**Christ’s gifts for church growth**

Text: Ephesians 4:7-16

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**Scriptures:** 1 Chronicles 15:25-28; Ephesians 4:1-16

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 84, 68, 439, 391, 525

**Series:** Ephesians (#16)

**Theme:** The Apostle Paul writes about the diverse gifts given to His church by the ascended Lord Jesus in order to equip the saints for the growth of His body in unity

**Proposition:** Brothers and sisters, speak the truth in love so that the church grows together in unity through Christ’s diverse gifts

**Introduction**

Are you in favour of church growth? Before you answer that question, you might well want to ask me a question (you certainly should ask me!), “*well what exactly do you mean by church growth*”? You might, very understandably be wary of the ‘church growth movement’ which was primarily established by Donald A. McGavran (1997-1990) in 1961, firstly with the ‘Institute for Church Growth’ and then with the launching of the ‘School of World Mission’ at Fuller Theological Seminary in 1965. Other names associated with the church growth movement include Peter Wagner, Robert Schuller, Bill Hybels and Rick Warren.

The contemporary church growth movement often adopts the techniques, practices, and attitudes of corporate business with secular strategies and marketing plans to the life of the church with the aim of rapidly expanding the size of the congregation by almost any means available. In this model of church life, the pastor is really like at Chief Executive Officer whose key performance indicator is a large and expanding congregation. He or she is often something of an elevated celebrity. Key ideas in today’s church growth movement include: that God’s will for every local congregation is always growth in numbers, that the ‘felt needs’ of the unconverted should determine the ways in which the church ministers and that all the teaching of the church must be attractive to the world in order to ‘succeed’ with growth. So, if we mean this type of ‘church growth’ then I hope you would answer that you are not in favour of this, because these are not the ways that God has ordained for the church to grow.

In contrast, our text unfolds for us the bountiful grace of God through Christ’s gifts for church growth. We’ll look at this gospel growth under three headings:

1. Christ gives varied gifts to His church
2. Christ supplies equippers for His church
3. Christ enables unified growth for His church
4. **Christ gives varied gifts to His church**

“Doing a victory lap” is an expression which is used today. This phrase comes from the world of athletics where the person who wins a race does an extra lap of the track as a public expression of their triumph. Today you don’t need to be an athlete to ‘do a victory lap’. Politicians who claim success and seek public praise and higher ratings engage in this type of celebration. We heard of something a little like a ‘victory lap’ in the reading we heard from 1 Chronicles 15. There King David, having defeated the Philistines and recovered the Ark of the Covenant, enters triumphantly into Jerusalem. In the ancient Near Eastern world, conquering champions would lead those who had been set free from enslavement by their enemies into their city to the praise and adoration of their people. Psalm 68 describes this well-earned ‘victory lap’ of the covenant God of Israel, as the victorious warrior who delivered His captive people from Egypt, bringing them to the land of Canaan. There is a joyful triumphal procession of the King, leading those who have been delivered from their captivity, followed by singers and musicians.

In our text today from Ephesians 4, the Apostle Paul quotes from Psalm 68:18: He writes (v8): *‘Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men."’* Paul uses this Old Testament image and applies it to Christ’s victorious ascent into heaven after His defeat of the spiritual forces of darkness at the cross. Whilst Psalm 68 describes the victorious One receiving gifts from men as tribute, Paul pictures Christ sharing the benefits of His conquest with those who were formally captives. We could say that those who have been set free receive some of the spoils of the war which has been won by their Champion.

There are three main interpretations of what Paul means in verses 9 and 10 when he explains the words ‘He ascended’.

* That Christ, who ascended on high, also descended to the Sheol – the abode of the dead.
* That Christ who ascended then descended a second time (in the Spirit) to bring gifts to mankind.
* That Christ ascended having previously descended through the humiliation of the incarnation and then of the cross (ref. 2:14-17).

This third interpretation is the most likely; that Christ’s ‘descent’ was His humbling of Himself by taking on human form and becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:8). The ascended Christ now gives varied gifts to each one of those who are called to be part of His body. The grace which Paul refers to in verse 7 is the ability to perform specific works of service. For Paul himself, this gift of God’s grace was given to him to ‘*preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ*’ (Eph 3:8)

It’s clear from our text here in Ephesians 4, and from elsewhere in Scripture, that every one of God’s people have been gifted by the Lord ‘*according to the measure of Christ’s gift*’. The gifts that we have received are not all the same, but are varied in type and in quantity. Paul expresses this generous distribution of grace to the church with these words in Romans 12:5-6: “*so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them”.*

One of the dynamics which exists in many churches is that only a relatively few people in particular congregations are engaged in the majority of the ministries. It is sometimes said that churches often operate by the ‘80:20 rule’; that is 80% of the works of service in the congregation are done by 20% of the congregation. There can be different reasons for this, for example:

Firstly, that many in the congregation are not using the gifts which Christ has given them. This could be due to them not having identified the gifts they have. It could be that they do not know where their gifts could be used in the life of the local church of which they are a part. It could be that they are not willing to put in the work necessary to use their gifts. In these ways the rest of the congregation (the ‘20%’) then need to work extra hard to serve in many different capacities.

