# Church in Wales Dignity Charter
# Bible Study B
# Ephesians 4.32

**"...and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."** (Ephesians 4.32)

### *Context matters*

Plucking any verse of Scripture out of thin air in order to imagine how it might refer to my life, as well as to the wider church, is potentially hazardous. On the one hand, the picture which Paul the apostle[1] gives in verse cited above is warm and encouraging: we are to behave towards one another with gentleness, compassion and mercy, echoing the reconciling work of God in Christ. Few would disagree with this exalted and inspiring ideal; we would dearly desire every Christian community to embody this model.

However, it is important to note that to read this verse in isolation could be extremely challenging if I were a traumatised child being called to respond charitably to an abusive, manipulative parent, or a wife who feels compelled by her marriage vows to love her violent husband despite his persistent assaults, or a junior member of staff who feels duty-bound to suffer submissively under the constant ridicule and humiliating behaviour of an unjust, domineering manager. Each of these situations demands that justice and truth prevail so that the vulnerable do not suffer at the hand of the powerful but rather enjoy the freedom, esteem and respect due to all.

So in what follows it is important to note that the kindness, tender-heartedness and forgiving spirit which Paul proposes may sometimes sit in tension with the rightful processes of truth-telling and restorative justice for victims. That is, the Church in Wales' proper mechanisms of safeguarding, whistleblowing and tribunals have their rightful place in order to bring wrongdoers to repentance and the oppressed to liberation and dignity. Justice and mercy are both needed; truth and love sit together (cf. Psalm 85.10). That becomes clear if we read Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus in its magnificent entirety.

### *Christ makes us one*

Ephesians provides a fascinating and compelling view of the Christian life. One of the recurring themes is that of unity which Paul examines from a variety of standpoints: the cosmic, the international and the local.

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[1] The letter to the church at Ephesus opens with the words "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God..." (1:1) However, some scholars have noticed some differences in language and theology with Paul's other letters, leading some to postulate that the letter is the work of someone else closely associated with the apostle. A range of hypotheses can be found in the scholarly commentaries. However, for the purposes of this Bible study, Pauline authorship is assumed and affirmed.

Following a brief opening greeting (Ephesians 1:1-2), the author launches into one of his great and most memorable 'purple passages' in which he offers effusive praise for the manifold and glorious blessings bestowed on us in Christ, the Beloved of God the Father. Through him, God has poured out astounding, superabundant generosity:

> We have redemption through [Christ's] blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us" (1:7-8a).

The result of this unprecedented, undeserved, extravagant act of divine favour has cosmic consequences:

> With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (1:8b-10)

Hence, just as the Jerusalem temple was believed to be the meeting-point of God and humanity, so in Christ, the new temple, heaven and earth come together. Hence, God's saving work in Christ is not 'merely' an act of unmerited love by which believing individuals are forgiven and restored, nor is it purely a gift given to a pre-determined group of favoured people. Far more than that, it is about heaven and earth becoming one again, thereby reinstating the cosmic unity which is implicit from creation's very beginning (Genesis 1).

As the celebrated New Testament scholar, Bishop Tom Wright, writes in his recent book,

> In Ephesians, more clearly than perhaps anywhere else, we see that God's plan in the Messiah Jesus was to *sum up the whole cosmos in him, everything in heaven and earth*. Jesus has fulfilled the role marked out in scripture for the truly human being, as well as the role marked out for God himself.[2]

Furthermore, this has profound implications for the church as it seeks to imitate the life of Jesus in its own common life:

> The humanity of Jesus is not simply a necessity for the purposes of rescuing the world, but *the fulfilment of the creator's original purpose*, and the true humanity of Jesus' followers is *designed to display to the world what human life was meant to be like*.[3]

The church is therefore given an extraordinary, exalted vocation:

> The way I have come to see this in recent years it to understand the calling of the church as being central to the purposes of God for creation and new creation and

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[2] Tom Wright, *The Vision of Ephesians: the Task of the Church and the Glory of God* (London: SPCK, 2025), p. 5; italics original.
[3] Wright, p. 5; italics added.

> thus think of the vocation of the church as the call to live as *the small working model of new creation*.[4]

So Paul opens his letter to the Ephesians with an 'eagle's eye view' of God's work in Christ on the 'vertical' axis between heaven and earth. But that has immediate – and astonishing – implications for the 'horizontal' axis of human-to-human relationships. Strikingly, this is seen in a miraculous new alliance between God's chosen people and the nations around them. Uncircumcised strangers – the very enemies of the people of Israel – have been welcomed into God's covenant people through Christ's sacrificial death. Paul's words would have sounded controversial, provocative – even explosive – to his fellow Jews as he addresses the Gentile believers of Ephesus:

> Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. (Ephesians 2:13-14).

