

# WALKING WORTHY OF CHRIST AS A CHURCH

## EPHESIANS 4:1-16 (A 3-PART SERIES)

EPHESIANS 4:7-11

### GIFTS FROM CHRIST FOR MINISTRY

In Judges 7 we read of God's victory over the Midianites through the three hundred men of Gideon. All Gideon's army had to do was blow trumpets, smash jars, and shout "For the sword of the Lord and for Gideon!" It was the Lord who won that victory, for the Scripture says, "The Lord set every man's sword against his comrade and against all the army." God sent the army of Midian into such a panic that brothers in arms began to turn on one another and slay each other with the sword. I suppose every army has sadly lost soldiers to friendly fire, but this was fratricide on a grand scale, such that Midian was made to defeat itself. Now this internal division was God's design to defeat Midian. This confusion, division, and brother killing brother was not a sign of God's favor, but an act of judgment on that army. Like Sodom and Gomorrah, the Midianites would be held up as a sign of what becomes of those who are not reconciled to God through the promised Savior. In Ephesians six, Paul speaks of Christians as soldiers, arrayed in God's armor, fighting spiritual darkness. Now, as the host of the Lord, we are to fight side by side against the enemy—the spirit now at work in the sons of disobedience. Our unified advance against evil is a sign of God's grace and power at work in us. So what message does the church send when brothers put brothers in their crosshairs? What is communicated about God and His people when sisters in Christ bite and devour each other or scratch each other's eyes out? This looks more like God's judgment than God's gracious blessing! Now of course, we don't literally shoot, bite and scratch each other. Well . . . we don't *usually* do those things. But we do find gossip that strikes a blow deeper than a broadsword. We sometimes see harsh words spoken in anger. We see wounded pride and stubborn grudges driving wedges between brothers and sisters in Christ. As James says of the terrible venom of the tongue used to poison one made in the image of God, "My brethren, these things ought not to be so!" (James 3.10). In fact, the unity of the Church is so important that Christ has purchased gifts through His suffering to preserve and promote that unity. As our victorious King, Christ gives the Church gifts to promote our visible unity and maturity.

Why is the unity of the Church so important to Christ? Well among other reasons, Paul tells us in verses four through six that our unity is grounded in and to be reflective of theological realities. In other words, our unity is to express truth about the divine nature. Most of our creedal formulations are Trinitarian. That is, they are organized around the Persons and Works of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. And they are usually in that order in our creeds. Here, Paul has a Trinitarian structure, but it moves from the Spirit, to the Son, to the Father. And with each person of the Trinity are associated works peculiarly associated with that person. The Spirit is linked particularly with the unity of the body. Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians that it is the Spirit who places each member in the body according to His will and wisdom. So the "one body" is peculiarly the work of the Spirit. The Spirit is also associated with the "one hope of your call." The hope is Jesus, but the call is the Spirit's work. **The call Paul refers to is the inward call of the Holy Spirit that is irresistible or effectual. Men have rejected the outward call of the gospel from the lips of preachers. Moses' words, for example, often fell on deaf ears. Elijah cried out for covenant loyalty to the God of Israel, and found only a remnant of seven thousand who had not**

bowed the knee to Baal. Our Blessed Lord, Himself, held out His hands to Jerusalem and lamented, "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" Jesus said, "Let all who are thirsty come to Me." But many would not. They rejected the outward call of the gospel. But the inward call of the Spirit is irresistible. It does not depend on man's will, for it penetrates deeply to the very affections that determine the will, and transforms them. It is that work of taking the heart of stone from us, and giving us a heart of flesh. This is why Paul could say in Romans 8.30, "and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified." This would not be true of the outward call of the gospel from the lips of preachers. But it is true of the inward call of the Spirit that tunes the heart to hear the gospel as the word of life.

After the Spirit's work, Paul praises the one Lord. Here, Paul intends the Lord Jesus. The Greek word that Paul uses for "Lord" is the word used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures to translate the Divine name "Yahweh" or "Jehovah." In fact, Paul often applies Old Testament texts that refer to Yahweh to the life and work of Jesus, indicating that Jesus is God in the flesh. Related to the Person of Jesus Christ are "one faith, one baptism." "Faith" is not the subjective act of believing, but the objective content of the Christian faith which, of course, centers on the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Baptism is the sign and seal of the New Covenant which expresses our union with Christ.

