

# Exegesis of Ephesians 4:1-16

Author Unknown

Fortunately, given the press of time, the section in question had been assigned for exegesis before, almost 40 years ago in fact, to our esteemed and sainted Prof. John Meyer. To him goes the credit for whatever is scholarly and worthwhile in what follows, since it is, for the most part, a restatement of his work, with a few insights of Stoeckhardt thrown in for good measure.

In the first three chapters of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul had pictured the glorious church of Christ's redeemed people. The church is Christ's body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way (1:23). It is the product of God's Holy Spirit of wisdom and revelation (1:17). Now, with chapter four, begins the second part of this epistle. Here the apostle focuses on the unity of the church and points out to the Ephesians that God wants them to cherish this unity. This section may be divided into two major parts:

1. General Encouragement Regarding the Unity of the Church (1-10)
2. The Gifts of Christ and Unity (11-16)

Each of these major parts might again be divided into three sub-parts: 1-3; 4-6; 7-10; and 11-13; 14-15; 16.

## General Encouragement Regarding the Unity of the Church

The opening word is one Paul uses frequently, *parakalo*. *Parakalein* denotes an urgent request and encouragement, a sort of spiritual "pep-talk." Luther translates "*ermahne*." AV: "beseech." NIV: "urge." Paul adds emphasis to his urging by calling attention to his imprisonment, which he is suffering only because he preached the Gospel. Yet he doesn't chafe under his lot. He considers his detainment a small matter when compared with the rich blessings which he reaped from the Gospel. Surely the words of such a witness, speaking from such deep experience, should carry some weight. The Ephesians have been "called," *eklethete*, with a "call," *klesis*, and as a result they belong to the *ekklesia* of the Lord. They are to consider what this means and live accordingly, *axios*, so that their life will be in keeping with this wonderful blessing they enjoy. What Paul is driving at comes out in v. 3. They are to make every effort to preserve this unity which is theirs. How were they to live a life worthy of the calling they had received? In v. 2 Paul points to several Christian virtues they were to cultivate: "Be completely humble." The perfect example of such humility, of courses is the Saviors as Paul pictures Him in Phil. 2:5-8. Paul adds the word "completely" for emphasis. Our humility is never pure. It's so easy to be proud of it. Yet nothing is more deadly to the church than the lack of humility in its members, nothing more disruptive to the unity of the church than harshness and haughtiness. Therefore, always cultivate complete, genuine humility, and let it be coupled with "gentleness," a gentleness like unto that of the Savior. "See, your king comes to, you gentle..." The members of His church must follow in His footsteps.

Lack of patience is equally destructive, so Paul urges his readers to "be patient." So they might understand what he means Paul adds the participial phrase *anechomenoi allelou*, "bearing with one another." None of us will attain to perfection on this side of the grave. Weaknesses of character—temper tantrums, deceitfulness, intemperate speech—trouble many a Christian and cause him to fall again and again into the sin against which he is striving. Think of the weaknesses in the lives of the disciples. But Christ does not cast off weak brethren. He receives them, bears with them, helps them, sustains them. Let us follow His perfect example! It is, of courses a different matter when error is upheld and tolerance demanded for it in the face of a clear Word of God. Then "bearing with one another" ceases to be a virtue. Then a different treatment on the part of the church is called for (Cf, Mat, 7:15; Ro 16:17; Titus 3:10). Everything he has urged to this point Paul sums up with the words *en agape*, This is the kind of love which takes the condition of its object unto proper

consideration and adjusts its actions accordingly. Where this is done by all concerned, the unity of the church is safeguarded.

The unity of the church is a spiritual thing, a *henotes tou pneumatos*. The Holy Spirit has created in all believers the same spiritual life of faith which unites them with their Savior and with one another. This unity is nourished by the Means of Grace. This unity of the Spirit is threatened when the Word of God is adulterated with errors, no matter how insignificant they may seem, and when external things are allowed to interfere with the mutual contact of brethren. Think of the factionalism in the Corinthian congregation (I, 19-11), Think also of a Christian isolating himself from his congregation, or a congregation isolating itself from the Synod for no God-pleasing reason. The *henotes tou pneumatos* would suffer from such isolation, though in itself it may be only an outward thing.