In Christ, Jew and Gentile find divine peace and access to God in the Spirit, becoming fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household (2:17-19). Furthermore, they are built up together upon "Christ Jesus … the cornerstone" into a "holy temple in the Lord … a dwelling-place for God" (2:20-22). So just as "Jesus is the temple in person, the cosmos in miniature", we "to our astonishment … *are called to share that status… we are called to be that temple where God dwells by the spirit.*"[5]

The church in Ephesus – and, by implication, the church in every age and place – finds its very existence, identity and meaning *in Christ alone* rather than through ethnic identity, or historic privilege. In Christ, God's providential purpose is fulfilled as the Gentiles – who were previously "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise" (Ephesians 2:12) – "become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (3:6). Jew and Gentile alike have received "boundless riches in Christ" (3:8) and have come to recognise the extraordinary dimensions of God's work, that they may "know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge" and so "be filled with all the fullness of God" (3:19).

### *The new life in Christ*

Paul's vision in the first three chapters of the letter is lofty and inspiring as his eagle-like theological mind soars to extol the unity between heaven and earth – and between Jew and Gentile – which has been won in Christ. In Ephesians 4, the eagle comes in to land as relationships and ministries in the local church come into sharper focus, yet with the overriding desire for magnificent oneness in Christ to be visible. The Ephesian church – and by extension every Christian community since – is called to "[make] every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). This great 'ecumenical' text of

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[4] Wright, p. 5; italics original.
[5] Wright, p. 56.

the New Testament emphasises that unity is no 'optional extra' but stems from God who calls the church into being: "one body… one Spirit … one hope… one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:4-6). Paul emphasises this oneness seven times – the number of perfection and completion – thereby according the church an expansive, all-encompassing identity, flowing from the very fullness of Christ himself.

Furthermore, the church, as the body of Christ, is gifted by the ascended Lord in many ways, generating diverse ministries that serve the community's oneness in Christ and their growth into him. In this closer, more immediate vision, Paul considers not so much the eagle's panoramic perspective as the work of the dove, the anointing Spirit who dwells within and animates various ministrations and offices. Moreover, this is a church focused on a God-given goal, ordering its life towards

> the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ (4:13).

This is therefore a community in dynamic, life-changing transition, not one that has become stale, stagnant or stunted. "Speaking the truth in love", these believers

> must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted 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 (4:15b-16).

Nevertheless, Paul's vision is not naïve, or some romantic ideal that cannot cope with the sobering, love-starved reality of human competitiveness and self-obsession. There is, he observes, the perennial danger of being hoodwinked by "people's trickery", by "craftiness in deceitful scheming" (4:14) and by continuing to live the old life they followed before coming to Christ, "futile of … mind", "darkened in … understanding, alienated from the life of God"… [ignorant] and [hard] of heart" (4:17b-18). The people Paul addresses are those who have learned that "truth is in Jesus" and in observing that way of unfailing faith, hope and love have been

> taught to put away [their] former way of life, [their] old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of [their] minds, and to clothe [themselves] with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:22b-24).

Such stark contrasts between the old life and the new therefore result in specific ethical choices: the community is to reject falsehood for the sake of truthfulness; to be angry, when appropriate, but not to sin or let that anger fester; to abandon theft in favour of honest work that funds generosity to the needy; and to avoid evil utterance but instead to speak grace-filled words which build up the hearers (4:25-29). These Jesus-followers are those who have been marked by the Holy Spirit "with a seal for the day of redemption", those set

aside to share in the very life of God itself, with no lamentable gap between their deepest, innermost Spirit-given identity and that which becomes visible in relationship with others. If we have been saved – by love, through love and for love – then love must be the defining shape of our common life.[6]

This "reject *X* … do *Y* instead" pattern comes to a striking contrast as Paul writes:

> Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:31-32).

These two behaviour traits represent the old way of life and the new way of Christ set in sharp divergence. This new ethic for the Church finds its root in God for his response to the age-old record of human sinfulness is not to perpetuate these seemingly endless cycles of human rage and rancour with devastating divine force, but instead to absorb them fully and finally in the cross of the Messiah. In Christ, therefore, vile power-plays are confronted head-on, stopped, broken and disabled: "God in Christ has forgiven you" (4:32). Having received this heaven-sent, undeserved reconciliation, Christ's body, the Church, is to reflect the same qualities in its own life, in kindness, tender-heartedness and forgiveness.

Tom Wright puts it well as he writes about the dramatic comparison between the "sketch of mounting fury" depicted in Ephesians 4:25-31 and the welcome release which follows in verse 32:

> It's like a moment in music when suddenly the clattering and clanging stops, to be replaced by a new melody, sweet, strong and clear. Kindness; tender feelings; forgiveness. Feel the sigh of relief. Then cherish that feeling. Then reflect on what brings it about. Then make a habit of it.[7]

### *How does Ephesians shed light on the Church in Wales' Dignity Charter?*

Making a habit out of this kind of noble behaviour can transform individuals and hence communities. Yet no one pretends that it is easy. It will demand that we bring our darkness into the gentle, but searching, light of God that we may be restored by the one who triumphed over darkness on the cross and lives for ever in the eternal light of Easter.

