

The Gospel-Tension that Builds Unity

Ephesians 4:1-16

related passages: John 13:35; Psalm 133

Introduction: Why aren't there any Evangelical Free Jokes?

You'll never hear a joke that begins: "A Baptist, a Methodist, and an Evangelical Free guy walk into a bar..." And I wouldn't recommend making one up. People will just look at you and say, "An Evangelical what?" Even the Christian satire site The Babylon Bee, which has found a way to make fun of every single sub-group of evangelicals hasn't been able to come up with any good material on the EFCA yet.

Now you might be thankful that we don't have jokes made about us, but you might also wonder if there is something wrong with us. Is it because we are too boring (too vanilla) that nobody can think of any jokes about the EFCA? Is it because we have no distinctives?

Well actually, we have a lot of distinctives. But many of them are distinctives we share in common with many other denominations. But this morning I get to talk about the thing that really sets us apart. And it's all the reason we are not good joke material...

One of the core distinctives of our denomination is that we drill deep on core doctrinal commitments but leave room for freedom and dialogue on secondary doctrines. Or to put it the way the average person will describe it, we major on the majors and minor on the minors. As one who came into the EFCA from the outside, this is one of the beautiful characteristics of our denomination. And I believe it is a core value that is largely embodied in our churches.

This characteristic, perhaps more than any other, is the thing that makes us different from other Evangelical Denominations. So when we ask what makes the EFCA different, it is what the early leaders of this denomination called the Significance of Silence. What is the significance of silence? Here's how EFCA director of theology and credentialing Greg Strand describes it. He writes:

According to former EFCA President Arnold T. Olson, "Once [the early Free Church leaders] began to put in writing what was commonly believed among them, they were silent on those doctrines which through the centuries had divided Christians of equal dedication, Biblical knowledge, spiritual maturity and love for Christ.' This

‘significance of silence’ reflected our strong concern for Evangelical unity in the gospel.”¹

Because many today misunderstand the expression “significance of silence,” another way to refer to this commitment is “unity in essentials, dialogue in differences.”

Unity in the essentials means there are certain things we have to believe in order to be a part of Christ’s Church. To be a member of an EFCA church you must be able to make a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

And there are certain things we have to require our church leaders to believe and subscribe to if we are going to have healthy churches. For instance, every EFCA pastor must be able to affirm The inerrancy of Scripture, the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of original sin, the virgin birth of Christ, the sinless life and substitutionary atonement of Christ, that the church is composed of regenerate believers, that those believers are called to live holy lives, that hell is a place of eternal conscious torment, that Christ is physically returning to this earth in his second coming. And this is just a sample summary of the doctrines the EFCA has clearly articulated. In other words, the “essentials” include a LOT of doctrinal content.

“Dialogue in the differences” means we talk about the things we disagree upon but we do not require uniformity. We encourage people to have deep convictions on secondary matters based on their understanding of Scripture. But we do not divide over those issues. Rather, we commit to talking about them with respect and love for one another.

For instance, the EFCA has been influenced by both the Calvinist/Reformed tradition and the Wesleyan/Arminian tradition over the years. And when you read the EFCA’s Statement of Faith you can tell that a lot of thought went into writing a statement that both could affirm with a clear conscience.

The EFCA has also chosen to remain silent on the issue of the continuation of all the gifts of the spirit. Some believe that the revelatory gifts of tongues and prophecy ceased after the apostolic age, and some believe that those gifts continue throughout the church’s history. Our SoF is one that both can affirm.

There are just two examples of areas where the EFCA has chosen the “Significance of Silence.” The freedom that the EFCA allows on these issues means that in the same church you might have people who think very differently about a number of doctrinal issues. The EFCA’s commitment to unity around the essentials means that in midst of disagreement about secondary matters, we are committed to not dividing over those things, and to not trying to flatten out the diversity and create absolute theological uniformity.

And friends, that is a very hard tension to maintain. I remember one of the warnings from a wise seminary professor who told us students “The closer you get to someone theologically, the more you start to assume or even demand absolute uniformity.” And then he exhorted us to learn early on in ministry to appreciate and learn from those who were different from us.

