

UNITY, DIVERSITY AND MATURITY

Growing a Healthy Body

Ephesians 4:1-16

Introduction:

→ Illustration – Parents holding a new born baby – as the years go by, watching that baby grow up into a strong healthy child and eventually into an adult. We all know that there are certain things which are necessary for that growth to take place.

In the Word of God, the church is referred to as a body, the body of Christ. In the book of Acts we see the body in its infancy and childhood state. But the goal is to see the church grow into a mature, healthy adult body, functioning in a healthy mature way. The same process is necessary in individual local churches. As they are established they begin as infants. But as growth takes place they begin to develop, to mature, to grow into adult bodies.

This passage in Ephesians 4 is really all about growing a strong healthy body. Just as there are certain elements which are necessary for the growth of a healthy well adjusted child, so there are elements which are necessary for the growth of a healthy, well-adjusted church body. So our focus here is on growing a healthy body.

Explain the title of the message – Unity is the foundation necessary for growth to take place, Diversity of gifts is the means by which God grows a healthy body, and Maturity is the result or goal of growth. Last week we looked briefly at the subject of unity, which is the key to a healthy church, so today we want to focus on the gifts God has given the church and on the result of growth which is maturity.

There are four key points I want to bring to your attention from this passage today. The first is...

The Distribution of Grace vv. 7-10

The thrust of these verses of Scripture is the giving of spiritual gifts. Paul refers to the giving of these gifts to the church as an act of grace – “*But grace was given to each one of us...*” (v. 7)

There are a few critical things we need to note here:

1. The gifts are given by Christ – we refer to these gifts as spiritual gifts, or gifts of the Spirit, and they are given by means of the Holy Spirit, but the giver is Christ.
2. The distribution of these gifts is determined by Christ – “...according to the measure of Christ’s gift...” In other words, as Christ has apportioned it. The ways in which you are gifted and the way in which I am gifted is determined by Him, and the gifts are gifts of grace. That means that one person is not superior to another because of their gifting, because that is determined simply by the grace of God.
3. In this passage spiritual gifts are linked with the descent and ascension of our Lord. Paul makes an interesting reference to a rather obscure OT verse from Psalm 68 in v. 8. He then goes on in vv. 9-10, in a bit of a parenthesis to give us an explanation of what he means. It would appear that Paul’s reference to Psalm 68 has a two-fold purpose. The first purpose is to show that spiritual gifts have their origin in the victory of Christ over the death, the grave, and His enemies. The second purpose is to demonstrate that spiritual gifts are closely related to humility. (*I appreciate Robert Deffinbaugh’s exposition for shedding light on these verses.*)

Quote – “Did Christ give spiritual gifts to His church because of His ascension? Yes, He did. And how, Paul challenges us, did Jesus come to ascend? He ascended only because He first descended. Without His descending His ascension would have been impossible. I believe that this link between ascending and descending is the point of Paul’s words in verses 9 and 10. What Paul is showing us is that even in our Lord’s life and ministry the way ‘up’ was ‘down.’ Christ descended in order to ascend. And he teaches us as he taught His disciples; the way to greatness is through service. If we are to employ spiritual gifts in a way that is consistent with the way our Lord obtained them for us we must humble ourselves as He humbled Himself.”

In Philippians 2:5-11 we see Jesus’ example of humility and his subsequent exaltation by his Heavenly Father.

So, the distribution of gifts to individuals and to the church is a ministry of grace and the gifts are apportioned by Christ himself.

Christ's Gifts to the Church v. 11

So, what are the gifts He gives to the church? The first thing we need to note is that the list here in Ephesians is a very small and distinct group of gifts. In fact, as we look at "spiritual gifts" in the Scriptures we see this list somewhat different from the others in Romans and 1 Corinthians. This passage is not so much about gifts given to individuals, but rather gifts given to the church. The individuals are themselves the gifts, empowered by the grace and Spirit of God to equip the church. So what are they?

- Apostles – a delegate, messenger, one sent forth with orders
- Prophets - one who declares to men what he has received from God
- Evangelists – a bringer of good tidings, herald of salvation
- Pastors – a shepherd, one who cares for the sheep
- Teachers – one who teaches the things of God and duties of man
- (or pastor-teachers) – these last two may be put together.

One expositor suggests that this list of spiritual gifts really encompasses just one category of gift. All of the gifts Paul names here are what we might call "foundational gifts." These are the gifts which are necessary for all other gifts and ministries. The apostles and prophets have laid the foundation for the church and ministry by giving us in the scriptures the teaching and doctrine of our Lord (see Ephesians 2:20). Evangelists proclaim the gospel defined by the apostles and prophets. They are the obstetricians of the faith. And pastor-teachers are the pediatricians. All Christian ministry is dependent upon the operation of these gifts.

