

## Prayer

We praise You, Lord Jesus Christ, for You give us hope when there is none other, You lead us forward when we are truly lost, You bless us when we are undeserving, and You love us though we have done nothing to deserve it. You do all this for us because You are a God of love, and we are not ashamed to declare this to the world. Alleluia!

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Sit quietly for several minutes and listen carefully to what the Lord would say to you today*

### On-going prayers

- **This week, pray for prisons.** Pray for those who work in prisons, including people who provide programmes of education or reform
- Pray for scientists and the pioneering work they do
- Give thanks to God for the joy of food, and eating

## Meditation

Read the Bible; it matters.

    dwell on it, think about it, and get to know what it really says;  
    enjoy the challenge to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest;  
    uncover the mystery of God's plans for the whole world;  
    let the Word of God teach you about what is right and wrong;  
    allow the Holy Spirit to guide your mind and heart as you read;  
    learn about the covenant of God's grace, the proof of His love;  
    discern the true meaning of discipleship, holiness, and justice  
    be astonished by the real truth behind faith, hope and love;  
    recall words and phrases of spiritual truth that feed your soul;  
    find out what the Creator says about the end of His world.

Read the Bible, it is God's Word.

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## Bible Study - Ephesians 4:14-16

<sup>14</sup> So we should no longer be infants, all at sea and tossed about by every wind of teaching, by the trickery of people and their cunning and deceitful schemes. <sup>15</sup> Rather, by upholding the truth in love we should mature in every way into Him who is the head, that is, Christ. <sup>16</sup> Through Him, the entire body is enabled to grow as a whole and build itself up in love, when joined and knit together by every supporting ligament and by the proper working of each part.

### Thought for the day

#### **Text**

#### Ephesians 4:14

<sup>14</sup> So we should no longer be infants, all at sea and tossed about by every wind of teaching, by the trickery of people and their cunning and deceitful schemes.

#### **Thought**

In Paul's day, the churches of God were flung across the length and breadth of the Roman Empire, and yet they were obviously part of one 'body', the 'body of Christ'. Paul was desperately concerned to keep it that way, and warned against any form of human trickery that might divide the church.

Although the church is deeply divided today, all believers are united in Christ, and Him alone. So let each of us stand against any philosophy, book, music, politics, social trend or fashion, that diverts us from the truth of God in Christ. The devil will use these to divide us.

## Review

The passage for today is brief, but it concludes the first of Paul's messages in this letter. It begins at the first verse of chapter four with an appeal to God's people to accept their unity in Christ; to 'spare no effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (4:3). It continues with the famous description of God's various gifts of ministry, which we studied yesterday (4:7-13). Today's passage completes the message with an appeal for God's people to do three things; watch out for the storms of life which batter the church (4:14), seek truth subject only to the love of Christ (14:15), and work together for the building up of the whole church, the 'body of Christ' (4:16).

Paul warns, as he does throughout his writing (2 Cor. 11:13f., Gal 2:4, Col 2:18, 1 Tim 6:3 etc.), that the world is full of false teaching, and the church is not immune to its effects. He pleads with his readers to grow in maturity and perceive the childishness of succumbing to every 'wind of teaching' thrown at the church by the world. This is an apt warning to each generation, for the temptations are different in every age. For example, because of the speed of modern society, people are tempted to abandon reading the Bible in favour of learning about life from songs, books, conversations and opinions.

This reading contains the famous phrase; 'upholding the truth in love' (4:15). Paul wrote this to illustrate practical Christians maturity, and although most Bible versions translate this 'speaking the truth in love', the original Greek phrase does not mean just 'speaking' the truth. Rather, it means 'being truthful' in general and includes doing as well as speaking what is right. Paul's point is that whilst truth should never be compromised, it must be handled with love, for that is God's way. This phrase is not a license for us to say what we think, but a warning to all to act and speak with the maturity of the love of God.

Verse 16 concludes the message with an uncompromising summary. The God is able to work when all His people do what is required of them interdependently, like the functioning of a body. Paul specifically mentions the connecting ligaments that bind a body together so that we are left in no doubt about this. God's people are not one as mere separate bits lumped together; they are one because they are joined to each other as well as Christ.

