

The Spoils of Christ's Victory  
Ephesians 4:1-16  
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At the beginning of Ephesians chapter 4, Paul exhorts us to walk worthy of our calling. We are not to live our lives as those dead in trespasses and sins. We are not to live our lives as those who are aliens from God's people and strangers from God's covenants of promise. We are not to live our lives as those who are without God and without hope in the world. That is not our calling. We are to live our lives as those who are made alive together with Christ. We are to live our lives as those who are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. We are to live our lives as those who are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. This is our calling, and we should walk worthy of it. Of course, there are many ways in which we should walk worthy of our Christian calling. In our passage for today, Paul focuses on one of the most important ways in which we should walk worthy of our calling as Christians. We should live with a unity of love which grows to maturity through a diversity of gifts. Let me repeat that: We should live with a unity of love which grows to maturity through a diversity of gifts. A couple of weeks ago, we looked at the unity in love which we should have as Christians. Today we are going further, and we will look at diversity and maturity. Again, we should live with a unity of love which grows to maturity through a diversity of gifts. We will today look at diversity and maturity under three headings: endowing, equipping and enhancing.

Our first heading is endowing. Christ has endowed the church with spiritual gifts. In the early verses of this chapter, Paul teaches that the people of God have a sevenfold unity in that there is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God and Father of all. After saying this, Paul introduces a new subject with the conjunction "but," a conjunction which indicates a contrast.

Ephesians 4:7

7 But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

With this word "but," the conjunction of contrast, Paul leaves the subject of unity in the church and introduces the contrasting subject of diversity in the church. The diversity is based on the differing spiritual gifts which Christ gives to every Christian. Christ gives every Christian abilities which that Christian can use in ministering to other Christians in the church. Every Christian is gifted for service. Yet not every Christian receives the same gift. There is a great diversity of gifts in the church.

Paul deals with this diversity of gifts in the church in two other passages, Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. In these two chapters, Paul discusses a broad range of spiritual gifts which are sovereignly distributed by the Holy Spirit throughout the church. In Ephesians 4, Paul discusses a more narrow range of gifts, what we might call the equipping gifts. These are the gifts which are necessary to help others in the church to use their gifts in truth and love and righteousness.

Here in Ephesians four, Paul mentions five gifts: apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors and teachers. Let's quickly look at each of these terms.

We will begin with the apostles and prophets. We can define these terms both in a broad sense and in a narrow sense. In a broad sense, an apostle is anyone whom Christ sends on a mission. We are all apostles in that sense. Christ has sent each of us to fulfill a mission of service in the kingdom of God. In a broad sense, a prophet is anyone who proclaims the word of God. A preacher is a prophet in this broader sense of the word. There are apostles and prophets today in this broad sense, but Paul is here using these two terms in their narrow sense. In their narrow sense, there have not been any living apostles and prophets since the age of the apostles which we read about in the New Testament.

In the more restricted sense, an apostle was a witness of the resurrected Christ to whom Jesus gave authenticating gifts of power and to whom Jesus gave the authority to proclaim and expound His teaching as foundational truth for the new covenant church. This apostolic teaching is called the apostolic tradition, and it is inscripturated for us in the pages of the New Testament.

In the more restricted sense, a prophet was a new covenant equivalent of old covenant prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. He was an organ of inspiration whom God used to speak His word orally in the days before the written Scriptures were completed and before the canon was closed.

In Ephesians 2:20, Paul says,

20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone,

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Here Paul says that the apostles and prophets in this restricted sense were the foundation upon which the new covenant church was built. Notice that Paul says that Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone of this foundation. We know that Christ did His foundational work once and for all. Jesus died as a finished sacrifice once and for all approximately two thousand years ago, and He does not return every generation to lay this foundation anew. This is also true of the foundational work of the apostles and the prophets. They did their foundational work once and for all. We have the full apostolic tradition recorded for us in the pages of the New Testament. The faith has been once for all delivered to the saints. You need to be wary of any church which claims to have living apostles who allegedly have authority to bind you with doctrines and commands beyond those recorded for us in the pages of the New Testament.

