

Future: Our Ministries Together – Ephesians 4:1-16

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INTRODUCTION

What comes to mind when you hear the words “The Future”? Our thoughts may run from one end of the spectrum to the other. We can look forward to the future with great joy and anticipation. The future has to be better than today or the past, right? As Christians, we can look forward to eternity future when he or she will be with the Lord and all things are made right. It is easier to start there on a day like today when we gather to worship and are stirred to remember what a glorious future awaits those who are in Jesus Christ.

But often we can look at the future with dread. You see our problem is not about eternity but all that might happen in between; we wonder about health, old age, the real possibility of upcoming physical pain or disability – we worry about maintaining a job – and we worry about our loving relationships going cold and our being abandoned – and a multitude of possibilities real or imagined. “What will become of me in this life?” If this is where you are right now, be encouraged today; the Lord of eternity is the Lord of tomorrow and tomorrow’s tomorrow.

But the temptation to be anxious over the future is ever at our door. And such anxiety can even creep into our life together as a community of God’s people. Change occurs in all churches including here at the Chapel. People come and go which naturally raises questions of where we as a church might be going.

So as is our practice, we turn to the Scriptures for help. What might they say about the future of the Chapel? There are many passages in which to turn but for this morning we will go to a familiar text; Ephesians 4:1-16. Please turn with me there.

As chapter four begins, Paul transitions, as he typically does in his letters with the application and imperatives which align with the glorious truths he has just presented; our having received every spiritual blessing in Christ, His resurrection power which operates in us, His having raised us from death to life by His glorious grace, and His creation of a new man which causes Jew and Gentile to come together. It is the answer to the “so what?” question the reader might ask after reading chapters 1-3. {However, if you have to ask that question, you might want to reread!} So Paul moves to duty from doctrine and in our text today, he will address unity in the church.

UNITY IN THE CHURCH (4:1-6)

Its Necessary Walk (4:1-3)

4 *I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

Ever the prisoner of Christ, Paul urges us to adopt the same conclusion – consider yourself to have no other choice but to order your behavior in the way the Lord commands – be constrained and compelled

to walk like Him and in a manner fitting sons of the risen and conquering King. Because of the Father's saving grace shown in His Son, we are sons of God. Therefore, let's live like it. Oh, how much we are missing this in our day-to-day lives! Perhaps it is only because we see God's calling as a helpful suggestion rather than a divine summons.

Paul then describes the qualities of such a walk in verses 2 and 3 – and note they are heart attitudes conducive to unity among us - first it is to be with humility, placing others around us in higher importance than ourselves and most especially keeping in mind how great God is and who we really are. The second attribute and a close cousin of humility is gentleness or meekness. To be gentle or meek is not to be weak but rather to be stronger than what the world calls strong – that is to behave in a way that places strength under control; self-controlled, forgiving, not retaliating when offended...that is real strength. It is Christ-like.

Paul then follows with patience – a characteristic we often lack and greatly desire – one we impatiently want to obtain! Patience or suffering long with one another is in view here. Suffering long with other people proceeds from our knowing our sovereign God is in control and He alone changes hearts and reminds us they and we are both in process. It is trusting God with correction and change. And when we exercise patience, we bear with another, which is more than just putting up with one another. Rather we move towards them and not away with loving words, deeds, and even non-deeds – in other words, we bear with one another with love.

Verse three says we are to be eager to maintain unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace with one another. This means we rush into the breach caused in our relationships by sin and offense (and even perceived sin and offense!) to maintain unity with one another. We are often to overlook some things in one another and respond with love, seeking peace instead. *Do you have trouble doing so?* Now there are some issues which need to be confronted (and may we understand the difference). Maintaining peace does not ignore the truth. Strive for peace but know that often the first job of a peacemaker is to stir the problem into the open so it can be resolved and true unity of the Spirit and peace is restored.