I believe that the first two gifts have been fulfilled by the apostles and prophets of the New Testament era. They are no longer needed since the canon of Scripture—God's Word—was completed. The latter gifts—evangelists and pastor-teachers—continue to function in the church today.

The Purpose of the Gifts vv. 12-13

As we look at these verses we see a process that is important to understand if we are to properly understand the purpose of these gifts.

Remember that these are foundational gifts, necessary for the basic functioning of the church. There are three steps to this process, each one building on the previous one.

1. They are given to equip the saints for the work of ministry – to prepare God's people for works of service. God has given leaders to the church—evangelists, pastors, teachers—not to do all of the church ministry, but to prepare and equip the members of the body to serve God and body. When this happens, it leads to the second step...
2. So that the body of Christ may be built up. This is edification, building up one another. The idea is that the body is to be complete, built from the foundation up, perfect and honoring to God.
3. The third step is God's ultimate goal. It is a two-fold goal – unity and maturity. Here Paul speaks of unity as a goal to be reached, yet as we said last week, it is not something we create, it is something which exists, and we must strive to preserve. Our goal is unity in the faith and in the knowledge of Christ – agreement regarding the things we believe and our love for the Lord. The other part of that goal is maturity – "...mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

In light of this goal or purpose, there are a couple of things we need to note. First of all, the emphasis is not about discerning what your gift is, but on finding the place where you can best serve God and the body. Paul does not urge us to discover our gift, but to find a place of service. As we seek to find a place to serve we will also discover the gifts Christ has given us.

The second important note is that the focus of Paul's teaching here is not on the individual, but on the contribution of each individual makes to the body of Christ. If I can quote Robert Deffinbaugh again:

"Spiritual gifts, according to Paul's words in verses 12-16, are given for the edification of the body, and to facilitate the ministry of the church as the body of Christ. Christ indwells the church corporately (2:21-22) and the church corporately ministers on Christ's behalf. The church is the visible manifestation of Christ on the earth. Christ not only dwells in it, it visibly manifests Christ to the world."

So often, when the saints go to church, they go to be ministered to, not to minister. They go in order to be blessed, not in order to be a blessing. They leave, not asking

whether Christ was exalted and whether others were edified, but whether or not they were blessed. Our text tells us that we are given gifts so that we may contribute something to the body of Christ, so that we may fulfill our mission to the church and through it."

Well, there is one more important point to mention from our text...

The Description of a Mature Body vv. 14-16

Paul says that when these gifts are being exercised in their proper place, and the body is being built up then we will see a church which is mature, complete. I would suggest to you three characteristics shown here in this description of a mature body

1. Stability – in our faith and in our practice – picture of a boat being tossed about in a storm. Whatever way the wind is blowing, that is the way it moves. We cannot afford to be like that. We need stability, so that when the winds of false doctrine blow we are not moved by it. "Infants" or "children" – used as a metaphor suggesting one who is childish, unskilled, untaught. (*Mention the gullibility of small children.*) We are to be mature – know what you believe and why you believe it – stability.
2. Security – secure enough in Christ to be able to speak the truth to each other – in love – so that we can prod and encourage each other in our growth in Christ.
3. Support – a loving supportive family – not perfect, but continually growing into a loving supportive family.

Conclusion

Growing a healthy body – The foundation is unity – without unity there can be no body. Unity is founded in what we have in Christ and we are called upon to maintain or preserve that unity.

The means to growing a healthy body is the proper use of the gifts Christ has given to the church.

And the result is a mature body, complete, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Once again, I have two questions to ask as we conclude this message. The first is this: Are you in the body of Christ? I'm not asking if you

are a member of a certain church. I am asking if you have ever put your trust in Jesus Christ as God's only means of salvation. Have you received eternal life by trusting that He died in your place, that He suffered the punishment for your sins, and that He rose from the dead for your eternal justification? If you have been "born again" by personal faith in Jesus Christ then you are a member of His church, the body of Christ.

Having asked this, I must also ask: Are you an active and vital part of the local church? The Bible never conceives of anyone coming to faith in Christ apart from becoming associated with a local church and then finding a place of service to the body of Christ. Every believer should be associated and involved in a local church. Every believer should be seeking to find his or her place of service. Every believer should be seeking not only their own growth and maturity, but that of the church at large as well.

Are you in the body of Christ by faith in Him? Are you actively involved in the body of Christ? Are you serving the body, playing out your role, and thus contribution to the growth of the body and the glory of God? I hope and pray that you are, because that is what our text demands of each one of us as Christians.