

Introduction:

I don't know about you, but one of the character defects I have is to read the Scriptures to learn how they apply to everyone else and forgetting God gave them to me to apply to me. One passage that quickly comes to mind with which I have been guilty of this is **Ephesians 4:4-6**. I have taught many times from this passage against denominationalism. Certainly, there is application there. However, when Paul wrote **Ephesians 4:4-6** there were no denominations. He did not have denominationalism in mind. Instead, he was fighting against division within the church as it existed. In fact, though he spoke of the church universal, he was making application to the local congregation at Ephesus. He was encouraging them to be united. He was encouraging them to be one body. With that in mind, instead of looking at the evils of denominationalism, I want us to look squarely at ourselves. We'll consider the concept of the universal church for a few moments but then look at the context to see what the members of the local congregation must do to allow each congregation to be a miniature representation of that one universal body.

Discussion:

- I. There is one universal body.
 - A. Though there are numerous religious bodies in existence, there is only one universal body belonging to Christ. According to **Matthew 16:18**, Jesus was going to establish His church, not His churches. One. Singular. It was not to be splintered into numerous sects and denominations. In fact, the splintering and dividing has not changed that there is only one body. Do not misunderstand. I am not saying all those divisions and denominations make up the one body. The one body is not made up of sects, denominations, or divisions. Additionally, the one body is not made up of all the local bodies. The one universal body of Christ is made up of the individual Christians God has added to His church (cf. **Acts 2:47; Colossians 1:13**).
 - B. If we are not part of Christ's one body, being part of some church or some religious organization does us absolutely no good. We should not rest upon membership in a local church. Rather, we should endeavor to be part of the universal body of the elect and saved.
 - C. Paul provides six qualifications to be part of the one body. If these things are not true for us, we are not part of the one body no matter how many religious organizations we are part of.
 1. We must be led by the one Spirit (cf. **Romans 8:14; Galatians 5:16, 25**). If our spirituality is led by anything other than the one Spirit, we are not in the one body.
 2. We must rest in the one hope of our calling (cf. **Ephesians 1:18-19; I Peter 1:3-5**). If our hope is anything other than resurrection and eternal life through Jesus Christ, we are not part of the one body.
 3. We must submit to the one Lord (cf. **Luke 6:46**). If we do not do what Jesus says, we are not part of the one body.
 4. We must be growing in the one faith (**Jude 1:3**). If we are growing in something other than the faith delivered through the apostles by the revelation of Jesus Christ, we are not growing in the one body.
 5. We must enter through the one baptism (**Acts 2:38**). If we were baptized in any way other than immersion in water for the remission of sins or not baptized at all, we are not part of the one body.
 6. We must worship and be empowered by the one God and Father of all (**I Corinthians 12:6**). If we worship, seek or gain strength from anything or anyone other than the one God and Father of all, we are not part of the one body.
 - D. Again, keep this in mind. This body exists and there is only one. There is one for every age, race, gender, socio-economic class, politics, level of intelligence, background (cf. **Galatians 3:28**). This is important for everyone, including us, to understand. We are not part of this one body because we are members of any particular congregation. We are not part of this one body because we are members of a congregation that has "church of Christ" written on its sign or letterhead. We are part of this one body when the above six requirements are part of our lives. Yes, we should also be part of a local congregation but being part of that local congregation does not make us part of the Lord's one universal body.

