

The Local Church:
Showcase of the Love of Christ

by
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The Exalted Church

The church is the most strategic entity on the planet. It is ground zero for God's work in the world, the principal agent by which the Lord is reclaiming 'all things' for his glory.¹ Most strikingly, it is the body of Christ, whose members present a tangible manifestation of the Second Person of the Trinity. To see the church in action is to witness the work of Christ. And no sight could be more awe-inspiring: through the church, God pours his illimitable resources into creation; through the body of Christ, God fills up 'all things' with his own fullness. To love the church passionately is not to love Christ less, but to love Christ fully.

Too seldom do Christians express unbridled affection for the church. There are many reasons for this, but perhaps none is greater than their failure to grasp the richness of Paul's teaching about the church. Nowhere does the apostle's insight emerge more profoundly than in the fourth chapter of his letter to the Christians in Ephesus. What he says there, in one short paragraph, opens a window on God's sublime purposes for the church.

Gifts Beyond Measure

Paul begins, in verse 17, with a priceless revelation. 'To each one of us grace was given.' In other words, a divine distribution has taken place: to every single believer, to every member of the local church grace has been given. 'Grace' is a word used in the Bible to describe a gift too big to be deserved, too grand to be earned by human effort, and the passive verb, 'was given', explains why – because 'grace' comes from the most extravagant benefactor, namely, Christ,

¹ Paul uses the cryptic term *ta panta*, 'all things', to designate the objects of God saving and unifying work through Christ. See Ephesians 1:10, 23; 4:10; Colossians 1:16, 17.

whose ‘grace’ is generous beyond measure.² Not surprisingly, such ‘grace’ is conveyed by a special envoy, the Holy Spirit, who lavishes spiritual grace on ‘each one of us’.³

The Size of Spiritual Gifts

The gifts of grace are prodigious in size. By a simple prepositional phrase, Paul underscores the reality: ‘grace was given to each one of us *according to the measure of Christ’s gift*.’ Many commentators believe Paul is highlighting the distributive nature of the spiritual gifts: to some Christ distributes gifts of one kind, and to others gifts of another kind.⁴ While the variety of gifts is certainly undeniable, I believe Paul is pointing to something more significant. More than acknowledging the mere proportional distribution of gifts, Paul is highlighting the remarkable weight of each gift: each is sized ‘according to the measure of Christ’s gift’, in other words, according to Christ’s gift of himself.⁵

What is the measure of Christ’s gift of himself? Paul attempts to answer the question in the next three verses. In verse 8, he quotes from the Old Testament, from Psalm 68, where God pours out gifts on his people. The Lord God protects the widow (Psalm 68:5-6), he prospers the prisoner (v. 6), he nourishes people in the wilderness (vv. 7-10), he provides victory over enemies (vv. 11-14), and so on. The magnanimity of God, exhibited by his unrelenting dispersal of gifts, fits well with what Paul wants to say about Christ. In Ephesians 4, the apostle quotes from Psalm 68:18, ascribing to Christ the generosity the psalmist ascribes to God. ‘When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.’ The quotation presents

² The verb here is a divine passive, indicating that God, or preferably Christ, is the one who gives every believer at least one supernatural gift.

³ For a list of the various graces, called spiritual gifts by Paul, see Romans 12:6-9 and 1 Corinthians 12:7-11.

⁴ For this view see Harold Hoehner (*Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* [Baker: Grand Rapids (2002)]) 523, an interpretation which harmonizes well with Romans 12:3.

⁵ This interpretation resonates with the context and also avoids a tautological reading of verse 7: ‘to each one of us a spiritual gift was given according to the measure of the spiritual gift Christ gave to us.’

several exegetical challenges,⁶ but Paul's main point is clear: just as the heavenly Father is by nature self-giving, so, too, the Son, Jesus Christ, 'gives gifts to men.'

