

Ephesians 4:1-16
Church covenant: the unity of the spirit

Years back, someone came up to me at my previous church with a problem. Let's be specific: it was *her* problem, though she was trying to make it mine, and possibly everyone else's, perhaps without thinking it.

The problem: "that woman" - fairly obviously, a "young mum" - "is breast-feeding her baby in church". I'm not sure if she *specified* that she thought it was my job to do something to stop this outrageous event happening, but she was clearly implying it. I was quite inclined to answer, "Yes, isn't it great that she feels so much at home here, with us as her church family!" ... but I suspect that might not have gone down well.

Folks, do you not think it is strange that so many of us have false expectations when it comes to church? There are so many people around whose faith status you could probably describe as *used to*. I *used to* believe that. Or at least, I *used to* go to that church. Until someone hurt me. Until something happened that I don't think should have happened. And now those people are resolved – in their self-righteousness, I think it very often is – that they will no longer be party to a place or a group of people where things like that happen. The people there, they're implicitly saying, are not good enough to grace with my continued attendance and participation.

Now I'm not saying that everyone who has left a church over some kind of hurt or dispute is some kind of *prima donna* fussing over something stupidly trivial. Clearly, things *do* happen in churches which *shouldn't*. Sometimes there are thoughtless things said or done – or not said or not done. Sometimes it's a whole lot worse than simply thoughtless. People can indeed be seriously wounded at times. Some pastors, particularly, have limped off into retirement bearing numerous undeserved scars of unholy battle.

But that is exactly what we should expect to happen when a group of sinners like ourselves get together. Just as normal human beings, we have different takes on things, different preferences, different characters. Some people regard as important something that another person thinks is just trivial. Older people who have been coming longer typically think they have the right to insist that things continue in the ways they have become accustomed to, and have invented apparently spiritual reasons in order to continue to get their own way. And younger people *chafe* at that – and far too often vote with their feet.

But the problems are not the problem. I'm convinced that the main problem is not that we do not always see things eye to eye, but that we simply refuse to handle those problems we have in a way which fits with the Scriptures. We run away from responsibilities. We abscond from our duties.

So that woman, several decades back, came to *me*. She says, in effect, *I've got a problem*, something like that. And she herself *becomes* a problem by not handling things right. I don't think she had the nerve to speak to this other woman, face to face, so she tries to get me to do her dirty work for her. She knew it wasn't a big enough issue, so she's ashamed to confront the other woman in person – but she's not prepared to let it go, either.

If we've got a single verse for a text for once, this is it:

... eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

(Ephesians 4:3)

And I've just given you my main answer by way of application of how we are to obey that commandment of Scripture. *How can we* "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"? One of the foremost ways, I think I would say, is to handle niggles and disagreements and hurts *Scripturally*, the way God tells us to.

But why this text from this passage today? I think I need to introduce the series of sermons that will take us, if our plans run smoothly, all the way up to the start of the Christmas season, a mere two and a half months away now.

You have hopefully read something about this in our church magazine for September already. I hope that you haven't reacted to this proposal of a "church covenant", under your breath, as "another stupid new-fangled bit of nonsense". I know that some of you don't like change. If we've been doing OK for quite a while doing something one way, why bother to do things differently? Hasn't it been good enough?

Actually, that is a recipe for eventual mediocrity. It's a refusal to even consider that there might be a better way to do things. Too much effort. Let's just bump along with "tried and tested" ... just as I'm sure you would with that old black-and-white 14" TV that only takes five minutes to warm up, and has as many as 12 channels on the dial.

Well, I sympathise with that, to some extent. A few years back we disposed of a *colour* TV that was still working – though the picture was becoming a little unclear with the different colour light guns no longer in perfect alignment – and replaced it with a new "smart TV". We didn't feel totally comfortable with making the change at the time – but I haven't regretted making the change. The new set *is* better, and it was worth the investment.