As we consider verses 1-3, recognize that lives characterized by these things are not an individual activity but rather a community one. For example, it is difficult to bear with one another when you are not around one another. You might be 100% successful if by yourself – perfectly bearing one another because no one else is there. Besides, I did not lose my patience with my brother! Oh, how easy the Christian life would be if there were no people around! No, Paul is speaking of expressing a worthy walk in the midst of one another in the church. So our future together involves culturing these unifying characteristics personally and as a people together. *How is your walk today?*

Its Foundational Reality (4:4-6)

Verses 4-6 go on to give the foundational truth concerning unity among God's people. Paul explains such unity as it pertains to each person of the Trinity. There is one Holy Spirit of God which indwells each of His people and holds the church together. There is also one Son of God in whom we have one hope (there are not multiple hopes in this life but Jesus), One Savior and Lord (not multiple), one faith and not multiple versions of the truth, and one shared baptism in His Name into His Body. There is also one God the Father whose is everywhere; over all, through all, and in all (that about covers all possibilities!)

Such constant and unchanging unity among the Trinity is convicting as we look into the future. *Is unity in the Body important to you?*

GROWTH IN THE CHURCH (4:7-16)

In verses 7-16, we see what Christ is doing and looking to produce in His church over time:

⁷ But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸ Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men."^[a]

⁹ (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth?^[b] ¹⁰ He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) ¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds^[c] and teachers,^[d] ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood,^[e] to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ 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.

Its Enabling Grace (4:7-10)

So Christ gives grace to every one of His people as they minister within the church. He does so by pouring out a diversity of gifts among His unified people.

Such an outpouring of gifts by Christ is supported by Paul's New Covenant explanation of Psalm 68 in verses 8-10. Psalm 68 is one of victory. God is victorious over His enemies for the good of His people – no different than His victory being proclaimed throughout this letter. When a king won a victory he took the spoil and received tribute from the other nation or nations. Here Paul points to the victory gained by Christ at the cross. And although He takes the spoil of victory which is His people, "the captives", He also gives gifts to them.

Paul shows that it was Christ who descended to the earth to complete His redemptive work on our behalf – of which ultimately took him to the deepest extent of His descent, the grave. Upon His resurrection, He ascended once again – ascending far above all things. There He would then fill all things by giving His people gifts and the Holy Spirit enabled power to use them for service in His church.

Its Equipping Process (4:11-12)

Now this passage is one of several places in the New Testament which mentions spiritual gifts given to the church. It is not as comprehensive as the others though since Paul only covers the preaching and teaching gifts.

In verse eleven, he points out that Christ has given the church the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers. The apostles and prophets were given for a time which was for the early formation of the church in the first century. They served a purpose for a time but are no longer on the scene.

But evangelists and shepherd / teachers have continually been given by Christ to His bride the church through the centuries. They are gifted people who can preach and teach. He raises them up in every church. Evangelists are those gifted in proclaiming the gospel to lost people. We have them among us at the Chapel. They are the ones with “beautiful feet” (Rom 10:15). They are single minded in gospel sharing and can work the gospel into just about any setting or conversation at any time. They encourage us by their articulation of the gospel here at church or in their day-to-day lives. And many of us can stand up right now and share a story about how someone God used to give us the gospel when we were lost. We ought to thank God for them.

Shepherds and teachers are continually given to the church as well. This refers to one ministry role with two functions; one is to pastor or shepherd or nurture God’s people, the flock, while the other is to teach or feed them. Both functions are done by and through the Word of God. Now elder is another name for pastor and this is the role elders are given here at the church. All play a pastoral role and are responsible for teaching as well. Now it is important to point out that for teaching gifts or any other spiritual gift, this is not referring to a specific office in the church – rather some hold an office and some do not.

Now verse twelve bring us to the primary purpose for teaching – the equipping of the saints. The giftedness provided in verse 11 by Christ gives the saints everything they need to accomplish the full body of ministry God calls His people to do in a local body; teaching, evangelizing, helps, prayer, wisdom, music, mercy, etc. Each of us has been given a gift in this local body to use in service to the King. Many of you are already using your gifts – if you are not, figure out what it is by trying some things or asking others around you what it is. Each of us has a ministry we have been gifted for and are being taught to use biblically.