After the Spirit and the Lord, Paul climaxes with "one God and Father of all." The "all" here refers to "all believers." The context is expressly concerned with the relationship of all believers to each other, so he is emphasizing that we Christians all relate to God as Father. He is over all of us in authority. He is at work through all of us to accomplish His will on earth and in heavenly places. He is in all of us, dwelling in us as a holy temple, and He is at work in all of us to make us more like Christ.

Paul would also assume that we understand that these three, Father and Son and Spirit, are not three different gods, as in polytheism, but three distinct Persons, who are the One God, whom we call the Trinity. The very nature of God, unity of being in plurality of Persons, is a ground for our unity as the people of God.

Our relationship to this One God in three Persons in the one body by the Spirit, signified by our one baptism in the Lord, and under one Father, is the ground of our spiritual unity and communion, and the great motive to guard the visible unity of the church. The Church rightly divides from those with whom she does not share one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father. Paul is not urging a meaningless "unity" concerned only to go along to get along. He is saying that for those who share this unity of the Spirit, outward division is a scandal. This is a key reason why the unity of the Church is so important to Christ that He would give gifts to the Church for the preservation of the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We will see that Christ purchased these gifts for us in His humiliation (4:7-9) and proffered these gifts to us in His exaltation (4:10-11). As we study the gifts mentioned explicitly in the text we discover that it is the ministry of the Word of God which holds us together in unity (4:7, 11).

**Christ purchased gifts for us in His humiliation (4:7-9).** When we think of purchasing something we usually have a monetary exchange in mind. But think instead of the time and effort that went in to earning the money that was used to purchase the gift. Think of the sacrifice made to make the purchase. O. Henry told the story of Jim and Della, a poor young married couple, who struggled to buy each other Christmas gifts that would express their love and appreciation for each other. Della had beautiful hair, for which Jim wanted her to have an expensive and complementary comb set. Jim had a fine pocket watch that he'd inherited from his father and grandfather, for which Della wanted him to have a matching platinum chain. So, unbeknownst to the other, Jim sold his watch to buy Della the combs, while Della had her beautiful hair cut and sold to a wig maker. When they presented their

gifts to each other, they both had gifts that were now useless to them, but that represented the sacrifice each was willing to make for the happiness of the other. Now, of course, Christ's gifts to the Church are hardly useless; but even more than this couple, Christ demonstrated His great love for His spouse by the depths of humiliation to which He descended in order to procure these gifts.

Now Paul speaks first, in verse eight, of Christ giving these gifts upon His ascension, one of the steps of His exaltation. But he immediately points to the purchase of these gifts in His descent and humiliation. Verse nine says "In saying, 'He ascended,' what does it mean but that He had also descended into the lower parts, the earth." This descent refers to the humiliation of the Son of God who left His glory and assumed an inglorious human nature, subject to all the miseries of the fallen race of Adam, except without sin. In this state of humiliation Christ was dependent on His mother, He became hungry and thirsty. He grew tired and weary. He felt deep emotional anguish, to the point of sweating drops of blood at the thought of His sin-bearing work on the cross. In this state of humiliation Christ was crucified and subject to the power of death for three days. His enemies mocked Him. His friends abandoned Him. His own brothers disbelieved Him. Judas betrayed Him. Peter denied that he even knew Jesus three times in one night, and that while Christ was being unjustly tried, falsely accused, and brutally beaten. He came unto His own once again, and His own received Him not. "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth. By oppression and judgment He was taken away; and as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of My people? And they made His grave with the wicked and with a rich man in His death, although He had done no violence, and there was no deceit in His mouth. Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush Him; He has put Him to grief;" (Isaiah 53:3–10). This was the humiliation of Christ. And it was this humiliation—this suffering and shame and death—that purchased our salvation and all the benefits we read of in chapter one and all of the gifts we read of here in chapter four.

Now, when we gather that this purchase is mentioned in the context of the unity of the Church, we begin to see just how important the unity of the Church is to Christ. The sacrifice of Christ's life for our salvation and for our enjoyment of His inheritance—all of His gifts—was part of His priestly work. Another aspect of the priestly work of Christ is intercessory prayer. In John 17 we read of Jesus' High Priestly prayer for us just before going to the cross: "And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, which You have given Me, that they may be one, even as We are one. . . . I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me. The glory that You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one even as We are one, I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as you loved Me." (John 17:11, 20–23). So, His entire priestly work is not only for our individual salvation, but also for our unity as His body, His people, His bride.

How important is the visible, practical unity of the Church to you? In His humiliation Christ purchased gifts for the unity of the Church.