This gracious work of God in Christ demands constant realignment that we may better reflect and embody a new life. This can be seen implicitly in the Dignity Charter of the Church in Wales as it sets out the need to "treat everyone with courtesy, dignity, and respect, ensuring that the rights of others are respected and upheld."[8] However, this recognises the need for self-awareness, reflecting on "how our own behaviour impacts on

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[6] Notice the echoes here with other parts of the New Testament, most particularly the First Epistle of John (especially 1 John 4).
[7] Wright, p. 101.
[8] The Church in Wales, *Dignity Charter*, p. 2.

others" whilst being ready to "make changes if it has caused offence."[9] "Bullying, harassment [and] victimisation" have no place in the church, nor the practice of "[discriminating] unfairly or unlawfully on any grounds", but instead the active "[promotion of] an environment which values all people's differences and does not cause embarrassment, conflict of interest, harassment, alarm or distress".[10]

Alert to the unequal power dynamics at play in the church and aware of the need for unfailing politeness and professionalism, such actions should make a tangible difference in our life as a church, thereby "[fostering] a culture of continuous improvement."[11] The Dignity Charter emphasises the need for repentance (in Greek, *metanoia*) which involves a complete turnaround in attitude, word and action so that genuine, lasting and systemic culture change is possible.[12] Just like the Christians of Ephesus addressed by the apostle Paul in such majestic – yet immediately applicable – images, so the contemporary church is to shun the self-seeking, manipulative behaviour of the old life, in favour of the self-giving, liberative conduct of the new.

> We need to practise the high standards of relationships and care for one another exemplified in the scriptures and to embrace the spirit of *metanoia* so that together we can walk the path of reconciliation, restoration, and respect together.[13]

### *Imitate Christ*

Jesus Christ exemplifies that intentional way of loving selflessness like no other, uniquely "[giving] himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:1). So when Paul urges the Ephesian church to shun "fornication, impurity… and greed", all "obscene, silly and vulgar talk", all "[deceitful], empty words" (5:3-6), all worldly foolishness, drunkenness and debauchery (5:17-18), he is presenting a holy alternative. They – and we – are to "be imitators of God, as beloved children" (5:1), to be people characterised by thanksgiving and praise (5:4; 5:19), inheritors of the kingdom (5:5) and suffused by the Spirit (5:18). The darkness which characterised the old life has been shattered and our shameful former deeds have been exposed. Yet whilst such painful confrontation with the misdeeds of the past is wholly necessary that does not lead to ultimate condemnation and death for we rejoice that God is both merciful and just. Thankfully, the light of Jesus makes us children of light who need constantly to repent and reorient our own personal lives and draw the life of the wider church towards that dawning brightness:

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[9] The Church in Wales, *Dignity Charter*, p. 2. See also footnote 3 in Bible Study A where the practice of the Examen of Consciousness is described.
[10] The Church in Wales, *Dignity Charter*, p. 2.
[11] The Church in Wales, *Dignity Charter*, p. 2.
[12] The Church in Wales, *Dignity Charter*, pp. 1 and 2.
[13] The Church in Wales, *Dignity Charter*, p. 2. For a more lengthy, extensive description of how the Church in Wales should reflect on the particular exercise of spiritual authority, see the report of the Standing Doctrinal Commission, published in 2025. Entitled 'Walking in Integrity: a Theological Reflection on the Use and Misuse of Spiritual Authority', the report is available here.

Sleeper, awake!
Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Ephesians 5:14)

To respond to that new reality in practical terms the Church must be committed to speaking truth about the human condition, especially when trust has been abused and people have been hurt. Through the Dignity Charter, through mutual responsibility and, if needed, through its disciplinary processes it is to defend the victim, hold perpetrators to account and administer justice. Talk of kindness, tender-heartedness and forgiveness (Ephesians 4:32) may seem too 'soft' for the hard reality of human sinfulness being confronted for fair, truthful processes need to run their agreed legislative course. Nevertheless, such processes are never the final word for either perpetrator or victim, nor is the church's deepest identity thereby defined. The true, Spirit-enabled process is the church's ongoing, never-ending growth into Christ for communities where kindness, tender-heartedness and forgiveness abound remains the ideal to which we should aspire to embody. To display that new humanity living in God's new creation is our vocation: "Ordinary Christians are called to produce extraordinary deeds which God is bringing to his disordered world."[14]

### *Questions for reflection*

1. In the early chapters of his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul paints a panoramic portrait of Christ's saving work. Do you find this inspiring, or does it seem rather abstract and distant?
2. Reflect on the picture of the Church which Paul gives in Ephesians 4. What sort of community is this? Has it already reached perfection, or is there still work to do?
3. Paul calls on the Ephesians to "put away [their] old way of life" and instead "clothe [themselves] with the new self" (4:22-24). How do we take seriously this call in our own lives as individuals and as a Church? When others look at us, do they see us fulfilling (in Tom Wright's words) "the vocation of the church as the call to live as *the small working model of new creation*"?
4. Do you see kindness, tender-heartedness and forgiveness (Ephesians 4:32) flourishing in the Church? How can the Dignity Charter help us to do this better?

[14] Wright, p. 58.