

The Spirit of Oneness and Onening  
Ephesians 4:1-16  
by Karen Quah

1. ONE

- The passage I'll be speaking on today is our second reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians 4:1-16. If this passage could be described as a number, I think it would have to be the Number ONE.
- This concept of oneness is introduced in early in the passage when Paul says (V.3) *"Make every effort to keep the UNITY of the spirit through the bond of peace"* Then - *"There is one body and one spirit just as we were called to one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all."*
- This idea of Unity is expanded throughout the passage as a means of ONENESS with God, ourselves and each other - means of becoming mature, modeling Jesus to our fullest capacity - which is the way God made us to be.

But first, let's take a step back and take in the landscape. What is Paul's letter to the Ephesians about, really?

2. THE STORY OF EPHESIANS

- Yeah, sure, we know it's a letter that he's writing to the believers of Ephesus from prison - But there's a story to it
- The people of the Bible are a storytelling people. Stories were handed down orally during the times of Abraham and Moses and throughout the Old Testament. Jesus was a storyteller, as we well know. And so were the first-century Jews. They loved telling stories – Which in fact was the same story told over and over in different ways –
- It was the telling of the ONE STORY gone wrong.
- See, for the first century Jews, the story of creation is not done. The Exodus story is not complete. The Jews have been driven into exile and oppressed by the Babylonians, Assyrians, the Persians... and now the Romans. God has left the temple. But prophets like Ezekiel and Malachi predicted that God's presence would once again return in and through the Messiah. And so he has!
- The story in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, is that God has returned in and through Jesus the Messiah.
- In the person of Jesus, the story of the world has reached its climax – Heaven and earth interlock – The holiness of God meets the humanness of humanity.

3. NEW STORY, NEW HUMANITY

- This is the mystery of the Gospel. That God the Creator has sent the Son, the second person of the Trinity, to be with us - to become one of us – in order to *make right the Story that went wrong. To set into motion a new story.*

- And those who choose to partake in this new story are called, 'A NEW HUMANITY' (Eph 2:15). The new humanity are Jews and Gentiles reconciled as ONE BODY IN CHRIST.
- This new humanity in Christ experiences life through this new narrative – the HEAVEN MEETS EARTH narrative – the narrative whereby we and all of creation are being transformed into who and what we were made to be - *In The Beginning*.
- The story that we share and live out today, is no longer a story of what went wrong. It is a story of what has been and is being made right, in and through Christ - And what will be made completely right and whole when Christ comes again.

#### 4. IN THE BEGINNING

- But it's hard to tell, isn't it? I mean, not only because of the state of the world today. But also, because when Christianity is taught, it more often focuses on sin and the Fall – and less on creation and the fact that we were made good. *Very good*.
- Couple of weeks, back Nathan preached on Ephesians 2:11-22. In his sermon, he described the significance of eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil – That the fruit, the apple, “infects Adam and Eve with the new capacity and inclination to decide that some things are good and others evil.” And so, here begins the story of tribalism – we are good, they are evil. And subsequently the disunity of humankind.
- But we forget the other named tree in the story and in the Garden of Eden – The Tree of Life
- Whether it was a different tree, or another name for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil - We forget that in the beginning, was the Word (John 1), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. We forget that Jesus the Word was with God in the beginning and through him all things and all creatures were made.
- And this, I believe, is what Paul means when he urges his audience to keep the UNITY OF THE SPIRIT –  
*It is the Spirit of Our Triune God . It is the Spirit of the one in and through whom we were created. It is the spirit of a new story that has begun in us and for us, in and through the person of Jesus Christ.*

#### 5. UNITY OF THE SPIRIT

- Now, most of us have very likely not heard 'The Unity of the Spirit' described this way. John Piper describes like this - “The Unity of the Spirit is a Common Conviction, a Common Confidence and a Common Care for one another in Christ.” This is the more common definition. But it only takes us so far.
- We need only look at discrepancies between Christian denominations and even within our own Baptist denomination regarding Biblical interpretations of

marriage or sacraments like Communion and Baptism, to know that this simply is not the case. Having a common conviction and a common confidence in Christ does not necessarily inspire care for one another.