Here Paul is keen to focus, not on the abundance of divine gifts, but on the weight of one gift in particular, the gift of Christ. For this reason, he draws attention to a cryptic phrase in the psalm, 'he ascended on high' (Psalm 68:18). Anticipating our bewilderment, Paul asks rhetorically, 'In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean?' (Ephesians 4:9a); and he answers his own question, '[It means] that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth' (v. 9b). Then Paul compresses the details of this ascent and descent into a single sentence. 'He who descended [into the lower regions of the earth] is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens' (v. 10). The upward and downward movement of Christ may baffle some readers, but the overall sense is plain: Christ covered an enormous amount of ground in the delivery of his gift. Indeed, if a gift could be measured by the distance traveled to make its delivery, then Christ's gift of himself exceeds by far any gift of history. According to Paul, the point of departure for the gift was 'far above all the heavens' – doubtless the exalted throne of Christ himself at the right hand of God – and the point of delivery was 'the lower regions of the earth' – a place so low one could descend no farther, most likely the sin-laden cross on which Christ died. Two points – one so high no mind could grasp its splendor and one so low no mind could fathom its bleakness. Polar extremes, separated by a gulf infinitely wide – this is the measure of the gift of Christ. In short, Christ's gift of himself was incalculably large.

The relevance of this teaching to the church could not be more striking. 'To each one of us grace has been given *according to the measure of Christ's gift!*' Bowing our heads in humble adoration, we can barely utter an incredulous exclamation: Is it possible that we possess a gift as

⁶ For an excellent discussion of the exegetical challenges of Ephesians 4:8-10, including Paul's allegedly altered citation of Psalm 68, see Hoehner 523-37.

large as the chasm separating the ascendant from the descendant Christ, as big as the gulf dividing the Lord of heaven from the Jesus of the cross? As people in Christ, we could not be more gifted.

Why have we been given such a sizable gift?

The Purpose of Spiritual Gifts

The apostle provides a simple answer in verse 10b: so that we ‘might fill all things’. Astute readers will notice that I have altered the personal pronoun here, substituting the first person plural ‘we’ for the third person singular ‘he’ – so that *we* might fill all things. This was no affront to the sacred text. Throughout Ephesians, Paul makes it clear that what is true of Christ is also true of his people. As members of the body of Christ, *we* are filled up with all the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 3:19);⁷ as people in Christ, *we* are gifted according to the measure of Christ’s gift of himself (Ephesians 4:7); and as the church, *we* are called to fill all things with all the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 1:23). By highlighting the church’s lofty endowment, Ephesians breaks new ground in the unfolding of biblical revelation. Never have we heard anything so breathtaking: graced with a gift on the scale of Christ’s gift of himself, and called, like Christ, to fill up all things (verse 10b), the church is endowed with a uniquely lofty vocation. Moreover, when we reckon closely with the term ‘all things’, which refers throughout Ephesians to everything God has made, ‘all rule and authority and power and dominion . . . not only in this age but also in the one to come’ (Ephesians 1:21), we can see that the church being called to empty its prodigious fullness into a crater as wide as all creation. Exactly what this means, and exactly how this is done, and exactly what this accomplishes, must await the unveiling of the

⁷ See also Colossians 2:9-10: ‘For in him (Christ) the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and *you* (Christians) have been filled in him.’ As people in Christ, we have been filled by the one (Christ) who is filled with all the fullness of God.

apostle's thought in the remainder of the paragraph. But for now we must reflect on a vital insight: the spiritual gifts given to each member of the body of Christ are given in huge dimensions so as to enable the church to fill up all things. Clearly, these gifts are not given to be hoarded, but to be given away. And to be given away not, in the first instance, to the 'all things' of creation, but (as we shall see) to the other members of the church. By divine design, we are meant to give away our spiritual gifts to one another. Hence the local church is designed to be a beehive of mutual gift-giving in which members pour their massive spiritual endowment into each other.