The main message in Ephesians 4:1-18 is that God's people are called to work together in order to be the 'body of Christ' and do God's work in the world. I know very well that today, although many individual churches work well by themselves, God's people are badly divided into innumerable denominations and church groups. Such is the antipathy towards 'church' and its perceived failures that some try to plant Christian communities with no connection to 'the church' and even reject the use of the word. In addition, most individual churches and denominations work as if others did not exist, and despite well meaning resolutions, take few opportunities to consult with other Christians, let alone do the work of God together.

I find this sad, not so much because I happen to believe that the attitudes behind this are misplaced, but because those who take this stance do so in the face of what God says about Christ in Scripture. The Bible clearly teaches that the 'body of Christ' is the 'church' (Rom 12:5, 1 Cor 12:6f., 28, Eph 5:23f. Col 1:18f. etc.), and it is one body with different members, not many individuals with a common aim. In addition, this text says plainly that the church as a whole can only grow when each member plays its part like the parts of one body, not separately, but inter-dependently. However immense the problems for God's people today, and however impractical and impossible it may appear to advocate any form of Christian unity today, this Scripture (along with many others) challenges us to work together with our differing gifts and graces, not apart. We cannot claim to accept God's Word and ignore this.

### ***Going Deeper***

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- How are God's people 'tossed about' (4:14)?
- Is it possible to be mature and 'uphold the truth in love' (4:15)?
- What is Paul really trying to say in verse 16?

## Notes on the text and translation

### **Important words**

#### **V14 'trickery'**

Greek 'kubeia'; meaning 'playing at dice'. This word is usually used figuratively to mean craftiness, trickery or cheating. Trickery remains the best translation, but it is worth remembering that by using this word, Paul implies gambling with faith; it is a powerful comment.

#### **V15 'upholding'**

Greek 'aletheuovtes'; meaning being truthful and honest, whether in word or deed. Because of the problems that have been created by the use of the phrase 'speaking the truth in love', I have chosen to translate this verb by the phrase 'upholding the truth'. Quite correctly, this implies being truthful in more than words (see study).

#### **Significant phrases**

#### **V14 'all at sea and thrown about by every wind of teaching'**

Other translations:

*'tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching' (NIV)*

*'tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine' (NRSV)*

The words used here paint a picture of being thrown about by a storm at sea. There are only five words to this Greek sentence, so I have simplified the translation as much as possible. Note also that the word 'teaching' can also mean 'something taught', which is why some translations use the word 'doctrine'. However, the word 'doctrine' has negative connotations today so I have avoided it.

#### **V16 'Through Him, the entire body is enabled to grow as a whole and build itself up in love, when joined and knit together by every supporting ligament and by the proper working of each part.'**

Other translations:

*'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.' (NIV)*

*'... from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.' (NRSV)*

Each word in this sentence is important, and the Greek of verse 16 is hard to translate. Most translators change the order of the words to help make the meaning clear, but my translation here is different in one important respect. The heart of the sentence reads like this in Greek; 'all the body (when joined ... etc.) makes for the growth of the body ...', and this makes sense in Greek but not in English. I have therefore translated it in this way; 'the entire body is enabled to grow as a whole...'. The meaning of this is important (see notes).

## Going Deeper

### **How are God's people 'tossed about' (4:14)?**

In verse 14, Paul uses three different 'pictures' to make his point about resilience in the face of turmoil. Firstly, he says that each child (the word means 'baby') must grow up into adulthood to withstand life's storms. Paul's point is not contrary to Jesus' call for people to enter the Kingdom 'like a child' (Matt 18:4). He explains that no Christian should remain a 'child' in spiritual things because God has made each one to grow both physically and spiritually. He expects once Christians have responded to the Gospel, they will continue to grow in spirit just as a body grows, and not remain stuck in childish ways. It may be natural for those who are 'newly born' in Christ to experience some turmoil when learning about faith and discarding the things of the world. However, He anticipates that a Christian will grow out of this and become mature in Christ. The 'childlike' innocence of those who first accept Christ is truly wonderful, but if people do not go on to grow in the spirit, then their faith will remain 'childish'.

