



GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

October 16, 2016

Discussion Guide

Myth of Uniformity

CONNECTING:

45 MINUTES

(THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE YOUR GROUP WITH A WAY OF CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER SO THAT YOU MIGHT PARTNER IN THE WORK GOD IS DOING IN YOUR LIVES.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they state they have held back.)

GETTING STARTED:

10 MINUTES

- How do you attempt to “get along” with people who differ greatly from you? Could you elaborate?

DIVING INTO THE TEXT:

60 MINUTES

(THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE YOUR GROUP WITH A SIMPLE ROAD MAP THROUGH THE TEXT. FEEL FREE TO USE THESE QUESTIONS IN WAYS THAT BEST FIT YOUR GROUP AND THE DYNAMICS OF YOUR OWN MEETING.)

- Read Ephesians 4.1-6 aloud. Pause. Read the text once more, paying attention to words or phrases which stand out to you. Listen to what God might be saying to you in these words or phrases.
- In these verse, Paul talks about the journey of faith as one traveled with others. According to Paul, what are to be the marks of this community of faith? Seek to find as many as possible.
- Would you say that these are the marks of most communities of faith? Could you elaborate?
- What would a community marked by these qualities look like in practice?
- Paul emphasizes at length the role of unity in the community of faith. How would you define unity, and how would you say we typically seek it within the Church? Would you say this is working well for us?
- How might Paul define unity and how to pursue it? In what ways, if any, is this different from how we are pursuing

unity?

- What might it look like to pursue unity within Union Center in this way? Within this group?
- What, if anything, keeps us from pursuing unity in this manner?
- Consider closing in prayer. You might consider using Jesus' prayer for unity as a model for your own time of prayer (John 17.11, 20-23).

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

UNITY

Unity is a state of being in which people seek to maintain their unique distinctiveness even as they pursue a oneness of mind and purpose. This concept of unity originates in the life of the Trinity as the three distinct persons of the God-head maintain their unique natures even as they exist in a oneness of mind and purpose so complete that it leads to a union of their essence (1 Corinthians 12.4-6). Those who join their life with Christ in faith are called to pursue unity with other people of God not simply because God himself exists in unity but because this God of unity has shared his life with them (John 17.11, 20-23). In fact, unity is to be one of the hallmarks of God's people, a sign that God himself dwells among them (Acts 4.32; Ephesians 4.3). However, one constant exhortation throughout the New Testament letters to the early churches is the exhortation to unity (Romans 15.6; 1 Corinthians 1.10; Ephesians 4.3, 13; Philippians 1.27; 2.2; 1 Peter 3.8). That the authors of these letters constantly shepherded these churches toward unity seems to indicate that unity is not easy to maintain. Rather, division and, at times, antagonism between the people of God seems to be the norm, even during the ministry of Jesus (Philippians 4.2; 1 Corinthians 1.11-17; Mark 9.38-41; 10.35-45).

The maintenance of unity among the people of God is no easier today than it was in the

early Church. Rather, division and periodic antagonism are still very much the norm, both within churches and across the wider Church. However, the presence of such division and reticence to attend to it signifies a significant misunderstanding of the redemptive work of God in Christ, a work which was intended to lead people to experience the Triune-unity of God with one another (Ephesians 2.14-22). Many times, attempts at this unity are attempts at achieving uniformity which involves a pursuit of oneness of mind and purpose by nullifying any unique distinctiveness which already exists within individuals, congregations, or denominations. However, unity and uniformity are not the same. True unity can only be achieved when God's people realize they already possess it as a gift of the Spirit made possible by the work of Christ (Ephesians 4.3) and they seek to maintain it (not develop it!) by living in loving relationships with one another in the same way the members of the God-head live in loving relationship with one another (Colossians 3.14; Ephesians 4.2).

THE TEXT

EPHESIANS 4.1-6: UNITY AMIDST DIVERSITY

Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus is his most general letter, a letter in which he outlines the redemptive work of God in the person of Christ. His letter might easily be broken into two parts: a description of the redemptive work of God in Christ (Ephesians 1-3) and the effect this work is to have on the everyday life of the believer (Ephesians 4-6).

Paul begins his section on the practical outworking of God's redemption in the life of the believer by exhorting the Ephesians to take special care to their everyday lives. They were to pursue lives which were worthy (in keeping) with the redemptive calling they had received. The mention of calling is important as it reminds the Ephesians that the work of redemption originates with God. However, it also points them back to chapters 1-3 where this redemptive work is nothing short of an invitation to enter into relationship with God

himself. Therefore, Paul simply says, "Be sure you live like people who are in relationship with God."