That is the payoff. Unity is not just about learning to get along with one another. Gospel-unity is rooted in the idea that each of us is better because we are in relationship with people who think differently than us.

If you have been around here very long, you know that I’m not neutral on the issues I mentioned above. I have strong convictions. I am basically a Reformed Baptist theologically. But I am a better man for serving a church where not everyone shares my convictions. I love these brothers and sisters. They are precious to me and they sharpen me.

And among the EFCA pastors who have become my dear friends, there is a good bit of diversity in how we understand these issues. I benefit greatly from fellowship with brothers who differ with me theologically.

And the man who has had more direct influence on my life as a pastor than anyone else is my father-in-law who is very different from me on a number of theological issues, but has always been a model of love, charity, respect, and wisdom.

So the question is: why does the EFCA believe that this dual commitment to: 1) Deep Doctrinal Convictions *and* 2) The Significance of Silence is so vital? It is because Gospel-unity is vital. Gospel-unity is THAT Important. The early leaders of the EFCA very wisely said, we are going to think very carefully about what

needs to be at the core of our doctrinal convictions in order to maintain both robust orthodoxy and vibrant unity!

Ephesians 4:1-16 is foundational to understanding this dual commitment. The first thing we see in this passage is...

I. The Call of Unity: Walk in a Manner Worthy of Your Calling (vv. 1-3)

Notice how our walk as Christians is intimately tied to our pursuit of unity in the body.

Ephesians 4:1-3. As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. 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.

This is not merely a call to personal piety. It is a call to live worthy of our calling in relationship to other believers! Walking worthy of our calling means being humble, gentle, and patient toward one another. It means bearing with one another in love. It means going out of our way to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

And this effort is built on the objective reality of unity that we experience in Christ. So let's look at...

II. The Reality of Unity: One Body and One Spirit (v. 4)

Ephesians 4:4. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called.

As individual believers, we are called into One body—not many bodies. There is one church universal to which we belong. We are united to saints past, present, and future, of every color and language and ethnicity. In Christ we have become one body, who partake of one Spirit. God, the Holy Spirit indwells every believer, and strengthens each of us. We also share in one hope. Whatever our circumstances in this life, our hope is that Christ is making all things new and one day we will be with Him TOGETHER in the new heavens and new earth.

There won't be different neighborhoods for Presbyterians and Baptists, Methodists and Charismatics. In Christ, we will all be one! And this future unity is built on a foundation that we experience even now. And so in verses 5 & 6 we see...

III. The Foundation of Unity: One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism (vv. 5-6)

Ephesians 4:5-6. one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

The foundation of our unity is not our ability to get along. It is God Himself. We are united because there is one Lord and head of the church. And as diverse as we may be each one of us is united to Him.

And there is one baptism. What Paul means by this is that whenever any of us are baptized individually we are being baptized into the body of Christ. We are sharing in something that has marked God's people from the inception of the church. This baptism points to an inward reality that all of us share in.

And God as our Father, calls each of us his children. We are members of the same family. And He is over all and through all and in all. We exist under His authority. We are sustained by His power. We all live Coram Deo, before the face of God.

So God Himself is the foundation of our unity, and his mark upon us—baptism—should be a sign of the unity that transcends all other cultural and ideological markers! But he has designed us to experience this unity through our diversity. And so in verses 7-12, we see...

IV. The Means of Unity: Diverse Body, Diverse Gifts (vv. 7-12)

Ephesians 4:7-12. 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 took many captives and gave gifts to his people." (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.) So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

Without getting into the various sticky issues of interpreting these verses, let's just focus on the main point here, which is that when Jesus ascends into heaven he gives gifts to his people through the Holy Spirit. And those gifts are diverse. In verse 7, we see that EACH ONE has grace (referring to spiritual gifts) as Christ apportioned it. Not everyone gets the same gift, but everyone is gifted. Everyone is valuable in the body. Some are apostle, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, and when we look at 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 we see that there is a whole host of other gifts given by Christ.