- You may also have heard this in reference to Unity – ‘Let’s focus on what brings us together rather than on what tears us apart.’ Once again, all well and good, but it only takes us so far.
- On the road to Damascus, Paul who was Saul at the time, was a Pharisee. If anyone knew what the unity of the spirit meant - intellectually, theologically, it had to be him. But when Jesus appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus as he was on his way and pleaded with him, *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?* This is when Saul/Paul experienced first-hand the Unity of the Spirit –
- The person whom Saul met on the road to Damascus – the ONE who changed Saul from a Christian-killer to one who was willing to be killed in the name of Christ – was no less than Jesus of Nazareth. But he was also much more. He was THE WORD, the Second Person of the Trinity, in and through whom all of us were made. I think Paul understood this.

#### 6. THE ONENESS OF CHRIST IN US

- The Unity of the Spirit is not some superficial call to focus on the positive and cast aside the negative. No. It is a UNITY that we cannot keep if we do not first TASTE – KNOW – EXPERIENCE profoundly the ONENESS of Christ in Us and in each other.
- I don’t think this is a stretch. In fact, Paul talks about being IN CHRIST – he uses this phrase more than any other phrase in his epistles – a total of 163 times. In Galatians 1:6 Paul doesn’t write that God revealed His Son to him (though that would be acceptable). Paul writes that God revealed His Son IN HIM.
- The English mystic Julian of Norwich turns this experience of ONENESS into a verb – ONENING (It’s my favourite word!). She describes The Trinity – Father, Son, Spirit as ONENING with each other. And she describes the mystery of CHRIST IN US as our souls ONENING with God.

*The Unity of the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, in and through us all. We can only keep it by experiencing first-hand the Oneness of Christ in ourselves and in each other.*

Not only that -

#### 7. IN VERSE 16

- Paul says “From [Christ] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

- Here again, most of us have been taught that what Paul is talking about here is this: That we are each a part of Christ's body and we each have a role to play in Christ's church.
- This is backed up by the middle section, Verses 7-13, in which Paul describes Jesus descending to us and by grace, apportioning to his church the many gifts of apostles, teachers, prophets... - So that "By focusing on our common conviction – And by using our God given gifts to do our part we may all together reflect the wholeness of the body of Christ." (Laughing bird translation)
- That might be okay as a starting point, but if Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a story - and a story, like the parables of Jesus, has many dimensions, then it is our duty to think and pray, contemplate and peel back those layers.
- While on one level Paul may be asking us to keep the Unity of the Spirit by using the gifts God gave us – on another level, he may also be describing a joining together of all the parts of ourselves and all the parts of each other as we become ONE BODY in CHRIST.
- V.16 From [Christ] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part of ourselves and each other does its work. (NIV)

*We can only keep the UNITY OF THE SPIRIT by experiencing the Oneness of Christ in all the parts of ourselves and each other*

## 8. THE GOSPEL AND ALL OUR PARTS

- When Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well, he didn't try to sort out what they had in common – very little, I imagine. He looked into her soul and saw all her parts. And she became his biggest fan ever - "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could *he* be the Messiah?"
- When the crowds clamoured for his crucifixion, Jesus on the cross said - "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." Was he saying this because they were Jews and so had that in common? No, Jesus saw them for all their parts – He saw that this was the same crowd who just days ago were waving palm leaves and welcoming him into Jerusalem as the Messiah. He saw the conflict within themselves. And he felt for them.
- Jesus came to bind together all our parts and make us ONE - the parts that worship him, the parts that deny him, the parts that don't want to know him, the parts that long to reflect him but fail to do so, time and time again.
- Jesus - the Son of God, came to humanity to make us WHOLE - that we may once again become image bearers of the holiness of God – and that we may exist in ONENESS with God - as we were made to be, in the beginning.