Now how do we know that Paul is not here talking about a foundation laid by old testament prophets and new testament apostles? It is true that the old testament prophets such as Isaiah and Ezekiel and Zechariah helped lay the foundation for the new covenant church through their prophecies. Yet that is not what Paul is talking about here. In the letter to the Ephesians, the prophets to whom Paul refers are new covenant prophets, not old covenant prophets. Paul again refers to apostles and prophets a few verses later in Ephesians 3:5. There Paul says

that God was then, at the time when Paul was writing this letter to the Ephesians, revealing through His holy apostles and prophets the mystery that in the age of the new covenant, believing Gentiles would be full members of the people of God. This tells us that Paul was talking about new covenant prophets who were still alive and not about old covenant prophets who had died centuries earlier. Again, these new covenant apostles and new covenant prophets revealed the new covenant truth that is the foundation of the new covenant church. That new covenant truth was revealed once and for all and has been inscripturated in the pages of the New Testament. We don't need apostles and prophets in every generation to lay again this foundation of infallibly inspired revelation.

The next gift Paul lists is the evangelist. Two evangelists are mentioned in the pages of the New Testament. They are Philip and Timothy. Philip proclaimed the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch in a desert and there baptized him. Timothy helped Paul on his missionary journeys during which Paul established churches and appointed elders. The church still appoints ministers as evangelists today. They no longer assist living apostles, but they otherwise follow the example of Timothy and Philip. Their calling is to proclaim the gospel in spiritually destitute places where there are yet no organized churches and there to baptize and to appoint elders.

Finally Paul lists pastors and teachers. In the Greek, it is clear that this phrase is referring to one category of people within the church, those who both pastor and teach. This is the job description of the elders of a church. The elders are a church's

pastors, the spiritual shepherds who oversee and care for the flock of God's people. They are also the official teachers of God's people. 1 Timothy 3 lists the ability to teach as a qualification for eldership, but only the teaching elder is called to labor in word and doctrine.

According to today's passage, all these gifted individuals -- the apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers -- are gifts which the risen Christ has given to the church as the spoils of war. Perhaps you have never thought of the elders of the church as plunder, but that is how they are described here. You see, the Bible uses many figures to explain the saving work of Jesus. Sometimes the saving work of Jesus is described as an atoning sacrifice. The sacrificial blood of Jesus covers our sins and puts them out of God's sight. Sometimes the saving work of Jesus is described as a redemption. We were spiritually kidnapped by Satan and made his slaves, and Jesus' death on the cross is the price Jesus paid to redeem us and to obtain our spiritual freedom. And sometimes the saving work of Jesus is described as a military victory. Satan is the evil lord over a dark kingdom in rebellion against God. Satan claims all who have ever sinned as his fellow outlaws and as citizens of his dark kingdom under his authority. When Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, He invaded this dark kingdom and engaged in battle with the evil one. Satan appeared to have won this war when Jesus died on the cruel Roman cross, but on the third day, Jesus rose in victory over death and the grave. Through this resurrection victory, Jesus defeated the devil, delivered the people of God from Satan's dominion, and translated them into the kingdom of God.

Our passage for today pictures the risen Christ as a military Victor in a glorious triumphal procession with His defeated enemies in tow trailing behind His chariot in the chains of captivity. The defeated enemies are Satan, sin, death and the grave. And this victorious Conqueror gives the plunder of war as gifts to His people. These gifts of plunder, these spoils of war, are apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers.

Think, for example, of the apostle Paul. He had previously been Saul the Pharisee who blasphemed Jesus and persecuted the church and tried to destroy it. Saul had been an evil man who did the work of Satan. Jesus rescued Saul from the kingdom of darkness, delivered Saul from his evil ways, and transformed Saul into Paul the apostle. In this sense, Paul was the plunder of spiritual conquest, and Jesus gave Paul to the church as a gift for its enrichment. This is also true of every man whom Christ saves from his sinful ways and then gives to the church as a pastor-teacher.

In explaining spiritual gifts as the distributed spoils of victory, Paul refers to Psalm 68 in verse 8 of our text. This psalm is a poetic celebration of God's victorious march in history which began in the time of Moses when God descended upon Mount Sinai and established Israel as a nation. God's historical march of conquest continued and had a special climax at Mount Zion when David conquered Jerusalem and then brought the ark of the covenant, God's earthly throne, up into the city. As the psalm says, God ascended on high in victory, and Jerusalem, the city located on Mount Zion, became God's dwelling place. Paul takes this old covenant imagery and applies it to the Son of

God's descent to earth in the incarnation and to the resurrected Jesus' ascent to the heavenly Mount Zion. God's march of conquest continues in this age in battles fought with spiritual weapons as Jesus uses His church to disciple the nations of the world.