II. Congregational unity

- A. In other lessons, we can learn more about these requirements. For now, let it suffice to say we must be part of the one universal body. However, Paul was not merely writing about the theological aspects of that one universal body. He was bringing up these general principles of the universal body to make application to the local congregation in Ephesus. For the remainder of our lesson, let's look at how we, as individual members of a local congregation, must live so this body can have the unity of being one body just as Paul was encouraging Ephesus. We will take from the context of **Ephesians 4** and also the parallel passage in **Colossians 3**.
- B. *Walk in Christ and His Word* (**Ephesians 4:15; Colossians 3:16**): If we will have unity, we need to grow up into Christ, our head, and let Christ's word dwell in us. As **Colossians 3:17** says, everything we do and say must be done in the name of the Lord. When we begin to go outside of His authorization, we will always end up with division. We are going to say a lot about our attitudes in the remainder of the lesson. However, we need to understand our attitude is not the foundation of our unity. Our attitudes are what help us build on that foundation properly. Jesus is the cornerstone and His word revealed through the apostles and prophets is our foundation (cf. **Ephesians 2:19-22**). When we make Christ and His Word the foundation for our unity, we will no longer be tossed about by every wind of doctrine (**Ephesians 4:14**). At the same time, keep the other side of this coin in mind. Sometimes we do not go outside the authority of Christ, but where Christ has left us open to judge what is expedient, we easily set up our personal preference as if it is the only way Jesus authorized. We must not allow our preferences, our think-sos, our desires to be the standard. Instead, we must stick with God's word. Even if we don't like something, if it is not an issue of violating Christ's word but is an area where Christ has left us free to determine what is expedient, do not remotely let it cause division. Maybe you don't like the order of the assembly, the Bible class curriculum, the songbook, etc. You may even be able to provide good human reasoning. You may have an opinion that some other course would be wiser. Maybe it would; maybe it wouldn't. If what you are saying is not a matter of violating Christ's authority, then do not let it cause division among you. If we will ever have a one-body unity, we must make sure we are wholly relying on God's word.
- C. *Walk in humility* (**Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:12**): I love one of the definitions Strong's gives this term. "A deep sense of one's (moral) littleness." There is no room for self-righteousness, for looking down on others because they aren't as moral or spiritual as you are. There is no room for the Pharisee who prays, "God, I thank you I'm not like all these other people" (cf. **Luke 18:11**). **Romans 12:3** says we must not think more highly of ourselves than we ought. We must not be the Diotrephes type of **III John 9**, wanting to put ourselves first. Instead, as **Philippians 2:3-4** says, we must put others before ourselves. We are all sinners who can't overcome our sins on our own and can't attain salvation on our own. How dare we act like others should not be part of our fellowship just because they don't measure up to us? We need a deep sense of our own littleness to have a one-body unity in the congregation.
- D. *Walk in compassion* (**Colossians 3:12**): The KJV says "bowels of mercies" in **Colossians 3:12**. These ancients viewed the abdomen or bowels as the seat of the deeper and stronger emotions. Instead of bowels of anger, violence, resentment and bitterness, we are to have bowels of mercy and compassion. This is the opposite of vengeance and wrath. When others are suffering, we must not sit in judgment about how they brought it on themselves. We must not sit in vengeance simply stating how much they deserve it. We must not sit in happiness, feeling vindicated because they are experiencing bad things. We need to be compassionate, merciful, sympathetic and empathetic. A great example of this kind of compassion is in **Psalms 35:13-14**. Certainly, we are not to be enablers (cf. **II Thessalonians 3:10**). Yet, the general outlook we are to have when our brothers and sisters are suffering is compassion. We need to walk in compassion and mercy to have a one-body unity in the congregation.
- E. *Walk in kindness* (**Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:12**): The compassion/bowels of mercy is an attitude of heart. However, having this attitude is not all it takes to have unity. Rather, we push that compassion into action. Then we are being kind. Kindness is goodness in action. We must move from sympathy to help. **Matthew 7:12** provides the principle that will help us pursue this course of action. Treat others the way you want to be treated. What kindnesses would you want

for yourself in their shoes? Offer that to your brethren. If we will have a one-body kind of unity, we must each walk in kindness.

- F. *Walk in gentleness/meekness (Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:12)*: Meekness/gentleness is not weakness. It does not mean submitting to others because we are not strong enough to do otherwise. Meekness/gentleness refers to controlled strength. It was used of a tamed horse. The horse is strong enough to trample its rider, but instead submits to his direction. Though we must certainly be meek in our relationship with God (cf. **Matthew 5:5**), in this context, Paul is talking about our relationship with each other. This principle demonstrates that just because we can do something, doesn't mean we should. As **Galatians 5:13-15** says, we must not use our freedoms as an opportunity for our flesh, but instead serve one another. As **Romans 15:1-3** says, instead of striving to please ourselves, we work to please others for their edification. Instead of demanding our rights, we reign in our power and freedom that we might serve others and strengthen them, following where they lead instead of demanding they follow ours. In order to have a one-body unity in this congregation, we must all walk in submissive meekness and gentleness.
- G. *Walk in patience (Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:12)*. Often, when we see the word "patience," the Bible is referring to the ability to bear up under pressure. The term here is different. The word translated "patience" in these passages actually refers to a self-restraint that does not quickly retaliate against a wrong done. We're human. We mess up. We are going to wrong each other now and then. If we can remember the humility and moral littleness we learned about earlier, we can remember that we are not only wronged, but we have often wronged others. With that in mind, we can approach those who have wronged us with gentleness. Our goal must not be to see them grovel. Rather, it must be to help them grow just as others have had to help us grow. How much unity might we have if we learn how to patiently face it when other growing Christians wrong us, just as we have often wronged others because we are growing Christians? If we will ever have the unity of the one body, we must have patience when wronged.
- H. *Walk in forbearance (Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:13)*: This principle cuts to the heart of unity more than all the others. Forbearance means we're not looking to get away from others. Rather, we are looking to prop them up and help them stand fast. As **I Corinthians 13:7** says, we bear and endure all things. Instead of looking for excuses to cast off and sever the relationships we have in the local congregation, we're looking for ways to help hold each other up, strengthening each other. To me, this is interesting. We often ask, "When should I leave a congregation?" Paul's teaching stresses figuring out how to stay together and bear with others. By the way, the forbearing implies enduring hardships with each other. This also deals with the all too common feeling of saying, "I wish they would leave." Instead, we should be bearing with whatever is going on there that frustrates us or puts us in hardship. In order to have unity and remain one body, we must learn to forbear/bear with one another even through hardship.
- I. *Walk in forgiveness (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13)*: While we forbear one another, sin may enter the picture. We're not perfect. We're going to hurt feelings, cross lines, and sin against each other at times. We have two choices, we can either allow those times to drive a wedge between us so we can't get along and finally are driven apart. Or we can pursue reconciliation and forgiveness. Remember, Jesus said if we do not forgive others, God will not forgive us (**Matthew 6:14-15**). This doesn't mean we simply forget when someone sins. However, it means instead of seeking vengeance, holding grudges, maintaining bitterness, we work to make things right with them. We go to them and talk to them alone (**Matthew 18:15ff**). Yes, if our brother or sister refuses to repent then we must pursue a disciplinary action within the congregation. However, most of our brethren want to serve the Lord and when we approach them privately about any sins they've committed against us, they'll listen and repent. When they do, we've gained our brother. When they repent, we must forgive (**Luke 17:3**), even if it happens seven times in a day (**Luke 17:4**). There is no way to have a one-body kind of unity if we do not learn to forgive.
- J. *Walk in love (Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:14)*: Above all these things, put on love. **I Corinthians 13:4-7** defines how we should treat each other when we love. It includes all we have said and lifts them up to an unconditional nature. We do not treat others with kindness, compassion, gentleness if they treat us properly. No, we love them unconditionally, therefore each of us is to live by these principles no matter how anyone else in the congregation is living. Statements