## 8. ALL OF OUR PARTS

- We are, each of us, made up of different parts, depending on how God made us and the journey we have lived – Some parts of ourselves we are quite proud of – the creative part, the outgoing part, the wise part. And other parts of ourselves we're not so proud of and try to hide – the hurting part, the vulnerable part, the traumatised part, the neurotic part...
- EXAMPLE: Some of you may be familiar with the Ashley Madison scandal in 2015. Ashley Madison was an infidelity dating site aimed largely at men seeking to have extra-marital affairs. In 2015, the site was hacked by a group who stole and released the personal details of thousands of users on the internet. Among those, were two prominent Christian figures. One, a pastor of the First Southern Baptist Church in Pearlington, Mississippi. Six days after the data breach, he was tragically found dead in his garage by his wife. He could not find forgiveness from himself or his fellow Christian brothers and sisters. He could not find a way back for this part of himself, that had been exposed for all the world to see.
- EXAMPLE: The other prominent Christian figure, together with his wife, were a Christian influencer couple on youtube. When the breach happened, the influencer confessed to his wife and the couple split. During this time, he sought years of counselling to reconcile the part of himself that had been an active member of this dating site for a decade, with the devoted Christian husband part - who was preaching the Gospel on youtube. As the estranged wife watched her ex-husband put in the work, she agreed to attend marriage counselling with him. And eventually came to understand the part of her husband who had betrayed her repeatedly for so long. It was a part of him she had never suspected because he had hidden it so well. But through her understanding of this part of him and what had motivated his actions, she was able to forgive her ex-husband and love all of him. Eventually they reconciled and report now, that their marriage is more authentic than it ever was before the scandal.

*We can only keep the UNITY OF THE SPIRIT by experiencing the Oneness of Christ in all the parts of ourselves and in all the parts of each other.*

## 9. EXPERIENCING CHRIST IN ALL OUR PARTS

- To exile the parts of ourselves we feel are unworthy or not good enough is not only unhealthy - it denies the mystery of the Gospel - and the power of God's Forgiveness and Grace.
- To exile the parts of ourselves that we feel are unworthy is to impede the progress of the New Creation Story that has taken root inside our souls, in and through Christ Jesus.

- How do we experience Christ in all the parts of ourselves? We do this by getting to know all the parts - by becoming acquainted with their core fears, core desires, core motivations –
- We experience Christ in all the parts of ourselves *by bearing each of these parts to Jesus – And by inviting him into ALL our parts, so that by the HIS SPIRIT of GRACE, he may heal us and reconcile us and make us ONE with him and in Him.*
- We do this in the knowledge that before the story of the Fall, was the story of Creation – where through The Word we were, all of us and all our parts, made good. Very Good.

#### 10. CHRIST AND ALL THE PARTS OF EACH OTHER

- The more aware we are of all our parts – the more understanding we will be of the parts of others.
- Listening to the exiled parts of others - allowing those parts to speak, reduces the other person's shame in revealing that part of themselves to us – It leads to less condemnation and disintegration in our relationships, in our families, and in our churches.
- Listening to the exiled parts of each other invites Christ into each of those parts – for healing, for reconciling, for ONENING with the Triune God.
- This is not to condone acts of violence, abuse, exploitation, ethnic cleansing. Such acts are unacceptable and there's no room for them in God's kingdom. Evil exists, darkness exists – And Paul talks about this later in his letter – “the powers of this dark world” (Ephesians 6)
- But today, we are talking about Unity - Oneness in Christ. And this doesn't happen overnight - There is no simplistic solution, no 3-step formula.

*Experiencing a ONENING of the Spirit is a process that happens day by day, moment by moment – By becoming aware of, by noticing the holiness of God within and around us - In our thoughts, our reflections – In our everyday routine, mundane chores – In the people around us, in what they say and do.*

#### 11. CONCLUSION

- We keep the Unity of the Spirit by noticing the holiness of God in our everyday lives, in ourselves and in each other.
- We keep the Unity of the Spirit by experiencing the ONENESS of Christ in all the parts of ourselves and all the parts of each other - by understanding those parts, by bearing those parts to Jesus, and by inviting Jesus into each one of those parts - for healing, for reconciling, *and for Onening with ourselves and with the Triune God.*