Tumultuous things may happen in any generation, but the one that bothered Paul the most is represented by his second picture. This is of a storm at sea, and it represents the many teachings, beliefs and religious practices of humanity. Various new teachings filtered into the early church as it grew and faced the challenges of the first century, but Paul perceived that maturity and growth in the things of the spirit came from a narrowing spiritual horizon, not an expanding one. Christian maturity would be found through focussing on Christ and knowing Him more deeply, not being knowledgeable about worldly things.

Lastly, Paul used the language of 'trickery' to illustrate danger to the church. He used three words in the sentence, and each of them indicates some form of deception. Interestingly, the first word, 'trickery', was used in his day to refer to the playing of dice (see notes above), so it is likely that those who first read the letter would have spotted this, and it would have suggested to them that playing with unorthodox teaching

was like gambling with the future of the church. Paul was not wrong, and throughout the history of the church, false teaching has pressed hard at every point, especially where God's people have not held the historic, apostolic and evangelical faith of their forefathers as sacrosanct. It is not easy to stand firm, but the very fact that the true Gospel has enlightened our lives today is testimony to the extraordinary power of the Gospel to remain pure throughout the centuries, despite all attacks. It is also a testimony to the integrity of the true church of God despite its problems of division.

### ***Is it possible to be mature and 'uphold the truth in love' (4:15)?***

The translation notes above explain why I have not translated this verse 'speaking the truth in love', a phrase recognised by many. Unfortunately, people who merely express their own opinions are known to use this phrase in defence of their right to speak their minds, as if it is kind of them to do so. If 'speaking the truth in love' has come to mean little more than this, then the phrase would best be abandoned.

However, if we think carefully about these words, and accept that 'upholding the truth in love' means maintaining the faith in Jesus Christ both in word and deed, then we come back to the heart of the text. 'Truth' is not a personal opinion, it is the truth of the Gospel, which is to be held lovingly by God's people in the face of worldly opposition. This is the proper meaning of the phrase, and we are unwise to modify it.

Of course, such a defence of the faith demonstrates great maturity precisely because it does not represent personal opinion. Rather, it refers back to the body of knowledge about God, salvation and human behaviour written in the Bible, demonstrated in the life of Jesus, and proved in the life of God's people in the present. Of course, Jesus Himself is at the 'head' (4:15) of this truth, and this is why no one can use this passage of scripture to justify the pursuit of a personal issue, however right they believe themselves to be. 'Upholding the truth in love' is not about conversations contrived by one person in order to tell someone else they are wrong about something in a nice way; it is about the consistent loving witness of those who believe in Christ and live in His light, a testimony that shows other people the truth about the love of God.

If we wish to deal with misunderstanding or disputes in the church, there are other passages of scripture that advise us about this quite specifically (e.g. Matthew 18:15f. and 1 Cor. 6).

### ***What is Paul really trying to say in verse 16?***

I strongly suggest that you read the translation notes (above) for this verse, because if you read this verse in some versions of the Bible, you may become confused about what Paul is saying. The verse is clearly about the important subject of the unity of the body of Christ and the way that it works. However, the confusion of Paul's original Greek sentence means that the verse reads awkwardly, so few people remember or refer to this important text. This is unfortunate, because it is the most forthright description of the working unity of the body of Christ to be found in the Bible, and it needs to be understood for the good of the church.

Some versions of the Bible (one of these is the NRSV, quoted above), could give you the impression that the body of Christ grows as long as the individual parts of the body play their part and perform their function. However, Paul says more than this. He says that the whole body grows when '*joined and knit together by every supporting ligament and by the proper working of each part.*' In other words, the growth of the body requires both the proper working of its parts and also the its connectedness. Moreover, the manner of this working together is also specified; he says, '*the entire body is enabled to grow as a whole and built itself up in love.*' Yet again, Paul emphasises that love is the key to the successful operation of God's will.