The Use of Spiritual Gifts

Surely, this must create an organizational nightmare. Who will insure that the church becomes an organism in which members pass back and forth their spiritual gifts? For an answer, we must examine verse 11, where Paul reveals that God appoints a select army of leaders to mobilize the church for the fulfillment of its calling. 'And God gave the apostles (who establish churches where there are no churches), the prophets (who announce the mysteries and revelation of God), the evangelists (who proclaim salvation to the lost and win converts to Christ), the shepherds and teachers' (who pastor members of the church and provide biblical instruction and counsel [verse 11]). In short, God commissions foundational leaders, supplying them with foundational gifts, to plant and to prosper churches – or as Paul puts it, 'to equip the saints for the work of ministry' (verse 12). The Greek word translated here, 'to equip', means simply 'to put in order'. The foundational leaders are to organize the saints, insuring that they do 'the work of ministry' (verse 12), or literally, do the work of service. Service takes place whenever members expend themselves on behalf of others, whenever they give away their spiritual gifts.

Thus we receive from Paul an implicit standard by which leaders – pastors and teachers and evangelists and prophets – can evaluate their success as ministers: not by how quickly their church grows, nor by how many accolades their sermons elicit, nor by how much the giving of members exceeds the budget of the church, nor even by how many converts are won for Christ, but by how well – how consistently and how diligently – people give away their spiritual gifts. When the saints are giving away their gifts, they create a foundation for ‘building up the body of Christ’ (verse 12b), and everything else falls into place. A gift-giving church is a successful church.⁸

Unity in the Church

It is also a beautiful church. Paul captures the splendor of the local church in three scintillating phrases in verse 13. First, it is a church in pursuit of the most exalted prize: ‘the unity of the faith’ (verse 13a). Unity is a rare commodity in a world torn apart by conflict and strife, where on the micro-level discord undermines marriages and on the macro-level enmity divides nations. In the midst of all this relational dysfunction, one body stands out. It is the local church, where unity predominates. It is a unity cemented by a common ‘faith’, and a faith rooted in ‘the knowledge of the Son of God’ (verse 13a). Knowledge of the Son is clearly more than academic knowledge. It is transformative knowledge. To know Jesus Christ is to be transformed, and especially in the matter of unity. Members growing in the knowledge of the Son of God are members growing in their unity with one another.

To help us to understand the mechanics of this unity, Paul introduces a bold image. He gathers up the many members of the church and compresses them into a single portrait. It would seem that the apostle is indulging in a brazen act of de-individualization, reducing the many to

⁸ For this understanding of the foundational leaders in verse 11, see Hoehner 540-47.

one. And, yet, there is no hint of de-personalization, because the singular portrait is unmistakably the image of a person, and a very impressive person. It is, says Paul in the second phrase of verse 13, an image of the ‘mature manhood’ (verse 13b). The adjective ‘mature’ is a translation of the special Greek word *teleios*, which means ‘having reached its end.’⁹ The emerging portrait thus depicts the arrival of humanity at its endpoint, at its fulfillment, at its goal. In the church, therefore, we discover the portrait of a finished man.

And what does that man look like? Most historians, sifting through their mental files of biographical information, would be hard-pressed to suggest a candidate for the title of ‘A Finished Man’. But Paul shows no such hesitation. In the third phrase of verse 13, he identifies the perfect man, and does so by underscoring this man’s embodiment in the local church. To the members of the church he writes: you are attaining ‘to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’ (verse 13c). The finished man is *Christ*. He is the mature manhood, the complete man, the fulfillment of what God intended for human beings when he first fashioned them. What makes the disclosure especially remarkable is how Paul unites this man, Christ, with the church. According to the apostle, it is through the church, collectively, that the image of the perfect man is projected. This is unity taken to its highest level, where the images of many people merge into the single image of Jesus Christ.

Christ in the Church

How does such a collective portrait come together? Paul has already hinted at an answer. When people lavish their spiritual gifts on one another, they begin to resemble Christ himself, especially the self-emptying Christ of the cross. And when they empty themselves into one

⁹ Moulton and Milligan (*The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* [Hodder and Stoughton: London (1963)]) 629.

another, they pull others into a nearly seamless union with themselves. Pouring themselves out, they draw others in. Thus it is through self-emptying service, by giving away their spiritual gifts, that the church not only is bound together but also projects an image of the manhood of Jesus Christ. Or as Paul puts it in verse 13, the church grows up into ‘the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’ (verse 13).

