

LEARN ON ME • COMMUNITY



WHAT'S THIS ABOUT?

This study deals with maintaining unity among the believers who make up a particular church, campus ministry, or other Christian community. The passage surveys the conduct that leads to greater unity, what things unify Christians, and how our diversity of gifts and talents can actually lead to greater unity, if we use them to serve.

We want to hear from you! Please send your feedback on this study to Materials@ImpactMovement.com

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW?

READ EPHESIANS 4:1-16

Background

Paul begins chapter 4 with the word “therefore,” which is meant to link what has been said before with what is about to be taught. What Paul has just been teaching is how God has left the nation of Israel as His vehicle for saving humanity. He now has created a new body, called the church. It is made up of people from all nations, believing Jews and Gentiles alike.

The one potential problem in all of this is that unity and community can be very difficult to achieve when you are dealing with local churches and groups of Christians that are comprised of people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

“Therefore,” Paul says, for unity to exist, certain things need to happen. Verses 1-16 are those things.

Conduct that Leads to Unity

Paul begins by addressing the four character traits that foster unity. Humility is a willingness to take little honor and to give a higher place to another (non-self-assertion). Gentleness speaks of a demeanor that is not abrasive or harsh. Patience is a long holding out of the mind before it gives room to action, passion, or retaliation. Bearing with one another is putting up with the shortcomings and idiosyncrasies of others.

Paul exhorts them to “make every effort” to pursue unity. By this, he is asking everyone to seek to manifest this behavior and, in so doing, take personal responsibility for the unity of the group. Relationships are always two-way streets and everyone must make an effort for unity to be maintained. This sort of unity is not prohibitive of disagreement, but insures that all disagreements are dealt with in a godly way that does not cause disunity.

What Unifies Us

Talk about unity is rather fruitless, if, in the final analysis, we have nothing that unifies us. Paul gives a list of seven things that unify all believers: they are members of the same body (Christ’s), and they have the same Spirit, hope, Lord, faith,

baptism, and Father. His repetition of the word “one” is to emphasize that in these major respects, they really are unified (one).

Some take this to be doctrinal accord: that all Christians share this same list of beliefs. To some extent, this is true. However, the focus is more experiential. What this means is: as Christians, we have the same Holy Spirit indwelling us; we have the same Father; and we walk daily with the same Savior. In other words, we participate in a common experience with the same person (God) whom we all know. Surely this is ample ground to create unity among Christians from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Diversity

Unity is not to be equated with “sameness.” Paul moves on to describe how God has gifted each of us with spiritual gifts that are different and unique. This is what he means when he states, “that to each one of us grace has been given.”

Nowhere in Scripture is found a complete list of all of the spiritual gifts. The most comprehensive list is found in Romans 12:4-6. Coupled with the gifts found in this passage, we get: encouragement, giving, leadership, teaching, evangelism, hospitality, tongues, pastoring, wisdom, and discernment.

There are other gifts mentioned in Scripture, like healing and faith, and perhaps there are even more than these. Added to this, are the unique gifts and aptitudes we were born with, or acquired through life. The bottom line is that we all have some gift or gifts that were given to us and were meant to be given back to God by using them to serve other Christians.

Often, the way we discover our gifts is in the context of actually seeking to serve our Christian community. Differing situations, roles, and problems seem to tease out our area of gifting. Most people will never discover their spiritual gifts unless they actively engage in Christian service over time.

Diversity Produces Unity

Paul states that the goal of using our spiritually diverse gifts is so “the body of Christ will be built up until we all reach unity.” Unity and maturity is the end goal of diversity used to serve the common good. This maturity is characterized by a strong and sound faith brought about through good biblical teaching, and Christians characterized by “speaking the truth” to one another from genuine love. The opposite picture Paul paints is of an unstable community that is easy prey for false teaching and false teachers.

This study is accompanied by an article. Take the time to read it.

WHAT IF THERE'S A PROBLEM?

Verses 8-10 are very difficult to understand, but the essential meaning is fairly simple to grasp. Paul is quoting from Psalm 68:18 to make the point that the idea of Christ equipping His people with spiritual gifts was prophesied in the Old Testament. He is saying that this verse is fulfilled in Christ's incarnation, resurrection, and in His giving His church spiritual gifts for service.

