
The Fellowship of the King: The Mandate of Christian Community

Ephesians 4:1-16

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Introduction

For the last two Sunday evenings we have been making our way through a series of messages titled “The Fellowship of the King”. In the first message titled “The Means of Christian Community”, we worked through 1 Cor. 12:12-31 and saw that the Church is a spiritual body under the headship of Christ. Last week’s message on “The Marks of Christian Community” was based on Romans 12:1-21, and challenged us to exemplify the characteristics of a kingdom community. Tonight’s message will speak to “The Mandate of Christian Community” taken from Ephesians 4:1-16 with a look at purpose of building up the body. Next week’s message will focus on “The Measure of Christian Community” as we study both Hebrews 10:19-25 and 1 John 3:11-4:12.

Like the passages of the first two messages, the Apostle Paul uses the metaphor of the body to illustrate truths for living within the community of believers. We started in 1 Corinthians by looking at the essential nature of our community. Being one body, yet made up of many members with a variety of roles, gifts, and purposes. We were reminded that the God who designed the physical body, is also sovereign in forming the Church. We then saw in Romans the necessary connection between sound doctrine and sound living. That the same power of the Gospel to save is to be at work within us transforming us for kingdom living. The result of which is to be evidenced in the body life of the church in its love and care for one another and in the harmony with which it interacts with those outside the body. And such evidence is to be a witness to the world of the power of Christ to redeem and change the lost.

If you’ve ever taken the time to listen to your own conversation or the dialog of others, it is interesting to note how much we are either critical or end up talking about ourselves. There is something about our sinful nature that enjoys being critical of others, finding fault, or diminishing the effect of what is said. Moreover, I am ashamed of the great number of times someone tells me something and I respond by connecting the conversation to something I have done or heard rather than asking another question to further engage the person to which I am talking. Such is the pride of our hearts and the habits of conversation that corrupt communication within our relationships both within the Church and without.

I found a humorous illustration that conveys a breakdown in communication. I especially enjoyed this story because it makes fun of those of us that make our living support and managing computer technology. Those of you who use or work with technology will realize how close this comes to representing the reality of what often happens in business.

The driver of a car realizes he is lost and pulls up to the sidewalk, rolls down his window and asks a young man on the sidewalk, "Can you help me? I am lost and I promised my friend I would meet him half an hour ago, but I don't know where I am." The young man replies, "Why yes, sir. You are on Main Street. You are exactly two miles from the center of town and 20 miles south of the county line and 15 miles west of Interstate 55." The driver calls back through the window, "You must be a computer geek." Surprised, the young man says, "That's right. How did you know?" The driver answers sarcastically, "Because although your answer is technically correct, it is of no useful value to me." The young man answers back, "You must be a business manager." "I am," replies the driver, "but how did you know?" "Well," says the young man, "you don't know where you are, or how to get where you are going. You have made a promise which you have no idea how to keep, and you expect me to solve your problem. Yet, the fact is you are in the exact same position you were in before we met, but now somehow it will all be my fault."

Communications is a key to our working together as a community. When communications breaks down, it also breaks down our relationships and our ability to encourage and strengthen with one another. Working toward our mutual growth is part of what it means to be a fellowship of the King. Communications and interaction within our relationships must be focused on building one another up toward unity, maturity, and wise living. We must speak the Word and truth into one another's lives or we become like the characters in the illustration whose communication is without value and at best, ends up leaving us no better off than we were before.

There is much in Ephesians 4 and tonight we are looking only at the first half of Chapter 4. In this chapter Paul focuses on one of the essential purposes of the body, which is to build one another up. Another way of saying this is that Paul is encouraging the Ephesians toward spiritual growth and maturity. While we can do much by modeling godly behavior and allowing others to be encouraged by the character of our lives, the primary means by which we teach, encourage, and correct others is through communications. In fact Paul deals with this topic directly in the later part of this chapter connecting growth with communications that build one another up.

Similar to the Paul's letter to the Romans, this passage finds us at a turning point in his letter where he is connecting sound doctrine to the necessary results it should produce in the lives of believers. One of the things I noted in the last message was that "all theology is practical and all practice is theological". In other words, sound doctrine must of necessity, live itself out within the primary community that God gave to us live in – namely the Church. So one cannot say they believe sound doctrine if it is not evidenced through growth and maturity within the body of Christ.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians was written while he was in prison in Rome. Unlike letters where Paul writes to address problems with a church, Ephesians is more of a general letter to Gentile Christians with the purpose of instructing, helping, encouraging, and strengthening their walk with Christ. The theme of the church weaves through the book including Chapter 1:22-23, where Paul calls out the spiritual reality of Christ being the head of the Church which is His body. The letter can be divided into two parts. The first three chapters provide a concise and rich presentation of God's grace and sound doctrine while the last three chapters define the practical implications of this grace for believers within the Church, our families, and as individuals.