The bond that unites hearts and that must continually be strengthened is what Paul calls “the bond of peace.” Christ is our peace. He came to establish peace on earth, peace between God and the sinner, This is that peace which the world cannot give, the peace which passes all understanding. Through this bond of peace we have been united in the one church by the work of the Holy Spirit. We can’t add to this bond of peace or improve upon it, but must ever strive to become more conscious of it, It must ever become a more powerful factor in our lives so our words and conduct give evidence of it. Let us, as Paul urges, “make every effort,” *spoudazontes*, to achieve this purpose.

Having warmed our hearts to follow his urging, Paul continues to pursue that same purpose by holding before us a vivid picture of that glorious unity with which we have been blessed.

The facts he presents in v.4-6 he assembles in three groups of three each. In presenting these nine points of unity he uses the numeral one seven times. The first trio consists of “body,” “spirit,” and “hope.” The church is “one body and one Spirit,” and that is true because all its members were “called to one hope when they were called.” Paul had reminded them in chapter two what a hopeless lot had been theirs before this call came to them (v. 1), They were “dead in their transgressions and sins.” They “followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air,” (v. 2), that is, the devil and his angels. They “gratified the cravings of their sinful nature and followed its desires and thoughts” and so became “the objects of wrath.” What a hopeless situation! But a ray of hope had shined into this darkness of despair when the Gospel call of God’s saving love in Christ reached their hearts. Their gloom was dispelled, and the call of hope with which they were called effectively joined them together into one body, Both NIV and AV capitalize the word “Spirit.” If someone prefers a lower case “s”, such a change would not affect the truth Paul is here enunciating. There is a unity of spirit in the church, and that unity is always the product of the one Holy Spirit. The more lively the hope in the hearts of Christians, the firmer will be the unity of the church. Whatever strengthens this hope also strengthens the unity. Whatever weakens this hope also weakens the unity.

The second trio is simple: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism,” The Greek makes this simple enumeration more interesting with its use of the genders of the numeral “one”: *heis, mia, hen*.

There is only one Lord, one Savior. Peter recognized that when he asked, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (On. 6:68). The call which offered this one Lord to us worked in each of our hearts one and the same faith in this one Lord. This is the “one true faith” Luther speaks of in his explanation of the Third Article. This call was sealed to us by one Baptism, a baptism into the name of the Triune God, “the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5).

The third trio is structured differently. The numeral “one” occurs only once in it, but the unity here is shown in a threefold relation: “one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” There is but one Father who is over each and every one of us who are members of the church, He is the one we call upon in the Address of the Lord’s Prayer: “Our Father who art in heaven.” He is also through all. He does His saving work through all the members of His church, for we have become “a royal priesthood ... that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet. 2:9). Finally, He is in all. The Father and the Son have come to us to “make their home with us” (in. 14:23). By His Holy Spirit He delights to live in our hearts as His glorious temple (1 Cor. 3:16).

But this unity of the church which Paul has been underscoring for us is by no means a monotonous uniformity. There is an endless variety here, as Paul demonstrates in the next verses.

The connective *de* is transitional rather than adversative. Paul now goes on to show that each individual member of the church is to contribute something to the beautiful harmonious pattern that is being woven, and each has received his special grace for just that purpose. This special grace which each member of the church has received is a gift from Christ, “it has been given as Christ apportioned it.” The NIV correctly translates the genitive “of Christ” as subjective, making Christ the dispenser of the gifts rather than the recipient, which would be the case if the genitive were objective. To this point Paul has been speaking of Christ as the foundation of the unity of the church. It seems most natural to retain that thought here also.

To strengthen his statement Paul quotes from Psalm 68:18 (Ps. 67 in the Septuagint). This has caused problems for some commentators because Paul quotes quite freely. He substitutes the third person for the second and speaks of “giving” gifts instead of “receiving” them. If we begin with the truth that Paul was writing under the guidance of the same Holy Spirit as was David, the author of the Psalm, we can assume that Paul had solid ground to stand on when he made these changes. Paul also knew that his opponents went through his letters with a fine-toothed comb looking for flaws. They would have been only too happy had they been able to show that Paul had done violence to an Old Testament passage. But Paul did not change David’s meaning. Psalm 68 praises God as the great champion of His people who in battle rescues them from their enemies. Paul quotes: “When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.” “Ascending on high” means going to heaven in triumph” as our Savior did in His ascension. David says that this ascended Savior received gifts, and Paul interprets that to mean that He gave those gifts to men. And that agrees perfectly with what David means to say in the Psalm, for Christ did not receive any gifts for Himself but for those He came to save.