Clearly, this passage does not envisage the unified working together of the body as something done by God because His people can't manage it themselves, it envisages God's people working together, that is, all God's people. Some commentaries I have read suggest that Paul's ideal here is too lofty, others dismiss this as impractical; yet I have not come across a commentary yet that suggests Paul was indeed telling us a truth about how God wants His people to work here and now. I suggest that Paul knew he was stating a high ideal, but he believed it was a realistic aim, at least for one good reason, which is that when God's people speak with one voice to the world, the message of the Gospel is clear. Jesus prayed for this in the Garden of Gethsemane, asking that His future disciples might 'be one so that the world might believe ...' (John 17:21).

Paul was undoubtedly aware of the pitfalls of division in the church (see his first letter to the Corinthians), and he knew about the sins that could undermine the work of the church, but he would be astonished to hear people dismiss the unity of God's people as being unrealistic and therefore not worth working for. As he said to the Corinthians; 'is Christ divided?' (1 Cor 1:13).

## Application

I have had a number of conversations with Christian people, including prominent leaders, who say quite openly that churches should do what they feel called by God to do, irrespective of other Christians. They suggest that the unity of the 'body of Christ' is a 'spiritual' unity never found on earth, but found only in heaven. They therefore reject the idea of working together with other churches or denominations. This is

unworkable, they say, and suggest that God will unify His people only when Christ comes. This approach to Christian unity is held by many people and is preached in many churches. It is highly convenient, but it is not supported by Scripture, and unsurprisingly, it can promote considerable antipathy between Christians.

If you have read these studies over any length of time, you will be familiar with my own concern for Christian unity, and my scepticism concerning the perceived wisdom about Christian unity (as outlined above). My suspicions that this is not right arise for several reasons. Firstly, Scripture tells us that God consistently pleads for His people to be 'one', both in the Old and New Testaments; not in the future, but in the present. Secondly, those who advocate this theology will often express attitudes towards other Christians that are less than loving, which reveals that there is no godly basis for this belief. Thirdly, the argument that Christian unity is impossible and impractical is unworthy of those who believe in the power of God.

If you ask me how God's people should live in unity, then I must reply in part that I do not know, but I know a God who does! I admit that this reply does not say what we should do with our different church structures, or whether we should compromise traditionally held doctrines about bishops, baptism or female leaders (for example). This is because I believe that none of these apparently insurmountable difficulties (and other apparent obstacles) are remotely as important as our salvation in Jesus Christ. Instead, I suggest that all who accept what Jesus has done for them should open their hearts to all others who have done the same, in the spirit of love (as in our text – 4:15). In addition, all of us must be prepared to re-examine our church practice. I do not suggest we re-examine our faith in Christ, but the patterns of church life and worship that we have built up over the years, which have more to do with culture and history than doctrine or the Word of God. By putting Christ first, as the 'head' (4:15), we may believe that 'mountains can be moved'; after all, it is God's will that His people be one, not my will, or that of anyone else.

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## Questions (for use in groups)

1. To what extent is the church of God today either childish or mature, by the standards of this passage of scripture?
2. Discuss any good examples you have come across of how to 'uphold the truth in love' (4:15) either by word or by deed.
3. How has the church of God grown in your own lifetime, and to what end? If you are not able to answer this question, discuss why not, and what can be done about this.

## Discipleship

### Discipleship issue found in this text

- *Being wary of false teaching*
- *Upholding the truth in love*
- *The unity of God's people*

### Personal comments from the author:

*I was cautious about writing this set of notes, because I fear boring readers about the subject of Christian unity. It comes up frequently, and I can do nothing except explain the text as I find it. I am not trying to find the theme of unity everywhere, but I challenge anyone to suggest that this passage is not about unity, and this alone. Indeed, I fear that verse 14 and 15 are often taken out of context by preachers who take what is said about teaching and 'speaking the truth in love' without explaining why Paul writes as he does.*

### Ideas for exploring discipleship issues

- *Do you think that anyone else in your church is willing to put any effort into being 'one in Christ' with other Christians? The answer should tell you much about the state of the church today.*
- *Ask yourself about the reasons why you prefer one Christian church to another. What does this say about you, and what does this say about your church?*

## Final Prayer

Lord God; we long to grow in Christ and be counted by You as people who are mature and worthy of our calling. Where we are blind, open our eyes; where we are inadequate, guide us; and where we are ignorant, teach us. Lead us onwards, we pray, as we submit ourselves to Your will; AMEN