

Ephesians 4 (Gafcon-2)
October 24, 2013
John W. Yates III



What a joy and privilege it is for me to be able to open God's word with you this morning. As we begin I hope that you will take out your conference packet and open it to the text of Ephesians on page 5.

My assignment is the 4th chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. As you know there are 6 chapters in this glorious letter, but we have only 5 days together. One had to be left out and the lot fell to chapter 3.

We cannot, however, simply set chapter 3 aside because it plays a key role in the development of the letter and leads us into chapter 4. So I'd like to take you there for just a moment.

At the beginning of chapter 3 Paul does something rather strange. He interrupts himself. Having declared the glory of the gospel and the wonder of new life in Christ in chapters 1 and 2 he interrupts himself at the beginning of chapter 3 in order to share his personal testimony, to bear witness to the power of the gospel in his own life and vocation as the Apostle to the Gentiles.

We know from the East African Revival the power of personal testimony in the work of evangelism and discipleship. Apparently Paul knew this as well!

Having shared from his own story he breaks into prayer in v.14. A man overwhelmed by the goodness of God cannot help but burst into prayer. And what a prayer it is.

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may

strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

As we read this prayer today we hear the breathless wonder of the man who prayed it. It does not contain beautiful poetry nor is it elegantly written. It is in fact a translator's nightmare – two run-on sentences filled with fits and starts. And yet the deep truths imbedded within it are enough to stop us in our tracks.

With this prayer Paul draws the first half of his letter to a close and gives an introduction to the second half. He is moving from a focus on who God is and what he has done to what God expects of his people.

This prayer acts a bridge between the two halves of the letter. But it also acts as an anchor at the center – holding the entire content of the letter in place by tethering it to the being, power and love of the one, true God.

After pausing for breath, Paul continues in 4:1,

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Having transported the Ephesians to the throne of God in prayer Paul drops them quickly back to earth – but not just to earth, he brings them into prison with him. That brief mention of prison says it all: the gospel has consequences – we must face

them and embrace them if we are going to live out God's glorious calling on our lives.

These first two verses of chapter 4 set the stage for the remainder of the letter. Paul is moving from gospel proclamation to gospel exhortation.

Here there is no room for selfish pride – so he calls us to humility. Here there is no room for roughness or condescension – so he calls us to gentleness. Here there is no possibility of instant gratification, only the long, slow road of faithful obedience – so he calls us to patience. Here there are no autonomous individuals, only the company of the redeemed – so he urges us to bear with one another in love.

With these two verses Paul invites us into the life of Christian discipleship, the specifics of which he will unpack over the next three chapters.

As we consider this glorious calling to be disciples of Christ here in chapter 4 I would like to do so under three headings. In vv.3-6 we will consider the nature of our unity. In verses 7-16 we will consider the goal of maturity, and then in vv. 17 through to 5:2 we will consider what it means to walk in the way of Christ.

We begin with the nature of our unity.

Verse 3:

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

The first thing to notice in this paragraph is that Christian unity is a gift from God. It is not something we construct. It is something we maintain. The unity of the church is the unity of the Spirit who has drawn us together through the bond of peace.

That peace is almost certainly not a *feeling* of tranquillity. Paul has already defined peace for us in 2:14-18, where he says of our Lord Jesus, “he himself is our peace... His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross...”

The “bond of peace” that unites us is the blood of the cross. It is the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, by which he reconciled us to God and to one another.

Christian unity, therefore, is not something that we generate. It is a gift we receive when we turn to faith in Christ and are imbedded in his body, the Church. It is the Spirit of Christ who brings this about.

Unity is a gift from God. That is our first observation. The second is that unity is rooted in God’s own being. Notice the Trinitarian structure of this short paragraph.

Paul roots our unity in the Holy Spirit in v.4. We are one people through the Spirit, who bears us up and calls us forward in the hope of new creation and eternal life. Think Romans 8.

Paul then roots our unity in the Lord Jesus in v.5. Through him we are reconciled to God the Father and share with him as co-heirs of the kingdom. Faith and baptism, mentioned here, are the internal and external means by which we are united to Christ and thereby to one another.

Finally, Paul roots our unity in God the Father in v.6. The Father who is sovereign over all things has welcomed us through his son into the mystery of his own being.

To top it all off, the perfection of this fellowship that we now share is emphasized by the seven-fold repetition of the word “one.” There is no doubt in Paul’s mind that we have been united with God – Father, Son and Spirit – and united to one another through God’s eternal being.

Christian unity is a gift from God. Christian unity is rooted in God's being. Finally, Christian unity is a reflection of God to the world.

Here we begin to see the practical significance of Christian unity. If our unity is rooted in God's own being then our life together is a reflection to the world around us of the integrity of God himself. We are like a mirror, reflecting the beauty and glory of God to the world. This is one of the key reasons why Paul urges the Ephesians to maintain their unity.

