

Ephesians 4:7-16

The Gifts for Maturity (Part 1)

As we saw in **vv. 1-6**, Paul longs that we would not only know and be strengthened by God's glorious work of reconciling us in Christ, which rooted in his eternal love for us, but that we would also grow and mature in Christ so that we would "walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called" in Christ. Paul told us that God's work of reconciliation in Christ has produced a unity among believers because we have been incorporated or united to Christ by his Spirit. It is a Spirit produced unity in which we have been bound together in peace, both with God and with one another. We do not produce this unity, but we are called to make every effort to "preserve" this unity. To do so, we are not alone. Christ has given us his Spirit to produce in and through us the "fruit of the Spirit" so that we now have certain characteristics of humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance toward one another in love.

But now we must ask, "What means has Christ given to the church through which the Spirit might work to preserve this unity among us so that we might "grow up" or "mature" into the full image of the mature man, Jesus Christ?"

The answer Paul gives is the ministry of the Word and sacraments. These are the external, concrete means given to the body of Christ to bring us to maturity in Christ.

In **vv. 1-6**, Paul has emphasized the unity of believers in Christ. It is a unity of one body and one Spirit. It has one hope for all because it is grounded in one Lord and one faith. We have all received this same union through one baptism into Christ so that through grace all glory will ultimately go to our one God and Father who is over all and through all and in all.

But now, in **vv. 7-16**, Paul turns his emphasis ("but") from unity to diversity. But not to a "diversity" that destroys "unity" but a diversity that entirely contributes to the unity of the body. Christ has given different gifts to each member of the body so that those gifts may be used by each member to build up and enrich the whole body of Christ. As Paul taught us in **1 Cor. 12**, the gifts of the Spirit have not been given for personal, selfish use but for use among the body of Christ.

To make a connection with what has gone before, Paul begins by reminding us that "each one of us" (individually) has been given gifts by Christ (**v. 7; cf. Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-31**). Christ sovereignly distributes gifts to all members of his body; none misses out on Christ's bounty. These gifts or graces are only used among the body because of the "grace" that is given by the ascended Christ. Not all believers have the same gifts. There is a variety, a diversity among the body. But we each use the gifts that Christ has graciously given us for the overall maturity of the whole body of Christ. In **1 Cor. 12:11**, Paul stresses the sovereign work of the Spirit who apportions each individual believer as he wills and in **Rom. 12:3** that God measures out different degrees of the measure of these gifts upon different believers. In Ephesians we see that the source of these gifts is the ascended Christ upon the whole body. The New Covenant, unlike the Old Covenant, sees the entire body (male and female, young and old, Jew and Gentile, slave and free) being gifted equally as a kingly priesthood of all believers.

But note that Paul emphasizes that the gifts that are given to the body by the ascended Christ are given according to or in conformity to "the measure of Christ's gift." But what was Christ's gift to us? First, and foremost, it was the gift of his own life in descending to this world and conquering our deadly foe: sin itself at the cross. It was at his cross (our punishment) that Christ

has reconciled us to one another (**2:13-15**) and has brought us to God with whom we now have peace (**2:16-22**).

Paul quotes from **Ps. 68:18** to show us a typological fulfillment of God's previous work of redemption. In **Ps. 68**, the Psalmist is calling upon Yahweh, the rider upon the clouds of the heavens (**vv. 4, 32-33**), to come and rescue his people. In faith, the Psalmist gives retells the work of redemptive history in remembrance of how God has acted in the past. It is upon that previous act that the Psalmist not only praises God but calls upon him to act in a similar fashion in his present circumstances. If God has acted in the past to gloriously deliver his people and make provision for them, then he will act now. The Psalmist rehearses the mighty deliverance of God who in the exodus delivered his people from bondage and brought them to Mt. Sinai. There he caused the whole earth to shake as his eternal, heavenly presence came down upon the mountain to visit with Moses. The kings of the earth scattered at the hand of Almighty God and upon choosing Mt. Zion as his resting place, Yahweh ascends to the high mountain leading his captives in his glorious train. In **v. 18**, the Psalmist praises God who has led his captives in triumphal procession to his resting place on the temple mount.

