

“Building Up the Body”

The Ninth in a Series of Sermons on Ephesians

Texts: Ephesians 4:7-16; Psalm 68:11-23

When God called us to faith in Jesus Christ he added us to Christ’s church. Paul refers to this church as the “body of Jesus Christ.” Once we become members of that church we are to strive for unity within the body by living humbly, acting gently, and bearing one another’s burdens in love. Paul’s point is that we are to strive eagerly to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, because it is Christ’s one body to which we’ve been added by grace through faith. But God does not command this of us, and then leave us on our own. When Jesus ascended into heaven, Paul says, Jesus gave to his church gifts—everything we need to ensure that Christ’s church functions properly, and so that we are equipped to be built up in love, maturing, and together growing into the fullness of Christ.

As we continue our series on Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians, we have made our way into the second half of this epistle (chapters 4-6). Paul begins to work out the application of those same doctrines he has set forth in chapters 1-3. As we work our way through Ephesians 4, I am dividing the chapter into three sections. We covered the first of these three sections last time—Paul’s exhortation regarding Christian unity as exemplified in the words of the creed given us by Paul in verses 4-6, “*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, who is over all and through all and in all.*” Paul’s point is that we are to confess this faith with our lips, and then strive to make sure that our lives match our profession.

In verses 7-16, Paul takes up the subject of God’s provision for the spiritual health and growth of the church. Within this section of Ephesians 4, there are two different topics which are the source of some fair bit of controversy in Reformed circles. The first has to do with the question as to what Paul means when he speaks of Christ’s “descent into lower regions.” The issue under debate here is “did Jesus actually descend into Hell after his death upon the cross?” The Reformed have always said “no” to that question, following John Calvin in understanding Christ’s death upon the cross as his suffering the anguish of Hell. Jesus himself steers us in this direction when he speaks of his own messianic mission in terms of a descent to earth, followed by an ascent to his Father upon completion of his redemptive work.

The second point of contention arises from Paul’s discussion of Christ giving gifts to the churches so that they might grow into maturity. Here the question is, “is it God’s desire that every member of the church be equipped for ‘ministry’ (the so-called ‘every member ministry’ model)? Or does God give ministers to the church whose task it is to bring the saints to maturity, (a view which does not see every member of the church as a “minister” with a “ministry”). We will tackle both of these controversies.

The third section of Ephesians 4 (verses 17-32), Paul deals with the effects of sin upon the human race. What does Adam’s fall do to us as a race, and how does human sinfulness effect our thinking and willingness to believe what we know to be true, but which we may not like—such as our guilt before God and his claim upon our lives? The effects of sin upon our thinking and mental ability is known as the noetic effects of sin. The Reformed (following Paul closely on this point) have argued that this factor must be taken very seriously whenever we talk about evangelism or apologetics. Those to whom we are talking are hostile to the truth and unwilling to accept it. Lord willing, we’ll take up this topic next time.

With much ground to cover, let's turn to our text (Ephesians 4:7-16), and tackle Paul's discussion of God's gracious provision for his church in the form of gifts.

In verses 1-6 of Ephesians 4, Paul stressed the unity of Christ's body—one Lord, one faith, one baptism. Now his focus turns to the fact that as members of Christ's body each one of us is to not only strive for unity, but maturity as well. We must not only strive to be one (and reflect our confession of faith through our lives), we must also strive to be mature, so as to be able to resist false doctrine and error. In verse 7, Paul puts it this way, "*But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.*" This is a very concise way of stating that grace has been given to each one of us by Christ himself, for the purpose of enabling us to strive for the unity and maturity required of us.

In 1 Corinthians 12:7-11, Paul makes a similar point in a bit more detail. "*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.*"

Notice that these gifts are given by God to Christ's church through the work of the Spirit. Since I hope to take up a study of Paul's Corinthian letters once we finish Ephesians, I'll let the details go until then. But the key thing to notice in 1 Corinthians 12, as well as in Ephesians 4, is that these gifts are given for "the common good." Spiritual gifts are not given for the personal edification of the one given the gift, but spiritual gifts are given for the collective well-being of the church as the body of Christ. Since there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, the giving of these gifts must be understood in the context of the overall benefit to Christ's "one body." Although it seems paradoxical to put the needs of Christ's body ahead of our own needs and interests, these gifts for the common good are ultimately for our own benefit as well.