I have enjoyed reading a book recently titled, "In The Likeness of God". While theologically it has some glaring weaknesses, it does provide an incredible God-glorifying description of the design and workings of the physical body. In one of the chapters, I marveled at the growth of our bones. Did you know that as young children the cells of our bones were replaced every year? What a wonderful design that allows the coding within the DNA to recreate the same bone, only larger, to accommodate the growth of the body. There are two key cells that function within the body to keep our bones healthy. The first are demolition cells called Osteoclasts. These cells burrow and tunnel clearing out microscopic sections of bone a little at a time so that the structure of the bone is not compromised. The other key cells, Osteoblasts, refill these holes, as well as repair breaks and fractures, with the fiber of new and healthy bones. The effect is similar to rebuild a brick wall one brick at a time so that during the repair the wall never loses its strength nor accomplish the purpose for which it was built.

As I reflected and prepared for this message, I saw the necessity and importance of growth both individually and as the body of Christ. Having been reconciled in Christ and made part of a kingdom community, we are given grace to grow and mature in both knowledge and right living. In fact, I believe that such growth is both healthy and necessary for all believers. The implications for Christian community are both individual and corporate. As members of the body we are to grow individually. But this growth is not to be self-serving. Rather the mission of our fellowship is to glorify God by equipping and encouraging the body for ministry and love. Much like the two key cells which keep bones healthy and growing, our aim is to use God's word to burrow and tunnel into the hearts of believers clearing out the weakness of sin and replacing it with the stronger fiber of obedience and a desire to live for the glory of God.

Unity Within the Body (v. 1-6)

We see the connection of the two halves of Ephesians with the word "therefore" at the beginning of this passage. Paul's appeal to sound living in the body of Christ is built upon the foundation he has laid in the first half of the letter. Because of who we are in Christ and the grace given us, we should walk in a way that pleases and glorifies God. Just as in Romans 12, there is an exhortation to live according to our new nature. There

is an inexorable link between theology and practice. In other words, we will always think and behave in a way that is consistent with what we believe to be true.

So out of a magnificent doxology at the end of Chapter 3, Paul calls for unity within the Body. Just as the physical body works together for a common purpose and in harmony with the whole, so the Church is one, united in Christ and working toward a common purpose. So that the unity of who we are is clearly seen in what we believe and then amplified into community life of the Church. This oneness within the body is both a present reality of our unity as a kingdom community here on earth and a preview of the glorified unity of the Church that is yet to come.

High call, low aim (v. 1-3)

Because of God's redemptive plan, we have been brought near to Him through the blood of Jesus Christ and joined together as a fellowship of believers to proclaim His glory. On this basis, verse 1 strongly urges the Ephesian church to walk in a manner worthy of the purpose to which we have been called. The irony is that our high call requires a low aim. We must not forget the high calling of our mission to walk in a manner worthy of our King. But this high calling must be lived with a lowliness of spirit that is aimed at maintaining the unity and harmony of our fellowship.

This low aim is measured in a four-fold description in verse 2. As believers, we are to live with all humility, gentleness, patience, and a selflessness that accepts and stands with one another in love. These four aims are necessary to maintain unity within the body. A former Clearcreek Elder and friend, Andy Snider, spoke of godly humility in a way that I will never forget. He said, "You know you are truly a servant, when you don't mind being treated like one." Lowliness and meekness is an eager willingness to put Christ and others before ourselves. In light of all that God has done for us and the holy purpose to which we have been called, we are to live with a strong desire for unity and the peace that binds us together as the Body of Christ.

One cord, many strands (v. 4-6)

Paul continues his urging of the Ephesians to walk in a manner consistent with their high call by reminding them that the strength of one cord is its many strands. Our unity is not to come at the expense of sound doctrine. The strength of the body is in the weaving together of these seven fundamental truths into a single cord that unites true believers. The affirmation of these truths unites and strengthens us just as denying one or more of these truths divides and weakens the Church.

