



ephesians

a church becoming

Sunday, November 24, 2024

Ephesians 4:7-16

Ephesians 4 is a significant chapter in the entirety of the book of Ephesians because it marks the start of the second half. A half which now shows us how to live and walk in the unity and calling that was established in the first half of the book. This calling is a general calling that as Christians we are to live in unity with one another and to not let our differences divide. We do this - Paul says - by being mindful that there is, 'one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God.' That we are brothers and sisters and as family, we should strive to live as such.

Which raises an honest question: Where do we draw the line? At what point does striving for unity become an acceptance of bad theology or doctrine?

This is a crucial question, and Paul's teachings here help us navigate it. Striving for unity doesn't mean compromising essential truths of the gospel. Instead, it means discerning between primary doctrines that are foundational to the faith and secondary issues where diversity of opinion can exist without breaking fellowship. This is beautifully described through the example of ice cream. The flavour isn't the point, the ice cream is. The flavour does not change the essence of what ice cream is - it remains ice cream regardless of whether it's chocolate, vanilla, or strawberry. Similarly, in the Christian faith, the core essence - the gospel truths that define our identity in Christ - 'one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God' - must remain unchanged. Differences in 'flavour,' such as worship styles, traditions, or non-essential theological interpretations, do not alter the foundation of our faith. So, striving for unity means maintaining the integrity of the 'ice cream' of our shared faith while allowing for diversity in the 'flavours' of expression, as long as they don't compromise the gospel itself.

A great example of this would be the difference between the Reformed view on salvation and the Pentecostal view. The Reformed tradition emphasizes God's sovereignty in salvation, teaching that God, in His grace, chooses who will be saved. In contrast, the Pentecostal tradition emphasizes humanity's responsibility, teaching that individuals must freely choose to respond to God's offer

of salvation. While these perspectives differ in how salvation is understood to occur, they agree on the core truth: salvation comes by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The focus of unity between the two should therefore not be on how salvation is initiated but on the fact that salvation has been received. This shared experience in Christ is the foundation of our unity in the gospel.

Hence Paul's focus on: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God (Ephesians 4:4-6). These are non-negotiables, the core doctrines that define what it means to be part of the body of Christ. Any theology or doctrine that undermines these truths would be a point where unity cannot be maintained, as it would compromise the integrity of the faith.

Ultimately, the line is drawn at anything that distorts or denies the gospel of Jesus Christ. Unity must always be anchored in God's truth, and when striving for it, we should do so with both grace and discernment.

That takes us now to the next section - verses 7-16 - where Paul now shifts from discussing the unity of the body to the diversity of gifts within that unity. While verses 4-6 focus on what unites us as believers, verses 7-16 now explore how Christ has uniquely equipped each member of His body for the purpose of building up the church. If you have your Bibles with you this morning I would invite you to turn with me to Ephesians 4:7-16.

(I'm also going to invite you to stand for the reading of the Word if you are able.)

Ephesians 4:7-16

'But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. 8 Therefore He says:

*"When He ascended on high,
He led captivity captive,
And gave gifts to men."*

9 (Now this, "He ascended"—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)

11 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, 13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to

the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, 15 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head— Christ— 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.'

The first thing we read in verses 7 to 8 is that as Christians, God has given each and every one of us grace. It's not an ambiguous term though. Paul says it is according to the measure of Christ's gift. And then he goes on to qualify that statement by quoting David from Psalm 68 by saying that:

Psalm 68:18a

*'You have ascended on high,
You have led captivity captive;
You have received gifts among men...'*

So, if you're paying attention this might raise a question. Paul says that God gave gifts, and uses Psalm 68 to substantiate that claim, but then as we read it, it doesn't say that God gave gifts but received them instead....

How do we reconcile this?

Now, although this seems to be a glaring discrepancy, I want you to see that it in fact, is not. You see David writes Psalm 68 from the position of a king returning from the battlefield victoriously and compares that with God by saying that God is the victorious King who has ascended His throne after defeating His enemies. In ancient times, a victorious king would often receive gifts from the nations he had conquered, as well as from those he had just freed. This receiving of gifts was a sign of honour and recognition of the king's authority.

But the gift giving didn't stop there. What's not explicitly mentioned but implied here is that a victorious king would also redistribute the spoils of war to his people as a demonstration of generosity and care. He would always give gifts. So, what Paul is doing here is highlighting this aspect, showing how Christ, in His ascension, not only triumphed over sin and death but also graciously gave gifts to His people - the church.