The primary role of the elders is to preach and to teach - to equip us for the work of ministry. This is what the elders here strive to do. Our elder given primary responsibility for preaching, Pastor Russ, sets the framework and carries out much of the preaching. The goal is to systematically teach through the entire Scripture to train our minds and speak to our hearts with an eye to application for ministry and spiritual growth.

And as a way to connect the teaching with its application to organized ministries, the elders have developed Ministry Organizing Documents or MODS. A MOD summarizes the teaching of the church as it applies to each ministry. They are not policies and procedures but rather a framework within which ministries can operate and flourish. They include mission, vision, and purpose statements based on the Scriptures and also include guidance on ministry structure.

The elders together developed and reviewed the original MODS for each ministry. The MODS are reviewed on a regular schedule to ensure they are current and if needed, adjustments are made which are usually minor. Occasionally there is a need to develop a new MOD and the process is by design rather slow in order to ensure accuracy and consistency within the overall set of MODS. But the overall mission, vision, and purpose do not fundamentally change since they are based on the Scriptures.

People may come and go at the Chapel over time but the MODS remain and thereby give continuity to ministries. MODS are a way of planning for the future to ensure ministries are carried out according to the Scriptures. If you have not already, ask your elder or ministry leader to review the MOD for the ministry or ministries in which you are involved.

Its Maturing Objective (4:13-16)

Now there is an objective in this core activity of the church of teaching to equip the saints for ministry. It is to attain maturity in our Christian life and this is characterized in several ways:

Unity (4:13)

The first is simply unity. Unity of what you might ask? Well, the unity of the faith first. We all come to the church as new believers or as believers with varying backgrounds in having been taught. If left alone, you can see how division would easily occur. Over time though this equipping ministry places everyone on the same track with respect to the faith or the Word of God – it accurately puts everyone on the same page so that we can move out together doing the works of ministry. Remember from verse five, there is only one faith - one truth about Jesus Christ.

The second form is a unified, singular knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. This begins with knowing everything we can about Jesus from what the Scripture says. But it also speaks of the knowledge we acquire concerning our experience of Him. Let me explain. As we move out in obedience to Christ, (ministry included), we get to know Him. The Spirit of God confirms our obedience. And we also suffer in our obedience which aligns us further with our suffering Savior. Passages such as Phil. 3:10, *“that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead”* become practical and every day experiences rather than lofty expressions only concerning our relationship with Christ. And this will occur as we obey Him in all things – even the hard and seemingly impossible things of life and ministry. However, many of us are caught somewhere in between and therefore our experiential knowledge of Christ is limited. Some are there and we can learn much by their example.

So arriving at a unified understanding of the Word of God and of the knowledge of Christ, brings us to spiritual maturity (not physical). You might ask, “well, what is the standard?” The standard is the person of Jesus Christ. We are to be like Him in every way.

Stability (4:14)

Verse 14 gives us the second objective. It is to achieve stability when maturing in Christian truth. It is obvious that we must acquire at least a basic body of knowledge of Scriptures to function biblically. There are so many twisted versions of Christian doctrine and biblical understanding – some are obvious but many are subtle and can be so pleasing to the ear – they build momentum in the universal church and can easily sweep us up if we are not careful. Mature Christians know the Word of God and how to apply it. They can sniff out error. And like a good airline pilot can fly above or around the doctrinal turbulence. However, we must watch that such teaching does not propagate or even originate among ourselves. Remember the church has an enemy who is always seeking to tear it apart.

A Truthful and Loving Quality (4:15-16)

Such a maturity is also characterized by a people who speak the truth in love. We “truth” one another in love - candid words informed and shaped accurately by the Word of God and spoken in a worthy and timely love to one another. These words and action are then received by others who have the same understanding of the faith and of the Christ and who see their intent. Now what kind of truth might this be speaking of? Well, it is truth concerning the Scriptures and the Christ. And it is this truth applied to our situations, relationships, and our interactions. Where the Scriptures speak directly to, we apply. If not, then biblical and Spirit given wisdom rule the day.