Paul begins in verse 4 by listing two triads of truths on "oneness" followed by single seventh truth. The first triad begins with there being one body, referring to the Church. While we function in a very large number of local assemblies, there is still one Church, which is visibly made up of believers alive on earth and invisibly of those who have already been called to glory. Next the triad continues with there being one Spirit. This is the Spirit of God by which we have been made a part of the body of Christ and that sustains and unites us, as we noted in the message on 1 Corinthians 12. Lastly, there is

one hope that is linked to our high call. This hope is the seen in our present redemption through the power and grace of the Gospel and our future and expected presence with Christ some day in glory.

Verse 5 begins a new triad of truths on “oneness” starting with there is one Lord. This one Lord is Jesus to which all believers owe their allegiance. He is our Lord and we are His. He is Christ the crucified and resurrected Lord who is exalted and honored above all others. Next, there is one faith. That is, there is one true faith by which we believe and bow to Jesus as redeemer and Lord. There are not many roads to heaven nor do we hold to the “big tent” fallacy that dilutes doctrine and ignores the essentialness of Christ’s work on the cross. Lastly, there is one baptism. While Paul does not make the distinction here between literally water baptism and a spiritual sense of union with the body of Christ, it must at least mean the notion of being joined with and having unity with the Church.

Finally, in verse 6, Paul concludes his list of affirmations by stating a final truth, that there is one God and Father of all. At the center of the strength and unity of the Church is our belief in one sovereign God who is supreme and transcendent over all. He is God “the Father” and not some neutered being put forth by liberal theologians. Note also the presence of the trinity as a part of these essential truths. Whether it is the Ephesians of Paul’s day or Clearcreek today, the Church must stand for and protect these truths as part of what unites us. To deny these truths is to be separate from and divided from what is essential to the body of Christ. As a kingdom community, we are the light and means by which these truths are communicated and ministered to a lost and dying world.

Diversity Within the Body (v. 7-11)

As we move on in the passage we see that there is not only unity within the body, there is also diversity within the body. In other words, we could say that unity is not uniformity. Just as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians chapter 12 of the many gifts given to the Church, Paul reminds the Ephesians that the gifting of the members of the Body is intended to contribute to its essential unity. The purpose of these gifts is to serve within the body and allow it to grow and mature.

Is grace enabled (v. 7)

When I graduated from college, I had an education and accumulated a fair degree of knowledge (much of it not terribly useful); but that degree, in and of itself, while valuable, did not make me who I am today. Over the course of 20 plus years, I have developed, grown, and become wise in my profession through a variety of work experiences, ongoing study, and transfer of knowledge from others. This growth has come by God’s grace to me and allowed me to provide for my family in this field. You might say that a diversity of work experiences and gifts has helped me to grow and mature so that I may work for the glory of God.

In a similar vein, we do not enter the body of Christ, fully mature and wise for kingdom living. Rather, we are more like a part of the physical body that must have

each of its parts grow from infancy to maturity so that it may all be united in mind and purpose. Paul writes in verse 7 that this gifting is grace enabled. By God's grace, he has sovereignly distributed gifts to each and every member of the Church. The beauty of God's gracing the body with gifts is seen in the variety and varying measure perfectly given everyone for the benefit of the whole. Just as there is beauty in the variety and varying measures given to our human bodies, so it is with the body of Christ manifest in gifts of service and ministry that unite us all.

Is Christ given (v. 8-10)

We see in these verses that our diversity is not only grace enabled, but it is also Christ given. These verses on the surface appear to be difficult, especially with respect to verses 9 and 10, particularly the descending of Christ to the lower parts of the earth. While there are several interpretations of these verses, I have neither the time nor the understanding to attempt a greater explanation. Rather I would focus our attention on the important phrase in these verses that is that it is Christ who gave gifts to men.

In verse 8 Paul is actually referring back to Psalm 68:18, which has a context of Christ coming to rescue His people. The picture here is that of a victorious king coming to establish his kingdom. Warren Wiersbe comments on these verses in his Ephesians commentary "Be Rich" with the following observation. "The picture here is of a military conqueror leading his captives and sharing the spoil with his followers. Only in this case, the "captives" are not his enemies, but His own. Sinners who once were held captives by sin and Satan have now been taken captive by Christ." So Paul is saying that in light of Christ's victory we now receive these gifts for the building up of the Body.

The end of verse 10 provides additional insight into Christ's giving of gifts to the Church. Here Christ is seen as exalted far about the heavens that he might fill all things. The power and supremacy of Christ is so that he might fill all things. He is the sovereign Lord over all and has been given all things under his authority and rule. Out of His Lordship is an overflow of grace and gifts given to equip the Church for maturity and ministry.