Because Paul says here that Christ gives these gifts to his church, while in 1 Corinthians he says the gifts of the Spirit are given to the members of Christ's body, we must see the important connection made by Paul between being "in Christ" and being "indwelt by the Holy Spirit." To be in Christ and to be filled with the Holy Spirit are but two ways of speaking of the same thing. God has made us alive with Christ and sealed us with the Holy Spirit until the day of redemption. To have the one (Christ through faith) is to possess the other (the indwelling Spirit). In this we see what I consider to be one of the biggest weaknesses of the charismatic movement—its stress upon spiritual gifts discussed apart from the person and work of Christ, something Paul refuses to do. Don't forget that John Calvin is often known as the "theologian of the Holy Spirit," since Reformed theology has always emphasized the person and work of the Holy Spirit, because of the Spirit's role in regenerating us, creating faith in us through the preaching of the gospel, and through applying to us the benefits of Christ. But for Paul, to be in Christ is to be indwelt by Christ's Spirit. And it is Christ who dispenses the gifts of the Spirit.

Given Christ's ascension and association with these gifts, we should not be surprised by Paul's introduction of the subject of gifts in verses 8-10 of Ephesians 4. "*Therefore it says, 'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.'* (In saying, 'He ascended,' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)" Whenever Paul says

something like “therefore, it says” we should take him to mean “Scripture says, therefore God says. . .”¹ Paul uses this formula to quote Psalm 68:18 (part of our Old Testament lesson). “*You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the Lord God may dwell there.*” As John Calvin pointed out long ago, the picture in Psalm 68 is one of victory, as a conquering hero leads a victory procession up the hill to the temple mount, with all those captured in battle in his wake. In the Psalm, the ark of the covenant (symbolic of Jesus Christ—the true ark of God) leads the way in the procession, and once in the temple courtyard, a thanksgiving offering for the spoils of war will be made to YHWH who gives his people the victory.² This Psalm was sung by the French Huguenot when thousands of them were being put to death by Spanish and French troops during the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of 1572.

Paul cites this Psalm (although he modifies it) to make the point that when Jesus ascended on high forty days after his resurrection, Jesus bestowed certain gifts upon his church which are necessary for his people to do that which God had ordained—namely strive for unity and maturity. This includes those good works which God ordained that we would do (cf. Ephesians 2:10), as well as those gifts of the Spirit which serve the common good. As for the fact that Christ ascended as the conquering king, Paul has already told us in Ephesians 1:20-21 that God “*raised [Jesus] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named.*” Therefore, Paul’s reference to Christ’s ascension must not only be seen as the fulfillment of Psalm 68, but his ascension to heaven follows his descent to earth.

This descent/ascent pattern is found throughout the New Testament. One notable passage is in John’s Gospel. In John 3:13, Jesus says, “*No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.*” This descent/ascent theme is echoed in John 6:38 when Jesus says, “*For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.*” Later in that same discourse about “living bread,” when the disciples struggle to understand Jesus words, he tells them “*what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?*” From this line of biblical evidence, it is clear that Jesus himself spoke in terms of descending from heaven to earth (in his incarnation), and then ascending back to his Father upon the completion of his great victory over sin, death, and the grave. This is a very good indication that when Paul speaks of the “lower regions” he is speaking of Jesus’ incarnation and descent from heaven to earth, not a descent into a netherworld.

While there is a long history in the church of theologians arguing that the “lower regions” is the abode of the dead (Hades), meaning that Jesus actually descended into hell after his death until the resurrection, so as to liberate those held captive there, the exegetical evidence for this is very weak. One church father (Irenaeus) argues (quite helpfully), that we should see Paul’s comment here in light of his comment in Colossians 2:15. “[Jesus] *disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.*” Those whom Jesus led away captive are symbolic of those defeated demonic forces which had previously deceived the inhabitants of the earth until the coming of Jesus.³

The fact of Christ’s ascent also means that Jesus is now in heaven. Yet as Calvin cautions us, we must

¹ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 341.

² Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians*, 174-175.

