

# Life: Connected in unity

September 1, 2014

• *The Bible Studies for Life lesson for Sept. 14 focuses on Ephesians 4:1-6.*

Unity is one of the most challenging issues in human life. History is filled with countless stories of people groups who forced themselves to accomplish collective feats. Several examples can be found in the Bible. The story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) describes how people were unified in a project that opposed God's purpose for mankind (compare Genesis 11:4 & 9 with Genesis 1:28).

While God works to bring disunity and frustration to the efforts of sin-focused humanity, he commands his followers to be united, "of one mind" (2 Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 2:2; 1 Peter 3:8). Philippians 2:5-11 describes the mindset God desires—the selfless, self-sacrificing, servant-mindedness modeled by Christ.

Ephesians 4:1-6 contributes to this conversation by revealing the oneness motif of God's kingdom work. The Apostle Paul shows God's oneness calls for the practice of unity.

## **We are to humbly accept each other (Ephesians 4:1-2)**

A major section of this epistle begins in chapter 4. Here lifestyle actions are strongly urged. The first word (in Greek) in verse 1 is the strong command "exhort." Sometimes this word is rendered "ask" or "encourage," but the more powerful force of "exhort" or "strongly urge" is required.

The urgency behind the actions exhorted in this section derives from God's outstanding accomplishments revealed in chapters 1-3. Verse one states the summary command for this section—live worthy of one's calling. The word translated as "live" actually is the word "walk," used by the New

Testament to refer to lifestyle.

One's calling is to salvation and to live by God's character, actions and direction. Paul's reference to himself as a prisoner in the Lord underscores that Paul has responded to this exhortation to live worthy on one's calling. It has landed Paul in prison, to await testifying before the emperor, and thus is a worthy consequence of living by his calling.

Verse 2 lists four qualities that characterize living out one's calling. Humility heads the list, emphasizing the understanding of one's position in life. Humility neither exalts nor debases, but leads one to live out properly one's relationship with God and other human beings. Gentleness, or meekness, refers to strength under control, meaning a believer knows how to relate to others. Patience is the quality of accepting God's timetable. Forbearance refers to forgiveness and enduring the actions of others and is to be governed by agape love—pure, selfless interest in the welfare of others.

### **We are to strive to keep the unity of the church (Ephesians 4:3)**

The purpose of practicing these characteristics, states verse 3, is to produce unity in the body of Christ. God's transformation of the lives of believers provides plenty of incentive to associate in unity. Unity among believers is lauded in Psalm 133. Unity is such a priceless commodity, the Lord promises the blessing of eternal life upon his people who practice it.

Verse 3 finishes the long sentence of verses 1-3 with a participial phrase describing how to accomplish the "walking" or "living" urged in verse 1. The first word of verse 3 is a participle that means "make haste" or "hurry" as an expression of zealotry or eagerness. Some translations render the word as "take pains."

The point is to make every effort, with a zealotry that responds to the Lord's strong urging, to guard the unity of the church. Disunity must be

seen as a wicked, worldly and unwelcome invader in the assembly of the faithful. God's followers must be as alert as military personnel on guard duty as they protect congregational unity.

God's peace is the basis for unity among people once separated from God because of the strife and warfare of sin that once reigned within them. Now the Prince of Peace rules their lives, and the effect should be peace within each believer and unity in the assembly of God's people.

### **The "oneness" of God is the foundation for the unity of the church (Ephesians 4:4-6)**

Now Paul refers to the unity God has worked into all his endeavors. This "oneness" theme begins with the declaration in Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." Only one God exists, and he operates with unity of purpose. Paul demonstrates this matter in a list of seven items that are distinguishable yet have a unified focus. Through them is shown God's ability to synchronize the grand elements of the spiritual realm. The items move from the body of Christ, which is near, and reaches to God himself. The five intervening elements include the remaining members of the Trinity, two grand characteristics of the Christian way and the singular act of commitment to Christ's way.

The reference in verse 4 to one body shows Christ's redemption transforms Jews and Gentiles into believers who can associate in harmony. The Spirit indwells and leads God's people. Hope rises from the Spirit's presence, for when God is with people, they find encouragement.

In verse 5, the Lord stands in the middle of the sequence, the object of hope, and the one inspiring faith. With but one Lord, there can be only one faith, just as Jesus declared he was the only way to life (John 14:6). Baptism follows as the demonstration of one's faith and commitment to walk by the Lord's leadership.

The whole sequence points to God the Father in verse 6. God has supervised the entire process—over all, through all and in all—so people are reconciled with him. Unity begins with God’s oneness and continues through God’s mighty work until God’s people are transformed into people who live by God’s character of unity. Therefore, unity among believers becomes a testimony to God’s presence among his people.