience. I say this "tongue in cheek," but in one sense I actually mean it, because it feels like I'd be inviting God to test my limits: "Okay God, please send someone my way who will test my patience and help it grow." (No thanks!) Being patient with each other is much more challenging than something like waiting in line at the DMV. The *King James version* might capture it best: patience is "longsuffering," or perhaps we should say, "loooooong-suffering." Patience is making allowances for the shortcomings of others (or, at least, our perceptions of their shortcomings). Patience chooses to endure all of the hassles and frustrations and disappointments of being in community with other people, rather than just flying off the handle and voicing our unfiltered thoughts.<sup>12</sup> Or rather than simply avoiding church altogether! In fact, if the challenges that we're talking about in today's text are why you're watching church online, then you need to come back to church, in person. Isolating ourselves from our church family, is a sure-fired way to isolate ourselves from opportunities for spiritual growth and maturity. (*This body needs you, and you need it.*)

Patience is further clarified in verse 2 with the phrase, "...bearing with one another in love." Bearing with means "to regard with tolerance, endure, put up with"<sup>13</sup> Let's make sure not to skip over, perhaps the two most important words in this entire passage, "one another." It's so easy for me, for us, to assume that we are always the one doing the "bearing with." We need to keep in mind, that there have been many, many times, when the other Christians around us, have had to bear with us. In other words, "one another" includes you! We've been putting up with you for years! Now, we've done this, because we love you, because we value you, and we care about you deeply. But it's probably best for you to realize, that sometimes... you're kind of a pain to be around! (*And, truth be told, so am I, sometimes. So thank you to those of you who've been put up with me, when I've been a pain to be around.*)

Well, we're not sugar-coating this today: being a deeply devoted follower of Jesus means that we're called to put up with one another. In fact, turn to

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<sup>12</sup> Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, p. 278.

<sup>13</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 78). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

anyone who may be next to you and tell them: “The Bible says I have to put up with you.” Then tell them, “And you have to put up with me.” (And smile.)

All kidding aside, each one of us needs to ask ourself a serious question:

**> Is there anyone at E-Free Bemidji that I’m unwilling to say that to?**

In other words, is there anyone who I’m NOT willing to put up with?

Whoever that person may be, and whatever we’re struggling to put up with, we’re called to “bear with one another in love.” In fact, asking God to help you get along with that particular person, is the key to our entire church experiencing unity. It’s that important! To put it another way: Refusing to be bear with that particular person, will hinder our entire church, from being the unified body that God intends us to be. In the words of verse 3, it will keep us from keeping the unity of the Spirit.

Let’s make sure we don’t skip past those last two words in verse 2: “...in love.” This “bearing with one another” isn’t done angrily or grudgingly, it’s done “in love.” God first loved us and then taught us to love Him, and then He teaches us how to love one another with that same love.<sup>14</sup>

To put it another way, our love for God and our love for one another work in tandem. 1 John 4:19-21 says it this way, “We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this *command*: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.”

So, God’s love, not only teaches us to love one another, it also teaches us how to live together in unity with one another.<sup>15</sup> Now, it’s human nature for us to prefer our own affinity group or clique. Even as Christians, we often break into our own small group of friends. This is a normal part of sociology and human behavior. In fact, it’s healthy to be part of a small group: a Life Group, a Bible study, a Sunday School class, or some kind of a serving team or music team. However, it becomes unhealthy, when it becomes a faction that pulls away from the unity of the larger group. At times, often without even realizing it, without even meaning to, we become a faction that stands apart from the larger church body around us.<sup>16</sup> These kinds of factions, work against keeping the unity of the Spirit. If we’re not pursuing unity with the body as a whole, then we’re in danger of divisiveness, which is sin. This would be the exact opposite of Ephesians 4:1 which urges us to “live a life worthy of the calling that we have received.”

This is why it’s good for a church like ours, which has two different worship service styles, to intentionally recognize that we’re still one church, one

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<sup>14</sup> See Romans 5:8.

<sup>15</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, p. 278.

<sup>16</sup> Consider what’s listed alongside “factions” in Galatians 5:19-21. Factions are an act of the sinful flesh.



body, one fellowship of believers. Ephesians 4:4-6 reminds us, “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.” Ok Paul, I think we get it! You repeated the word “one” 7x in a row! Oneness is a BIG deal; Jesus died to make us one in Him. This oneness is the foundation for our unity as a church.<sup>17</sup>

- > E-Free Bemidji is one body even though we’re made up of many parts.
- > One Spirit dwells in all of us, and empowers us for unity.
- > One hope in the salvation and new life, that we share in Christ.
- > One Lord to whom we all submit.
- > One faith which we all believe and learn together.
- > One baptism unites our common identity in Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection.
- > One God and Father of all, unites us into one Church Family.

So let’s celebrate the unity that we have today thanks to the one Spirit we all share! And as we celebrate it, let’s also recognize that keeping this unity means doing the ongoing, hard work! Let’s take one final look at Ephesians 4:3: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” So, unity isn’t a “one and done” kind of thing; it takes daily, moment-by-moment effort to keep our unity. A New Testament scholar named Peter O’Brien makes an interesting observation about Ephesians 4:3. “Paul’s appeal is urgent and cannot be easily translated into English. The verb he uses [for “make every effort”] has an element of haste, urgency, or even a sense of crisis to it, and has been rendered by [some] as, ‘Yours is the initiative! Do it now!’”<sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup> This means that we shouldn’t be passive about unity; we shouldn’t just pray about it and see what happens.<sup>20</sup> Rather, we should “make every effort,” we should take intentional strides toward it. Brother or Sister in Christ, what intentional step toward unity is God telling you to take today? Is there a brother or sister in Christ with whom you need to reconcile? Then don’t wait; do it today! Take the initiative and make every effort to keep the unity of our church!<sup>21</sup> You won’t be able to do this on your own strength, so ask God for help!

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<sup>17</sup> See *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2405 footnote on Ephesians 4:4.

<sup>18</sup> “Make every effort” (σπουδαζω), Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, p. 279 and footnote #27.

<sup>19</sup> In Matthew 5:23-24 Jesus says, “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.” Really? Shouldn’t I put my relationship with God 1<sup>st</sup>, and THEN take care of my relationships with people? The fact is, it’s unwise to separate the two.

<sup>20</sup> a “wait-and-see attitude.” Citing Barth, Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, p. 279.

<sup>21</sup> Now, you may be thinking, “even if I make every effort, I can’t force the other person to be in unity with me!” That’s true, we can’t force anyone. Romans 12:18 says, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” All we can do, is what we can do. We need to be humble and gentle, and patiently bear with one another. That’s how we “keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”