Now Paul explains what the “ascending on high” really implies. The only way the Lord of heaven could be said to ascend into heaven is if He first descended from heaven. “What does ‘he ascended’ mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?” Some have sought to confine these words to the descent of Christ into hell. But as the ascension is the crowning event in the exaltation of Christ, so the descent “to the lower, earthly regions” most likely refers to His humiliation. He comes forth as victor from the fierce battle and ascends triumphantly to heaven where He had been before. And then in v.10 Paul writes: “He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.” The ascension did not remove Christ from this earth. Rather, it expressed His omnipresence. He is present on earth and in heaven and everywhere, also according to His human nature.

Here we see our Savior as He really is. He who “descended to the lower, earthly regions” and “humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!”; He who in our stead and for our benefit did battle against our enemies and came out victorious, He is not a new lawgiver. He is exactly what He wants to be a dispenser of gifts. Christ with His redemption and with the gifts He won for His followers is the foundation on which the unity of the church rests.

### **The Gifts of Christ and Unity**

What are some of these gifts, and how do they benefit the unity of the church? The NIV does a better job than the AV in getting us to feel the emphasis which Paul lays on the subject of the opening statement of v. 11. The Greek uses the emphatic *autos*. “It was he who gave some to be apostles...”etc. He, the descender and ascender. He who “led captives in his train.” He is the Giver. Here Paul does not mention all the gifts the exalted Christ bestows on his church. For a more complete catalog see chapter 12 of Romans and First Corinthians. Here he points only to those gifts which have a direct bearing on the unity of the church. “Some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.” The apostles were called personally by Christ. From the account of the election of Matthias to take the place of Judas (Acts 1:21-22) we can see what other qualifications they had to have. They had to be eye- and ear-witnesses of the public ministry of Jesus from the baptism of John until the ascension. These apostles had the gift of inspiration.

That there were many prophets in the early church is evident from the many warnings against false prophets and from the special gift of discerning spirits which Christ bestowed on His church. Jesus warned against false prophets (Mt. 7:15) and foretold their feverish activity as Judgment Day drew closer (Mt. 24:11). John repeats the warning and urges his readers to “test the spirits” (1 John 4:1). Some are mentioned by name: Agabus (Acts 11:28); Silas, Paul’s partner on his second mission journey is called a prophet; a certain Judas (Acts 15:32), In the Corinthian congregation there were a number of prophets (1 Cor. 14:29-33), It is not known whether all could foretell future events but we can learn something about their work from the effect it had on unbelievers. In I Corinthians 14:24-25 we are told that the unbeliever could be convicted of his sins and be moved to glorify God under their influence.

Philip is perhaps the evangelist we know best. He was one of the seven chosen in Jerusalem to distribute food. After Stephen’s martyrdom he did mission work in Samaria, baptized the Eunuch of Ethiopia, and preached the Gospel along the coast of the Mediterranean from Azotus to Caesarea, where he located his base of operations with his four prophesying daughters. The work of the evangelists was like that of the apostles in many respects. It was mission work.

Paul listed “teachers” third in 1 Corinthians 12:26. Here he couples them with pastors and puts them in fourth place, an indication of the absence of rank among the workers with which the exalted Christ blesses His church. The pastor’s work of shepherding is assigned by Paul to the bishops and elders of a church (Acts 20: 28). The work of a teacher was to strengthen the believers and train them in the art of Christian living.

The work of all these man was varied, indeed, but they were all alike in this, that they were gifts from Christ, gifts for the church to receive with gratitude and to use diligently so that it might grow in unity.

Paul points to the glorious purpose which these gifts serve in v. 12: “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.” Three prepositions are used here in the Greek, the first, *pros*, expressing direction and aim (toward); the second and third, *eis*, expressing relation (with respect to). So each succeeding phrase modifies the one preceding it, like this: The gifts of our exalted Savior aim toward preparing God’s people; this preparing is to take place with respect to works of service; and the works of service pertain to the building up of the body of Christ.

The “saints,” of course, are all Christians, each one possessing full forgiveness of all sins, Each saint is to grow and to become ever more well prepared for “works of service” (*ergon diakonias*). There is no definite article in the Greek, so the two terms really express one compound concept, that of service work. This ministry for which each saint is to be thoroughly equipped does not here refer to the pastoral office as such, but to spiritual service which one saint renders the other. The purpose of this service work is this, “that the body of Christ may be built up.” This grand purpose must be pursued vigorously “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God.” The building up of the body of Christ, which is the church, takes place only as the individual members are built up, as they grow in faith, in knowledge, in understanding, in sanctification. The genitival “of the Son of God” is objective. He is the object of both our faith and our knowledge. We believe in Him and experience His blessings through the Word. The oneness in these two basic factors of church life, faith and knowledge, is the goal toward which we are working.

