

*Building Biblical*  
COMMUNITY *in* CHRIST

***Body Building 201***

Ephesians 4:14-16

Paul's comparison of the church to the human body is one of the most masterful and insightful metaphors in the Bible. In fact, there are so many points of comparison that we couldn't begin to address them all in one short message. Latter this summer we'll be taking this image of the church as a body and developing it in greater depth.

I'm sure that all of us can think of times when one or more parts of your own body were malfunctioning. The other day I found myself trying to pick up an object with my left hand. Within seconds, it began to slip through my grasp due to a thumb that has been dislocated over the past couple of years. I'll never forget walking with Mary Alice, Justin and our dog on Halloween evening, 2003. I suddenly slipped on a wet bank and tried to catch myself with my left hand. The impact dislocated the bone in my left thumb. I was rather surprised when I looked at it. There was really no pain. But the impression it left was very fitting for Halloween! Add a black cape and a little make-up, and I might have won the best costume contest at Candyland. Even my dog seemed a little scared!

Hardly without a thought, my body went into motion and I quickly snapped the bone back into place. There...it's done! Problem solved! Or so I thought. But for the last two years, that simple dislocation has made it difficult to securely grasp objects with my left hand. My left thumb simply doesn't work like it used to. And every time I go to lift something with my left hand, I'm reminded of just how important each member of our body really is.

In the passage we just read, Paul begins and ends his thought with an emphasis on the indispensable role that *each one* plays in the Body of Christ, the church. Notice what he says in verse 7: "*But to each one of us grace has been given...*" Then, at the end of this section, in verse 16, he concludes: "*From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*"

These two verses mark off a section in this letter in which Paul is talking about the *growth* of the Body, the church. We might say he is talking about

“body building.” Just as an individual might sign up at the local athletic club and commit to a *process* of body building so as to achieve the end *product* of a healthy, harmoniously working physique, so Paul outlines for us here both the process and the purpose of the Body of Christ growing and building itself up in love.

We cannot underestimate the importance of these verses for our church. This is the “job description” of the church; not only of the universal church, but of each individual local church. You ask, “What is the vision of Central Bible Church?” The answer is clear. The Bible answers that question by giving us both the *what* and the *how*.

The *what* is found in Matthew 28:19-20 –

*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*

Though we have outlined it here at CB with five distinct purpose areas (worship, mission, fellowship, nurture and service), the essential is right here: “to make disciples.” That’s the “what?” We are to “make disciples.”

But then Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 4 gives us the *how*. This can only come about as the Body is equipped with a view towards each and every part using the gifts of grace that God has given for the building up of the whole.

So let’s explore just what this looks like. Paul here in Ephesians 4 explains the *process* of “body building” in verses 7-12. He then describes for us the end *product* or *purpose* of “body building” in verses 13-16.

We’ve seen that this entire process of body building is dependent upon four categories of gifted individuals that Paul refers to in verse 11 – the apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers. These gifted individuals can be compared, as we saw last week, to the four corners of a jigsaw puzzle. All the pieces of a puzzle are indispensable to the final product, but the four corner pieces are foundational. When constructing the puzzle, you usually start with the four corner pieces that provide perspective and symmetry enabling you to put together the rest.

These four gifted individuals are like that. Paul mentions first the *apostles*. An apostle is simply a delegate, a messenger, one sent forth with orders. The word is used for example in John 13:16 with this idea – “*A servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him.*”<sup>i</sup> An apostle, then, is “one who is sent.”

Beyond the general category of “those who are sent,” the Bible refers more specifically to the “*apostles of the Lord.*” This special category referred only to those who had seen the resurrected Christ and had been directly commissioned (or sent) by Christ.

I personally believe that Paul is referring here in Ephesians 4 to the apostles in the more general sense, i.e. “those who are sent.” This, of course, would include the apostles directly commissioned by Christ. Last week we had the encouragement of commissioning Dan and Daryl Collins to the specific work of equipping others to do the work of missions. In this sense, they are *apostles*, sent out by us with a particular task in mind. And they will carry out that apostolic role in equipping others for the work of ministry in another culture.