Surprisingly, his first exhortation regarding living in relationship with God involves living in relationship with other believers; that is, the journey of faith in Christ is traveled with others. The relationships with other believers were to be marked with humility (putting others first), patience (long-suffering), and love which enabled fellow believers to stay together even in difficult circumstances. It is difficult to miss that these relational qualities are not unlike those modeled within the Trinity. Thus, believers are to live with one another in community in the same manner God exists in community with himself. Naturally, this is easier to say than do, particularly when we consider the differences which existed in the Ephesian congregation. In this congregation we discover men, women, children, slaves, and slave owners. This congregational makeup ensured that significant social and economic dynamics were always in play. Men had a higher status than women. Slave owners were most likely wealthy. Children were often ignored, and slaves were looked down upon. These pre-existing socio-economic dynamics naturally created tensions which made humility, patience, and love difficult at best. So the pressing question is how might this congregation live with one another in this manner?

Paul's answer is that the believers first recognize that the distinctives which they believe separate them have actually been removed through the work of Christ. The work of Jesus has made peace (whole relationships) possible (Ephesians 2.14-22). This wholeness between people has been given to the Ephesians as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Simply put, the believers can live with one another in community as God lives in community not by striving for it but by recognizing they already possess this community and making the choice to live into it. This choosing to live into the community they already possess is done by

recognizing what they have in common rather than what divides them. Paul lists what appears to be a seven-fold confession which may or may not be an early confession of the Church. Most likely, Paul is simply hammering home the major factors which the Ephesian congregation needs to remember, factors which are greater than any socio-economic differences. They form the single body of Christ by one Holy Spirit and as this body all pursue the same hope. They have one Lord (Jesus) and confess the same faith in him through the waters of baptism. They all have one God who is the sustaining creator of all people and all things. It is not difficult to see the Triune thinking of Paul here in these statements. In Paul's mind, the life of community as God experiences community is possible because the Triune God has made it possible, filling the believers of Ephesus with their life.

REAL LIFE WITH BLAKE:

How do we maintain unity in the church? Maybe I should phrase it this way. How do we get messy people from all walks of life to do more than tolerate one another? How do we get them to hang together with deep devotion even as their unique backgrounds, viewpoints, and personalities threaten to tear them apart? Easy, right? Not always. So how do we do it? Typically, I have one of two ways I try. The first is I try to tolerate people. I would like to say I try to love them, but in reality, I just try to tolerate them. I try to ignore their faults, their annoying habits, their viewpoints which are not my own, and I pray they do the same with me. However, it doesn't take long before tolerating becomes very difficult. Their habits begin to grate on my nerves. Their viewpoints annoy me, and their faults stand out more and more. Finally, I get to the point where I can't tolerate them anymore and I shift to option two which is to find a new community, one where people are more like me. I want people to be more like me because I reason that if they are more like me I will be more able to tolerate them, and they me. The problem is that this cycle simply repeats and I never really experience true unity. So unity must be found in something other than toleration. I am coming to understand that there will never be a time in the life of the Church where people are all

the same. After all, just take a look at the crew that hung out with Jesus (Matthew 10.1-4). Talk about a bag of mixed nuts. And, I know by experience that I can't tolerate people who are not like me, but I don't have to try. Unity with these people is something I already have, a gift from God made possible by Jesus. Unity is not something I have to pursue. It is simply something I must choose to live into, and I make this choice every time I choose to recognize what I have in common with others rather than our differences. Every time I choose to recognize the deep connectedness that already exists because of the work and presence of God among us rather than our differing viewpoint, our various backgrounds, or diverse personal habits I choose to step toward unity, and in stepping toward unity I step toward the very life of God himself.

REAL LIFE WITH YOU:

How do we find unity within the church? Across churches or even denominations? This is one of those difficult questions to answer. As the people of God we know we are to be unified. Jesus himself prayed for our unity (John 17.11, 20-23), but that unity is often elusive. Sometimes we try to equate unity with tolerating one another, and at other times we try to equate unity with uniformity. Neither approach is ever very effective, but they don't have to be. Unity is not something we have to strive for. It is something we already have, a gift of the Spirit made possible through the work of Christ. We already possess unity. We just have to choose to live into what we already possess. Just how do we do that? According to Paul, we do this by choosing to recognize what we have in common with our fellow believers rather than what divides us. So often what we consider are things like personal preferences, divergent viewpoints, or even doctrinal or methodological differences. Sometimes these are small and at other times they can be great. However, what we have in common is much greater, for what we have in common is God himself who lives among us and gives us life.

This week, consider taking up the spiritual practice of seeing what you have in common with your fellow believer. Whenever you are tempted to see a difference in anything from a preference to a political viewpoint, consider saying, "But the same God lives in both of us." See how, if at all, this changes how you feel and relate to others around you. Consider journaling your experience.



SENIOR
PASTOR
BLAKE
SHIPP

 twitter.com/blake_shipp
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