

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Ministry of the Church: Ephesians 4:7-16

In Ephesians 4:1-6, Paul calls us to live in a way that expresses the unity that God has already begun in bringing us together and which he will one day complete (1:9-10). He reinforces that call to unity by reminding us that we all have experience of the *one* Spirit, and have faith in the *one* Lord, and call on the *one* God and Father. However, the very next verse (4:7) begins with that all-important word – ‘but’. The fact that we’re all one doesn’t mean we’re all the same. There is *unity* in the church, but there is also *diversity*. Interestingly, the purpose of this diversity (the giving of different ministries) is so that we might reach *unity* (4:12-13)! Paul provides a genuine vision of unity-in-diversity, diversity-in-unity. As we look at this passage on the ministry of the church, we will ask and try to answer three crucial questions: (1) Who gives the gifts? (2) What are the gifts? (3) Why are the gifts given?

1. The giver of the gifts: Christ as the head of the church (4:7-10)

Who has received gifts? Paul says so clearly in 4:7 – ‘to *each one of us* grace has been given’. Who gives the gifts? Paul again says so clearly in 4:7 – ‘grace has been given as *Christ* apportioned it’. It is *Christ* who gives the gifts; it is *Christ* who is head over the church. Paul has already made this point in his prayer in 1:22-23, and he picks up the same image (christ as *head*) in 4:15.

As so often in his letters, Paul quotes the Old Testament to reinforce his point (4:8) – Psalm 68:18 in this case, which speaks of God *ascending* to the temple on Mount Zion. Paul likes this reference to ‘ascending’, and he develops it in the next two verses (4:9-10). Although this is an obscure passages in some respects, the main point is clear: Christ is in charge! He’s in charge not just of the church, but of *everything* – the one who ‘descended’ (however we

understand that) is the one who ascended ‘higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe’. *That’s* what the church needs to take on board. Christ is the head.

Whenever we feel discouraged, we look to Christ, our head. When the church is weary and feels let down, the church looks to its victorious head, Christ, the one whom God has appointed to fill the whole universe. He’s the one who’s in charge, he’s the one we look to for all things, and he’s the one who provides for the church. We need to know that he is the giver of gifts. If we’re ever tempted to envy someone else because of what they have or what they can do, or if we’re ever tempted to be a bit full of ourselves because of what *we* have or what *we* can do, it’s important for us to be reminded that it is *Christ* who gives gifts. That’s where Paul begins – with Christ, as the victorious ascended king, the one who, from his loving grace, provides to meet the needs of his church.

2. The nature of the gifts: Ministry at the heart of the church (4:11-12)

We’ve asked: Who gives the gifts? It is Christ, as the head of the church. We now ask: What are the gifts? Psalm 68 is also helpful here, in that it picks up passages in Numbers 8:19 and 18:6 about the giving of the Levites to the people, so that God could dwell with them. The Levites themselves are described as *gifts* to the people. That’s the important thing about the gifts in this passage: they’re not talents or abilities, they’re *people* – given to the church. This gives Christian ministry a supreme significance. We serve as Christ’s love gifts, captured by him, and poured back on the church. This is a crucial dimension we don’t always notice: it’s not so much that we *have* gifts, but that we *are* gifts. We must see ourselves not merely as cogs in the church

'machine', or simply as doing jobs in the church, but as *gifts* of Christ who have been given to the church.

Paul goes on to mention some of gifts in verse 11. Whatever we make of them, it's clear that priority is given to ministries of the *word*. The selection of people gifts highlights those who *reveal, declare, and teach* the gospel. The ministry at the centre of the church is a ministry of the *word*. We must never lose sight of that. But we're still not at the *real heart* of the ministry of the church. *Why* are these gifts given? 4:12 tells us – 'to prepare God's people for works of service'. Here is the heartbeat of the passage. Church leaders are given to prepare *everybody else* for the real ministry; the real ministry isn't what the minister is doing, it's what everybody else is doing! Leaders are given so that all God's people may in turn fulfil *their* work of ministry, and so build up the entire body. We all minister, as grace has been given to *each one*, for the good of the whole church.

Churches can expect the wrong sort of thing of their pastors. Ministers are sometimes seen as masters of ceremonies who conduct services for other people to watch. In fact, the church is more like an *orchestra*, with everyone playing a part, each one contributing to the whole. The nature of the gifts that Christ has poured out on his church means that ministry is at the heart of the church – not just ministry of the few, but ministry of the *all*.

3. The purpose of the gifts: Maturity as the goal of the church (4:12-16)

We ask finally, *Why* are the gifts given? The passage tells us that the gifts are given so that the church will *grow*, so that it will reach *maturity* (4:12-13). On the last day, all disunity will be gone. On the last day, we will be completely mature. But, for now, that's what we seek: maturity and unity through spiritual leadership given to the church, and through the ministry of each person in the church. It's not just any old unity, however: it's 'unity in the faith and knowledge of the Son of God'. Paul is also

specific about the maturity: it's nothing less than 'the whole measure of the fullness of Christ', which relates back to his prayer for them in 3:19.

Like any wise pastor, Paul wants us to grow up out of infancy into adulthood (4:14). With immaturity goes gullibility. If they were mature they would not be so easily deceived. Blown about in all sorts of directions, they have no settled convictions of their own. There is restlessness, and the danger of no common mind. *Why* are *leaders* given? *Why* does *each member* do the ministry? So that the church can grow up, so that we can avoid error, so that we can avoid being tossed around by wrong ideas, so that we can be stable and secure.

The false teachers used methods which involved cunning, craftiness and deceitful scheming. In countering these methods, says Paul, we need to speak the truth to one another in love (4:15). Once again, who builds up the body of Christ? *We do*. And if the ministry of the leaders in 4:11 is a *word* ministry, the ministry of the rest of us is also a *speaking* ministry. As every Christian is *taught* the truth, he or she is also able to *speak* the truth. I won't be carried away by false teaching if my fellow-Christians are constantly speaking to me about the truth.

What keeps the church together and growing is not just the ministry of the leadership, but the ministry of the *whole* body. That's how Paul concludes in 4:16. Growth comes through the head, Christ, and when every joint and ligament in the body does its work.

A church is where each member lives for the well-being of the whole body. Where each part does its bit, the whole body grows and is strengthened. The final emphasis of the passage is on the need for the believers to build one another up in love. All of which shows that Paul's first concern here is not individual spiritual growth, but for individuals to live and grow *together* as a part of the greater whole – according to the grace given us by the victorious Christ, the head of the church. Amen.