Next, Paul mentions those who are *prophets*. Prophets are not necessarily proclaimers of doom and gloom. They are not all like John the Baptist with clothes made of camels hair and who eat locusts and honey as a regular diet. They are rather those with the supernatural ability to receive and speak truth given by divine revelation from God. Both the apostles (in the sense of those directly commissioned by Christ), and the prophets (in the sense of those who receive direct revelation), are said by Paul in Ephesians 2:20 to form the foundation of the church. But I personally believe that, just as for the category of apostles, Paul here speaks of prophets in a broader sense, referring to all those who take revealed truth and authoritatively apply it through the means of preaching.

The next person mentioned is the *evangelist*. This gifted person is mentioned by name only three times in the New Testament. Here and in Acts 21:8 of Philip and in 2 Timothy 4:5 of young Timothy. The evangelist is one who has the God-given ability to present the Gospel with unusual effectiveness.

And then lastly are mentioned the *pastor-teachers*. While the evangelist introduces others to Christ, the pastor-teacher nurtures them in Christ. The evangelist is more like the obstetrician, the pastor-teacher more like the

pediatrician. But be sure not to confuse the individual gifted as a *pastor-teacher* with a particular church office. On our pastoral staff not all are necessarily gifted as pastor-teachers, and not all those who have the gift of pastor-teacher in our church body are on our pastoral staff.

There you have it...the four “corner pieces of the puzzle,” the four foundational gifts (or better gifted individuals) given to the church. But to fully appreciate the role of these gifted individuals mentioned in verse 11, we need to put this in context with what precedes. And this is where Paul’s words become a little more difficult to understand. Notice what he says:

*This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men." (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) Ephesians 4:8-11*

The various interpretations of what Paul is saying here are “all over the map.” I don’t want to bore you with unnecessary details, so let me cut to the chase. Some hold that Christ, after dying on the cross, descended into hell from where he led certain demonic powers captive. Actually, I believe the that NIV version has the best translation. Christ did not descend into Hades or hell after his death on the cross. That teaching is found nowhere in the Bible. Paul is simply saying that before ascending to heaven, Jesus Christ descended to the “lower regions,” i.e. the earth.

Paul is here quoting Psalm 68:18 which says this:

*When you ascended on high,  
you led captives in your train;  
you received gifts from men,  
even from the rebellious--  
that you, O LORD God, might dwell there.*

This psalm is a song of praise to God’s majesty describing His victorious march from Egypt where he redeemed his people to Jerusalem, his chosen place of residence. In fact, this psalm may have been composed when David brought the Ark of the Covenant up into Jerusalem as recorded in 2 Samuel 6.

However, when you compare this psalm to Paul's citation in Ephesians 4:8, you see rather blatant discrepancy. Paul says that God *gave* gifts to men – these prophets, apostles, evangelists and pastor-teachers – whereas the psalmist says that God *received* gifts from men. What is the solution? And more than that, why does Paul even cite this Psalm? The answer to those questions is not only interesting, but helpful for discovering the uniqueness of how we function as a church in contrast to Israel in the Old Testament.

The background of Psalm 68 seems to be found in Numbers 8:6-19 and 18:6-9. In those passages we find that the Levites, who were devoted to the service of the Lord, were *taken by God from among* the Israelites and then *given back by God to* the Israelites to perform the service of the tabernacle. For example, in Number 18:6 we read:

*I myself have selected your fellow Levites from among the Israelites as a gift to you, dedicated to the LORD to do the work at the Tent of Meeting.*

Paul then takes this psalm in its historical context and applies it to the church. The God of Israel victoriously received and gave gifts in the Levites who performed the service of the tabernacle and later the Temple. And in a similar way, the victorious Christ, after conquering death, received and gave gifts to the church in these gifted individuals. The difference is that in the OT, the Levites job was to *do* the work of ministry. In the New Testament, the job of these gifted individuals is not to do the work of ministry, but to *equip others* to do the work of ministry. Put in other terms, the role of the gifted individuals of Ephesians 4:11 is not to *monopolize* the ministry, but to *multiply* the ministry by equipping the Body of Christ.