It is immediately noticeable that the portrait of the church is not a still photo, inert and motionless, nor is the unity of the church a static unity. Rather, the church projects an image in motion, a moving picture of a mature man, a video of Christ playing on the screens of self-giving men and women, who pass back and forth spiritual gifts in a way reminiscent of the cruciform gift of Christ. To look at this self-emptying body of people in motion is to behold – in a very real sense – the Lord himself.

It is impossible to overstate the power of this spectacle. In some ways, it is similar to the process of nuclear fission, where atoms are split apart and then united with other split atoms, creating explosions of energy capable of lighting up entire cities. But the energy of nuclear fission is slight in comparison to the power of the local church. When the spiritual gifts of one member are split off and united to another, and when the process is repeated among many members, a series of ‘explosions’ takes place, reaction upon reaction, creating enough energy to electrify not just entire cities, but, more importantly, a world dying of spiritual darkness. The energy emanating from local churches, united by repeated expressions of gift-giving service, can electrify the earth. Or in Paul’s own words, it can ‘fill all things’ (verse 10); it can fill the emptiness of a spiritually starved creation. It is thus through the local church, topped up with the fullness of Christ, that God intends to ‘fill all in all’ (Ephesians 1:23).¹⁰

¹⁰ Note the teaching of Paul in Ephesians 1 that from the beginning God’s plan was to bring ‘all things’ under one head, namely, Christ (1:10). Through Christ, God would reclaim for his glory ‘things in heaven and things on earth’.

Antidote to the World

The local church is thus an antidote to a world mired in social dysfunction. All around us, people are trying to put one foot in front of the other in pursuit of a meaningful existence, but instead they are sinking into uncertainty and despair. Craving companionship, they find only loneliness. Seeking assurance, they are riddled by self-doubt. Yearning for security, they are wracked by fears. Postmodern men and women are quintessentially the weary ones, and yet they push forward, looking for solace in anything that might distract them from their present emptiness – a screen, a beer, a dalliance. When those things, too, fail and when desperation begins to mount, they wish – indeed they pray – that someone, anyone, who has walked their path before them might point them to something beautiful, something substantial, something transcendent . . . something to banish discouragement and provide reason for hope.¹¹

There is reason for hope, only one reason – a solitary spring able to refresh parched human hearts. It is the body of Christ, the local church. To catch a glimpse of its members in action, pouring out their God-given gifts, showcasing in the relentless use of their spiritual gifts the self-emptying service of Jesus himself, is to witness more light by exponents than anyone could hope to take in. Above all, it is to witness what society desperately lacks, a fullness without which people wither and die, a fullness for which people (whether they realize it or not) earnestly long. It is a fullness inundating the local church. This is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Where would this divine reclamation project take place? In the church, says Paul. God has ‘put all things under his (Christ’s) feet and has given him (Christ) as head over all things *to the church*’ (1:22). Home base for God’s work in the world, the place where Christ is uniting ‘all things’ under his headship, is the local church. According to God’s plan, the local church could not be more strategic.

¹¹ A few of the ideas contained in the last two paragraphs appeared in a different form in *The Church: God’s New People* [Crossway: Wheaton (2011)], a book I authored for The Gospel Coalition, and used here by permission of Crossway, a publishing company of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60187, www.crossway.org.

Paul now hammers home the truth by contrasting its alternative. Lies, not the truth, rule contemporary life. Like gullible ‘children’, people are ‘tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes’ (verse 14). The operative term here is ‘deceitful schemes’. People are being deceived about what it means to be human. They are being fed the lie that true satisfaction can be found by grasping after their own desires apart from God. This is no different from what brought down our ancestors Adam and Eve. They succumbed to the most famous deception in history: to satisfy their deepest longings, to soothe their restless hearts, to boost their sagging identities, to calm their frightened minds, they grasped after whatever false doctrine slithered in their direction. Perhaps it was a forbidden fruit, or an illicit relationship, or a dodgy scheme. Whatever it was, they took it, grasped it, consumed it. But tragically, slithering things never deliver on the promise of personal fulfillment. In fact, the enticements of self-grasping only toss us about like the waves, emptying us, never fulfilling us. They torpedo our human relationships, damaging our interactions with people, and, worst of all, they sever our connection to God, whose affection is more precious to us than life.

