

ALL FOR ONE, ONE FOR ALL

SERIES: GREAT TRUTHS RECONSIDERED

by Steve Zeisler

I've been listening to a series of messages that Earl Palmer gave at his church in Seattle on the occasion of C. S. Lewis' 100th birthday. He called them *The People of the Lion*. (1) The repeated refrain in these messages is that all of us live our lives by a certain set of convictions that govern everything else we do, and it's important to know what your convictions, your great ideas are; what beliefs you are willing to live and die for. Churches have great ideas. We at PBC have themes or convictions that have shaped us as a church. This message is one in a series in which Doug Goins and I are reflecting on some of these great themes.

In this message we'll begin consideration of the idea of body life, the community of Christ (we'll continue this topic in the next message). If you were to travel elsewhere and mention this church, chances are people would say (if they had heard of it), "Oh, that's the Body Life church." By far the best-known and most widely quoted of Ray Stedman's books is *Body Life*. In it are his reflections going back more than 20 years on what it means to be the church.

Live a life worthy of your calling

The Greeks crowned champions in the games with a *stephanos*, a wreath made of leaves. Anybody who knows and has walked with the Lord is wearing a *stephanos*. We are all victors in Christ. James, in his letter, said this: "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown [*stephanos*] of life that God has promised to those who love Him." (James 1:12) As we persevere and trust God and learn the lessons of faith, we are given life itself, which is figured as an invisible crown that wreaths our heads. Jesus warned in Revelation, "Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown." (Revelation 3:11)

We are royal sons and daughters, but we don't see it. We don't often treat each other as if it were true. But think about the Christians around you in the family of God. They were chosen before the creation of the world to inherit every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. They live every moment of their lives in the caring gaze of Jesus Christ and with his protective hand upon them. In one of C. S. Lewis' most famous sermons, he said, "the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship...." (2) So we need to be urged by the apostle Paul to take seriously things that are true, yet don't command attention. We need to undertake the changed thinking and behavior that will make our lives an honor to the gospel and make the invisible known.

Ephesians 4:1 says,

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

Let me stop at that one sentence and supply a little background to the book of Ephesians. The apostle Paul was the author of this book, and he describes himself in this sentence as a prisoner of the Lord. He was in fact a prisoner in Roman chains because he had been faithful to his ministry, because he had done what God had called him to do. He had told the truth and had refused to back down. He was willing to take whatever would come—the consternation, the overturning of expectations, the turmoil that sometimes followed the preaching of the gospel—and he was willing to stay the course. That is one of the reasons to listen to what he is going to say here. Paul is about to urge us to think and live differently. And his courage, faithfulness, and perseverance give him the right to say what he says.

The first three chapters of the book of Ephesians are filled with theology, and the last three chapters with practical application of theology. In chapter 4 we are going to be entreated to take body life seriously: to love one another and grow together in Christ.

The word "then" in this first sentence of chapter 4 hearkens back to what Paul said before this: profound instruction about how we have been forgiven, how those far away have been brought near, how we are seated with Christ in the heavenly places, how God loved us and knew us before he created the world, and how he chose us to receive honor as the companions of Christ. All this remarkable teaching should inspire us to do what he will shortly command us to do.

In the paragraph immediately preceding chapter 4 is a prayer:

"I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge-that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." (Ephesians 3:16-21.)

We should listen to Paul as he admonishes us because he was a man of courage and because of the marvelous insight of his instruction as to the nature of the gospel. But perhaps we should listen to him most of all because he prays for those who read his words. Even his good example and clear teaching will not penetrate us finally without his calling on the Lord to do the work of making things clear, without his marvelous willingness to be on his knees before God, holding on tightly to him and speaking to him of his beloved. We cannot underestimate the importance of prayer.

Having now been stirred to listen carefully, here's what we're commanded to do. Verses 2-16:

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 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.

**But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says:
"When he ascended on high,
he led captives in his train
and gave gifts to men."**

(What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 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.

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 men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 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.

There are three ideas here that I would like us to focus on. The first is the experience of what it means for all of us to share one kind of relationship with God. The second is that each one of us individually has been given an opportunity, a gift from Christ, so that we can play our part in doing good to everyone. We discover what we were made for, our place, what open door God has given us. And the third idea is that the church makes progress only as we all make progress together. There is no such thing as competitive maturity, where I'm determined to know more and look better, to outshine everyone around me with my spirituality. Remember Paul's prayer at the end of chapter 3-it is only "together with all the saints" that we can learn of God's love.

Verse 2 is an introduction to all the responsibilities that follow. In order for us to have unity in this family, to think well of each other, to understand our place, we must get over being selfish. So if you have a bad attitude, the first call is to deal with it. "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love." If you're prickly and impatient, involved with yourself, habitually tapping your foot and being put off by all the inadequacies and foolishness of the people around you, you've got a problem. Get over it. We have no right to pout and have things our own way. Learn to be sweet in your response to people. How impressed you are with yourself is of no interest to God or anybody else.

Keep the unity of the Spirit

Then Paul says how we should regard each other, and that begins with this series of "one" phrases in verses 3-6: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. We're told in these verses to keep or preserve the unity of the Spirit. It doesn't say, "Create unity." The unity already exists; we are already joined to one another

as sons and daughters of the King because of what Christ has done. Our responsibility is to value the unity, to hold on to it, to commit ourselves to experiencing it, to resist everything that would drive wedges between us, to stop listening to the innuendoes and the complaints and all that pits one against another, group against group. We should be diligently, anxiously, seriously committed to the preservation of unity.

Unity is Trinitarian in Paul's writing of it here. The Spirit, the Lord Jesus, and the Father are all mentioned. We all experience God the Father in the same way. Your experience of joy in the Lord Jesus is just like the experience of everybody else. Your insights into the wonders of the gospel are shared by other Christians who have found the love of God to be as glorious as you have found it to be. The Spirit who empowers and changes you is the same Spirit who is at work in the people around you. None of us has unique insights. None of us has God in a way that no one else does. We all have him in the same way. We all fail and are forgiven our failures in the same way and for the same reason. There is one Spirit, one Lord, one God. It should create a sense of appreciation for one another that any good thing we have from God, he's given away a million times over to others.