Now, there is an apparent tension in this passage between the fact of our unity as a God-given gift and Paul's command to pursue it. This tension is well-captured in the ESV translation where we are told in v.4 to "maintain" the unity of the Spirit and then in v.13 to "attain" the unity of the Spirit. Which is it? In typically Pauline fashion it is both!

I think the analogy of the mirror is helpful here.

I wonder if you have ever had the misfortune of breaking a mirror? In my case it was a large, wooden-framed mirror dropped in the process of being hung on a wall.

Falling to the ground the mirror shattered into dozens of pieces, but because of the way it had been mounted the fractured pieces remained nestled in the wooden frame. It was a shattered unity. And in its shattered state it could only reflect a distorted image.

Our unity is like this mirror. The Spirit frames the Church, uniting us one to another as a gift for the purpose of reflecting God to the world. When the mirror is whole and spotless it reflects the beauty of God and the light of his glory into the darkness of our broken world.

This unity, however, is easily shattered by pride, roughness, tribalism and individualism, with the result that the image of God we reflect to the world is

distorted and ugly. How many times have we heard non-believers say, “I like your Jesus, but I do not like your Church”?

When we are fragmented we preach a gospel of divine incoherence. That is why Paul urges his friends in Ephesus to maintain the unity established by the Spirit and to work at all times to keep it and repair it whenever it is fractured.

These three observations on the nature of our unity have significant practical application for us here at Gafcon.

If unity is a gift and if it flows from the being of God himself then any effort to unite God’s people *must* begin with a humble belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ and the very specific way in which he unites us to God the Father and to one another through the reconciling work of the cross.

The kind of unity Paul describes for the Church is *impossible* apart from the gospel. To seek unity apart from the gospel is, therefore, spiritually dangerous because it seeks to do the work of Christ for him. When we seek to construct what only Christ by grace can impart we engage in a form of idolatry.

For these reasons, efforts to unify the Church are, at one and the same time, deeply important and full of human temptation.

Christian unity can be a marvelous expression of the grace and goodness of Jesus Christ. Or it can be the futile expression of human idolatry. A patchwork unity of fractured bits of glass built on the back of human endeavor reflects a broken image of God to the world. On the other hand, a humble, Christ-centered unity, gratefully received as a work of the Spirit reflects the glory of God to a world in need.

What have we said thus far? Christian unity is a gift from God. Christian unity is rooted in God’s being. And, finally, Christian unity is a reflection of God to the world. This is the nature of our unity. I am halfway through my time and have covered precisely six verses! We better move along!

We move on to the next section and then phase of our glorious calling as disciples of Christ: this is the goal of maturity in vv. 7-16. The key verse is v.13, where the growing Church is described as “mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

Our first observation in this section is that maturity requires diversity. For the body of Christ to grow as a coherent whole we depend on one another’s gifts.

This is clear in v.7 as Paul moves from a focus on unity to a focus on diversity: “But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.” We are so familiar with Paul’s lists of spiritual gifts elsewhere (1 Cor. 12:4; Rom. 12:6) – given for the building up of the body – that we immediately understand the broader context of what he is saying.

But here he takes a slightly different tack. Rather than listing a variety of gifts he steps back into Psalm 68:18 in order to offer a Christological explanation of the ground of all gifting by the Spirit. In doing so he continues the Trinitarian emphasis of the previous verses by showing that the grace given to each one of us for the building up of the body is a direct result of the incarnation and glorious ascension of Jesus Christ.

Having ascended to reign at God’s right hand, Jesus sends the Spirit to impart his grace to all believers. The diversity of each particular grace brings about the beautiful unity of the Church. Maturity requires diversity – we need each other if we are to grow in Christ.

Our second observation is that maturity flows from the word of God.

Paul continues in v.11, but instead of listing spiritual gifts he lists a select group of spiritually gifted people who are Christ’s gift to his Church. Verse 11:

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers...

Each one of these represents a different word-centered ministry.

The Apostles gave testimony to the word made flesh in Jesus Christ, offering his Church authoritative teaching on our savior. Prophets speak God's word to God's people for the time in which they live. Evangelists carry on the work of the apostles by proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. Pastor-teachers oversee and instruct God's people through the exposition and application of Scripture.

The purpose of these word-centered gifts is given in vv. 12-13:

... to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

We are here as leaders within the Anglican Communion and we have been called to steward God's word for God's people so that they may be equipped for works of service, so that we all might be built up in the faith and grow in the knowledge of Christ.

And when we fulfill these word-centered vocations, we are Christ's gift to his Church. What a noble calling! What an awesome responsibility! But with this responsibility comes danger. Paul describes it poignantly in v.14. If we fail to provide instruction and training in the Scriptures we leave Christ's Church untethered in a violent sea. Our people become separated, isolated, blown about by the fickle wind of false teaching and left to drown in the tempest.

What a noble calling. What an awesome responsibility.

Maturity requires diversity. Maturity flows from the word of God. Finally, and very briefly, maturity is a corporate reality.

Verse 15: “Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is Christ. 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.”