**Secondly, Christ proffered gifts to us in His exaltation (4:10-11).** After an allusion to Christ's self-humbling descent in verse nine, Paul returns to the exaltation of Christ in verse ten, where He speaks of Christ's gift-giving: "He who descended is the One who also ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things." Christ's humiliation and exaltation is the fulfillment of Psalm 68, which Paul quoted in verse eight: "When He ascended on high He led a host of captives, and gave gifts to men." This Psalm celebrates God as the warrior-king who conquers all of His and all of His people's enemies; it looks back to God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt, bringing them to Mt. Sinai; but Paul shows us that it also looks forward to an even greater act of redemption, the great exodus of God's people from the dominion of sin and Satan by the incarnate God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Imagine a victorious king returning to his city with all the spoils of war and then, rather than storing them in his treasuries, he disperses them among the populous. That is how both David in the Psalms and Paul in this letter conceives of the work of Christ—conquering sin and Satan and death, triumphing over all earthly and heavenly powers—and giving the reward of His victory to His people.

The first step of Christ's exaltation was His resurrection. Then, as Paul says here, He ascended far above all the heavens. We call this His ascension. After Jesus rose from the grave He spent forty days instructing His disciples about His kingdom. Then, right before their very eyes, Christ ascended to heaven in a cloud. Now He is seated at God's right hand, as Paul had said in chapter one verse twenty. Then, as the exalted Christ, who possessed the Spirit of God without measure, He poured that same Holy Spirit out on His people. In Acts 2 we read of this outpouring of the Spirit on the Jews. Later in Acts we read of the Spirit being given to the Samaritans, when they believed, and then to the Gentiles in Cornelius' household when they were grafted into this olive tree by faith. Paul tells us that we all receive this One Spirit since we are the one body of Christ. And it is through this gift of the Spirit that all the gifts of Christ flow to us and are exercised among us.

God the Father had promised in Isaiah 53 that after Jesus had suffered utter humiliation in a shameful death as the object of God's judgment in our place He would "see His offspring, He shall prolong His days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in His hand. Out of the anguish of His soul He shall see and be satisfied; by His knowledge shall the Righteous One, My Servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and He shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the many, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong" (Isa 53:10-12). And Jesus does divide the spoil of His victory with us! He gives us gifts out of the treasures gained from His victory. And these gifts are for the unity and the maturity and purity of the Church. In Romans and 1 Corinthians Paul mentions many gifts that Christ has given by the Spirit to the church for the edification of the Church. In this passage Paul focuses in on certain gifts that are related particularly to God's revelation of Himself and His will—gifts related to the Word of God.

**Christ's gifts to us are gracious "Word gifts" (4:7, 11).** In verse seven Paul indicates that every believer has been given gifts for the building of the church. But in verse eleven he focuses on certain ministers who are given as gifts to the church. Each of these—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastor-teachers—have one thing in common, namely, their gifts and ministries are related to the proclamation of the Word of God. Just as the Lord came down to Egypt to lead the people to Sinai and ascended Mt. Sinai and sent Moses with the Law of God written by the finger of God on stone tablets, so Jesus, having ascended far above the heavens, sent ministers to us with God's revelation, God's truth, God's word. This message from the ascended Christ was laid as the foundation of the Church by the apostles and prophets in the earliest years of the church. This is why Paul says in Ephesians 2:20 that the church is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets." They were not foundational because of their personal merit or moral influence. They were foundational because they received direct revelation from God which they imparted to the Church under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The evangelists and pastor-teachers are not foundational. These ministers do not receive direct revelation from God by the inspiration of the

Holy Spirit. These servants of God's people are gifted to expound the teaching of the apostles for the building up of the church on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

In 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, Paul challenges preachers and people of influence who would try to undermine apostolic teaching. He sounds an important warning for those ministers who would build on the foundation laid by the apostles and forbids any to try to lay another foundation: "According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple" (1 Corinthians 3:10–17). So, no minister should dare to add to or take away from the Scriptures, which, as Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:16, are "God-breathed."

So, one of the gifts of Christ to His Church, purchased in His humiliation and proffered in His exaltation, is the foundational teaching of the Apostles and Prophets. Since the apostles are dead, and we infer from Scripture that charismatic prophecy belongs to the foundational era of the New Covenant, do we today benefit from these gifts, and how? Thankfully, we have the writings of the apostles, writings written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Now, letters and books may not seem like a great substitute for the actual presence of the apostles, but perhaps we have it better than we think. Sure we can't call Peter up and ask him to resolve a theological question for us. But what we do have from Peter is definitive. It is written down, not subject to the miscommunication that often happens in oral communication. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are an objective source of truth that can be carefully studied from generation to generation. And the Bible is not written in technical philosophical jargon. Calvin put it like this, that in the Scriptures God lisps to us as a parent talking to a little baby.