Now, returning to the gift of grace that Paul mentions, we can see that this is not referring to the

grace given for salvation. Rather, this grace is better understood as an enablement bestowed upon us to accept the gifts that Christ has given and to use them for His Kingdom. This enablement is measured according to the generosity of Christ's victory - an immeasurable generosity - equipping each one of us accordingly with unique abilities and roles to serve and build up the body of Christ.

Of which Paul now says that, '...He Himself gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ...'

In some translations, you may notice the words 'to be' or 'as' added (ex: 'gave some to be apostles'), but the original Greek does not include these phrases and translates accordingly as, 'He Himself gave some apostles, some prophets...'. Paul intentionally omits them to focus on the person of the gift rather than the gift of the person. By listing apostles and prophets first, Paul draws the reader's attention to specific individuals Christ gave to the church - people like Paul, Peter, Timothy, or Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Micah. These individuals were not just filling roles; they were gifts, uniquely graced by God to do what He had called them to.

The term 'apostle' is the first one Paul uses, and its first mention in the Bible is found in Luke 6:13, where Jesus identifies certain disciples as apostles. The word itself means 'sent one,' emphasizing their role as individuals specifically sent by Christ with His authority to establish His church. Apostles were entrusted with laying the foundation of the church by faithfully establishing the theological doctrine that the New Testament church would be built upon and would continue to be built upon. Their work, empowered by the Holy Spirit, ensured that the church was grounded in truth and unity, with Christ Himself as the cornerstone

The next gift Paul mentions is the gift of prophets, who historically served as God's messengers, speaking His truth to guide, correct, and encourage His people. In the early church, prophets often worked alongside apostles, offering Spirit-inspired insight and direction to help establish and unify the body of Christ. Whether in the Old Testament or the New, their messages were always grounded in God's redemptive plan and served to build up His people.

The word Evangelist appropriately means 'good-news-bringers.' These are individuals uniquely gifted to share the gospel with those who have never heard it. In Acts 8, Philip the Evangelist, for example, played a pivotal role in the early church, bringing the message of Christ to Samaria and guiding the Ethiopian eunuch to faith. Evangelists speak the same gospel message entrusted to apostles and prophets. They are uniquely wired with what could be described as a 'holy restlessness,' an urgency

to see every people group and every nation hear the good news of Jesus Christ.

Pastors are often referred to as Shepherds in the Bible. Whereas the evangelists love to get people saved, the role of pastor is ultimately to care for and nurture those who are being saved, guiding them toward spiritual maturity and helping them live out their faith in community. The role of a pastor includes teaching, spiritual direction, comforting, and correcting, always seeking to lead the church into closer alignment with Christ's character and mission.

Teachers are those whose sole focus is on teaching the Word. People like seminary professors, bible study leaders and those gifted in explaining Scripture fall into this category. Teachers have a unique ability to make the Word of God clear and accessible, breaking down complex theological truths into practical and understandable lessons. Their role is not just to impart knowledge but to equip believers to live out the truths of Scripture in their daily lives.

Together, pastors and teachers reflect the heart and mind of Christ - pastors shepherd the flock relationally, while teachers instruct and guide the flock intellectually and spiritually. Often, these roles overlap in one person, as a pastor who teaches brings a relational depth to their instruction, establishing trust and fostering a stronger connection between the Word and the lives of those they shepherd. This dual role actually mirrors the ministry of Jesus, who was both the Good Shepherd and the ultimate Teacher.

Now, what I find really interesting is that when we read the Bible, we see the prevalence of the office of Prophet and Apostle but not as much the office of Pastor, Teacher or Evangelist. And if you compare that generation to our context today, it's the complete opposite, where the offices of Apostle and Prophet now seem to have been replaced by the offices of Pastor, Teacher and Evangelist.

Think about it.

In the Old Testament, people didn't have access to God like we do today. They didn't have the Holy Spirit dwelling within them as Christ hadn't sent Him yet and they didn't have the Bible like we do today so prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah were central figures, delivering messages from God to guide, correct, and encourage His people. Then in the New Testament, apostles like Paul, Peter, and John played a foundational role in establishing the early church. The fact that the twelve closest to Jesus were specifically named apostles and commissioned to lay the groundwork for the church underscores just how foundational the office of Apostle was to God's plan at that time. Em-

powered by the Holy Spirit, these apostles spread the gospel, established the church, and laid the theological and doctrinal foundation for what would become the global church.

Now, when talking about the role of apostle and prophet in the Bible, no verse quite sums it up as Ephesians 2:20 which tells us that the church was, 'built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone.' (SHOW ON SCREEN) This verse gives us incredible insight into the unique and foundational roles of prophets and apostles in the establishment of the church. These roles were vital during the early church's formative years, ensuring both doctrinal integrity and the spread of the gospel.

