

Ephesians: Thought Flow

In this lecture I hope to present to you a little of what is going on in Ephesians concerning unity. We do not necessarily need to look for a statement or a definition in Ephesians that says, “Unity is \_\_\_\_\_,” and then fill the blank in. Rather, we need to analyze and explore what Paul speaks about in the whole epistle. There we find that the image of the body is a very significant beginning—the body of Christ, the image of the head and the body working together. Actually that image is given, I believe, to the Ephesian church and to us to address one simple question: “Is Jesus Christ the real head of His church or do we need a mediator; do we need a human representative for Christ?” The Roman Catholic structure demonstrates their belief that you need to have a human visible representative, a vicar, who represents the head, who makes the head visible. But that is exactly the question in Ephesians as the image of the body is being developed and used; is Paul not saying that Christ is the real head of the body?

Some of you are church leaders, some of you are on sessions, and some of you have to make daily decisions about the life of churches. I have been in that place myself. What do you do when you have many questions and problems in your church? Do you just say, when you are exhausted, “Come on, let us just make a decision. Let us just do it like this. This is the way we need to do this; let us just talk with this and this and this person and then we will just get it done.”? It is so tempting sometimes to do that rather than to say, “I do not think we have a mature unity among ourselves as a leadership here. We need to know the mind of Christ; we need to explore and search the Scriptures. We will wait for two months or half a year.” We live under the true headship of Christ. Our commission, as leaders in the church—which Paul is explaining here to some of the offices in the church—is not to replace the Head, but to lead the church to maturity toward the Head. Every single member needs to grow in maturity of dependency in relating to and growing up in the Head. If you feel that your purpose as a leader in the church is to make people come to you and ask you for advice so that you will have that wonderful feeling of, “Wow, I am somebody really important; they come to me.” Then you are subtly making them dependent on yourself. You are not exercising the real headship of Christ which means, “Let us walk together; let me share with you my struggles. What are you struggling with and how can you grow in trusting in Christ? My goal is to make myself superfluous to you, not to make you dependent on me. If I can be out of here in half a year, then I have done a good job. If you live well before the Lord without me as a leader, I have done my job. I need to work myself out of a job. If I do not, I am not really doing my job as a pastor [or mentor, counselor, or whatever type of job you may have].” Our purpose is to spur the body on to mature under the Head, not to make others dependent on us.

Thus the single most important question on the unity of the body as Paul describes it in Ephesians is not, “How should we organize ourselves; should we be uniform, should we be connected, should we have organizational connections—what about all the denominations?” etc. These are the questions that immediately come to mind when we think about unity, but the single most important question is this: “Is there real headship? Are we all pursuing the true headship of Christ?” Ephesians 1:22 leaves no question about that. It says, “And God placed all things under his feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way.” We cannot come away from Ephesians and just say, “Yes, Christ is the head—but we do not see Him, feel Him, or know Him. Let us have a representative; let us have somebody we can see, who will speak to us and comfort us.” That replacement of the true headship of Christ is the single most fatal cause for disunity. Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel, *The Great Inquisitor*, has a section where Christ appears to a church leader in the medieval times. The church representative says to Jesus, “Why have you come to disturb us? Why are you here? The people need us. They need visible leadership. They need to be dependent on us. They cannot handle the freedom that you give them. They cannot handle the kind of life that you want to give them. They need to be kept in dependency on us. They are much happier this

way. Do not disturb us. Go back.” This novel is a very moving commentary on this question of where the true headship of Christ is in the churches.

I believe that we need to follow the way Paul in Ephesians approaches the issue of unity as we reflect on that issue. Who is the true head of your life, marriage, relationships, and, most importantly in Ephesians, of the body of Christ? Ephesians 3:21 gives a further commentary: “To [God] be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” Christ is the appointed head; therefore, to Him be the glory. This is the worship of the church: acknowledging Christ as head is not only submission, but also worship. The theme of submission is again echoed in 5:24 where Paul says this: “Now as the church submits to Christ, and then applies that model to the family situation of marriage, this is submission to Christ.” Therefore, when we think about unity, although we often think about the horizontal unity of believers, the initial question ought to be “Who is our head? How is the head honored and glorified and what is the level of submission to the head?” So my aim, in the highly fragmented and denominationally puzzling world of the church, is submission and worship to Christ as our head. I do not ask first the question, “How can we organizationally make this all uniform? How can we get out of all this fragmentation?” These are legitimate questions, but the beginning of unity is the question of the true headship of Christ. We need to study Christology: who is Christ? Who is He revealed to be? Knowing and believing Christ will lead to worship and submission to His authority and leadership. Wherever you are, whatever denomination you belong to, whatever concerns you have—you must commit yourself to the true headship of Christ. Who is He really? We must speak about that gladly, openly, and freely, confessing Christ to seek the worship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Living under Christ’s headship must be pursued biblically and in this indicative/imperative sequence—not in a stoic sense of, “Get yourself right and do something good for God.” Then, I believe, we will be a help and a tool in the advancement of the church toward the unity that Paul speaks about.