We often refer to people in our churches as either mature or immature in their faith. It is a shorthand way of assessing their spiritual health. So when we come to mention of maturity in the New Testament we tend to think of it in this individualized way.

The maturity envisioned in this passage is not the maturity of an individual follower of Jesus Christ it is the maturity of the Church as a whole, brought about by the united gifts of God’s people and the faithful teaching of God’s word. If we want mature Christians we must grow a mature Church.

Maturity requires diversity. Maturity flows from the word of God. Maturity is a corporate reality.

We have one final section, vv.17-5:2. We have considered the nature of Christian unity and the promise of Christian maturity. Now we turn to consider what it means to walk in the way of Christ.

Kanishka’s marvelous exposition of Ephesians 2 prepared us well to understand this section, because here Paul adds to the picture he painted there of personal transformation through Jesus Christ.

At the heart of this new section is a simple truth. It is not sufficient merely to *believe* something about Christ. We are called to *be* someone in Christ – to put off the old self and put on the new self, “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” as he says in v.24.

Paul begins with an emphatic statement, “So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do.” What follows in vv.17-19 is a terrifying portrait of what life apart from God looks like: hardened hearts producing darkened minds and clouded judgment; this leads to self-indulgence, endless consumption and an ultimately pointless existence.

“That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ,” Paul says in vv.20-21. “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self.”

In the ancient church it was common for new believers to be baptized naked. Having shed the clothing that marked their old way of life they entered into the waters of baptism, where they were washed clean and emerged to be clothed in a new robe of spotless white.

This liturgical movement gave visual confirmation of the spiritual reality at work – old selves were dying and new selves were rising. The way of sin and death was removed and replaced by the way of Christ, who is our life.

But what does this life look like? In vv.23-5:2 Paul elaborates with a series of exhortations. In these two paragraphs I count 19 different commands – things to do and things not to do.

We will look at each one individually. I am kidding!

We don’t have time to walk carefully through this provocative landscape. Instead, I want to step back and summarize four aspects of the way of Christ to which we are called.

First, the way of Christ requires a soft heart.

In vv.18-19 Paul described the Gentiles as hard-hearted. “Having lost all sensitivity,” he says, “they have given themselves over to sensuality.” The distinction between sensuality and sensitivity is striking and instructive.

What is sensuality? It is the acute awareness of and tireless pursuit of your own pleasure. It is necessarily self-centered and over time de-sensitizes you to the needs and realities of the people around you. Take a careful look at the sins listed in the latter half of this chapter and you will see how many of them flow out of acute self-centeredness.

Sensitivity by contrast is the determined awareness of people and circumstances around you. It is necessarily other-centered and flows from a heart that has been softened by the gospel. Take a look at Paul’s specific exhortations in the latter half of this chapter and you will see how many of them flow from hearts that are centered on others.

The way of Christ begins with a soft heart sensitive to the needs of others. The way of Christ continues with a renewed mind.

“You were taught,” Paul says in v.23, “to be made new in the attitude of your minds.” We hear in this phrase echoes of Romans 12, where Paul says, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

If we are to walk in the way of Christ we must learn to understand the world afresh. How do we do this? By returning again and again to God’s word. It is no wonder that in the same chapter where Paul has described the importance of careful teaching he encourages renewal of our minds. We cannot understand the world according to its own terms and walk in the way of Christ. We must seek to understand the world according to its creator and redeemer.

The way of Christ continues with willing hands. Verse 28: “Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.”

The other-centeredness of Paul’s exhortation continues. We work with our hands not solely for our own survival, but for the good of those in need. When your heart has been softened by the gospel and your mind renewed by Jesus Christ your hands are freed to work and serve.

Finally, the way of Christ requires a chastened tongue. Verse 29: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs.” Of the many sins listed in this passage sinful speech dominates.

Reckless speech leads to ruined relationships and a fractured body. Our tongues do more to shatter the image of God in the Church than any other organ. We are rightly concerned about sexual purity. We should be even more concerned about the purity of our lips.

Softened hearts, renewed minds, willing hands and chastened tongues. This is the way of Christ.

Paul concludes this section in 5:1-2 with a summary of what he has said: “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

God’s children are meant to look like him. But what does God look like? We have seen him with his arms stretched out on the hard wood of the cross. This is what we are called to. Self-denial and self-sacrifice for the glory of God and the sake of those we love. This is the way of Christ.

Oh, but *how*? How can we possibly lay down our lives for our neighbors? We cannot do this under our own strength. But God can do this in us.

Remember what I said about the prayer at the end of chapter 3? It is the anchor at the heart of this letter holding Paul's words in place by tethering them to the being, power and love of the one, true God. Having read Paul's exhortation we are right to return to this prayer and pray it for ourselves. Will you let me pray for you?

Almighty God, out of your glorious riches strengthen us with power through your Spirit in our inner being, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. Rooted and established in his love, grant us power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that we may be filled to the measure of your fullness. Now to you who are able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to your power that is at work within us, to you be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.