So we are hoping, as a church, to work on "doing church" better. We're trying to be a bit more careful that people *becoming* members of the church know what they're getting into – what they can expect, and what will be expected of them.

And those of us who have been members or committed regulars here for years ... well, perhaps the occasional refresher course is needed. Just as I might occasionally need Jenny to remind me how I can be a better husband – by remembering again what I used to do, or even had promised to do in those vows from way back.

The way we're thinking to do this is by trying out a "church covenant". That's a list of promises or commitments concerning the way we will aim to consciously strive to live our lives *together* in the "fellowship" of this church. We'll be going through them, week by week, for the next couple of months, grounding them in Scripture, so that when, earlier next year, we put the full works of that covenant up on screen and in your hands, you'll have had a chance to think through those commitments, and be ready to publicly make them again.

Not just for show, but in the hope and with the prayer that it will help us to do exactly the kind of stuff that the Bible tells us we should be doing. And the first one of those promises or commitments is simply picking that verse from Scripture:

We will work and pray for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

But, good stand-alone line that it is, good summary of the passage that it is, I think we need to be *sure* that this it really can be boiled down to and summarised in this single line. And taking time to look through the passage that the verse comes in – and *its* context within the book as a whole – is far more likely to help us to be able to think through and work out something really important:

So how are we going to *do* this?

What difference might this make to our lives – our lives together here? How can we show true Christian love to one another more effectively? What does it entail? What *changes* might we have to make, if we are going to follow the Lord Jesus Christ as *disciples*? If we are going to

... be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

(James 1:22)

So let's get back to not that single verse in Ephesians 4, but to the first half of the chapter in which it comes.

First, what we've been thinking of as a command is *not quite* stand alone. It is an explanation, an application, a *how-to* following on from a bigger command. Well, technically, *not* a command, but an exhortation:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ...

(Ephesians 4:1)

Hebrew thinking, by the way, Paul using the word “walk” to mean simply “live”. But if there's a “therefore” there, will that help us to pick up on what this “calling” might be?

It probably takes us back to not the immediately preceding chapter, but the end of chapter 2, where Paul is talking about some kind of “construction project” of God's, involving – *amazingly*, for those days – both Jews and Gentiles together.

... the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

(Ephesians 2:21-22)

Now *that* is quite some kind of calling, isn't it! Not exactly the person-in-the-street's definition of “church”, is it! “Somewhere for God to live by his Holy Spirit”. But doesn't that make a lot of sense of Paul's *therefore*? If you have been given such a high calling, it has to have implications on our lifestyles. There are some ways of thinking and living that fit with this, and some that don't. So which do we choose? Paul's “urge”, in this context, is pretty much the obvious command:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ...

(Ephesians 4:1)

But let's put some specifics in here, shall we? What would such a “walk” look like? What footprints would it leave? That's where we get to our text for today, part of that church covenant for next year. Here is Paul's immediate explanation of where that walk would lead us – or how we would conduct ourselves on that path

... with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

(Ephesians 4:2-3)

And there are three things to bring with us, and two activities to be continually about. Let me just add a couple of words to the translation to bring that out a bit more clearly:

... with all humility and [with all] gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, [being] eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

(Ephesians 4:2-3)

Now there's not a lot of difference between those first two words, humility and gentleness, so Paul sort of brackets them together, but patience gets a slightly more separate mention. So when we return to this in a bit more detail this evening, we might have time to put some more flesh on the bones here.

But even now, when we have to move on quite quickly, isn't it worth pausing to at least ask the question? If we are to exhibit *these* kinds of qualities, in order to live a life in keeping with the calling we have received, disciples of Jesus Christ, under his leadership, under his authority ... in what areas of our conduct do we find it difficult to be **humble**? Have we trained ourselves to be **gentle**? Or do we just excuse harshness by saying *I'm just like that!* Is that a good enough answer to Jesus' call? Do you think he would be impressed with a *But I'm just not a naturally loving person, so I think I will just exempt myself from what you said about showing love to other people?* Is it any difference with gentleness?