While we may be concerned about organizational association, God's concern, in the fragmented situation that we find ourselves in, is the true headship of Christ. We need to believe the truth about this head because we know that from Him life is drawn and life arose. Chapter four is a major section on the unity of Christ and how this is developed. We are brought in a relationship with God and from that comes unity. Look at how the offices in the church are being described in 4:11-12: “It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” That is a long statement and it is hard to understand because it is so full with, perhaps heavy, theological terms. But a simple way to describe this is that the office and responsibility of leaders in the church is to help people serve each other and also grow up in maturity in Christ so that the entire body would be mature. The goal is that you could go to anybody in your church and find a worshipper of the living God who appreciates and acknowledges the Son of God, knowing why he or she worships Jesus as God. We all ought to be glorifying and honoring Him and also learning to live out the will of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

There is a wonderful climax to this in Ephesians 4:14-16:

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

This is a completely Christ-dependent maturing process. But you cannot leave anyone out. You cannot overlook someone in your church who looks inconspicuous, or a little shy, or a little cumbersome, or someone who is always saying the wrong thing—you cannot leave them out. The whole church is to grow in this mutual service to build each other up in that maturity in Christ. We are each one of us a beloved, important part of this whole horizontal growth toward the head, that is, Christ Himself.

Therefore, it is so plain to me that everything depends on the relationship to the head. Holding on to the head is a common term used in Colossians. Much distraction, deception, and deviation arises because we are not holding on to the head. We are substituting; we are finding easier ways than the challenging way of worshipping one whom we do not see, of speaking to one whom we do not audibly hear. Yet He has left us with the seal of His spirit and He will truly come back—and He is working mightily in our hearts to compel us to grow. In this invisible and yet clear way, He is working in our midst; He is strengthening our trust in Him and He is growing us up. That is unity. Therefore, I cannot support the efforts of such institutions as The Ecumenical Council of Churches because the initial decision of who Christ is, what is taught about Christ, and are we all in agreement about seeking the supremacy, greatness and worship of Christ as our head? has not been made. There cannot be unity unless we are all in agreement on that crucial point. These institutions' efforts are well meant. The Catholic Professor Hans Kungs, who is a great leader in Germany at the University of Tübingen, is advocating for understanding and empathy for other religions—to the point of saying Christianity is not the only truth. He has gone so far as to say that there is as much truth in Islam and Buddhism as in Christianity. He argues that we will never get out of all this fighting if we do not learn tolerance. He has good intentions, but the crucial understanding of Christ as the head of the church has been sacrificed—the understanding of Christ as the head, established from the beginning of time, the one from whom we draw our sustenance and our salvation, but also our daily bread, our wisdom. It is only under Him that there can be any kind of powerful growth within the body; under Him we can actually forgive, accept, and love each other unconditionally. Where can you find that kind of bread? Where can you find that kind of nourishment? Only at the feet of Christ. Therefore, if we cannot agree on this I cannot talk to you about unity because it will not work. It is not because I am stubborn, or because I have my little religion that I need to preserve, or because I am an intolerant person. It is because the Word of God, the sound revelation of God, is so strong on this point that I cannot deviate from it.

At the same time, I must be willing to associate with those who seek the greatness of Christ, who confess Jesus as Lord, and who seek the same God that I am serving and am called by. I must lay down my barriers; thus, I will teach about God wherever I am called. And I am very glad that I have connections to groups that are rather against the Gospel. I am glad to be invited to speak about the Gospel of Jesus Christ in those circles; I would be a fool not to go there and testify about God. That is how we can grow in unity, for people to come to Christ, the head, and then under the authority of the head to go and live that out across denominations and other barriers, but not at the expense of the truth of the Gospel. There is a commission to unity because the world will believe on the basis of what they see. So, there is a great challenge for us. We cannot sit back and just say, “Well, I believe in Christ so I have arrived.” We have a great commission; but as we pursue unity, the headship of Christ needs to be at the center and the heart of our concerns. Ephesians is the single most important document in the New Testament in voicing that call (besides John 17 and a few other passages) to that inner unity under the head.

So this is our definition of unity—unity under the headship of Christ, not unity of any other sort. That is where we need to grow and develop. We need to close this lecture but we have studied a major section of Ephesians. Read through Ephesians with all of this in your mind and you will benefit greatly from it. Thank you very much.