

Ephesians 4:1-16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Ephesians chapter 4 verses 1 to 16 But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

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. And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 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, 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 and deceitful schemes, rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 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.

In the first three chapters of the book of Ephesians, Paul presents the remarkable scope of the gospel. It starts at the dawn of history. It reaches its climax at the end of the age.

It goes from the depths of the grave to the heights of heaven. It overcomes the alienation of man from God, and the enmity and division between man and man. It's a great mystery, now revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ and his glorious gospel.

[2 : 12] And in chapter 4, Paul speaks more directly about what this means for the life of the church. He describes himself as a prisoner, but a prisoner in the Lord. He wears his bondage as if a badge of honour.

The physical constraints of human captivity placed upon him are spoken of in terms of his spiritual bond service to Christ. He may be in prison, but he's in prison because he is captive to Christ. He then turns to address Christian practice in the light of the awe-inspiring reality of the gospel that he's declared. We must live a life worthy of such a calling, act in a manner befitting of such a gospel.

The calling isn't just the gospel in some objective sense. It's the fact that we have been made part of this story by God's grace. God has called us. He has elected us.

We find ourselves in the middle of history, at the centre of God's purpose, a plan that has been intended from the beginning of all history. And now it is coming to fruition, in part through us.

[3 : 13] And in response to this, we must be characterised by complete humility, by gentleness, by patience and by bearing with one another. Humility is a virtue that would not have been seen as such by many within the ancient world.

But humility is the only fitting response to the scale of the gift that we have been given. We're called to gentleness. Gentleness is not prone to wrath. It's not prone to violence.

It's merciful. It's without jealousy. It is without malice and cruelty. It's kind. In the same way, we're called to patience. Patience requires mastery of your spirit, the ability to endure, to be persevering, to hope.

We bear with each other in love. It's a posture that we take towards each other. It's informed by the previous virtues. It's gracious. It's not vaunting over others. It believes the best of others.

It's hopeful for others. It's long-suffering with other people. It avoids censoriousness and condemnation. And all of this is informed with love. We desire the best for each other, and we commit ourselves to practical service and care for each other.

[4 : 20] The focus of this section is on unity. The source of the unity that we have is the spirit, and the shape of that unity is a bond of peace. This bond of peace is held together by the spiritual virtues that Paul has just described.

And in speaking of the bond of peace, Paul is suggesting that the way of peace has a power to hold people together. It is a bond. It's a glue. Paul now lists various facets of the unity of the spirit.

One body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father. There are three sets here when you break it down, and they can be arranged in a Trinitarian manner.

The first one, the one body arises from the one spirit, who grounds its unity in the one bond that he forms. The spirit is the down payment, and as such is also the one who guarantees the one hope of our calling.

The second one is the oneness of the Lord Jesus Christ. That corresponds to the oneness of the faith that has him as its object, an exemplar. And it's the oneness of the baptism in his name.

[5 : 24] We are baptised into his name, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, baptised into Christ. And then the third one is the unity of the Father. The oneness of the Father establishes the unity of all creation under him, and as the realm of his presence and his providence.

But we can say more. Implicitly, Paul's argument depends upon the oneness of these three. One God in three persons. The final verse of this section connects the theme of unity with the theme of comprehensiveness that has been prominent throughout the Gospel.

God is over all, and through all, and in all. And from unity, Paul moves to discussion of the diversity of Christ's gifts. Here he gives a rather loose quotation of Psalm 68 verse 18, and shows how it can be related to Christ and his work.

You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train, and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the Lord God may dwell there. The psalm speaks of the Lord's ascension from Mount Sinai to reign, perhaps through the story of the Exodus, as he goes up into the land and reigns from Mount Zion.

Here it's related to Christ's ascension in triumph. Christ has won the victory, and goes up to the throne in power, with captives in his train. He gives gifts as a sign of his enthronement.

[6 : 47] The same notion that gifts are a proof of enthronement is expressed by Peter in his sermon on the day of Pentecost. To ascend, Christ had to first descend to the lower regions.

This refers not, I believe, to Sheol, but to the earth itself, the earth over against heaven. Christ first descended from heaven, and then he ascended. And in his descent and ascent, Christ moves through the entire order of reality, gathering it together in himself, uniting it.

Christ is, we might say, Jacob's ladder. He is the conduit uniting heaven and earth. He is the one that holds everything together. Christ's gifts take the form of ministries to his church.

Apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers. These ministries are focused upon teaching, which instill the principles of true growth. Now elsewhere, there are similar statements that are made.

For instance, in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, verses 4 to 6. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit. And there are varieties of service, but the same Lord. And there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.

[8 : 09] In that statement, there is a sort of Trinitarian structure again. The gifts and their variety come from the spirit. The services and their variety comes from the Lord. And the activities and their variety come from God, the Father.

Here the focus is especially upon the services connected to the unity and the gift of Christ.

Apostles, prophets, and evangelists primarily minister to the wider church and serve as founding ministries.

Shepherds and teachers, meanwhile, are ministers to more specific congregations, guarding and instructing them. There is some sort of a hierarchy here. A movement down from the head to the body, establishing the sort of hierarchy that renders a body an ordered body.

However, these forms of service, while representing the authority of the head, are ministering to and for the sake of the body, so that it might be established, that it might grow and flourish.

And the purpose of these ministries is to equip the saints for their own activity. The whole church is to grow into maturity, not through the ministry of just a few members, but through its united work, through which the gift of Christ in the ministers has equipped it.

[9 : 20] Growing in such a way will lead to the unity of the faith. Faith is united. There is one faith. And division is a sign of the church falling short in maturity or failing on account of sin.

Division. Divisions in the church are a sign that something has gone wrong. That doesn't mean that divisions are wrong per se. The unity is not found in the church as it currently exists. The unity is ultimately situated in Christ.

And the more that we are conformed to him, the more that we will know unity. However, our lives are much mixed with error, with alien principles of society, and other things that prevent us from arriving at the unity of the faith.

It should lead to the knowledge of the Son of God. He's the one true object of our faith. And the more that we grow in that knowledge, the more that we will find unity with everyone else who is growing in that knowledge.

This leads to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Christ is the standard. We are being conformed to Christ through the ministries of the Spirit that he has given us.

[10 : 20] Part of the intent of this is that we might be children no longer. God doesn't want us to be thrown to and fro by false teaching and by deception. We should have the wisdom, the clarity of understanding, the settled will, that enables us to be fixed and determined in our pursuit of the truth, no longer so susceptible to deception.

We speak the truth in love. And these are the two criteria of unity. Unity is found in the truth. Unlike lies, truth has a unity to it. Truth is one.

And the more that our lives are lived under the truth, the more that we'll find that we have unity with other people who are living their lives in such a manner. Love, as well, is another principle of unity. It's an expression of the communion of the Spirit. Any approach to union that does not hold both of these criteria, or any approach that pits one against the other or tries to subdue one to the other, must be rejected.

We need both truth and love. And we will also find in the final analysis that these things are one too. If you are not acting in love, then you are not acting in truth.

[11 : 29] If you are not acting in truth, you are not acting in love. We must grow into the head who is Christ. This growth occurs through the united work of the body. The joints here may be the ministers given to the church by Christ, with each part being the members of the church more generally.

The ministers given by Christ play critical roles, but every single member must be involved. Paul fuses architectural and organic imagery here.

He speaks of a body being built up. And elsewhere, earlier on, he has used the language of a building being grown. In verses 19 to 22 of chapter 2, There is one gift of the Spirit, The unity of the church is found in the one Spirit, but the practical realisation of this unity is found in the re-presentation of the one gift, in the manifold giving of our individual gifts of the Spirit in love.

The unity of the church, then, is not found in a gift that's given directly down, and the church has no activity relative to it, and it's given to everyone in an undifferentiated manner. Rather, the unity of the church is found in the way that God has equipped us to be participants in his giving process.

He has given us the Spirit, but he's given us the Spirit in such a way that he has given us the Spirit to give. And so each one of us has a measure of the Spirit that we might minister to others, that we might be means by which God gives to others.

[13 : 24] What we have received of the Spirit is not for our own sake alone, it's for the sake of everyone else. This helps us to understand why Paul speaks of the body being built up by itself.

The gift comes from Christ, the ascended Lord, but it comes to us in a way that comes through the gifts of other members of the body. The unity of the church requires the manifoldness of the church. Paul's doctrine of the church arises out of the ascension of Christ. The ascended Christ gives the Spirit by which he forms his body, in which he, as the head in heaven, is connected to his people on earth.

As Christ ascends, the Spirit descends and becomes the means by which Christ fills all things and gathers all things under his rule. It is because Christ has ascended that he can fill all things.

A question to consider. An important theme in this passage is maturity. How might we see the ascension itself in terms of this theme?