Or **patience**? Have you ever stopped to ask yourself – or ask someone who knows you well – just what makes me lose my rag? What really irritates me? And why? And what can I do to tackle that, instead of just believing the Devil's lie that you are what you are, and not even the Holy Spirit of God can start to change you? Or that God is simply not bothered about working that rough edge off, to make you more like Jesus Christ?

And patience, that property, the way Paul writes this here, becomes not a one-off, but a way of life. It progresses from “with patience” to “**bearing with one another in love**”. There's the motivation, notice. Not just obedience about being patient, but as an expression of tough love – love that maybe is tough *on you* to show, rather than *on them* to receive.

Folks, have you ever sat down and realised that there are some people that you are just going to have to *bear with*? They will never be interested in Dr Who. They will *always* talk about football. They will *never* learn to sing in tune, but they *will* always try.

It might even be about your spouse. After a while, you realise that there are certain things that you are not going to be able to change about them. They just do not notice when they tread all over a clean floor in muddy shoes. They will never match up to your

dress sense; they will continue to wear *that* top with *those* trousers. They will insist on keeping their feet warm with socks *even when* they are wearing sandals.

And yet, because you love them, you decide that you will *not* make an issue of it. It is *not* a moral failure that needs to be challenged. They are just *odd* that way ... and further odd in that *they* think it's *you* who is the odd one. But *in love*, you *bear with them*.

And, says Paul, in *the church*, too, we must insist to ourselves that certain things are *non-issues*, even if they grate upon us. The Gospel is bigger than that. *Jesus Christ* – and his reputation – are more important than us simply having our own way or being able to stay in our own comfort zones.

So there must be that established practice of *bearing with one another in love* ... which itself is an expression of an eagerness and a desire and a commitment. There is something important here which needs to be maintained. God insists that this has priority over our own mere preferences. The oneness that originates from and is a continual focus of the Holy Spirit: **the unity of the Spirit** ... which needs not to be established but maintained and **kept**.

■ Some particulars of unity (4-6)

Let's be a bit more literal in our translation, shall we, to make the point here.

... eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

(Ephesians 4:3)

"Unity" is a nicely rounded English word, but I want to use a synonym for it here which brings out the point Paul is intending to make rather better. Let's use the word "oneness" instead.

... eager to maintain the oneness of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

(Ephesians 4:3)

It's more literal in that the Greek word there is the word "one", with an ending which is the exact equivalent of our "-ness" ending. Why the fuss? Because Paul then just goes straight on – without the padding of the "there is" in our English Bibles – with a list of ones. That "oneness of the Spirit" is reflected in the one-flavouredness of so much of the Christian faith. "One" is like the key signature of a piece of music, that the tune just can't keep from coming around to, over and over again.

... eager to maintain the oneness of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ~~There is~~ one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call — one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

(Ephesians 4:3-6)

Jeopardise that *oneness of the Spirit* – by refusing to be bound by the principle of peace – and you implicitly assault all those other ones. Split the body into two based on whether the chairs face this way or that in the chapel, or whether we use hymnbook A or hymnbook B, or no hymnbook at all, and we're saying to the world as well as to each other that those things are more important to us than the fundamental unity – *oneness* – brought

about by the Holy Spirit. As if your salvation is dependent upon Jesus Christ *and* the King James Version of the Bible.

Folks, I know that none of you actually *thinks* this kind of way. You would not dream of saying that the style, colour and comfort of the chapel chairs is of greater importance than the Gospel of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. But if we argue and bicker and fall out and separate on the basis of disagreements about these small things, what impression will that inevitably give to people who do not know Christ?

Isn't the name and honour of Jesus Christ far more important to us than the precise details of how we remember him with bread and wine? – white bread or granary, or even unleavened? one big cup or individual glasses? whether we go to the front to receive them, or are served to us by a set number of men or women? ... all things which the Bible does not bother to stipulate for us.