Paul sees the work of Christ as the greater fulfillment of God's triumphal ascension to his throne in earthly Jerusalem. Christ has brought about the greater fulfillment in his ascension to the heavenly Jerusalem upon which he then shares the glorious treasures of his victory with his people (**cf. Eph. 1:19-22**).

The key phrase of the Psalm that Paul focuses upon is "and he gave gifts to men." Many have wondered about Paul's use of the OT in this verse because it seems that Paul has changed the original wording to fit his purposes ("you have received gifts among/from men"). In the original Hebrew and in the LXX, the people give gifts to Yahweh. But in Paul's quotation, Christ is given gifts to men.

One argument that has been given by scholars is that Paul is quoting from a variant reading from another tradition and using that variant form in light of its fulfillment in Christ. That variant reading was in fact very important to the latter rabbinic tradition where this text became associated with the celebration of Pentecost and sung in the Jewish synagogues in celebration of Moses receiving the Law on Mt. Sinai. In latter Jewish traditions, the feast of Pentecost became associated with Moses' reception of the Law on Mt. Sinai and this Psalm (**68:18**) became associated not with Yahweh's ascent, but with Moses' ascent on Mt. Sinai where he received the Law from God. Christians show the fulfillment of this feast on the Christian day of Pentecost where Christ ascends into heaven and pours out, not the a new law, but the promised Spirit upon his people in order to write God's law upon their hearts.

Another scholar has noticed that many early Jewish scholars saw **Ps. 68:18** as a commentary on **Num. 8:6-19; 18:6** where Yahweh takes a portion of the people (Levites) from among the nation of Israel to himself only to then given the back to the people as his gift in the service of the tabernacle. Therefore, **Ps. 68:18** is referring to the ministers or priests that God as given to his people to serve them on his behalf. Both of these suggestions together may in fact be a helpful way of understanding Paul's usage of **Ps. 68**, because in **vv. 11-15** Paul shifts his previous focus upon the gifts of the whole body in **v. 7** to gifts of ministers through whom the gospel is revealed, declared and taught so that the whole body will be built up in the faith. As the ministers of the church proclaim and teach the gospel of Christ, the body is matured in the doctrines of the one faith so that they are no longer children who are easily deceived but they are matured and strengthened through the means of grace so that they can now use their individual gifts to contribute to the building up of the body of Christ (**v. 16**).

After Paul quotes **Ps. 68:18** he now expounds on its meaning in **vv. 9-10** to show how Christ fulfills the Psalm through his ascension and Spirit-bestowal of gifts upon his people. Paul directs our attention to two verbs: he ascended (**vv. 9-10**) and he gave (**v. 11**).

"He ascended" originally applied to God who came to Sinai and gloriously ascended to Mt. Zion. In latter Judaism it referred to Moses ascending to Mt. Sinai to receive the stone tablets of the Law. But here it is applied to Christ who ascends from earth into the highest heavens (**cf. 1:20-21**).

Immediately upon referring to Christ's ascension, Paul discusses Christ's descension. Some have argued (along with **1 Pet. 3:9**), going back to the ancient church, that Christ's descension "into the lower parts of the earth" refer to his descending into the underworld or the realm of death. The Apostles' Creed says, "He descended into hell."

Luther agreed with the traditional church's interpretation of Christ's descent into hell. Luther believed that Christ went to Hades/Hell/Sheol to pronounce his victory over Satan and the powers of darkness and to pronounce their soon destruction. This would be the first act of Christ's exaltation, rather than the last act of his humiliation.