Through a variety of gifts (v. 11)

Paul ends his thoughts on the diversity within the Church by concluding that our diversity is grace enabled and Christ given through a variety of gifts. Having achieved ultimate dominion over all things, Christ perfectly distributes gift to each and every member of the body. These verses seem to beg the question, Why would Christ having conquered Satan and death not exercise His authority so as to build His body, the Church, so that it may achieve His purposes as a kingdom community here on earth?

The gifts listed in this verse may be seen in four broad categories. It is likely that Paul did not intend for this to be a complete list. Rather, it demonstrates the fullness of Christ's gifting for the purpose of building his kingdom on earth through the

Church. First in the list are apostles. In the strictest sense, these are those who, with special authority, were appointed to establish the early Church. Second we have prophets. These are those who are gifted to proclaim the Word of God to the Church. Third we have evangelists. These are those who are specifically gifted to bring the Gospel to the lost. Fourth, and last, we have pastors and teachers. These are the ones whom Christ has gifted to shepherd and lead the Church. These gifts serve to establish, grow, strengthen, and sustain the Church to the glory of Christ who is its head.

Growth Within the Body (v 12-16)

Having established the unity and diversity present within the body of Christ, Paul turns to the key point of the passage. The purpose of our high calling and the diversity of gifts given to believers is growth within the Body. That is Christ has brought us into a kingdom community so that we may mature and be bonded together in love. Note that verses 12 through 16 both start and finish with idea of building up. Here we have the mandate of Christian community; to build one another up in maturity and love, to serve and minister with all our strength until that day when we shall be with Him in glory.

In maturity (v. 12-14)

In verse 12 Paul immediately establishes that we are to equip one another for the work of ministry so that the Body may be built up in maturity. The idea here is that each and every member of the Church has been gifted for the purpose of laboring together in ministry to one another so that together we may grow to fully be the kind of Kingdom community that reflects the nature of Christ our King.

The three-fold goal of this maturing is explained in verse 13. First, we are to mature in our unity and knowledge of the Son of God. There is to be a oneness of doctrine and of striving to know Christ that is a priority to our fellowship. Second, there is to be a fullness in our maturity, which is seen in the expression “mature manhood”. That is, we are to grow to full maturity and not stump our growth at infancy or adolescence. Third, there is to be a maturing to the measure of Christ our Lord. The call here is to minister to one another with a humble, selfless service that marks the Body of Christ.

Finally, the result of our maturing is described in verse 14. Growth that is marked by maturity is a stable faith. The image Paul provides here is a contrast to the mature man. We are not to be like children who are easily swayed and because of our immaturity are unable to discern truth from error. We are not to be like ships at sea that are tossed about by waves and wind, carried about by whatever book, magazine, or radio program with the latest popular teaching. Rather, there is to be a steadiness and steadfastness to our faith that comes from loving sound doctrine, a fullness of maturity, and a focus on ministering to others.

In love (v. 15-16)

Paul finally sums up the essence of this passage in verses 15 and 16. “Rather”, he begins these verses, our community is to be steeped in love for one another. Note that

these verses both begin and end with the phrase “in love”. Love within the kingdom community is evidenced specifically in our speech and in our serving. The true measure of our maturity and growth is in our ability to humbly love one another just as Christ loved the Church.

As a community, we are to speak the truth in a loving way to one another. In our one-anothering, we are to speak truth into each others lives, but it is to be done with humility, care, and genuine concern for others. The objective to our speaking the truth is the maturity of the Body so that as a fellowship we may reflect every facet of the beautiful character of our King. Our goal and objective as a Body is to grow and mature into Christ, recognizing that we are dependent upon one another and dependent upon Him who is our head.

In verse 16, Paul again uses the image of the physical body. Christ is not only the goal of our growth but He holds the Body together. Each unique part, each uniquely gifted member is held together and equipped through Christ that it may operate in the way it was intended. The Body cannot function without Christ. He connects and supports the body just as ligaments, bones, and joints hold together the physical body so that it can stand, move, and function properly.

Moreover, the image here is that Christ sovereignly knits together all the pieces so that the body can and will grow. The members of the body cooperate and function not only with unity, but with love. It is Christ, that not only holds the body together, but makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. There is a inescapable connection here between our growth and love within the body. Love becomes the vehicle through which truth and ministry flow. The Church will only increase and mature where there is a Christ-enabled love that permeates our speech and ministry to one another.