Folks, remember Corporal Jones in *Dad's Army*, standing to attention. Remember how he was always out of synch with the others. How can we dare be that one person out of synch, out of step, off key, by making such a big deal of relative trivia when there is this principle of the *unity* ... all those *ones* ... of the Holy Spirit that we are called to fall in line with?

And yet in this passage there are also ...

■ **Some paradoxes of unity (7-14)**

Unity is not uniformity. In fact, it is the same Holy Spirit who seems to delight in the very *opposite* of uniformity. Just be careful how you say this in today's political climate, but the Holy Spirit has always delighted in *diversity*. There is an “all”, but there is also an “each one”:

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

(Ephesians 4:7)

And a couple of verses later he explains what he means. Different people will have different giftings, but all designed to work together within God's grand scheme of onenesses. Here's four groups of people, for example, operative within the church of Paul's day:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ...

(Ephesians 4:11)

They all have a common purpose, but they serve that purpose *differently* – though Paul does not spell out those differences for us here:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ...

(Ephesians 4:11-12)

Folks, here's another challenge for us. Do we *delight* in our differences? Do we see this as something positive, that God has not just made us little clones or carbon copies of each other? Do you see that someone thinking differently from you, preferring to do things differently from you in church, even daring to propose such wild notions at a church members meeting, is actually *great*? Breast-feeding in church, *bring it on!* Or is it OK for God to make every snowflake to be different, but every Christian has to think the same about politics in general and Brexit in particular?

Not that the diversity thing is the only paradox. We've read the earlier verse which talks about *keeping* unity:

... eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

(Ephesians 4:3)

And yet by the end of the section, doesn't Paul seem to be contradicting himself? That work of those diverse ministers ... what was that for?

... to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ...

(Ephesians 4:12-13)

In the earlier verse we had *maintain*. Here we have *attain*. So is this something that we've *got*, or something that we have to *grow into*? I think the answer is Yes. To both.

Perhaps we could use an example from married life. Imagine a couple on their wedding day. They are now legally united. There is even a spiritual unity, irrespective of whether they're believers or not, because it is God who instituted marriage right back at the beginning, Jesus said, one man and one woman. And therefore there is a real sense in which, irrespective of faith,

“So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

(Matthew 19:6)

They are united. They have a shared bank account. Shared ownership of a property, or at least a shared tenancy. Shared chores, ladies, if you're lucky. Shared desires and objectives and priorities, we would hope.

But think of what that couple might feel if God grants them 50 years together. They look back on shared child-care, with its delights and occasional stresses. On holidays spent together, sometimes on the beach, sometimes in a traffic jam on the M5. On sharing the pain of family bereavements that slowly accumulate over the years. Memories of unemployment, of uncertainty, of ill health. Of falling asleep together watching your favourite film.

Are they more united than on that first day? They still have the shared bank account and stuff like that. Or is it just that they have *lived* that unitedness out over the years, losing some of those dopey romantic notions of youth, but finding deeper joys and satisfactions than they had ever considered as part of marriage.

Folks, I know that God has not granted that kind of thing to every one of you, and I'm not aiming to cause you pain by thinking through this analogy. But it's still a good analogy, because God designed marriage deliberately in order to display something of the relationship of Jesus Christ and his people. Just bear with me in love, please.

So is it possible for people to be united, but still to grow in that unity? In marriage, yes, I think it is. In Christ, yes, I think it is.

Did you love your spouse *then* ... and do you love them more profoundly now? Did you love the people of Christ in principle, then, at one time? And do you love them now, more maturely – even bearing and bearing with the scars of those encounters – because you know those are the people of your Lord Jesus Christ?

Will you commit yourself to growing in that grace, for his sake? Because, even if it's a bit of a paradox, this is *some* calling!

