1-27-19

Ephesians 4:7-16

Paul continues here to look at the unity of the church. This is a unity that God sees as He looks at each Christian through Jesus; He sees the righteousness of Christ and it is God’s plan to sum up all things through Christ. Because of these things, it is also for us, as members of Christ’s body, to work for Christian unity; as long as that unity is based in truth.

Last week, we covered verse 6. But we need to look at it again to see an important difference that takes place in Paul’s letter. Verse 6 says, “*one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all*.” Then verse 7 begins “*But to each one of us…*” Paul is still speaking of the church, but he shifts from “*all*”, the entire church, to “*each one of us*”. He is now looking at individuals. What we see here is unity, not uniformity. We are all together in Christ, but we are not all the same; and we shouldn’t try to be.

One way to look at this unity and individuality is to consider a marriage. It is hard to find two creatures, of the same species, that are more different than a man and a woman. There are substantial physical differences. While our emotions are the same, they express themselves differently and are triggered differently. Our brains actually function differently; our minds don’t work in the same way. Yet a man and a woman can enter a marriage and form a unity; while maintaining their own identity.

And so it is with the church. We each have differences and keep those differences, yet we form one church. Now certainly, this refers to our personalities, our experiences, the way we think about things; but that is not what Paul is concerned about here. Paul is concerned with our different gifts; God given gifts. Those abilities we have that we can do especially well.

In a marriage, if a man and woman work together in love, their differences will complement each other and their lives will be better and fuller. It is the same with the church, which is where the unity comes in. If we work together in love, each one using their gifts for the good of the church, the church will become a fuller, more mature, body of Christ.

We can see this by how Paul finishes out verse 7. “*But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift.*” Recall that “grace” means “unmerited favor”. We have all received favor from God that we have not earned; we don’t even deserve it. We are familiar with saving grace. This is the favor that God has shown us when He offers us salvation and even gives us the faith we need to accept it. Our salvation is utterly and entirely from God; we have no claim to restoring our fellowship with Him.

Although the saving grace we receive from God is more than we could ever hope for, He gives even more. This is the grace Paul is referring to here in verse 7. We have all been graciously given something from God that we are good at or have a great desire for. Now with that, God expects us to use these gifts for His glory, for building up His church.

Notice also, how Paul says that the gifts are from Christ. We are very used to thinking of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. But here Paul begins by saying that the gifts are from Jesus. Additionally, in Romans chapter 12, the giving of gifts is attributed to God the Father. Instead of being confused by this, just remember the doctrine of the Trinity. God is one and although each person of the Trinity has their own work to do, they are of the same mind and they are all continually involved in building the church.

In verse 8, Paul makes his point by quoting from Psalm 68:18. “*When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men.*” Psalm 68 is a prayer to God to restore Israel as He had done in the past. It brings to mind the leading of captive Israel from Egypt to Mount Sanai. Also, leading the enemy captive in the Promised Land by ascending Mount Zion. These images of God ascending show God in great power and victory. Paul associates this with Christ’s ascension into heaven.

Christ’s ascension into heaven was a display of great power over death and a display of great victory over his enemies; all the forces of darkness. Death and the evil forces are indeed captive. Their abilities are severely limited by God and their end is near.

There is another beautiful dimension of Paul’s quotation. In Jewish theology, Psalm 68 is associated with Pentecost. Pentecost is the celebration of when God gave the law. The law is a wonderful gift from God, that He gave to His people. And we all know what happened on the day of Pentecost after Jesus’ crucifixion: He gave the gift of the Holy Spirit. Hence, we see a tie between the Old and New Testaments in gifts God gave to men.

Although Paul’s focus in this quote from Psalm 68 is in regard to gifts, he spends a couple of verses talking about “ascend”. Most translations have verses 9 and 10 in parenthesis to show the digression. The idea of ascending is also tied in with leading a host of captives. This is one of those sections of Scripture whose meaning is debated between Christians.

There are two main views. One is that the “*lower parts of the earth*” is simply a description of the earth itself. For Jesus, who was in heaven, the earth is as low as you can get, but He was willing to come here for our salvation and the defeat of His enemies. The captives He leads are the spiritual forces of darkness that He was victorious over.

The second main view ties this verse in with 1Peter 3:18-19:

For Christ also died for sins once for all, *the* just for *the* unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits *now* in prison.

In this view, while Jesus’ body was in the grave, his spirit went to the holding place of the dead. In this place, the unregenerate were in torment, but the Old Testament saints were in paradise, which is different from heaven. They were here because their sins had been covered by the blood of animal sacrifice but not cleansed of sin by the blood of Christ. Once Jesus had been crucified, he was then able to lead these Old Testament saints, these captives, into heaven.

This is not a salvation issue and there is no reason to get bogged down in details here. I invite you to study the Bible and read reasonable comments on this passage and reach your own conclusion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This passage does, however, point to certain truths in the Bible that are not negotiable. Jesus was not created and He was in heaven before He became a man here on earth. He was executed by crucifixion, placed in a grave, and rose again in three days. After spending some more time here on earth, He ascended into heaven. His sacrifice was retroactive to remove the sins of the Old Testament saints. He has defeated the enemy; satan and death and sin will not last and are held in check by Him.