In any church, to the degree that this ministry of multiplication is not taking place, there are at least two potential problems. Either the ministry is being monopolized by those mentioned in Ephesians 4:11, or the people in the pews are paralyzed and not available or equipped to do the ministry. A recent Gallop pole indicates that only about 10% of the people in evangelical churches are active in ministry, but about 40% say they would like to be but don't know how or have never been asked. Somehow we're not getting it in terms of our job description that Paul gives us here in Ephesians 4!

On the other hand, when the ministry is not monopolized and the laity is not paralyzed (by the way, the word "laity" has not negative overtones, it

literally means “the people”), an amazing thing takes place – there is unity, maturity, stability and mutuality in the Body as described in verses 13-16!

But more specifically, *how* does this take place? Now last week we focused on the specific role of these four foundational gifts (or gifted individuals) mentioned in verse 11. They are to *repair* and *prepare* God’s people. Today, I want to focus on the role of God’s people. Their role – *your* role – is to do the work of service.

What is ministry, or service (as it is translated here in the NIV)? Luke 12:37, which uses the same word that Paul uses here, can help us answer that question. Notice what Jesus says:

*Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them.* Luke 12:35-38

This is an amazing passage. Jesus uses a very vivid term to describe what our posture should be in light of his soon return: “be dressed ready for service.” Literally he is saying: “let your clothes be girded up around you.” This was the ancient way of calling one to service. The amazing twist in the story is that, when the master arrives, *he* dresses himself to serve *us!* -- “*he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them.*”

The actual word for service in this passage, and the same word that is used in Ephesians 4, is here translated “wait on.” And that is what authentic ministry is. It is a table waiting term. The word comes from two different words meaning “dust” and “through” – literally, “through the dust.” It is a table waiting term. It is a term that describes the humble character of ministry.

Many believe that they can’t be involved in ministry because they are not “gifted” as someone else is, or are not mature enough, or have not yet attained a certain spiritual stature. But I’m reminded of D.L. Moody’s words, “We may easily be too big for God to use, but never too small!”

Why? Because of the very nature of service. Service (ministry) is moving through the dust to serve another to the glory of God.

So don't make excuses! Look at those that God used throughout the Bible. The vast majority were either dysfunctional or came from dysfunctional backgrounds, or had other major blind spots in their lives. Abraham was old, Jacob was insecure, Joseph was abused, Moses stuttered, Gideon was poor, Samson was codependent, Rahab was immoral, David had an affair and all kinds of family problems, Elijah was suicidal, Jeremiah was depressed, Jonah was reluctant, Naomi was a widow, John the Baptist was eccentric to say the least, Peter was impulsive and hot-tempered, Martha worried a lot, the Samaritan woman had several failed marriages, Zacchaeus was unpopular, Thomas had doubts, Paul had poor health, and Timothy was timid. What a bunch of misfits, but God used them all in ministry! He will use you too if you stop making excuses!<sup>ii</sup>

Finally you may ask: How does each part discover his or her most effective area of ministry? Let me answer this way. Unfortunately, Paul does not attach to his letter a "spiritual gifts inventory quiz" to help you and me discover what our specific gifts are (picture). We do have one of those in our "Discovering Your Ministry Class" and I believe it is very helpful.

But we also emphasize this: *ministry is both general and specific*. Your specific ministry should be according to your gifting. And the best way to discover your gifting is to be involved in many areas of general ministry. What do I mean by that? For many of the spiritual gifts mentioned in the Bible (teaching, helps, exhortation, evangelism, etc.), there is also a call to *all* of us to perform a "general" ministry in that area. For example, Colossians 3:16 encourages every one of us to instruct each other. Hebrews 10 tells us all to exhort each other. And Matthew 28, the verse we have already referred to, tells us all to go and make disciples, i.e. evangelize. In fact, it is in obeying Scripture and being involved in these "general" ministries, that we discover best our spiritual giftedness and our specific ministry.

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<sup>i</sup> Paul is likely referring to apostles in this sense when he writes about the "*apostles of the churches*" in 2 Corinthians 8:23

<sup>ii</sup> Adapted from Rick Warren, "The Purpose Driven Life," *Zondervan* (October 2002), p. 233.