



ONE CHURCH

EPHESIANS

Ephesians 4:7-16
Lesson 8—The Gifts

February 6, 2022

Introduction

If I brought a box of gears to your house, dumped them on your dining room table, and said, “can you make something out of these,” how well would you do?

Would it stump you? Would you waste a lot of time trying to get them together?

At the same time, a watchmaker may take the same gears and start assembling them. The teeth of small ones would fit into the gears of larger ones. They would begin to turn. A timepiece that works together to make something vital would come out of this mess.

That's the puzzle of the church. In it are different people. Some speak other languages. All have different temperaments, personalities, and abilities. Yet, somehow, God is supposed to take this heap of humanity and make them into something.

That is what our lesson is about today. How does God take all the different pieces to make it one church that has lasted through centuries? It comes down to what we do but what God gives us.

Discussion

The Dilemma

Now, I know that we have well-coached ourselves to give the correct answer. What do you think of when you say, "church?" "The church is the people, not the building." But is that how you consider it.

Let me give you a few examples:

- I'm going to church. (Can mean "I am going to the church building.")
- During church, we sang... (Church now is an event such as worship.)
- I gave \$50 to the church. (Church has transformed into an organization.)
- Joe is part of our church. (The church is the people.)

We know that the church is people, but they are also organized, go to one location, and do things together. "Church" seems far broader in our vocabulary than in our theology.

This lesson emphasizes the pure form of "church" as the body of Christ accomplishing Christ's purposes.

But we arrive at this lesson fresh off the heels of a seven single-word list.

“There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4:4-6, ESV)

The series of “one” is essential. We know that there is only one hope, one Lord, and one God. There is only one body and only one Spirit.

Even baptism, which seems to be distorted into various forms, is a single item for Paul. After all, if all other items in the list mean “one and one only”, it also must apply to baptism.

But that seems to dictate something called “uniformity.” If there is one and only one, aren’t we all the same?

Some have tried to do it that way. One of the strange aberrations in the modern churches of Christ was a group popularly known as the Boston Movement. It started in Florida and moved north to Boston. The church’s goal was noble, to elevate discipleship in the church. But even noble purposes go awry in practice. Suddenly, new converts were instructed concerning who their friends could be, people they could go on a date with, movies, and television to watch. The theory was if we were to reproduce disciples, they would look alike.

Studies done by people like Flavil Yeakley told a story of people whose personalities were forced into a very human mold. It created terrible damage to the people they wanted to change into the image of Christ. Instead of Christ’s image, it was the image of the leading preacher of that church.

It seemed like a good idea, but it was built on uniformity, not unity. The two are not the same.

In this lesson, we seem to spin around in a different direction. In the last lesson, we spoke of “oneness,” but in this lesson, the concept of “different.” takes center stage. How can you have oneness and still have differences which unique to individuals?

The answer is that God's unity is not found in man's uniformity. We want the church to be efficient, like a corporation churning out widgets. But the model of corporate sameness skews the reality of the Biblical view of unity.

God's unity can be found in two verses in the passage we study this morning which emphasize a single characteristic.

"He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)" (Ephesians 4:10, ESV)

"until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ," (Ephesians 4:13, ESV)

Did you catch the repetition? It is the concept of the "filling or fullness of Christ" in the church.

Unity is not about being like one leader. It does not conform to a standard of behavior defined by an organization. It is about reflecting the ideals and life of Christ. If his presence does not fill the church, it matters no matter how polished the services are or how popular the programs are.

The world must see Christ in the church. And that's for a reason. The way the world sees Christ is through the church. If it presents an inaccurate picture, the lost have no way of finding the Savior.

So how does God accomplish this grand purpose through us, the church?

The Plan

It is crucial to see the distinction between an organization and a body.

A body is comprised of different organs. And they do not operate the same way at the same time. You can take your index finger and use it to punch buttons, but your

little toe is not trying to do the same thing. Instead, it stabilizes the body to let the other activity take place.

To produce the church as a body, we must have what a human body has—a creator and designer.

Think about your body for a minute and the gifts God put in you for your body to function. For instance, take the opposable thumb. It might get in the way of a hammer driving a nail, but it is necessary to hold the hammer.

Or take your ears. When you get older, you may find age-related hearing loss. That makes you appreciate what God gave you. You can be in a crowded restaurant and isolate the conversation you want to hear, and your ears will focus on it.

The same can be said of so much of what makes up our bodies. We truly are gifts put together in unique ways.

The premise of this lesson is that God gives gifts to make a functioning body.

In verse 7, Paul says grace is given to us.

