

On Being One: An Introduction to Ephesians

Acts 20:17-38, Ephesians 1:1-2

Introduction - The Hat

This last week I came across a really interesting article in an online magazine.

The reporter had been interested in a growing church movement in New York City, and, in her words, she wanted to:

"...find out if Christianity can really be this cool and still be Christian."¹

She visits the church on multiple occasions. There she finds a congregation made up of what would be described as 'cool people'. Some might even go so far as to call them 'hipsters'. And there are hundreds of them. Wearing their skinny jeans, their ironic spectacles, their Saint-Laurent fragrances they were, as she observed, "*buoyant and shiny with salvation*"². Whatever that means.

But the thing that really draws her attention is a particular hat that has become a ubiquitous fashion accessory for everyone from the band, to the preacher, to the average pew-warmer.

"...the first thing I noticed, which is: They're all wearing this hat. Consider how unusual it is for people to wear the same hat if they aren't, say, working at [MacDonalds], or on a baseball team."

She sends a photo of the hat to a friend in the hat-making trade, who responds saying that it's really a nothing-kind-of-hat. She goes on:

"But it's not nothing. It's what they're all wearing, like a badge or a uniform."

"And at some point you have to acknowledge that a large group of people in New York City adopting the fashionable choices of their spiritual leaders is a peculiar thing, but also an indication that whatever these leaders are doing, they are doing it very effectively. They are leading. They are influencing."

¹ <http://www.gq.com/story/inside-hillsong-church-of-justin-bieber-kevin-durant> Accessed 24/12/2015

² *ibid.*

Now, church practice and fashion choices aside, the reason I'm telling you this is simply to show how incredibly easy it is for a church to be united around something.

In fact, the thing that a church is united around might be as simple as a common choice in headgear. I'm sure you know that this isn't the the first time in history that hats and church have been a thing.

Apparently the leaders of this church created this trend in their church with very little effort or intention. And the congregation adopted this badge, this uniform, this common identifier, with very little effort or intention. Perhaps no intention, other than to say, "Hey. That's cool."

Of course, a church is more likely to unite around things other than hats. These things might be a shared cultural or ethnic background. It might be a common economic bracket. It might even be around things that particular people like doing together, like camping, or fishing, or crafting, or having tea together. Sometimes churches are simply united around family relationships.

If a church is really doing well, they might even be united around a shared understanding of what the Bible says!

But the reality is that every church is actually united around something. If they weren't, there wouldn't be a church in the first place. Our church is united around something.

Far harder than being united around something, though, is being united around the right thing.

This is the reason that Paul writes his letter to the Ephesian Christians, to remind them of the absolute necessity of ensuring that they are united first and foremost in the Lord Jesus Christ. He reminds them of the importance of making Jesus their common identifier, the glue that holds them together. That when people walk into their church, or see their people in the street, they see Jesus.

And of course, this is true for every Church, no less our own church here in Buderim.

So as we move through the letter of Ephesians in the coming weeks, I'd encourage you to think about this question: What is it that makes our church "one"?

I hope this will also have some flow-on questions too, like, "What sort of one-ness am I looking for?", "Have I found the one-ness I am looking for here at Grace?", "If not, why not?", "Am I contributing to the right kind of one-ness here?"

Well, let's get some background on the letter so we can understand it better.

Paul's 3rd Journey

As the apostle Paul moved around the Roman Empire teaching and preaching the gospel of Jesus, he arrived in the city of Ephesus, in the province of Asia. Today this would be in western Turkey.

This all happened on Paul's third and final missionary journey, which probably took place between 51 and 57AD.

Ephesus was a very important city. It was a port city of the Roman Empire. It was also a centre of pagan spirituality. One of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, a temple to the goddess Diana, or Artemis, was located in Ephesus. Artemis (or Diana) was an important Greek deity, concerned with fertility, hunting, wild animals, childbirth, and a few other things.

During Paul's time in the city, he butts heads in a serious way with the followers of this goddess, and with those who were profiting from all the little parallel industries that fed off the cult. The Bible records that the industries, "*brought no little business to the craftsmen.*" (Acts 19:24)

One of those was a silversmith called Demetrius, who had a business building little silver statues of the goddess. He had tried to bring a legal charge against Paul and his companions.

Though the legal offensive fell flat, Paul saw this as the right time to finally leave Ephesus, as he had previously planned, after about two-and-a-half years of work.

Aside from cultic worship, the city was also a hub for those who practiced "magic arts."

When the gospel took root in Ephesus, a number of the new converts came and burnt their spell books and other occult literature on a huge public bonfire. The Bible tells us that the combined value of all the books burned was about 50,000 pieces of silver. When you consider that a piece of silver was the equivalent of a day's wage back in Paul's day, that's some expensive ash.

When Paul started in Ephesus, he did as he usually did, and taught in the Jewish synagogue. Apparently, this became a dead end, and so Paul established an alternative teaching point in the Hall of Tyrannus, where he could explain the gospel of Jesus.