The Hebrew of Psalm 68 says that God received gifts from men, and the Greek translation of Psalm 68 which Paul quotes says that God gave gifts to men. There is a consistency here because after victory, a king both receives plunder from his enemies and distributes plunder to his own people.

Under the old covenant, God did receive gifts from men. In 2 Samuel 8, we read that David dedicated plunder and tribute which he received to the Lord. David also set aside gold, silver, bronze and iron for Solomon to use in building the temple in Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 22:14). Under the old covenant, God received gifts which He used to build His temple of stone. Under the new covenant, Christ gives gifts to His people as He builds up the new covenant temple made of living stones. We are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, and God is building us on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone, and we are growing into a holy temple in the Lord for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

We have considered our first point, Christ's endowing the church with gifts. We will now go on to our second point, the equipping of the saints.



Verses 11 and 12 of our text says that Christ gave apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers for the equipping of the saints for the work of service for the building up of the body of Christ. The word here translated "equipping" is interesting. This Greek noun is based on a Greek verb which is found several times in the New Testament. This verb can mean to repair or restore. For example, it is used in Matthew 4:21 to refer to mending nets. This word can also mean to prepare, to equip, to complete, to establish, to strengthen. All of these nuances of the word are helpful in understanding the work of the elders in the local church. As the elders teach the Word of God in integrity, as the elders exhort the sheep to follow them as they follow Christ, Christ uses the elders to restore, strengthen and establish God's people as ministering servants. The works of service which the elders equip the saints to do are fulfillments of the law of love which is incumbent upon us all. These are things such as visiting the sick and shut-ins, praying with and for people, inviting people to attend worship, exhorting one another, encouraging one another, assisting one another, and so on. As more and more of the saints do such works of service for one another in the church, the stronger the church as the body of Christ becomes.

God still uses all the gifts mentioned in our passage. God uses the apostles and prophets through the inscripturated apostolic tradition found in the Bible. God uses evangelists to teach and administer this message in spiritually destitute places. God uses pastor-teachers to teach and administer this message in established churches. Through this work, God equips the saints to do the work of ministry for the building up of the church.

We have looked at our first two points, endowing and equipping. Our last point is enhancing. As equipped saints led by gifted leaders do the work of ministry, the church is enhanced. The church grows in unity and maturity, in solidarity and strength.

Paul has now come full circle in his teaching. He has gone from unity to diversity back to unity. Through the exercise of the diversity of gifts, the local church over time is edified, built up and strengthened. Over time, the church comes to a new unity. The people of God are no longer easily blown about by every new teaching that becomes popular in our culture. The people of God become united by a growing commitment to the one true faith that is taught in the Bible and by a growing knowledge of the genuine Jesus who is revealed in Scripture. The people of God thus united learn to work together and to minister to one another. The people of God become increasingly bound to one another with the cords of love.

And as the church develops this spiritual strength and maturity and unity which manifests itself in sincere deeds of love and service, the gospel becomes increasingly credible to a watching world. We tell people that Jesus died on the cross to deliver those who believe in Him from their guilt for their sins and from God's judgment upon their sins and from the dominating power of sin as a way of life, and we exhort them to look to Jesus for this deliverance and to become a part of God's people. This message becomes so much more credible when these people can look at our church and see that Jesus has indeed delivered us from our sinful and selfish ways and has transformed us into a loving, unified body.

Suppose you were a salesman for a company which manufactured ice skates. Suppose also that the company was assigning sales territories to its salesmen. If you were one of the company's salesmen, would you rather that the company assign you Canada or Mexico as your sales territory? You would prefer Canada because there is a greater demand for ice skates there for obvious reasons. In the same way, we are responsible for witnessing for Christ with our words and lives wherever we are. Yet our message has much more credibility when we are part of a church which is living in the power of the gospel. Witnessing for Christ in an area where the church is known for its hypocrisy is like trying to sell ice skates in Mexico. It can be done but it's not easy.

Pray that God will use our church's elders to equip our church for ministry. Pray that we will grow in our love for one another, that we will grow in our ministry to one another and that we will grow in our commitment to the teachings of the New Testament. Pray that God will work powerfully within our midst through His Spirit and His Word. Pray that God will use our church to demonstrate the power of the gospel and thus make the gospel more credible here in Collins. Pray that God will use us to draw people to Jesus Christ.