³ See the discussion in; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 344.

not think that heaven is a place in the sky where Jesus is “counting stars.” Rather, heaven is that place where Jesus is in the presence of the Father, and where he will remain until he comes again at the end of the age. One’s understanding of Jesus’ present location, where he remains until his bodily return at the end of the age, not only has profound ramifications for understanding of ends times (and how we understand Christ’s kingly rule and millennial reign), but also our understanding of the Lord’s Supper. How can Jesus be present in the Supper, when he is at this moment present bodily in heaven?⁴

The real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper is, of course, another thing accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit, for it is the Holy Spirit who ensures that we, who remain here on earth, actually feed upon Christ’s true body and blood through faith, because Christ’s physical body remains in heaven. As we have pointed out on other occasions, the theological ramifications of Christ’s ascension are huge—impacting how we understand the mission of the church after Christ’s ascension, our expectation of his bodily return from heaven, as well as our view of the sacraments. At the very moment we expect the triumphant end of the story (Christ’s triumphant resurrection), the central character disappears into heaven (the ascension). Until Christ returns, God creates a church (composed of all those justified by the merits of Christ), and calls that church to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. In any case, I don’t think Paul teaches that Jesus descended into hell to liberate those held captive there. Instead we should see this in terms of a passage like Hebrews 4:14. “*Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.*” I take Paul to be talking about Christ’s descent to earth (in his incarnation), followed by his ascent back into heaven.

Having mentioned that Jesus gave gifts to his church after his ascension, in verses 11-12 Paul lists some of the specifics regarding the gifts given the church. “*And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.*” Although many will get nervous when we speak of only certain Christians being given certain gifts—especially those who grew up in churches where someone could play three cords on a guitar was immediately made into a worship leader and sent out to “minister”—the fact of the matter is Paul speaks of Christ’s grace to his church coming in the form of various functions of the pastoral ministry as the means of bringing the saints to maturity—the theme of verses 13-16. In other words, Jesus gives ministers to his church to build up the body of Christ (the saints) so that it functions properly.

At this point, we need to draw a distinction between the priesthood of all believers and the pastoral ministry. While all believers are priests (with direct access to God through the priestly intercession of Christ in and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit) not all believers are ministers who are called to participate in those activities described here by Paul (i.e. through ordination through the laying on of hands). This becomes clear simply by looking at the list of gifts given us by Paul.

First, Paul points out that God gave the apostles and prophets, those men whom Paul has already spoken of as the foundation of the church—“*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.*” Paul also mentions “evangelists” (an office which doesn’t appear in any other catalogue of Paul’s) and in light of Paul’s instruction to his young pastor friend Timothy (“*do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry*”—2 Timothy 4:5), “evangelist” probably refers to one of the functions of those pastors who served the churches established by the apostles. In this case, an evangelist may be a minister whose primary focus was directed toward those outside the church.

⁴ Cf. Douglas Farrow, Ascension and Resurrection (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999), 176.

But the tie that binds apostles, prophets and evangelists, however, is the ministry of the word. This is why the Reformed have always considered preaching by ordained ministers to be the primary means of evangelism. But this emphasis upon evangelism through the preaching of the word should not be construed as an excuse to ignore secondary means of evangelism, such as you talking about Christ and the gospel with your neighbor!

Paul also speaks of more specialized functions of a minister, that of shepherd and teacher. Shepherds care for their flock in a personal way—they provide pastoral care (prayer, visitation, counsel). Teachers on the other hand, appear to refer to those men who were especially called to find Christ in the Old Testament (specifically through fulfilled prophecy), teaching basic Christian doctrine, as well as refute error whenever heretics appear. While the apostolic office is never passed on to others, all of these duties mentioned by Paul (prophecy—which is preaching Christ with a supernatural boldness and insight into the Old Testament, evangelism, shepherding, and teaching) are part of the New Testament’s job description for those ordained as “ministers” or “overseers” (bishops), by the apostles, and who together with the elders, rule Christ’s church.

While most commentators and translations contend that God has given these offices to the church to equip all the members of the church for ministry, I don’t think that is what Paul is saying here.⁵ While there is a strong tendency today to see the church as a sort of egalitarian democracy (we are all ministers with personal ministries), and while there is a strong tendency in churches to see the pastor as having a ministry just like everyone else—only he does it full-time and gets paid for it—I think Paul is making the point that in giving ministers to the church (men who fulfill the specific functions Paul mentions) God is bringing the saints to completion (i.e. maturity).