WHAT'S YOUR POINT?

The point of the study is unity. As a major application, think through what specific ways you can serve within the community of believers of which you are a part.

They should also see that making unity happen is their responsibility. And that they should do whatever is in their power to keep the group unified.

MEMORY VERSE

Ephesians 4:2 "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love."

WHAT ARE THE ANSWERS?

1. That God has left the nation of Israel as His vehicle for saving humanity. He now has created a new body, called the church. It is made up of people from all nations, believing Jews and Gentiles alike.
2. The opposite of humility would be pride. The opposite of gentleness would be harshness or abrasiveness. The opposite of patience would be "quickness to retaliate." The opposite of "bearing with others" would be to get frustrated with them.
3. Jot down your thoughts.
4. There are godly reasons to disagree. Disunity always has sin on someone's part at its root.
5. There are seven "ones." Paul's point is that they don't have to simply act unified—they really are "one" on the most important things.
6. Most likely both are in view, but there is particular emphasis on their common experience of these realities.
7. Disagreement is inevitable. Everyone will not ultimately agree on all theological issues. It is our common experience that can unite believers from diverse theological backgrounds.
8. Write out your own experience.
9. While our diversity extends to many things, the passage is dealing with the diversity of spiritual gifts.
10. Write out what you feel are your gifts. It is important to give thought to how you can serve from their gifts.
11. Gifts are usually discovered in the context of serving and community.
12. The picture Paul paints is of an unstable community that is easy prey for false teaching and false teachers.
13. Strong in biblical knowledge. Strong in truth and love.

LEAN ON ME • EPHESIANS 4:1-16

Conduct That Leads to Unity

Read Ephesians 4:1-3

1. In verse 1, the word “therefore” connects what came before in the previous chapter with this passage. What has Paul just said that is relevant to this discussion on unity?
2. Paul lists four traits that lead to unity. To better understand what these qualities are, describe the opposite of each:

Humility

Gentleness

Patience

Bearing with One Another
3. How does humility help this study group to function better? What would this group be like if no one were humble?
4. Are there ever godly reasons to disagree? Are there ever godly reasons for disunity?

The Basis for Unity

Read Ephesians 4:4-6

5. How many “ones” do you count? What is the point Paul is trying to make with this emphasis?
6. What is Paul saying is the basis for our unity: our common doctrine, our common experience, or both?

Doctrine: We all believe in the same Savior and Holy Spirit, therefore, we should be one.

Experience: We all have a relationship with the same Savior and are filled with the same Spirit, therefore, we should be one.

7. What happens if doctrine is our only foundation for unity?

8. What have you seen as the greatest causes of disunity in the body of Christ?

Diversity

Read Ephesians 4:7-11

9. In what ways has God made us diverse according to this passage?

Read Romans 12:5-8. We have both natural gifts and skills (which we were either born with or acquired), and spiritual gifts. The Scriptures don't give a comprehensive list of the different spiritual gifts. Some of the gifts it does mention are: encouragement, giving, leadership, teaching, evangelism, hospitality, tongues, pastoring, wisdom, and discernment.

10. What are the greatest gifts, skills or talents you personally can offer your Christian community? In what ways have you attempted to serve through your gifts?

11. If you don't know your spiritual gifts, how would you discover what they are?

Unity through Diversity

Read Ephesians 4:12-16

12. The result of everyone using his or her diverse gifts and talents to serve is unity. Summarize the picture Paul paints of an immature community of Christians.

13. Summarize some of the characteristics of a mature Christian community.

Memory verse

Ephesians 4:2 "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love."

COMMUNITY

“They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42-47 NASB).

Does this sound like your Christian experience? Gladness, sincerity, unity, generosity, awe, and wonder are all words that can be used to describe the experience members of the first Christian community enjoyed. So, what words would we use to describe our own experience of Christian community? Some of us would probably have to use words like boring, shallow, and disappointing. Others might use more positive adjectives like fun, nice, positive... but what happened to the awe and wonder? Let’s take a look at some of the things we need to do if we want to experience the kind of Christian community that Acts talks about.