This was probably a lecture hall belonging to a man called Tyrannus (yes, like the dinosaur), and it's likely that he let Paul use it after the morning lectures. Some manuscripts record that Paul taught from 11.00am - 4.00pm.

It was common in this time for people to put in a solid morning's work, and then to take a break during the hottest part of the day. It seems like instead of resting, Paul and the Christians in Ephesus were willing to give up their rest hours to be taught from God's Words. Perhaps there something we can learn in that.

The success of Paul's time teaching in Ephesus is summarised in Acts 19:10

"This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."

(Acts 19:10 ESV)

What is also clear is that in his time in Ephesus, a healthy Christian community was established, and a great love had developed between Paul and these Christian brothers and sisters.

We see this love quite clearly in the passage that was read for us a little earlier from the book of Acts:

Paul's Farewell (Acts 20:17-38)

After Paul left Ephesus, he travelled north and then west across the Aegean Sea to Macedonia, where you'd find the city of **Philippi**. Paul had helped establish a church in Philippi back in Acts 16.

He then travelled down the Greek peninsula, probably to **Corinth**, where he had planted a church in Acts 18, and spent three months there. He had planned to sail across the Mediterranean to Syria, but some Jews plotted against Paul, so instead he went north again. He went back to Philippi, and then back across to **Troas**, back across the Aegean Sea.

It's in Troas, as Paul is preaching late one night, that a young guy fell asleep and fell out of a third story window. The Bible tells us that he was *"taken up dead"* (Acts 20:9). But Paul took him in his arms, and he was raised back to life.

For some reason, Paul then skips Ephesus on his travels and sails down the Asian coast, eventually arriving at the important harbour city of **Miletus**.

And it's when he gets to Miletus that he calls the leaders of the church in Ephesus to come and meet with him, and says a final goodbye.

Paul's farewell is made up three main sections, which we'll go through briefly.

First, Paul **looks back** on his past ministry in Ephesus. Second, he **looks forward** what lies ahead. Third, he gives some **final advice** to the leaders of the Ephesian church.

1. Looking back (v18-21)

Paul begins by reminding the Ephesian church leaders of that his work in Ephesus wasn't easy. It required courage, it required endurance. It required faith.

And what was that ministry? Well, Paul summarises it really simply in v20-21:

"I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

(Acts 20:20–21 ESV)

This is the foundation that the church in Ephesus was built on. Paul never missed an opportunity to teach, whether in public or in private, whether formally or informally.

He didn't discriminate in *who* he taught. This is important for when we get into Ephesians in coming weeks. He taught Jews *and* Greeks - all the residents of Ephesus. No one would be left out.

And the message he taught was this: repentance towards God, and faith Jesus. This is the heart of the gospel, friends. Recognising that we have sinned before a holy God, to whom we are accountable, confessing our sin to him, and trusting in what his son Jesus Christ achieved in our place on the cross. And then walking a new life, in faith, where we turn away from our former sin. Repentance and faith.

What motivated him? Respect and influence? Reputation? Financial gain? Well, clearly not. Back in v19, Paul describes his ministry as *"serving the Lord"*. He's not serving the church, he's not serving his friends, he's not serving those who would hear the gospel; fundamentally, he's serving God, and seeking to bring glory to God.

So Paul's ministry, the ministry that established the Ephesian church, was this:

Serving God by persistently teaching everyone the gospel.

Of course, Paul wants the Ephesian church leaders to continue doing just this. This is to be the ministry, and their perspective on that ministry, no matter what happens.

2. Looking ahead (v22-27)

Next, Paul looks ahead to what will come, things that seem to have been revealed to him by the Spirit of God.

Quite simply, the outlook is bad from a purely human perspective. As Paul says:

"...not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me."

(Acts 20:22–23 ESV)

He also knows that he will not ever see the Ephesian church again. Timothy went to minister there, as did John the Apostle. But Paul's third missionary journey would be cut short, and he would spend the rest of the Biblical record of his life in a jail, probably in Rome, awaiting trial.

So, with this in mind, what's motivating him to continue? Why not just quit while he's ahead?

Well, look down at v24:

"But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."

(Acts 20:24 ESV)

Paul is motivated entirely by the ministry that he has been called to, simply, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. It's the same gospel which established the Ephesian church, and which he encourages the Ephesian leaders to continue proclaiming.

And looking ahead, even though the future looks bleak, Paul knows that God will continue to use him for this purpose, until the work that God has for him to do is finally done.

Paul is **facing the future with single-minded determination in the gospel.**

Just a note on v26. What Paul says there sounds a bit strange to our ears, and not at all encouraging.

"Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God."