The Love of Christ

But the legions of empty ones are not without hope. Not if there is a church in their community, a church filled with the fullness of Christ, whose members empty themselves into one another, giving away massive spiritual gifts and reproducing among themselves the self-emptying image of Christ’s love. Love – here is a word we have not yet encountered in Paul’s tribute to the local church in Ephesians 4. But that changes in the exhortation of verse 15a: ‘speak the truth in love.’ Love is a term that sums up everything Paul has been saying. He has

withheld the word until now, probably because it was as superficially perceived in his day as it is in ours. He wants to fill the word with substantial meaning, and has now laid the groundwork to do so. He has called the church to give away its spiritual gifts, which is the perfect demonstration of Christ's self-giving love. It is also the truest expression of what it means to be human, in contrast to the deception of worldly self-grasping. Hence Paul can distill his teaching to a single instruction: 'be truthful in love'.¹² This is not a call to temper the truth with love, as though the truth were a harsh commodity in need of the soft packaging of love.¹³ Rather it is a call to embody the truth as it is epitomized by love.¹⁴ In other words, Paul is calling Ephesian Christians to confront the deception of worldly self-grasping with its opposite, the self-giving love of Christ, which is the true way to be human.

Here, then, is a glorious alternative for the fractured families of earth: a new family of families, called out of the families of the earth, to project in their interactions with each other the self-emptying love of Christ. It is only in the church, says Paul, where the world will behold such a family 'growing up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ' (verse 15b). And just to insure his readers do not miss the magnitude of this truth, the apostle recapitulates his teaching in Ephesians 4, using the slightly different terms of verse 15. 'The whole body,' exults Paul, is 'joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped' (every member being equipped by God to unite to other members) 'when each part is working properly' (every member pouring his or her spiritual gift into the others), 'makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love' (every member resolved to give away, in love, his or her spiritual gift, so that the whole body grows into a mature manhood, imaging the perfect man Jesus Christ).

¹² This is a literal translation of the Greek in verse 15.

¹³ This view takes the preposition *en*-phrase instrumentally, producing the rendering 'speak the truth *with* love'.

¹⁴ This view takes the prepositional *en*-phrase almost exegetically, producing the rendering 'speak the truth *embodied in* love.'

Summary and Conclusion

From the back end of Paul's teaching in Ephesians 4, we can now rightly assess its seemingly grandiose beginning. To every new person in Christ, we may recall, a gift of incalculable dimensions is given, comparable in magnitude to Christ's gift of himself. Why are Christians so spectacularly endowed? In the course of the paragraph, Paul has delivered an exciting answer. God has equipped us for a task of cosmic significance: the filling up of all things for his glory. It is a strategic task. The things of creation, and especially the human inhabitants of creation, are spinning out of control, battered by self-grasping ways, tossed to and fro by waves promising perfect rides, but delivering only the wipeouts of emptiness and despair. Humans need salvation. The sin of their rebellion against God needs to be expunged, restoring them to a right standing before their Maker, and the emptiness of their hearts needs to be filled by what God intended for them in the beginning. Putting humans right – that is the task at hand. And it is something only God can do. Remarkably, and in a display of unparalleled might, God accomplishes the task through the gift of his Son on the cross. God then perpetuates his work through the church, by drawing reclaimed sinners into the orbit of his Son and arranging them perfectly in the body¹⁵ and endowing them with sizable gifts, so that when those gifts are given away the church becomes an exhibit of what it means to be human, a motion picture of the self-emptying love of the finished man Jesus Christ.

The local church is a showcase spectacular of the love of Christ.

¹⁵ See 1 Corinthians 12:18.