Devotion to Christian Teaching

The first aspect of Christian community is also the most obvious—it needs to be Christian. Not just Christian in name, or a social club of people who happen to be Christians, but there needs to be a commitment to studying Biblical truth. It is in the context of Christian community that God intends for us to grow in our relationship with Him. Learning to apply Christian truth to our lives isn’t just a personal exercise; it is an act of communal worship. Without devotion to Christian teaching, Christian community is over before it begins.

Devotion to Fellowship and Breaking of Bread Together

A second commitment that is foundational to community is a commitment to fellowship. This commitment means a lot more than just showing up at Bible study once a week. A devotion to fellowship requires us to be a meaningful part of other Christian’s lives. While we certainly should have non-Christian friends, there’s something wrong if most of our closest friends aren’t other Christians. As we see in the example from Acts, fellowship doesn’t happen accidentally. Sharing meals together, giving generously of our possessions, visiting other Christians where they live, is the result of intentional planning. Without intentionally spending time together, and a conscious commitment to fellowship, community will never happen.

Continuing In One Mind

Just as the early Christians “continued in one mind,” we too need to continue to be united together throughout the Christian community. Unity among believers is so important that Jesus prayed to the Father saying, “I pray also for those who will believe in me.... May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me...” (John 17:20-23). Jesus actually connects unity to the effectiveness of our witness to the world around us. It should be no surprise that when the book of Acts finishes the description of the early, united, Christian community, that it concludes with, “And the Lord was adding to their number day by day...” (Acts 2:47 NASB). Clearly, a united Christian community is attractive to outsiders.

Unity has been always been an elusive goal. Even in Biblical times, we are shown a whole range of problems that undermine Christian unity. Most of these problems are still around today in some form. The Corinthians were guilty of factionalism as members claimed their primary loyalty to different teachers (1 Cor 3:1-9). Racial and economic prejudice challenged the one-

ness of the early church (Eph 2:11-22, 4:1-5, and James 2:1-6). Disunity also came from overzealousness in minor issues (see Romans 14:1-23). I'm confident you can see how these same sources of disunity are still in the church today.

Sincerity of Heart

"Being of one mind" is needed for community, but an even deeper requirement is the sincere openness of our hearts. This is a kind of vulnerability that is rarely found outside of Christianity. Insincerity is natural for all of us who live in this fallen world. It's just easier to be insincere, to hide, and to subtly deceive by keeping people at a distance. It is also easy to treat your Bible study just like any other small class that you might take on campus. It is easy to come and engage intellectually without ever really letting our guard down and letting others see our heart. If we are to grow in our Christian walk, and if we want to overcome sin in our lives, it is absolutely essential that we communicate the true state of our hearts in Christian community. This forces us to be honest with ourselves while providing an atmosphere of loving accountability.

Praising God

Praising God together can be one of the most enjoyable parts of community. This is more than just singing or prayer; this is worship together. As we share what God is doing in our lives, it encourages the entire community and brings glory and honor to God. As we take time to praise God for who He is and to thank Him for all that He has done, God naturally brings the community closer together.

Evangelism

Although there are things our secular society dislikes about Christians, community is one aspect it wishes it could replicate. It's unusual to see people who have deep, meaningful, other-centered relationships, and we live in a society that desperately wants those kinds of relationships. The goal of Christian community is not just that we can enjoy the blessings of God together, but also that we can develop a place that is attractive to non-Christians. Unfortunately, rather than welcoming newcomers, many Christians develop very closed, cliquish communities. Most people who are deeply antagonistic towards Christ, base their opposition on negative experiences with Christian community (or at least what they think is Christian community). If outsiders experience Christian community as a place where intimate, meaningful, loving, welcoming, God-Centered relationships happen, it will help remind their hearts of all that they are missing and bring them closer to Christ.

Community doesn't happen by accident. It requires commitment, time, patience, humility, and old-fashioned hard work. But, it is one of the best uses we can make of our time. One clear trend is that Christians who are part of community tend to walk closely with God throughout their lives. Those who are isolated from community tend to make more and bigger mistakes, and are far more likely to give up on their faith. For our own sakes, for the sake of other Christians, the sake of non-Christians, and for the great purpose of bringing glory to God, let us commit ourselves to developing the Christian community on our campus.