Once this foundation was firmly laid however, we see a shift. The prominence of prophets begins to diminish as the Holy Spirit works directly within the body of Christ, equipping all believers for service. Similarly, the role of apostles - specifically those personally commissioned by Christ - concludes with the early church era. By the end of the New Testament, the focus transitions to roles like pastor, teacher, and evangelist - because the priority is now on building up and equipping the church. Pastors shepherd local congregations, teachers ground them in sound doctrine, and evangelists carry the message of salvation to the world.

Which begs the question - do the offices of Apostle and Prophet still exist today? I would argue, likely not. The foundation of the church has already been laid in alignment with the cornerstone - Jesus Christ. The apostles established the doctrine, and the prophets delivered God's messages to guide His people. Today, we have the words of the apostles and the teachings of the prophets preserved in the Bible, which are the foundation of the church. Pastors, teachers, and evangelists now build on that foundation, continuing the work of equipping the body of Christ for growth and maturity.

However, this does not mean the apostolic and prophetic functions are irrelevant today. In fact, I would argue the opposite. While the formal offices of Apostle and Prophet may no longer exist, the pioneering nature of apostleship and the Spirit-led insight of prophecy are still active within the church. Where these were once specific offices held by a select few, they now operate more broadly within the body of Christ. Pastors, teachers, and evangelists may also embody an apostolic anointing to pioneer new works or a prophetic passion to speak truth into their communities.

Ok so, if you've made it this far, then it's likely that another natural question has arisen: Where do I fit? If I'm not a pastor, teacher or evangelist, what then is my role?

This is where the next part of Paul's message comes in beautifully. Look at verse 12 where Paul says that the purpose of these 5 leadership offices (Apostle, Prophet, Pastor, Teacher and Evangelist) is, 'for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry...' (SHOW ON SCREEN)

This is massive. This means that every single believer is called to participate in the ministry of the church. You may not hold a formal office like pastor, teacher, or evangelist, but remember what Paul said in verse 7, that: 'Grace has been given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.' (SHOW ON SCREEN) This grace equips you to play the role that God has, 'prepared in advance for us.' Whether it's through serving, encouraging, giving, showing mercy, or leading, you have been uniquely gifted to strengthen the body of Christ and reflect His love to the world.

Paul's vision is one of a fully functioning body, where every part works together in harmony, contributing to the growth and maturity of the church. As he writes in Ephesians 4:16: '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.'

Paul loves the imagery of the human body representing the church and it's why he uses the specific term body when referencing the church. We are a body with many different members who have many different gifts that are all to be used together in harmony and unity so that together, we can fulfill the mission of Christ and grow into maturity as His church. Each member of the body plays a unique and indispensable role, and it is only when every part is functioning as intended that the church can thrive and truly reflect the beauty of Christ to the world.

Paul doesn't place the office of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers above the rest of the body though. Instead, he highlights their role as equippers - empowering every believer to step into their God-given calling. The success of the church isn't dependent on a few leaders at the top; it hinges on the active participation of every member. As our church continues to grow, it's essential to recognize that this growth isn't because of me - it's because of we. It's the result of embracing the biblical model of discipleship, where we pour into others, and they in turn pour into others. This creates a beautiful, compounding effect of God's goodness, spreading outward and multiplying through His people.

This is the beauty of God's design for His church:

The one who serves behind the scenes is just as vital as the one who preaches from the pulpit.
The one who offers encouragement and compassion is just as essential as the one who leads us in

song.

The one who prays in secret contributes as much as the one who leads publicly in prayer.

The one who gives out of his lack is just as important as the one who gives out of their abundance.

The one who teaches a small group of children is just as crucial as the one who teaches the adults.

Each act of service, whether seen or unseen, carries equal weight in God's Kingdom because every part of the body is indispensable.

Your role matters deeply.

As Paul reminds us in Ephesians 2:10, 'We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.' (SHOW ON SCREEN) The grace given to you equips you for these good works, whether they are visible to others or known only to God.

So where do you fit? You fit wherever Christ has gifted and called you. You are a gift to His church. He has given you to His church with purpose and intentionality. Whether you're serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, or showing hospitality, your contribution strengthens the church and glorifies God. Remember, the church grows and builds itself up in love only as each part does its work. When you embrace your unique role in the body of Christ inside and outside of these walls, you are fulfilling His plan and helping His Kingdom grow in strength and in unity.

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