While the exegetical arguments are quite complicated (and I hold the minority opinion), I don’t think Paul sees the role of ministers as equipping everyone to have a “ministry.” Rather, through the office of pastor (“overseer” “bishop”), God brings his saints to maturity. I think the KJV translation of verse 12, gets this absolutely right—*“For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.”* As I mentioned, this is the point of the following verses.

In Ephesians 2:20-21, Paul had spoken of the role of the apostles and prophets as the foundation of the church with Jesus being the chief cornerstone *“in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”* In verse 13 of chapter four, Paul returns to this theme only this time focusing on the reason why Jesus has given these particular gifts to his church. This building up of Christ’s body will continue *“until 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.”*

Unity of the faith is a reference to the fact that what unites us (especially in those cases where we have different cultural, social and ethnic backgrounds) is our common faith (trust) in the saving work of Jesus Christ. Knowledge of the Son of God refers to the fact that Jesus Christ is the object of our faith. We look to him to save us from our sins. We believe him to be very Son of God, that one who accomplishes salvation for us when we were dead in sin, that one who was raised from the dead, so that through faith in him, we are seen as raised with Christ and seated in heavenly places. It is important to notice that Paul

⁵ See the discussions in Lincoln, [Ephesians](#), 248-255; Bruce, [The Epistle the Ephesians](#), 345-349. I’m with Lincoln on this one.

bases this unity on our confession of a common faith, not on a common experience.

The goal of all of this is that we who are spiritual children, will continue to grow into spiritual adulthood—we are to mature in the faith, just as we do in life. This is not an instantaneous thing, but the goal of our entire life “in Christ.” The standard for which we aim is the fullness of Christ, something for which we strive, but which will not be reached until Jesus comes again at the end of the age. Here again, we see Paul’s doctrine of the already/not yet. We presently possess all the benefits of Christ, but Jesus remains the standard of our conduct. What does God expect of me? Look to Jesus! This is why we presently strive for both unity and maturity, even though these things are not realized in their fullness until the end of the age. This means there is no perfect church, and no end to our striving for both unity and maturity until we die or Christ comes again!

But the immediate pay-off in this struggle for maturity is an important one. As he tells us in verse 14, Paul exhorts us to do this so that “*we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.*” Perfection does not come until the end, but in the meantime we must be prepared for every kind of assault which may come our way, from false doctrine, to all sorts of human scheming and deceitfulness. Paul implies that it is not a matter of *if* this will happen but *when*. Spiritual children cannot deal with these attacks, but mature Christians can. If unity comes from a common confession of faith, and maturity comes through knowing more and more about Christ, then I take Paul to be exhorting us to be knowledgeable Christians, able to respond to the false doctrines which will come our way. And it falls to the ministers given by God to preach, teach, shepherd and evangelize, so that the body grows from childhood to full maturity.

In verses 15-16, Paul says “*Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom 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.*” Instead being tossed about, defenseless, and embracing error, we speak the truth in love. In doing this, Paul says, we grow up into maturity with Christ as head of that body to which we have been added. When those whom God has called to serve his church as ministers are fulfilling the purpose for which Jesus has sent them (preaching, teaching, shepherding and evangelizing), the body of Christ functions as it should. The church grows into maturity, and as it does so, it builds itself up in love.

What then, can we take with us from this passage?

Whenever Paul discusses the unity and maturity of the church, he reminds us that since Christ ascended into heaven, Jesus enables his people to grow to maturity by giving gifts to his church. In Ephesians 4, Paul’s point is that Jesus descended from heaven to earth to accomplish our redemption, and then returned to heaven in his resurrection and ascension. But Jesus has not left us on our own. He has given us gifts of the Spirit, and sent to us ministers of the gospel who are to preach, teach, evangelize and shepherd the saints so that they grow from spiritual infancy to full maturity. Once mature, we are able to resist heresy and error, and we see through the plots and schemes of those who oppose the gospel. There is a reciprocal relationship here. As we mature, the body functions properly. As the body functions properly, we mature. We are held together in unity through our common confession of faith, and through those gifts Christ gave to his church we are properly equipped so that as we mature and remain unified, we also grow in love. Why did Jesus give these gifts to his church when he ascended into heaven? He gave ministers to his church for the building up of his body—those for whom Jesus has died, and those for whom Jesus was raised—until we reach maturity, are working properly, built up in love.