

Unity, Truth and Love (Ephesians 4:1-16)

We live in a world, where the church appears riven by division and many reject the possibility of absolute truth - especially when it comes to talking about religion.

Yet, Paul's vision for the church is that sharing the truth helps us grow in love and unity. How does this work?

A Brief History of Truth

Our passage today presents the big picture of what the church is meant to be like. It is a great vision of a church that is united, living in love and held together by the truth.

But for us as 21st Century Western Christians this vision raises questions. We are part of a church that feels deeply divided, with lots of different denominations and we live in a society that is deeply suspicious of absolute truth. Why is that?

To understand I want to do a whistle stop tour of a Brief history of truth in Western Europe over the last 500 years.

Christendom...

Just over 500 years ago, all of Western Europe would call itself Christian. There was one institutional church which had influence over every aspect of people's lives. It's Christian teachings were universally accepted as the truth.

It had become incredibly politically powerful and wealthy, but partly to maintain its power, wealth and control its teachings had become corrupted.

Reformation...

So increasingly, people began to question the truth that the church taught. People started looking more carefully at the Bible and realised that the good news about Jesus and salvation through faith had been lost.

This was the heart of the reformation. It was an argument about truth, a challenge of the truth taught by the Roman Catholic church where it disagreed fundamentally with the Bible.

Sadly, this argument about truth led to a split in the church between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Similar arguments since then have led to more splits and more denominations forming.

Worse than that, the splits led to religious wars in Europe and violent persecutions of Protestants by Catholics and Catholics by Protestants. Even in recent history we have seen echoes of these conflicts in the violence in Northern Ireland in the late Twentieth Century.

Enlightenment...

For many in Europe looking on, the arguments and violence over religious truth, led to a rejection of religious truth altogether. If people could not agree with what the Bible said, then let's seek truth through human reason.

This approach was called the enlightenment and led to a rather arrogant confidence that human beings could discover absolute truth through scientific method and without resorting to religious documents.

The result? Even greater violence as people sought to impose their man made ideologies on others around them - just think of the bloody French Revolution and the numbers of people who died at the hands of Fascist and Marxist regimes in the Twentieth Century.

Postmodernism...

If the enlightenment rejected the idea of a religious absolute truth, because of the bloody religious conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, then postmodernism rejected the idea of any absolute truth, because of the bloody ideological conflicts of the Twentieth century.

Now any claim to absolute truth is seen as a means of exerting power over others. You can believe whatever you want as long as you do not try to tell me that what I believe is wrong. The only absolute truth is that there is no absolute truth.

This is what many today think, because history seems to teach that claims to absolute truth leads to oppression and violence. Truth it seems destroys unity and love.

The assumption seems to be: if you want to maintain unity and love, then steer away from absolute truth.

As Christians this attitude poses big problems, because unity, love and truth are both fundamental to the Christian faith.

So how can what Paul wrote 2,000 years ago help us rethink the conclusions that many have drawn from the last 500 years of our history?

We are called to live in love and unity - 4:1-6

First, we need to be clear that love and unity are fundamental to our calling as Christians.

The start of chapter 4 is a turning point in the book of Ephesians. Basically, in the first three chapters, Paul has laid out his vision of what it is to be a Christian.

Chapter 1 says: We are called by God to be his adopted children in Christ and to receive a wonderful inheritance.

Chapter 2 says: We are transformed by grace to live a new life with Christ, as part of a new united people of God, where old divisions are gone.

Chapter 3 then talks about the surpassing love of Christ.

This is the big picture, love and unity as part of Christ's body.

Now, in 4:1, Paul urges them to live a life worthy of this calling. Most of the rest of the letter will spell out what it means to live life in this way, in many different aspects of life.

But to start with we see that this is a call to be a community, a true body of Christians. This is love in action.

Verse 2 spells out the qualities and attitudes people need to have to live successfully in community with one another:

Pride creates conflict as individuals seek to be seen as more important than others, humility on the other hand sees others as more important than yourself and so helps to create harmony.

Pushing people around and being insensitive to their needs and concerns creates upset and conflict, but gentleness cares about the needs and weaknesses of others and promotes understanding.

Impatience tries to make people march to your timescales and puts peoples backs up, but patience allows people to catch up in their own time and creates peace.

All of this is bearing with one another in love. Love is not being surrounded by nice people, love is being able to show humility, gentleness and patience with difficult people. But such love helps to create a united and loving community.

If you find being with other Christians easy, then you can't be sure you are loving them. if however, being with other Christians is difficult, but you manage to bear with them in humility, gentleness and patience, then God has helped you to live out your calling and love as you are called to love.

Such attitudes and love of course helps create a united people. This is how we make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Notice, Paul does not see unity among Christians as an optional extra. Achieve it if you can. This is to be our primary aim as Christians. Why? Because not to seek such unity is to deny the big picture of who we are in Christ.

In verse 4-6, Paul gives 7 ways in which as Christians we are one:

"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." (Ephesians 4:4-6)

- As we hopefully emerge from the Pandemic over the coming weeks we need to make rebuilding such a united community of Christians a real priority. And we need to seek to build back better.