(Acts 20:26–27 ESV)

Paul isn't saying he wants nothing more to do with the Ephesian church. What he is saying is that he has taught them everything they need to know about the gospel. He calls it "the whole counsel of God." You can also translate that word "counsel" as "mind", "purpose", or "will"

And because he has taught them everything they need to know, he is no longer responsible for them, and they are responsible for themselves. He has told them how the story ends. He can't do anything more for them, it's up to them now to carry the gospel forward.

Let's look at the final part, Paul's advice to the elders.

3. Looking sharp (v28-35)

Now, "looking sharp" is a bit of an old-fashioned phrase, but it used to be a command to "keep strict watch".

And this is the final advice Paul gives to the Ephesian elders as he brings his farewell message together.

He tells them to to keep strict watch over two areas: themselves, and the church body.

"Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood."

(Acts 20:28 ESV)

The motivation for doing this is the ministry that they have been called to, like Paul, as well as the value to God of his church. The leaders of the Ephesian church should recognise

the value that God has for his church, giving the life of his Son for his people, and they should have the same value for God's people.

They also need to recognise the gospel of the shed blood of Jesus Christ as ground-zero of the church.

Paul then outlines the danger that will face the church in the future.

"I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them."

(Acts 20:29–30 ESV)

Remember how earlier we spoke of the need in the church for unity and "oneness" around the right thing?

Well, this is what the leaders are to ensure. Constantly bringing everyone back to the foundational principles of the gospel. And if they fail to do that? Well, the church will fragment.

And there are two possibilities for this fragmentation: danger from outside, and danger from outside.

The danger from outside is often obvious. These are the outside attacks on the gospel and the church from society around us. These wolves come in the form of insult and ridicule, they might come in the form of reduced liberties for Christians, they might come in the form of strained relationships, they might even come in the form of physical violence and persecution.

So Paul says to look sharp, stick to the unifying truth of the gospel and stand against outside danger as one.

But there is another more subtle danger, which is perhaps even more dangerous, because often it's hard to recognise until it's too late. And that's danger from inside the church.

Paul talks here of the danger of fierce wolves arising from within the church, speaking twisted things, and dividing the body.

Now, the only way this can happen is if a church is failing to cultivate one-ness in the gospel.

What usually happens is that a church slowly deviates from gospel-oneness, to things that may even sound very Christian but are really side issues. And when side-issues become central issues, God's people will be divided. This is the twisting that Paul is talking about.

A great example of this in in Paul's letter to the Galatians. The Christians had lost sight of gospel-oneness, and had started having divisive debates about obedience to the Old Testament law! They were even suggesting that all the men should be circumcised if they were real Christians! Paul wrote a whole letter to call them back to gospel-oneness.

Will it be easy? Not at all. Paul reminds the Ephesian elders of the three years' worth of emotional turmoil that he went through doing just this, establishing the church in the oneness of the gospel of the Lord Jesus.

But the Ephesian leaders have a weapon with which to defend the church, and maintain its oneness in the gospel: the Bible. Paul says:

“And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

(Acts 20:32 ESV)

Quite simply, they are to...

...let the Word do its work, as they actively defend the church against the dangers of division.

Finally, Paul reminds the Ephesian church leaders that they are to expect to receive nothing in return for serving God and his people in this way. Of course, they will receive an inheritance among all those who are sanctified (v32), but this is about serving, it's about giving, giving to the weak, those who can't serve or give in return, imitating Jesus himself.

What follows is a tearful goodbye, mainly because of Paul's words that the Ephesian elders would not see him again.

To the Saints (Ephesians 1:1-2)

But a few years later, sitting in a Roman jail cell, Paul writes them a letter. Not to deal with a particular issue, like the church in Galatia, but to continue encouraging them towards gospel-oneness. The dangers from inside and outside are still the same.

This is the letter we'll be getting into in coming weeks.

As we close, though, let's revisit that question about one-ness.

If the Ephesians followed Paul's advice, both in his final words to the leaders, and in his later letter, people walking into their church wouldn't have seen a trendy hat on everyone's head. They would have seen the truth about Jesus Christ in everyone's hearts and heard it on everyone's lips.

Can we say the same for Grace?

The reality is, of course, if we're not united around the gospel, if we're not "one" in Christ, then we don't have a church at all. We have a club, a group, a society; but not a church.

In closing, I'd like to read you something from American pastor Mark Dever's book *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. He says this:

"...God's Holy Spirit creates his people by his Word! We can create a people by other means, and this is the great temptation of churches. We can create a people around a certain ethnicity. We can create a people around a full-graded choir program. We can find people who will get excited about a building project or a denominational identity. We can create a people around a series of care groups, where each feels loved and cared for. We can create a people around a community service project. We can create a people around social opportunities for young mothers or Caribbean cruises for singles. We can create a people around men's groups. We can even create a people around the personality of a preacher. And God can surely use all these of these things. But in the final analysis the people of God, the church of God, can inly be created around the Word of God."³

Let's pray.

³ p.50, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, by Mark Dever © 2004, Crossway
6.00pm Service, Grace Christian Church Buderim