“But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” (Ephesians 4:7, ESV)

Paul uses the term “metered” to describe a measured process. A meter lets the right amount of something through at a time. God gives what we need in the way we need it.

Verses 8-10 reflect an allusion to Psalm 68.

“Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)” (Ephesians 4:8-10, ESV)

The psalm portrays God's conquering the enemies of Israel and uses the language common in the day for a returning victor. It was also true of the Romans.

When a king would return victorious from battle, he would bring back the spoils of war. Many times this included wealth, clothing, or even slaves. When he returned home, many showered people with the gifts of war.

Paul adapts this custom to fit with what Christ did for the church. Christ was victorious over death and sin. In that victory, he established his church. He pictures the death, burial, and resurrection as descending and ascending. The descent was inclusive for Paul. As he portrays in Philippians 2, it meant Jesus humbled himself, dying, and being buried in a grave. Then, his resurrection was his adoration as the victor. He returns to heaven to rule as head of the church.

But Paul's main emphasis in this allusion is the "gifts" he brings to the church.

In verse 11, he lists "gifts" given to the church.

"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers," (Ephesians 4:11, ESV)

Apostles were those invested with the message and were eyewitnesses of his resurrection. Prophets were spokesmen who "spoke for" the Lord. Evangelists traveled to various churches spreading the good news.

The last two are probably one due to the way the language reads. They were the ones in a local congregation who cared for the flock of believers and instructed them in the ways of Christ. Therefore, teaching shepherd might be the best reading.

I want to make a few observations about this list.

First, many of the functions described here no longer exist. Once the last remaining eyewitness of the resurrection died (John the apostle), the role of the apostle died. Many in the religious world make themselves apostles, but they do not fit the Biblical view of apostleship.

Prophets suffered the same fate. Once inspired works were available to be read, the message needed no more elaboration. In fact, they depended on the gospels and the writings of Paul and John in the second-century church.

The voice of God can now be heard through scripture rather than being incomplete.

Some can be fitted to the modern church, such as shepherds and evangelists.

Second, this was never to be an exhaustive list for all time. It fit the needs of the first-century church precisely.

The principle remains the same. God provides what his church needs.

Finally, the whole of the New Testament fills out the picture, not just Ephesians. We can take a more significant look by putting together what Paul told the Galatians or the Thessalonians or what he wrote to Timothy.

These gifts and other provisions of God had a purpose, as stated in verse 12.

“to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,” (Ephesians 4:12, ESV)

The purpose was to equip for ministry.

I suspect Paul has spent enough time with Luke that he adopted some of his language. The term “equip” means “set a broken bone” or even mend a net. God wants his church whole and in one piece. For that reason, he places people with abilities to do something specific.

These listed are not to be the “doers” for the church. Instead, the “ministers” or the ones that serve as the church members.

To put it another way, Waterview has a bulletin. On the inside is a list called “ministers.” That is a modern way of putting it. Actually, Paul wants to put the names of every Christian in that blank.

Picture it this way. Leaders are planters trying to grow a harvest. If they do not plant, nothing will grow. A farmer's goal is to bring in a crop, not to have a silo full of seed.

God's intention is that leaders strive to make people the ones doing the serving no matter their office. Those serving the church will build the church. Sadly, many churches are filled with spectators watching someone else do the work. It was never the plan of God.

The aim of all leadership should not be to do the church's work. It should be to get the church's work done through the people. For the actual servants include us all.

And all of this service is to "build up" the body of Christ. It is to develop Christians so that the church is strong, vibrant, and active in sharing the faith throughout the world.

The goal of a church should always be strength, never numbers. A strong church will grow and have the numbers. When the body is built up, the church flourishes. A weak church can attract many and lose them at the same time.

The Goal

Nothing happens if you don't know where you are going. It would be like going on a road trip without a destination or the next stop. You might see a lot of sights but get you nowhere.

Paul says that all of what God is doing in the church has a grand purpose.

Unity

Verse 13 describes the first goal.

"until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ," (Ephesians 4:13, ESV)

Paul refers to that concept of unity as one of the goals of God giving gifts.

Again, we return to that word. It tells you it is important to Paul.

It speaks not just of oneness but harmony.

Throughout school, I played in the band. I remember one time, we had a brass section rehearsal. The director was called to the office to take an urgent phone call. When you leave junior high kids by themselves, they get into trouble.

So we started playing the piece without a director. And we thought we sounded pretty good.

The director heard it, ended his call, and flew out of his office in a rage.

“What do you think you are doing? You think you sound pretty good, but you don’t. It’s not about how you sound in here. It’s how we all sound together. So don’t ever try that on your own again.”