This doesn't mean that all of the Scriptures are equally clear. There are some things that are hard to understand. Even Peter found some of Paul's letters intellectually challenging, and warned that some people were distorting Paul's words to teach falsehoods. But God's will and His way of salvation are not hard to understand. It is impossible to *believe* apart from a new birth. But His law and His gospel are plain. And yet, there is great misunderstanding of God's Word, not because of any deficiency in the Bible, but because of our moral and intellectual deficiencies that make us, like the early disciples, "slow to understand" all that Moses and the prophets wrote. Even among Christians there is often great difficulty in understanding the Scriptures. The good news is that God did not intend for the Christian life to be just "me and my Bible." That *is* how many people paint the picture. We live in a very individualistic society. We can hardly conceive of salvation and the Christian life in anything other than "I come to the garden alone." But Paul is telling us that we don't come alone; we come as fellow-citizens with the saints; we come as members of the household of God; we come as various parts of one body. Our Christian life is designed by God to be lived in community—a community where love is mutually expressed and where we are interdependent. I need you and the gifts that God has given you to help me grow and persevere. And you need each other. We are not each other's saviors, but we are instruments used by the Savior to build each other up. Just peak down at verse sixteen, which we will look at next week, where Paul says, "when each part is working properly, [it] makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love." One of those "parts" or "gifts" given for the building up of the body is the "pastor-teacher." Pastors are not apostles or prophets, despite what some are claiming for themselves today. Rather, they have the blessed task of expounding on the teaching of the apostles. It's not just "me and the Bible." It's me and the Bible and God-given, gifted pastor-teachers, who are equipped by the Spirit of God to help me understand and apply the Bible. Of course teacher and student would be helpless

without the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit, to illuminate our understanding to know the truth, but this is not a mystical experience without objective criteria. The Spirit works with the Word, the Bible, and through teachers.

My work as a pastor is not to come up with new revelations from God to guide your lives and build this church. My calling is to proclaim and explain and apply the Word of God written in the Old and New Testaments. This is not the time to expound on my philosophy of preaching and pastoral ministry, but this text among others has shaped my understanding on my task. I do not believe that it is my job to mystically divine what topics you need to hear each Sunday. God has already spoken definitively in His Word. He has revealed what is important to Him and what is necessary for life and godliness. So, I want to expound on what He has said, and I want to do so in the orderly manner in which He has spoken. That is why you usually do not have to guess where I will be from Sunday to Sunday. I will usually pick up right where I left off the previous week. Now please don't misunderstand what I'm saying. I don't mean to imply that the pastor should not know his people well and speak to them with knowledge of them. Of course, a shepherd must know his sheep. Jesus, the Chief-Shepherd, exemplifies that for us. Nevertheless, I would still maintain that it is a dangerous game to build a preaching and teaching ministry on a psychoanalysis of the church. Paul said I can build on the foundation of Christ with gold, silver, and precious stones or with wood, hay, and straw; but it will be tried by fire. David said, "The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times" (Psalm 12:6). I think I'll build with God's written word the Bible, since it has already stood the smelting heat of the furnace.

So, how can we take advantage of the Word-gifts that God has given to the Church?

- Sitting under the preaching of the Word of God
- Studying the Bible in a small group
- Daily Bible intake (reading, meditating, memorizing)
- Reading the writings of highly gifted teachers of the past and present
- Why do I read commentaries? I've had friends boast that they prepare their messages without consulting any commentaries. I believe this is arrogant and impoverishing, since God gave pastor-teachers to the Church for our edification. We ignore their ministries to our detriment.

How do these gifts serve the unity of the Church?

- Our direction for life and worship is not about what you think or what I think, but about what God has said.
- Hebrews 4:12 "For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." The Bible is not a self-help book. It doesn't just give principles for living that if applied will make you well-adjusted. By His Word God brought the world into existence and by His Word He formed it and filled it into a beautiful and functional cosmos. By His Word He is making a new creation, beginning with the rebirth and renewal of our souls. In short, God's truth transforms us into those who love God with a whole heart and who love each other with the love of Christ.