Here's the point. God creates unity not by shoving everyone into the same mold. No, he creates unity by creating a diverse body of diversely gifted people, who are united together by One Savior, One Baptism, One Lord, One Gospel.

But what is the goal of this unity? Is it just so we can be at peace and get along. No there is more to it than that, and so in verse 13 we see...

V. The Goal of Unity: Maturity in Christ (v. 13)

Ephesians 4:13. 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.

Our experience of unity is something we have to grow into. It is something that comes with maturity. A church that has frequent fights over secondary matters is a church that is immature. At the same time this verse suggests that none of us has attained the kind of maturity Paul is describing here. He defines maturity as attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ, which is something we haven't reached yet. We only know this kind of full maturity in eternity.

And so we work relentlessly toward unity, because without unity we cannot grow toward the kind of maturity we are designed for. So our pursuit of unity in this life is anticipating the fullness of unity and maturity that we will experience in the end. But to grow toward unity, we need to be grounded in the truth. And so in verses 14-15 we see the...

VI. The Anchor of Unity: Doctrinal Grounding (vv. 14-15)

Ephesians 4:14-15. 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 people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

Isn't it interesting that unity is anchored not in indifference toward doctrine, but in a commitment to sound doctrine. When Paul says that we will no longer be blown around by every wind of teaching, he uses a word here that is often translated "doctrine." Here's what this means. We don't find unity by saying things like "we don't worry about doctrine, because doctrine divides." Actually, without an emphasis on sound doctrine, you can NEVER have the kind of unity that Paul describes here. Because without it, the church will be tossed around by every wind of doctrine that comes along, without the grounding to stand against it.

True unity requires solid doctrine. One of the things I love about the EFCA is that they know there are certain things we have to be rock solid on if we are going to allow for freedom in other areas.

But there is also a manner of speaking that allows us to challenge each other toward the truth while still pursuing unity. In verse 15, Paul calls us to speak the truth in love to one another. Which means our main goal is never to win arguments, but to build up brothers and sisters. It is as we do this for one another that we grow into maturity as the body of Christ. And so finally in verse 16, Paul shows us...

VII. The Result of Unity: The Body Building Itself Up in Love (v. 16)

Ephesians 4:16. 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.

This is the picture of a healthy church! It is held together by every supporting ligament. Each member is doing his or her part. The whole body is growing as it builds itself.

Conclusion & Application

1. What the EFCA's commitment to unity does not mean.

- a. It doesn't mean that pastors, elders, & church members cannot have doctrinal commitments that are more specific than our SoF.
- b. It doesn't mean that we are aiming for the lowest common denominator.

2. What it DOES mean.

- a. It means we refuse to dive over secondary doctrines.
- b. It means we are committed to loving each other through our differences.
- c. It means we strive for unity in Christ, not in maintaining uniformity. Fundamentalism went array when it equated Gospel-unity with uniformity.

3. What it looks like in practice.

- a. We listen to one another.
- b. We fairly represent one another and choose to assume the best.
- c. We honestly seek to learn from one another.
- d. We don't dismiss challenges to our own position.

- e. We look for common ground → Unity in the essentials.
- f. We do theology with our HEADS, HEARTS, & HANDS.

4. Why this matters for our witness in the world.

- a. Our polarized world desperately needs to see unity in diversity lived out. In a world where issues are settled through Twitter wars, sweeping generalizations, and demonizing all opponents, the church **MUST BE DIFFERENT.**
- b. John 13:35 – “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”
- c. Enmity with God and others is our natural state. The Gospel message is that Jesus lived, died, and rose again to reconcile us to God and to one another. This reality should be tangibly felt when others spend time with us.
- d. Psalm 133 is the picture of unity that is tangibly felt! It is like precious oil poured over the head and running down the beard! This pictures the kind of healing presence a unified people can have! May the body of Christ embrace wholeheartedly the opportunity to be a tangible healing presence in the world as we proclaim and embody the Gospel as a unified people!