That may have been the best lesson on unity. Unity occurs when different people play their part, and together, they make a whole. No one instrument is better or worse. We just need to be on the same page following the same beat.

When a church follows Christ’s instruction with the same heart and soul as the other, unity happens. When it is off, the spiritual music is off-key.

This unity comes because we have the “knowledge” of the Son of God. It refers to a similar relationship of closeness and devotion.

Mature Growth

But Paul continues:

“until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” (Ephesians 4:13, ESV)

Now he comes to the illustration of growth. It comes in many different dimensions.

It can be a fruit that ripens. We know that green bananas are not “ready yet.” They need to ripen. Paul wants the church to ripen into what Christ wants it to be.

The other illustration is of human development. Parents and grandparents take great pride in watching their children grow. Marks on the wall tell the story of growth.

God wants us as a body to grow up together. And that means something specific.

Maturity brings the ability to make correct spiritual decisions. Paul describes what immaturity looks like as well.

“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.” (Ephesians 4:14, ESV)

A child doesn’t have the stability he needs to navigate the dangerous waters of various opinions and teachings. They are innocent and vulnerable. They are easily manipulated.

Paul describes the dangers using two illustrations, one from the sea and one from the weather.

The first is the tossing of the sea. A boat acts more like a cork than anything else in a terrible storm. It is carried by the crest of one wave and dropped by the ebb. It is always in danger.

But the second is the wind that drives the ship. The foul weather of hurricane season brought winds that “drove” the boat onto the rocks. In Acts 28, Luke describes Paul’s passage to Rome.

These two pictures show the danger to spiritual youngsters. They are exposed to evil.

I sometimes wonder where Paul learned some of his words. In this verse, he speaks of “human cunning.” He uses a term for “wicked dice playing.” It is a picture of men in an alley gambling to see who can take something from the other.

People are led astray by using a methodic way to teach error as truth. Unless someone is developed enough to challenge their thinking, they can succumb.

It has been said that there are two kinds of people. One is the people to be protected, who Paul calls the children in this text. The other is those to be guarded against, who seek to lead astray.

One reason to mature people in faith is to give them stability. This stability comes in a tangible form.

Truthing in Love

Verse 15 is often quoted and applied poorly.

“Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,” (Ephesians 4:15, ESV)

Most translations use the term “speaking” even though a verb for speaking does not exist in the Greek text. Instead, it literally says, “truthing in love.”

Our manner of life and speech should be one devoted to the truth in a way that we build and not destroy another.

I have heard people use this verse as an excuse to be brutal with others. With a snarl, an angry Christian (often a preacher says), “I am only criticizing you out of love.” You know from their tone it is not loving but arrogance. Sadly, many want to show their own importance rather than concern themselves with the actual needs of others.

Some just enjoy a good fight. It is great fun for that kind of people, don’t mind the damage. But it is hard to be loving with clenched fists, raised voices, and name-calling innuendo.

It has well been said that truth without love is brutality, but love without truth is hypocrisy.

The two foundations of all relationships in the church is:

- Is truth guiding my action and speech?

- Am I focused on making another better or making myself look better?

Unless we balance love with truth and truth with love, we never grow into the fullness of Christ. The church is where people are engaged in loving truthfulness.

As with the words, the verse ends in “we are to grow up into the head, into Christ.”

Fit Together

If we grow into Christ, we will exhibit a trait spoken of in verse 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.” (Ephesians 4:16, ESV)

We will become a functioning body.

The human body is fascinating. Think of how we move. Paul speaks of the “joints fit together.” When we walk, joints in our toes must walk in concert with the joints in our ankle. Those also move as the knee swings to and fro. All of this is from the movement of the hips, spine, shoulders, guided by the head.

It is a marvelous picture of total cooperation to get to where we want to be.

When the parts work, the body works. But, if your knee is damaged, the whole body will suffer.

Paul’s point is that if we respond to the lead of Christ himself, all the pieces of the church, including you and I, will help the entire body grow. When love guides our actions, the body “builds itself up.”

It is a fantastic picture of how God designed the church to work. He provides all of what we need if we will but respond.

Conclusion

How can you take people from different backgrounds and languages, and customs and make them one in Christ? How do you turn hate into love and hatred into compassion?

Many well-oiled machine churches die each year. We can devise the perfect organizational chart. We can put people we consider gifted into the correct positions. And it will be efficient all the way to its grave.

But Paul knows what makes God's mystery a reality in this world. God knows how to take different people with different gifts to accomplish different things to become one.

He is like the master watchmaker. He can put the various gears in place to make a masterpiece.

God gives his gifts for the church to grow into the fulness. That includes you and me. Are we willing to be used to accomplish heaven's purposes?