like “He started it,” “She did it first,” “When they do such and such it makes me act in this negative way,” are childish and not to be among us. No matter how others treat us, we are to love them. Isn’t that how we want God to treat us? Isn’t that how we want others to treat us? When we love others, we are looking out for their best interests no matter what they have done for us, can do for us, or have done to us. If we are going to have unity as one body, each of us must learn to walk in love.

- K. *Walk in Christ’s peace* (**Ephesians 4:3; Colossians 3:15**): No doubt we are to be peacemakers among men (**Matthew 5:9**). Certainly, as much as it depends upon us we are to be at peace with all men (**Romans 12:18**). However, within the context of **Ephesians**, Paul is dealing with a specific issue. While we often view these issues of unity as teaching against denominationalism, Paul was actually dealing with the division between Jews and Gentiles. One of his main points in this letter was that Christ brought peace between Jews and Gentiles by bringing peace between both groups and God (**Ephesians 2:11-22**). Jews are reconciled to God by entering Christ. Gentiles are reconciled to God by entering Christ. If we are all in Christ, how can we war with each other over petty differences like cultural background? In context then, we recognize **Ephesians 4:4-6** meant there is one body for Jews and Gentiles, one Spirit leading Jews and Gentiles, one hope for both Jews and Gentiles, one Lord of both Jews and Gentiles, one faith for both Jews and Gentiles, one baptism for both Jews and Gentiles, and one God and Father of both Jews and Gentiles. If that is the case, why then should Jews and Gentiles be divided from one another? Today, we don’t see a division as much between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. But what about black Christians and white Christians? There is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father for black and white. We should practice all of the principles we have just discussed with impartiality among our brethren no matter their race, gender, socio-economic class, educational background, etc. Rick Warren aside, we are not to have some congregations for yuppies, some for older folks, some for white, some for black, some for rich, some for poor. We should not try to focus our congregation on one group. The gospel is for all. Christ is the Lord of all. We must learn to work together in congregations and have peace. If we will ever have a one-body kind of unity, we must walk in Christ’s peace toward everyone, no matter how different they are from us.
- L. *Walk in work* (**Ephesians 4:15-16**): Unity comes when every joint does its work. The world may be happy with the kind of unity that merely means we are getting along. Paul encouraged us to have a unity so we can work together and grow in the same direction. We are not united simply to feel good. We are united to accomplish growth for ourselves as individual Christians and for the congregation. We may not be able to do what others can do. We may not have the same skill level as others. However, there is something we each can do. Let us not be satisfied with showing up. Let us not be satisfied with merely getting along. Let’s not be satisfied until our unity is building up the congregation.

Conclusion:

Sadly, we often preach sermons on how bad the denominations are for being so divided and dividing up the one body. The fact is, the one universal body is never divided up. It exists apart from all these religious organizations. We must be part of that body to be saved and we must not assume that because we are a member of a local congregation we are part of the universal congregation. However, we are to work with other Christians in the context of a local congregation. Nothing is more sad than to hear lessons on the evils of all that denominational division from brethren that can’t ever seem to get along. We in churches of Christ are often just as bad as the denominations at being divisive. Every time there is division, one or more of these principles has been violated. Certainly, there is a time to let folks leave (cf. **I John 2:19**). Certainly, there will be divisions. Paul said as much in **I Corinthians 11:18-19**. But as much as depends on us, let there be peace and unity. Let’s make sure we’re rigorously honest about this. We must walk in a manner worthy of our calling (**Ephesians 4:1**). Then and only then will we be pursuing the one-body unity God has asked of us.