Christian Unity

The sermon preached by John Sawkins at Rosyth Methodist Church
at Morning Worship on 18 January 2026,
at the beginning of the Week for Christian Unity

From Paul's letter to the Ephesians, Chapter 4 and verses 4–6@

> "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

Introduction

This Sunday marks the start of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The week began over 100 years ago, back in 1908, in the Episcopal Church in New York State; and was an attempt to focus attention on the need to reconcile the different church denominations with one another. Sad to note that we seem to need it just as much today as back then.

Which brings me to the story of a Christian who was stranded by himself for several years on a deserted island. One day a ship happened to see three huts on this island and sent a rescue team to investigate. The rescuers were confused to find one man but three huts and so they ask him about them. "That one", said the man, "is my house". "That one", he said, pointing to the second, "is the church I go to". "And that one," he said with a sniff, "that is the church I used to go to."

To those outside the church our inter-church relationships must look a bit like that – pretty dysfunctional. Yes, thanks to the ecumenical movement rival church denominations have come together. But in the process of uniting, splinter groups have spun off to set up new rival organisations. As far as ecclesiastical unity is concerned one plus one does not equal two – it often equals three or four.

Not that this is anything new of course.

More than fifty years ago I recall very well, as a child, hearing moans from older Methodist Church members that things had been going downhill since the Prims and Wesleyans united in 1932.

Indeed, if it's any consolation, it seems this was the way things were from the very beginning. Most of Paul's letters were written to deal with issues that were threatening to divide the churches to which they were written. And the letter to the Ephesians is one of those.

Letter to the Ephesians

The letter was most likely written by Paul towards the end of his ministry, whilst he was in prison in Rome. It was probably a circular letter, meant to be sent around and read out by the new churches which were popping up all over the eastern mediterranean.

The letter comes in two parts. Chapters 1 to 3 set out a vision of the Church in the world as a great coming together of Jew and Gentile in God's new family [household] in Christ. The vision was of everyone being part of that family with Christ the head. All one in Christ.

And where we pick the story up in Chapter 4, Paul is now turning to the practical way in which this one-ness, this unity, under Christ can be made real.

Two things strike me about what he says. First that one-ness is the aim. In Chapter 4 and verses 4 to 6 that is the word that keeps coming back. One.

"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

In that translation the word recurs no less than seven times.

The second thing that stands out is that Paul works on the assumption that being one, being united, takes work. Unity is not something that human beings with all our tendency to self-centredness are predisposed towards. But be careful here. Paul is not making the case for everyone's beliefs and practices being carbon-copies of some great master plan that he has laid down. Rather, he expresses the hope that this church and all churches may find a way to live with diversity in a way which is worthy of being disciples of Christ.

Let me pick out four things from this passage which, I think, still resonate for us as 21st century Christians.

Remember what unites us

First, remember what unites us. Because sometimes we forget.

Once upon a time a minister had a pet cat that often wandered into his services and became something of a nuisance, a distraction from the worship, not to mention his sermons. To sort this out, before the service began, he put the cat in a collar, tied a lead to it and put the lead under the leg of a chair, where it settled down and snoozed through the service. This became part of the routine and the cat was no longer a nuisance.

A few years later the minister died and the people faithfully kept the cat on its lead, and the lead under the leg of a chair as was their custom – it was a great help to the new minister and reminded them of the old.

But eventually the cat died too and so the stewards decided they had to find another cat, fast, so they could put it on a lead, with the lead under the leg of a chair, before the service could go ahead.

A bit of pragmatic cat control had, over time, morphed into being an essential part of the liturgy of the Church.

How much of what we, as a church, and other churches do, feels a bit like that? What is it that actually unites us?

What unites us, is that we all worship Christ, who is one with God the Father and God the Spirit. The one thing, the only thing, that unites us is Christ. Nothing else.

We are not one because our churches are organised and run in the same way. We are not one because we all believe in the same things. We are not one because we offer worship in the same way.

We are one because we profess Jesus as Lord.

