

The Book of Ephesians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 7: Unity and the Gifts That Build the Body

Ephesians 4:1–16

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Chapter 4 begins the second half of Ephesians, where Paul turns from doctrine to duty, from what God has done to how we must walk. The doctrinal heart of this lesson is the unity of the one church, summed up in the seven ones of verses 4 through 6: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father. The teacher should help the class see that this unity is not a human achievement but a divine reality grounded in the very nature of God. Paul says one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and the church of Christ has always taken these words seriously as a rebuke to denominational division, competing creeds, and party labels. There is one faith, the apostolic gospel, and one baptism, the immersion of a penitent believer into Christ, not many rival faiths and many conflicting baptisms.

The lesson also teaches God's design for how the church grows. The ascended Christ gives leaders, not to do all the ministry themselves, but to equip the saints for the work of ministry (v. 12). The teacher should correct the common assumption that ministry is the job of a paid few while the rest watch. Paul's vision is a body in which every member works, and the whole grows up into Christ the head as each part does its share. This both dignifies and obligates every member.

Formationally, Paul roots unity in humility, gentleness, and patience, and maturity in speaking the truth in love and refusing to be tossed by every wind of doctrine. The aim is to send students out as humble guardians of unity, as working members rather than spectators, and as maturing believers who hold truth and love together. Doctrine and character meet: the soundest theology of the one body bears fruit only in people gentle and patient enough to live it.

Question 1

Student Question:

In verses 1 through 3 Paul urges believers to walk worthy of their calling with all humility, gentleness, and patience, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit. What attitudes does Paul say preserve unity, and why might he place these character qualities before any discussion of doctrine?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul opens the practical half of the letter with a call to walk worthy of the calling to which you have been called (v. 1). The word walk pictures the daily conduct of life. Everything that follows in chapters 4 through 6 unpacks this worthy walk, and it begins with unity.

Strikingly, Paul names character qualities before he names the doctrinal basis of unity. Humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love (v. 2) come first; the seven ones come after. The order is deliberate. Unity is preserved not mainly by winning arguments but by the kind of people we are. Proud, harsh, impatient believers fracture even sound churches.

Note the phrase eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (v. 3). The word eager conveys diligent effort. Unity does not maintain itself; it must be guarded, and guarding it takes work, especially the work of swallowing pride and extending patience.

Help the class see that the health of a congregation depends as much on humble character as on correct doctrine. Both matter, but Paul lists character first for a reason.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The worthy walk as the theme of chapters 4 through 6
- Humility, gentleness, and patience as the guardians of unity
- Character placed before doctrinal discussion of unity
- Unity as something to be diligently maintained, not assumed

Discussion Prompts

- What character qualities does Paul say preserve unity?
- Why might Paul place these before the doctrine of the one body?
- How can proud or impatient people damage even a sound church?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul ties unity to humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love. Where do you most struggle to bear with others, and how does your pride or impatience threaten the unity around you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question makes the call to unity personal. Paul names bearing with one another in love, which assumes that fellow believers will sometimes be hard to bear. Unity is tested not in theory but in the friction of real relationships.

Invite students to identify their hardest quality to practice: humility, gentleness, or patience. Most of us have a besetting weakness here, a quickness to take offense, a tendency to control, a short fuse, a critical spirit.

Help them connect their inner pride or impatience to the outward strain it causes. The threats to unity are usually not grand heresies but small, repeated failures of love. Naming our part is the first step toward guarding the peace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Bearing with one another as the test of unity
- Identifying one's besetting relational weakness
- How pride and impatience strain unity
- Personal responsibility for the peace of the body

Discussion Prompts

- Which is hardest for you: humility, gentleness, or patience?
- Where do you struggle most to bear with others in love?
- How has your pride or impatience strained a relationship?

Question 3

Student Question:

In verses 7 through 12 Paul says the ascended Christ gave gifts to His people, including evangelists, shepherds, and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry. What does this teach about the purpose of leaders in the church, and what does it say about the role of every member?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul says that when Christ ascended He gave gifts to His people, and the gifts he names are people: apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers (vv. 11). These leaders are Christ's gift to the church for a specific purpose.

That purpose is stated clearly in verse 12: to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. The leaders are not hired to do all the ministry while the members watch. Their God-given job is to train, prepare, and equip the members so that the members do the ministry.

This overturns a common but unbiblical model in which a few professionals perform while the congregation spectates. In Paul's design the leaders are coaches and trainers, and the whole body is the team. A church where only the staff minister is a church operating against its design.

Note the implication for every member: ministry is your work, not only the preacher's. The saints, all of them, are called to the work of ministry, each according to the grace given (v. 7).