After this digression, Paul goes back to gifts and he focuses on four gifts in particular because of their relationship to the unity of the church. Again, different gifts, yet for the unity of the church.

Paul begins with apostles. Jesus did provide apostles, in fact, they had to be directly appointed by Him as the risen Christ. We have considered apostles before and we must make sure that we have a good understanding of apostleship. The word “apostle” simply means “sent one”. In this broad view, all of us who are Christians are apostles because according to Matthew 28:19, all of us are sent into the world by Jesus to make disciples. But this is not a gift, it is what we are sent to do by Christ.

As we have discussed before, Paul is referring to the office of apostle. There were very few apostles and this office no longer exists. Those with the office of apostle were the eleven and Matthias, who was elected by God to take Judas Iscariot’s place, Paul, James, the brother of Jesus, and perhaps a couple of others. These men had been commissioned by the risen Lord Jesus, whom they saw with their own eyes. They had the ability to perform miracles and, very importantly, they had the authority to write Scripture; the infallible word of God.

This group was necessary to found and stabilize the new church. Their teaching, as found in the New Testament, is what the church has to be based on. Scripture itself tells us that it is closed, no one may add to it or take away from it, it is not to be modified. Additionally, Paul calls the apostles part of the foundation of the church in Ephesians 2:20. Once a foundation has been established, we don’t mess with it. Jesus used the apostles as the foundation, so we are to build on what is there. For these reasons, we can see that this particular gift is no longer given.

Probably the closest we have today to apostleship would be missionaries and church planters. We can especially see in the life of Paul that a big part of his ministry was to bring the Gospel to new places. Once people became Christians, he would establish a church. Both missionary and church planter are spiritual gifts. These are ministries that certain people are called to and God blesses them with what they need. But they still build on the foundation already established by the apostles with Christ as the cornerstone.

Keep in mind that with each of these gifts, Christ gives the spiritual gift to the person, but the person is then a gift to the church. Next Paul tells us that Jesus gave some as prophets. We have looked at the prophetic gift before also. The prophets Paul is referring to here, receive divine revelation relating to what Christ and the apostles taught. There were only so many apostles and the number of churches quickly outnumbered them. Each church couldn’t have its own apostle to provide Christian doctrine or provide insight to what was taught.

This is where the New Testament prophets came in. They were supernaturally gifted in revealing the teachings of Christ. Notice a difference between the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament prophets: What the Old Testament prophets said, and later what they wrote, actually became Scripture; a part of the finished Bible. The New Testament prophets didn’t write anything in the Scripture. There are a couple of prophecies they made that are recorded in the New Testament, but they are messages for people rather than revelations of Christ.

This particular form of prophecy no longer exists. Again, from Ephesians 2:20, these New Testament prophets were part of the foundation. Once the foundation is established, it doesn’t get changed. I do believe that the gift of prophecy still exists today, but it is different from what Paul was describing.

Today, there may be prophecy given for an individual or perhaps a church body. But we must be extremely careful in accepting these. Any prophecy must be checked against Scripture. If it in any way contradicts or modifies Scripture, it is not a word from God. There are some people who claim the gift of prophecy today, who say that it has changed so that sometimes their prophecy might be wrong. This is in direct violation of Scripture. The test given in the Bible for a true prophet of God is that the prophecy always comes true. The other important thing we are told is that God does not change.

We will continue with our study of these verses next week, Lord willing. But let me close with the reason that these gifts are no longer necessary for the building of the church; it’s because we have the Bible. Through the Bible, we have all the revelation that God wants us to have. All of the New Testament was written by apostles or somebody under their direct supervision. The last writing was the book of Revelation, written by the last surviving apostle, John.

With Revelation, the cannon of Scripture was complete, although it wouldn’t be put together in its final form for a couple of centuries. Still, all the letters were there, all the accounts of Jesus’ life were complete. These, also, are gifts of Christ: The Bible, the Holy Spirit to give us illumination and to call Scripture to mind when needed, and people gifted with special insight to give explanation of God’s word.

Prayer

Lord God, we offer You thanksgiving through Your Son, Jesus Christ. Your grace toward us is beyond words; You took it upon Yourself to save us though we were Your enemies. In our sin we turned away from You, but by grace You have gently called us back. Our salvation comes from You alone and we praise You.

Thank you for the precious gifts You give us. We acknowledge that these gifts are to be used for Your glory and for the upbuilding of Your church. Help us to avoid the sinful tendency to use the gifts for our own benefit, or, perhaps worse, to think that these are abilities that we have developed on our own.

Thank You for the Bible; it is truly Your word. You have provided the proper foundation; a foundation that will never be prevailed against. With this foundation Your church will always stand strong and will never fall. And again, it is all in Your strength and wisdom.

We bless You in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ

Amen