Some are and will be eager to do that after such a long break. Others may be wary for all kinds of reasons. As Colin said last week, it is easier to sit at home and watch church on a sofa than to come along and engage with other Christians in real life. But it is only by engaging face to face in real life that we can work for the unity and love that we are called to make.

And this is not just a calling for the spiritually enthusiastic - whoever they may be - this is a calling for all Christians.

Having said that, not all Christians will play the same role. That is partly what Paul starts saying in verse 7 and will go on to explain in verse 11-16, but first he introduces what seem to be some strange verses in verse 7-10.

How can truth and love go together? #inChrist - 4:7-10

Love and unity, then is a fundamental call for the church. But, don't arguments over the truth destroy that love and unity? Shouldn't we as Christians follow the world's conclusions and reject the idea of absolute truth to maintain church unity?

The answer to this is, 'No!' But to see why not, I think we need to understand what Paul is doing in verses 8-9, when he quotes from Psalm 68:18:

"When he ascended on high,
he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men." (Ephesians 4:8)

Psalm 68 actually rejoices in God's victory over Israel's enemies. It extols the fact that no-one can defeat God.

Paul, takes the verse from the Psalm and applies it to Jesus. In fact in Ephesians, Paul has been emphasising that Christ is the one who ascends on high:

"That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills everything in every way." (Ephesians 1:19-23)

For Paul, Christ is the one who has the ultimate victory, who will rule in eternity. He will be the Head over all Things! He has ascended on high.

Yet, Paul says to say that Christ ascended also admits that he descended. Christ came to earth, placed in a manger as a baby, living a life without wealth, prestige or power and dying a humiliating death on the cross. Yet, God raise him up and brought him to be head over all.

The authority of Christ comes not from seeking to exert power over others, for the sake of worldly wealth, prestige or power. His birth life and death shows the opposite of those things.

Rather his victory, his being placed above all things comes from his dependence on God.

This is the truth that Christians teach. A truth rooted in the humility of Christ, the self-giving sacrifice of Christ. A truth that teaches love.

This is what makes Christ's truth different.

The Medieval Catholic church started twisting the truth to maintain its own power and wealth. The wars and violence of the reformation and indeed, the conflict in Northern Ireland, were just as much about power politics and control as they were about religious truth.

The ideologies of human reason and truth that sprung from the enlightenment were used by the likes of Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin and Mao to bring about incredible power.

Even the postmodern denials of absolute authority are an attempt to exert the power of the individual over wider society.

None of these so called truths, were about love, humility, gentleness and patience. They are bound to create division and cause harm.

Christian truth, however, is different because it is the truth about Christ, who was humble, gentle and patient. It is when we are firmly rooted in this truth and live it out that we can create the kind of united church that God calls us to be.

We grow together through truth and love - 4:11-16

And this is what Paul goes on to say in verses 11-16. We grow together through truth and love.

Paul has said in verse 7, that we are all given different gifts by God. However, his focus here is on those who are gifted to teach the truth about Christ: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists and the pastors and teachers.

The apostles and prophets are foundational to the church as Paul said back in chapter 2:20. We are probably here to think of those who are behind the teachings of the New Testament as we have it. The New Testament after all was still being written and formed as Paul wrote. We no longer have the apostles, but we do have their teaching in the form of the New Testament.

But we all need help to understand and see the relevance and application of the Bible. That is still the role of evangelists and pastor-teachers today. They help us all to be rooted in the truth.

This is not for the sake of truth in and of itself. Rather as we learn the truth of Christ, we are equipped to serve as Christ served and we grow as a body to be the mature body of Christ. Christ becomes more truly our head and our community reflects more fully his values and ways.

As the truth of Christ is proclaimed and heard, so the unity and love of the church community grows. The truth of Christ does not destroy unity and love it creates it. Why? Because there is no-one like Jesus and because of the surpassing love of Jesus Christ in dying for us.

- It is easy to become disillusioned about Christian truth in a world, which rejects absolute truth as a means to power and in a church, where sadly arguments over truth are mixed with human pride, insensitivity and impatience and even used as a means of power and destroy the unity of the church.

But, when we see that the truth about Christ is the means to unity, when we humbly seek to live according to his calling, living out the gospel of Christ in his community, then we will want to be fed more and more by the truth of the Bible and by those who speak its truth in love.

A Prisoner of the Lord

Paul begins this section by reminding us that he is writing as a prisoner for the Lord.

It reminds us that He also lived in a world, where people rejected the truth about Christ and locked Paul up for it. It too was a world intolerant of claims of absolute truth.

It reminds us as well, that Paul like Christ speaks the truth not from a desire to exert power over others - he was powerless in prison, but because he loved the people he was writing to.

But, it also reminds us that Paul was in a sense not just a captive for Christ, but a captive of Christ. His desire was to serve him and speak his truth, for the sake of his church.

Please pray for us who preach and teach, that we may have boldness to speak Christ's truth into a world that rejects absolute truth and to do so not for our own wealth, prestige or power, but purely to serve the church and because we are captive to Christ.