... until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ...

(Ephesians 4:13)

Folks, the choice we are being asked to make here is between immature, juvenile discord and discomfort, or mature gracious peace. Look what happens if we do *not* grow towards that adult stature:

... so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

(Ephesians 4:14)

Here is the far preferable alternative: growing more like Jesus Christ:

■ **Practical peaceable progress (15-16)**

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

(Ephesians 4:15-16)

There's a certain structure to what Paul is saying here: notice **love** and **grow** at the start, and **grow** and **love** at the end of the sentence. And whereas we could zoom in on this, and study it long and hard, I think I just want to suggest to you that this is some very down-to-earth advice on how to do what we've been thinking about already: maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We are to do so by **speaking gracious truth**.

If we do not do that, we are actually showing to the world that we are still bratty children. If we speak with anger, if we simply push our own agenda, we are declaring that Jesus Christ is actually so trivial to us that we will ignore his commands, rather than tackle our pride, swallow our anger, or forego our preferences. I will have my way, even if it undermines his. I will speak my mind, rather than obey his words.

Let me give you a couple of practical examples to finish. Yesterday there were a few of us here at the work morning, and much of the work was focused on continuing redecoration downstairs.

But I just thought, as I was up on a ladder with paint roller in hand, about that new coving. Actually, I had always thought of our needing to redo that ceiling as a wonderful opportunity to make that room look fresh and modern. So we replaced the lights, rather than trying to re-mount the obsolete and rusty old ones.

But that coving ... that was never discussed or agreed at a church meeting, was it? I still don't know whether Greg *asked* for it, *agreed* to it, or was *surprised* by it. Personally, I wasn't expecting that as part of the new look. I'm not sure I would have proposed any substantial further expenditure to include it in the refurb. But Greg called the shots on that one. We've asked him to head up buildings maintenance, and he has done it. Whether I agree with every last decision he has made, I'm backing him. Even if he made some choices I wouldn't have, I'm backing him.

Because to make an issue of *that room isn't the same colour that we've had it for fifty years, AND the piano is now in the wrong place* would be putting *my* feelings or preferences above the bond of peace that is to characterise us. It would be to say that my image – or should I say idol – of the Chapel is more important to me than God's vision of the Church.

If something causes me some kind of offence, I've only got two options, according to Scripture. Instead of grumbling or going behind someone's back, I take it to that person *in person*. I speak what I perceive to be the truth *within the constraints of love*. Or I ask God for the grace to help me to shut up, and bury that offence at the foot of the Cross.

It is like forgiveness: you undertake to *not* speak those words of un-grace that still bubble up, not to yourself, not to the person you are trying to forgive, not to anyone else, and not to God.

And perhaps we need to ask someone else close to us to remind us, when they hear or see in your eyes those angry and ungracious thoughts buzzing around again, to call you to the foot of that Cross, to lay down that burden upon Christ. To put it down, before it starts to corrode your own soul, or to contaminate the church. To remember that what he calls *you* to let go of is so far less than what *he* willingly let go of for our sake.

Oh yes, that work morning. We made quite a bit of mess preparing the walls for repainting, and Greg mentioned that the church needs a new vacuum cleaner. I was delighted. I have been waiting for someone to show the initiative to notice that and say it. So I believe he's going to go and get one. I don't know exactly what. But that gives us a chance to practice progress in peace.

For all that we're told in the earlier bits of this passage to walk *with patience*, I confess that mine will be sorely tested if I start to hear critical words afterwards that Greg has not bought the right model, the right shape, the right make, or the right colour of vacuum cleaner. Folks, are we really content to still fall out over such petty little things as that?

And yet we still do often do, don't we, if we're honest? Isn't it time to not just read this verse that has been on screen all this time, but to finish by *praying* it?

Our heavenly Father, Help us to ***speaking the truth in love***, and ***grow up in every way ... into Christ***. ***Being eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace***.