Wiersbe in the same commentary makes this wonderful statement. “Truth unites, but lies divide. Love unites, but selfishness divides.” As a fellowship, we must heed the call of scripture to be a community united around sound doctrine, to strive to use our gifts to grow and mature in Christ, and to love one another so that together there is a harmony and fullness to our ministry that brings great glory to our King. This is the purpose of our fellowship, to grow together in maturity and faith that God may be glorified in all we do.

Lessons and Application

In closing, I want to consider again what it means to be a fellowship of the King. Like Tolkien’s fellowship we are at war with an enemy and living in a foreign land. And yet, we often live like this spiritual reality isn’t true. How many of us would send out a family member into battle with our proper preparations? How many of us would send out friends into hostile territory without the support and training needed to come back safely? I remember one of the Tripp brothers saying at a family enrichment conference a few years back that he would warn his kids as they walked out the door. He would say something to the effect of, “You are going out into a world that is waging war against you. Be careful, because the stake of this battle is your eternal soul.” This should be a sobering thought for each of us.

But this is why we must come together as a community. As body we must mature and grow that we may fight the battle that engages us each day. We were not meant to fight individually. Independent of each other and the body we are prone to be defeated. Certainly we can do all things through Christ who is our strength, but I believe that God has ordained the Church to be the principle vehicle through which he equips His people to be victorious. We need each other. Not just to fellowship and have friendships that make us feel warm and happy inside. We need each other to grow in Christ. We need each other to be strengthened and encouraged. We need each other for the variety of gifts God has given so that we may function as a whole.

So what then are the lessons of this text? First, we must not forget that our high calling to be a kingdom community requires humility. It is ironic that our high calling requires a lowliness of spirit. But this is the beauty of how God has structured the Church. When we are meek the Church is made strong. Second, the precious truths of scripture unite us and make us strong. Sound doctrine unites and lies divide. When together, we hold dear the truths of scripture and regard them as precious, we will join together with Christ and be strong. Third, our spiritual gifts are given to the church for the good of the whole. Our gifts were not meant to serve ourselves. They are given by Christ and belong to Him to be used in service to others. Rather than waiting to see who fills a need, we should be stumbling over each other as we all rush to serve each other.

Fourth, our spiritual gifts are given to equip the Church for ministry. Our gifts are given to equip and edify the Body. This is the preparation and training for the battles of life and the war against this world. Let us not leave weaker members and those who are new in the faith to flounder on their own. Fifth, we are to grow together toward maturity. Growth comes through understanding the Word. This is why Clearcreek is so committed to teaching all of scripture. Growth brings maturity, stability of faith, and strengthens the body. Sixth, it is Christ that holds this community together and builds it up. Let us not think that we are strong because of what we have done. Rather, it is because of what Christ has done through us. Lastly, a Christ-enabled love for one another is an essential part of growing as a community. Let us be a church that is both sound in doctrine and caring in ministry. We should never forget that every week people come through these doors who are hurting and in need of love and kindness. For us to grow and be knit together as a community we must have genuine love for one another.

Here are a few applications that we can make. First, how do I think and speak when I am serving others? We should not be serving and all the while gritting our teeth and biting our tongues. If our goal is the growth of others we should serve wholeheartedly and with great joy. Another application is, do I value the truths of scripture and strive to help others know Christ better? Truth and desire for sound doctrine should be at the heart of what draws us to be together every time there is teaching going on at Clearcreek. This includes Adult Bible Education, Sunday mornings and evening, and flocks. Next, am I growing in spiritual maturity so that I may help others within this community? We have a responsibility to grow and mature individually so that we can glorify God and grow and mature as a community.

A fourth application is am I actively involved in the lives of others to help them mature in Christ? Older men are to mentor younger men. Older women are to train the younger women in the Church. There should be all kinds of mini gatherings each week as this local

community seeks to encourage and engage one another. Also, do I lovingly speak the truth and am I as willing to hear it from others? The church should be a community where the truth is regularly spoken to one another. We must be open to speak it and even more open to hear it so that others need not be afraid of our response. Lastly, am I stable in my faith and able to discern truth from error? We must grow and mature or become stagnant and ineffective in our faith. Instability can keep us from being useful in ministry and may even draw others away from truth.

Let this passage from Ephesians encourage us to grow and be stronger in our walk, not just for our own sakes, but for the sake of the Church. We are all a part of this Body and we are called to mature in our faith so that we may obey all that God call us to do and be strong in a world that is hostile to us. May Clearcreek always be a place where the truth of the Word is proclaimed and the love of Christ be poured out to one another.