Calvin (and most of the Reformed church with him) has understood Christ's descent into hell figuratively rather than literally. Calvin interpreted this act as referring to the pain and suffering of the full wrath and condemnation of God as a result of God placing the elect's sin upon Christ at the cross. In other words, Jesus died and suffered the "pains" of hell. Calvin then interpreted this figuratively (rather than literally with Luther) to refer to the judgment that Christ experienced for our sin. If man must suffer eternal punishment in Hell for their sins, then the one who takes our judgment upon himself must also experience an eternal punishment in Hell. But since Jesus Christ is not only man, but also God then he can experience the eternal punishment of Hell in one moment in satisfaction of our sin.

Note how the Reformed Creeds interpret this:

Heidelberg Catechism Q. 44:

Q44: Why is it added: "He descended into hell"?

A44: That in my greatest temptations I may be assured that Christ my Lord, by His inexpressible anguish, pains and terrors, which He suffered in His soul on the cross and before, has redeemed me from the anguish and torment of hell.

Notice the pastoral aspect of this confession. We can be assured of our salvation even in the midst of our greatest temptations because our Lord truly suffered in his very soul the full torments of hell for me.

The Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 50 interprets this in a little different way, more in accord with Ephesians 4:9:

Q50: Wherein consisted Christ's humiliation after his death?

A50: Christ's humiliation after his death consisted in his being buried, and continuing in the state of the dead, and under the power of death till the third day; which hath been otherwise expressed in these words, he descended into hell.

When Christ descended into Hell he simply continued under the power of death until the third day. Certainly, this would not exclude Calvin's understanding of the creed. Some would also

include the pains of Gethsemane, but I would limit them to what Christ suffered for us as a result of our sin being placed upon him at Golgotha.

While the Reformed church has tended to lean toward the "figurative" interpretation of Calvin, I wouldn't necessarily rule out the literal as an option that would be outside the scope of biblical theology. However, even if we were to speak of a literal interpretation, it is not simply that Christ went to Hell but that he suffered the fullness of God's wrath (however you understand that) so that you don't have to.

One thing to note is that the Reformed confessions are in agreement that this article of the creed belongs to us (as Protestants) and that we should not fear a full confession that Christ descended to Hell to suffer for my sins the fullness of God's wrath so that I do not have to suffer one flicker of flame but rather I might call upon God as my father who loves me with an incomprehensible love.

Therefore, **Ephesians 4:9** may in fact be understood as Christ's descended into the lower parts of the earth to take our punishment (condemnation and death) upon himself but we should include the entire work of humiliation which began at his incarnation (**Phil. 2:6-11**) where Christ first humbled himself by taking our flesh upon his divine person and nature. But Christ's descent into our flesh also includes his greater work of humiliation in that by taking on our flesh he also took on our judgment so that through the shedding of his blood our sins have been paid in full and for all who are in Christ Jesus there is therefore no condemnation (**Rom. 8:1**).

Jesus Christ is therefore the perfect and complete fulfillment of **Ps. 68:18** because he alone has descended from heaven to perfectly complete our salvation and then ascended into the true heavenly Jerusalem to the place of highest supremacy of exaltation and enthronement that he might subject all things under his feet and fill all things with his glorious presence (**1:20-23**).

Now, the goal of God's eternal plan of redemption is that he is working everything according to his ordained plan so that he might sum up all things in the heavens and all things on the earth in Christ Jesus (**1:9-10**) and so that in his body he might fill all things (**1:23**). As we have already seen the way Christ is accomplishing this eternal goal of summing up and filling up all things is through his unified body to whom he gives gifts to supply their every need to accomplish the growth and perfection of his own body (**v. 13**). Having perfectly achieved dominion over all powers through his victorious ascent into heaven, he now sovereignly distributes gifts to the members of his body. It is through the building up of his own body (the church) that he is fulfilling the work of summing up and filling up the entire universe (the whole creation) with his sovereign rule over all things.

But what gifts has Christ given to his church through which the Spirit may work to enable them to use their own gifts and develop those gifts to bring about the growth of the body in love (**v. 16**)?

To answer this question, we now turn to **v. 11**.

V. 11 -- 4 kinds of gifts "apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastor/teachers."