Help leaders and members alike embrace this. Leaders measure success by how well the body is equipped and working, not by how much they do themselves; members measure faithfulness by whether they are doing their share.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Leaders given by Christ to equip, not to do all ministry
- The work of ministry as the calling of every saint
- Correcting the spectator model of church
- Grace given to each member for service
- Leaders as trainers and the body as the team

Discussion Prompts

- According to verse 12, what is the purpose of leaders in the church?
- How does this challenge the idea that ministry is the job of a paid few?
- What does it mean that every saint is called to the work of ministry?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul says the saints, not only the leaders, are to do the work of ministry. Are you living as a worker in the body or as a spectator, and what is one area of ministry where God may be calling you to take part?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the previous truth into a personal decision: spectator or worker. Many sincere believers attend faithfully yet never see themselves as ministers, leaving the work to others. Paul's vision will not allow it.

Help students think concretely about ministry. It need not be a title or a stage. It includes teaching a class, visiting the sick, encouraging the discouraged, showing hospitality, serving behind the scenes, reaching the lost. Every member has a share.

Encourage one step out of the audience and into the work. Ask each person to name an area where they could begin to serve, and to take a first concrete step rather than waiting to be asked.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The choice between spectating and serving
- The breadth of ministry beyond titles and platforms
- Every member finding their share of the work
- Taking initiative rather than waiting to be recruited

Discussion Prompts

- Are you living as a worker in the body or as a spectator?
- What is one area of ministry where God may be calling you to serve?
- What first step could you take this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

In verses 14 and 15 Paul says we are to be no longer children, tossed about by every wind of doctrine, but are to speak the truth in love and grow up into Christ. What guards a believer from being blown around by false teaching, and how do truth and love work together?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul warns that we should be no longer children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning and deceitful schemes (v. 14). Spiritual immaturity leaves a believer unstable, easily swayed by the latest persuasive teacher or fashionable idea.

The remedy is twofold. First, growth in the knowledge of the Son of God and of sound doctrine (vv. 13). A believer grounded in Scripture is not blown about by novelty. Second, speaking the truth in love (v. 15), which holds two things together that we often split apart.

Truth without love becomes harsh, combative, and proud; it wins arguments and loses people. Love without truth becomes flattery and compromise; it keeps the peace by abandoning the faith. Paul insists on both at once: truth spoken in love, love that never sacrifices truth. This combination both protects the church from error and builds it up.

Help the class see that maturity is the goal. Children are easily fooled and easily swayed; grown believers, rooted in truth and seasoned with love, stand firm and help others stand.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Immaturity as instability before false teaching
- Grounding in Scripture as protection from error
- Truth and love held together, not split apart
- The dangers of truth without love and love without truth

Discussion Prompts

- What protects a believer from being tossed by every wind of doctrine?
- How do truth and love work together, and what happens when we separate them?
- Do you lean toward truth without love, or love without truth?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul warns against being tossed by every wind of doctrine. Where are you most vulnerable to being swayed, and do you tend to hold truth without love or love without truth?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the warning inward. Everyone has points of vulnerability where they are most easily swayed, perhaps a teaching that flatters them, a trend among friends, a season of weakness or longing when a false promise sounds appealing.

Help students identify their own susceptibility. Often we are blown about not by careful reasoning but by emotion, relationships, or unmet desires. Knowing our weak points helps us guard them.

Then apply the truth-and-love test to themselves. Some students wound others with blunt truth; others avoid hard truths to keep the peace. Invite each to name their tendency and to ask God for the missing half.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Recognizing personal vulnerability to being swayed
- Emotion, relationships, and desire as channels of deception
- Self-examination on truth and love
- Asking God for the balance we lack

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most vulnerable to being swayed?
- Do you tend to hold truth without love, or love without truth?
- How could you grow in the half you most lack?

Question 7

Student Question:

Verse 16 says the whole body grows and builds itself up in love when each part is working properly. What does this teach about how a healthy church actually grows, and who is responsible for that growth?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 16 gives Paul's picture of a healthy, growing church: from Christ 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. Every phrase matters.

First, growth comes from Christ the head; He is the source. Second, the body grows when each part is working properly. The growth is not the work of a few but the contribution of all. Third, the result is that the body builds itself up in love. A church grows healthy from the inside as its members serve one another.

This corrects two errors. One is passivity, leaving growth to the leaders or to God alone while members do nothing. The other is mere programs, as though growth came from techniques rather than from every member functioning in love. Paul says the body builds itself up as each part works.