Throughout the New Testament the idea is expressed in any number of ways; we are all members of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12), we are all branches of the vine (John 15), we are all members of the household of God (Ephesians 2). We are united in Christ. That is what Paul was saying when he noted,

> "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

And so remember – when we get hung up about ecclesiastical routines or ways of doing things, or translations of the Bible, or the hymn tunes chosen, or whether we kneel or sit or stand to pray, or whether we ask forgiveness for our trespasses, our sins or our debts, or if candles are lit, or what the colour of the preacher's tie is – remember that these things ultimately do not matter. What matters is our profession that Jesus is Lord.

That, ultimately, is what unites those of us who are part of a church, and what unites churches across the world. Our profession that Jesus is Lord.

Deal graciously with each other

Second, deal graciously with each other when you disagree.

This is practical advice from Paul about how to deal with the smaller things in church life, the things that get under our skin, that niggle, that send us round the bend, and that have the potential to divide us.

In verses 2–3 of Chapter 4 this is the advice,

> "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."

In other words, be gracious in the way you treat others in the church. And that's tough if you think you are right and the other person is wrong.

I recall the story about the former Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher who one day breezed into a meeting, thumped her famous handbag down on the table and said, "I'm in a rush. I only have time to lose my temper and get my own way."

Or we might feel like singing that old Country and Western song, "O Lord it's hard to be humble when I'm perfect in every way."

But, when we make the effort, when we are humble, we think of others' needs ahead of our own and we admit that we just might be wrong … sometimes.

And when we are patient we listen more than we speak and when we do speak we take time to reflect on whether our words come from a place of love.

And what is true for us within a church is true for the way in which we deal with our brothers and sisters in Christ in other churches. We owe those in other churches recognition, assistance, love and co-operation.

What Paul is saying is simple to hear and understand, but hard to live. When we are humble, patient, and bear with one another in love we are united in Christ and bound together in peace.

Recognise and celebrate the diversity of gifts

Third, recognise and celebrate the diverse gifts that God has given us.

Thank God we are not the same. We don't look the same, we don't think the same. We were not made in that way. After all, not even identical twins are exactly the same.

It is the diversity of humankind that enriches the world. It is variation and not sameness that leads us to explore and discover new things.

Sameness is actually more problematic than diversity because diversity is a gift of the Spirit, whereas sameness suggests we are in charge.

So when different people come together for worship that's a sign that God is at work. If diversity is absent we risk worshipping a god made in our own image.

Yes, we do find some forms of worship more helpful than others. Some which resonate deeply with us. Some which stir our hearts and minds, and some that leave us cold. And that is perhaps one of the reasons behind the variety of denominations and expressions of Christianity that we have today.

Paul does not insist that worship should be offered in a particular way. To do so would not be authentic.

But what is required is Christ at the centre. Worship which offers our best to God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Worship in which we tell and celebrate the story of the saving acts of God in Christ.

Put our gifts to good use

And lastly, fourth – put the gifts you have to good use, put them at the service of all members of the Church.

In verse 11 of Chapter 4, Paul runs off a list of those with differing gifts – apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers – making the point that there are diverse gifts but, in verse 12 he says that whatever the gifts, they are there,

"… to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up."

We as a church, this church, every church, is to equip people for service, and it is through service that the body of Christ is built up.

Paul says to all the churches who receive this letter, that their call is to build up and not to tear down the body of Christ. Our divisiveness and tendency to fracture and break apart cannot but drive people away. Our love for one another and our service may powerfully witness to Christ and his transforming power in our lives.

Transformed. That's the right word. Not just changed a wee bit, or tweaked, or made more efficient or tuned up a bit. Transformed. Until, Paul says, in verse 13:

"… 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."

May we individually and as a church, together with all our brothers and sisters in Christ in every church professing Jesus as Lord, work humbly for unity and peace so that we may all attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

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Let us pray.

Heavenly Father,
you have called us in the Body of your Son Jesus Christ
to continue his work of reconciliation
and reveal you to the world:
forgive us the sins which tear us apart;
give us the courage to overcome our fears
and to seek that unity which is your gift and your will;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Our picture of a group of people standing on top of a sandy beach was taken by James Lee and made available on Unsplash.