This speaking the truth in love is all done in the course of exercising our gifts in the work of ministry, all under the headship of Christ, joined by Him, and when working properly, the whole body grows.

I grew up in northern Wisconsin. My father was a forester and he loved what he did, which was to manage thousands of acres of forestland on behalf of the company for which he worked. My dad loved to take us out (and anyone else who would go) and show us what he was working on. Standing in the midst of what seemed an endless stand of trees that all looked the same to me, he would explain what was going on in there. There were the variety of species with their different leaf types, bark, and overall size and shape. Each tree was in different stages of life; old and young, healthy and sick. Each was playing a part in the formation of that given forest stand and each relied upon a common source of rain and groundwater and each reached for the sun. From a distance, it simply looked like a green mass. But inside, each tree contributed to the overall forest, playing its unique role in that stand. All peacefully grew together and on a sunny day, the stand was beautiful

So it is with the church. From a distance, the church looks like a multitude of people. But taking a closer look inside, you can see the church has a variety of parts with each playing its Christ given role. Each person has different giftedness, experiences, time in the faith, etc but held to others by one Spirit, by one faith, and by one Savior. Each is growing individually but more importantly together. And this body grows by exercising its gifts and by doing so it cannot help but exude a love between its members that beckons an unbelieving world.

REFLECT AND RESPOND

This text gives us a view into the future of our church community. And this is what this church is committed to doing by God’s grace; faithfully preaching and teaching the Word of God to equip its members, the saints, for the work of ministry. And we are all called to do the work of ministry whether formal or informal in a way that is worthy of what God has done for us in Christ, and thereby grow in unity, knowledge, maturity, and in love together. It is hard work. But this has always been God’s plan and remains the same for all generations until the Lord returns.

I hope you are not disappointed – left to think there should be more. Because what more could there be than knowing Christ and His Word, becoming more like Him, and serving Him together in a unified way?

Now granted the Bible does not give us the particulars concerning the future. For that we are to work out in applying wisdom and watching carefully for God’s providence. For example, there have been questions around Chapel expansion – do we expand on campus, find another campus in the area, and / or plant a church. We have explored the options yet God has not yet granted a clear path. So we wait and watch and do what we can to be ready in anticipation of such a door opening.

God also gives us seasons of transition – people come and go as God provides and takes away. We recently have had several families be transferred in their jobs to other locations in the US. This is hard to watch for they are dear to us. And some of these relocations have affected the elders here – elders whom God used to bless us through their shepherding and teaching ministries over the years and for whom we can be thankful. Yet God has raised new shepherds and teachers in the past and will continue to do so as we are faithful to what God commands for His church.

So God moves people in and out of this body periodically but always provides going forward. We have enjoyed and been edified by the ministries of others who have since moved on. God used them to edify and grow us. But let us look forward rather than stuck looking back longing for the past. Let us realize it is our turn to imitate them and apply the same things into the lives of others. *Is the Lord calling you to step forward in ministry; better using your gifts and stepping outside your comfort zone?* Perhaps you need to be less of a ministry recipient and more of a ministry giver.

And perhaps you desire more ministries. If so, make it happen. If you are not sure how to do it, talk to your elder but *be ready to roll up your sleeves and do the work.*

There is no need to be anxious about the future. Despite changes in people through the years, we rely on the Word and the Spirit to do ministry and to grow and to carry us into the future. And with wisdom, we make provision to leave behind resources like MODS for the next generation and beyond. So by the Word and the Spirit's enabling power, let us work hard to culture among ourselves the characteristics of a worthy walk and in doing the work of ministry. And in doing so, may we mature and grow up together in Christ, unified, stable, and speaking the truth in love as time moves forward. This is God's will for His people and His church until the Lord returns.