Help the class own their share. The health of the congregation is not someone else's responsibility; it is the sum of each member doing their part in love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ as the source of the body's growth
- Growth as the result of every member working
- The body building itself up in love
- Against both passivity and reliance on mere programs

Discussion Prompts

- How does a healthy church actually grow, according to verse 16?
- Who is responsible for that growth?
- What happens to a body when some parts stop working?

Question 8

Student Question:

If the body grows as each part does its work, then your participation matters more than you may think. What part has God given you to play, and are you doing your share to build up the body?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question makes the body image personal. In a physical body every part has a function, and the loss of even a small part is felt. So in the church, each member has a God-given part, and the whole is weakened when any member sits idle.

Help students discover and value their part. Some parts are visible, like a hand or an eye; others are hidden but essential, like an internal organ. The quiet, behind-the-scenes members are as vital as the prominent ones.

Press the question of faithfulness: are they doing their share? Not someone else's part, and not nothing, but the part God has given them. Encourage them to identify it and to commit to it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Every member with a God-given function
- The value of hidden as well as visible parts
- The body weakened when members sit idle

- Faithfulness in doing one's own share

Discussion Prompts

- What part has God given you to play in the body?
- Are you doing your share, or leaving it to others?
- How is the whole body affected when you do or do not function?

Question 9

Student Question:

Verses 4 through 6 declare that there is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all. What is the unity Christ has established, and how do these seven ones, especially one Lord, one faith, and one baptism, confront the denominational divisions and party labels that mark so much of Christianity today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal center of the lesson, and the teacher should give it full attention. Paul grounds Christian unity in seven great realities: 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 (vv. 4–6). The repeated one is the drumbeat. Christian unity is not an optional ideal; it is rooted in the oneness of God Himself.

Three of these ones speak with special force against denominational division. There is one Lord, Jesus Christ, to whom all believers owe allegiance; not many masters and not competing human authorities. There is one faith, the apostolic gospel once for all delivered (Jude 3), not a marketplace of contradictory creeds. And there is one baptism, the immersion of a penitent believer into Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27), not a confusing array of conflicting practices and meanings. When Paul says one baptism, he assumes a single, definite act that all share.

The plain force of these verses is that the divisions of denominationalism, with their rival names, creeds, and authorities, run against the unity God established. If there is one body, the splintering of Christ's people into competing groups, each wearing a party label, cannot reflect God's design. The church of Christ has historically pleaded, on the basis of texts like this, for believers to lay down party names and human creeds and simply be Christians, members of the one body, holding the one faith, submitting to the one Lord.

Teach this with humility and longing, not with sectarian boasting. The point is not that our group has cornered the market on God but that division itself is contrary to the gospel, and that the way forward is a return to the simple, apostolic basis of unity: one Lord to obey, one faith to believe, one baptism to receive. Pride that merely congratulates itself for being right has missed the gentleness and patience Paul demanded at the start of the chapter.

Bring it home practically. The same seven ones that rebuke large-scale division also rebuke the small party spirit that can fracture a single congregation into cliques and factions. Wherever believers wear smaller labels than Christ's, these verses call them back to the one body.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Unity grounded in the oneness of God: the seven ones
- One Lord, one faith, one baptism as the basis of Christian unity
- One baptism as the immersion of a penitent believer into Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4)
- Denominational division and party labels as contrary to God's design
- The plea to be simply Christians, members of the one body
- Pursuing unity with humility and longing, not sectarian pride

Discussion Prompts

- What do the seven ones teach about the basis of Christian unity?
- How do one Lord, one faith, and one baptism confront denominational division?
- How can we long for unity without falling into mere party pride?

Question 10

Student Question:

Paul's goal is that we all attain maturity, the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Looking back over this whole passage, name one specific way the Lord is forming you through it, and one step you can take toward greater maturity and unity in the body.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone draws on Paul's stated goal: that 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 (v. 13). The aim of all the gifts, all the equipping, all the body working together, is maturity, growing up into the likeness of Christ.

Note that maturity and unity belong together. We grow up into Christ as a body, not in isolation. The mature believer is not a lone expert but a member who helps the whole body rise toward the stature of Christ.

Press for a personal response. Ask each student to name one way this passage is forming them, perhaps a new commitment to guard unity, a step out of the spectator seats, a resolve to ground themselves in truth, or a softened, humbler spirit.

Then ask for one concrete step toward maturity and unity, a relationship to mend, a ministry to begin, a doctrine to learn, a pride to lay down. The lesson ends not in abstraction but in a single act of growth.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Maturity, the stature of Christ, as the goal of the body
- Growing up into Christ together, not in isolation
- Unity and maturity bound together
- Concrete steps of growth as the response

Discussion Prompts

- Which truth from this passage most needs to shape you this week?
- What is one step you can take toward greater maturity?
- What is one step you can take toward greater unity in the body?