Paul defines this “unity” more closely with two appositional phrases. The first (*andra teleion*) is translated “unto a perfect man” in AV. NIV simply says, “become mature.” Paul has reference to a full-grown, mature man, the opposite of what he in v.14 calls *nepioi*, infants. The second appositional phrase is “attaining the full measure of Christ.” This goal, of course, is never perfectly attained in this life because of the Old Adam who still clings to the Christian. But we are to strive to reach this goal by continued teaching and admonition.

There is a very practical purpose in striving to reach the goal of maturity. It is this, that we outgrow the weaknesses of childhood. Children may be like a ship without a rudder, tossed back and forth on the waves or driven here and there by the wind. From this picture language Paul switches to plain talk. He is speaking of doctrine, of teaching. We may consider some doctrines as more or less important than others. Paul is concerned about “every wind of teaching.” God has made provision (v. 7-13) that we may be able to stand firmly against

“every wind of teaching.” That’s why He wants those saints who are still in the *nepioi* stage to be tenderly trained so they become *andres teleioi*.

Make no mistake about it, false teachers can be dangerously effective. Paul denounces them as toying with the most sacred things. He speaks of the “cunning (*kybeia*, i.e., dice game) of men.” and of *panourgia*, cunning craftiness, a readiness to try anything, *pros ten methodeian tes planes*, toward the intrigue, the tricky expertness of error. This danger is present in every false doctrine. We do well to heed the warning. While v.14 stressed the negative, that we get rid of childish helplessness in the face of error’s allurements, v.15 accentuates the positive. The verb of this verse is dependent on the same *hina* that introduces v.14. We should be mature so that “speaking the truth” we may once and for all (aorist) “grow up” in every respect in relation to Him who is the Head, namely, Christ. Only the truth of the Gospel can effect this blessed outcome, for it is the power of God unto salvation. But we are to handle this truth of the Gospel “in love,” lest our lovelessness hinder this effective tool of God’s Holy Spirit. The very first fruit of the Spirit which Paul mentions in Galatians 5:22 is love, a love that is sincere, a two-sided love, hating what is evil and clinging to what is good (Rom. 12:9).

We are to grow *eis auton*. NIV, AV, and NASB all translate, “into him.” But does a body grow into its head, and would it do so “in every respect,” *ta panta*, as Paul puts it? Prof. Mayer suggests a different approach. Christ is the Head; the church is the body. Why not let *eis* refer to this relationship? By using the truth in love we shall grow so that in every respect the body corresponds to its Head.

Christ is the church’s Head. But He means much more to the church than a head ordinarily means for its body. He is the source of all life that courses through this spiritual body. He causes it to grow. “From Him,” he begins v. 16. But what from Him? The principal clause is: the whole body produces for itself the growth of the body, *pan to soma*, as Paul had pictured it in the previous verses. *Poieitai* is the middle voice: by and for itself the body works, again as outlined in the previous verses. What the body produces is *ten auxesin tau somatos*.

Paul describes the subject, to some, with two present participles, as in the process of “being joined and held together.” This process has its source in the Head, but it is carried out “by every supporting ligament.” The preposition *dia* governs the genitive *tea epichoregias*, which is modified by the preceding genitive *pases haphes*: by means of the supply of every joint. This is explained by a prepositional phrase introduced by *kata*: “according to the proportionate (*en metro*) working of every individual part,” or (NIV) “as each part does its work.” Each part of the body, according to the gift bestowed on it by the Head, makes its particular essential contribution, great or small, to the growth of the body.

The fruit of this growing process within the church is the “building of itself”, growth from within. The church is a wonderful, living organism! And the life stream, coming from its Head and pulsating through its veins, is love, intelligent, purposeful love!

All of this is from Him who is the church’s Head, Christ. It is He who founded the church by His descent and ascent. It is He who blesses the church with the Word of truth. It is He who bestows many special gifts on the church. Any error, no matter how insignificant it may appear, will adversely affect the health of the church. Any claim of personal merit will stunt its growth. Let us cultivate the unity of the church by nourishing our faith in our Savior!