Secondly, that some in the congregation are very active in using their gifts, but do not allow others the opportunity to share in these works of service. This could be due to them finding great satisfaction in their ministry, but not being willing to share it with others. It could be due to being unwilling to take the time to gradually train others so that they can also be blessed by serving with their gifts. It could be that they do not know the gifts that others have been given by Christ and so do not realise that they, as part of the ‘20%’, do not need to do most of the work of ministry in the life of the congregation.

Where do you fit in this picture with the grace which was given to you according to the measure of Christ’s gift? Would you describe yourself in the 80% or 20% category? For what reasons? How could this change when we commence meeting together again so that all the parts of the church body are able to exercise the gifts Jesus has given to them?

Christ gives varied gifts to His church. He also supplies equippers for His church, which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **Christ supplies equippers for His church**

Here is a quote from the ‘equipperschurch.com’ website: “*Equippers Church is a whole lot of friends championing one another to go higher in Jesus Christ. We have 39 Churches located across 9 Countries around the world.  We believe that significant ministry flows from significant relationships*”.

This description raises the helpful question “Who are the ‘equippers’ in the church?” We find the answer in verse 11 of our text which speaks of the some of the ascended Christ’s gifts to the church: “*And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers*”. Let’s look as these people who Christ gifted to the church:

Firstly, **Apostles –** They werewitnesses of the resurrection of Christ, or those who received a special revelation of the risen Jesus like Paul. The Apostles were commissioned by Christ to be founders of the New Testament church (Acts 1:21-22; 1 Cor 15:1-9). The term ‘apostle’ is also used in a broader sense in Scripture of those sent out as delegates to local churches before all the books of the Bible had been written (2 Cor 8:23; Phil 2:25).

Secondly, **Prophets –** The New Testament prophets who communicated God’s special revelation to the church (Acts 15:32; 21:9-11; 1 Cor 14:3).

Apostles and prophets had a foundational function in the New Testament church (2:20), however these roles did not continue beyond the time when all the 66 books of the Bible had been completed and were circulating amongst the churches. In this letter to the Ephesians, Paul has already explained that the combined church community of Jews and Gentiles, the church of the ascended Lord Jesus Christ, has been “*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone*” (2:20). After the initial period of establishment of the New Testament church, the Word ministry of these ‘offices’ has continued to be conducted by pastors and teachers.

Thirdly, **Evangelists –** those especially gifted to proclaim the gospel outside of the covenant community of the church, like Philip ‘the evangelist’ (Acts 21:8). As you may be aware, there is quite a range of views as to whether the ‘office’ of evangelist continues beyond the foundational ‘apostolic age’ of the early New Testament church. Those in favour of this specific role continuing may point to foundational ‘apostles and prophets’ (but not ‘evangelists’) in Ephesians 2:20. Whilst those in favour of this specific role ceasing may note the absence of this ‘office’ from the Scriptures where we see the roles and qualifications of elders and deacons described. What we can say with certainty is that the gift of being able to proclaim the gospel outside the church is still being given by Christ to His Body.

Fourthly, **Pastors and teachers –** The word ‘pastor’ literally means ‘shepherd’ and refers to the ministry of protecting and providing for those in a church congregation. We see this pastoral gift in Peter’s exhortation to elders to ‘*shepherd the flock of God that is among you*’ (1 Peter 5.2) with the encouragement “*And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory*” (1 Peter 5:4). We often refer to elders as ‘under-shepherds’, willingly serving under Christ’s delegated authority.

In the Greek language in which the New Testament was first written, ‘pastors’ and ‘teachers’ share a single ‘definite article’. We see this reflected in our English translations with the absence of the word ‘the’ before ‘teachers’ in verse 11. This suggests that ‘the pastors and teachers’ were one group ‘pastors who are also teachers’ or else two groups with overlapping functions.

You may be aware that there is some debate in Reformed churches as to whether there are now ‘two offices’ in the church (elder and deacon) or ‘three offices’ (teaching elder/pastor/minister, ruling elder and deacon. The way we function as the Reformed Churches of New Zealand has been described as a ‘two and a half office view’; whereby the minister is ‘sort of’ a separate office, but ‘sort of’ an elder with special teaching responsibilities. Historically, most Reformed and Presbyterian churches have held to three distinct offices. I am not planning on entering into this debate now in this sermon!

If verse 12 were not part of this portion of Scripture, you could think that those who were given the gifts to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors were the saints who did all, or almost all, of the works of ministry service in the church. This is largely the view of many in the Roman Catholic church, Eastern Orthodox and High Anglican churches, but it is most certainly not the teaching of Scripture.

The purpose of the ordained offices of the church is to “*equip the saints for the work of ministry*’. The word translated here ‘equip’ in the original language literally means to “mend, repair, make whole or perfect”. The basic idea is that of putting a thing into the condition in which it ought to be. We find this word in the description of the event where Jesus saw the brothers James and John in their father’s boat, mending their nets to prepare them for more fishing (Mat 4:21). We could say that these fishermen were ‘equipping’ their nets in order to prepare them for service so that they would be ready for the action of doing what they were designed for: catching fish!

So, the four types of ‘equippers’ which Paul identifies in our text are Christ’s gift to the church for the benefit of the saints. Their ministry is that of ‘mending the saints’, of preparing the flock for service, of getting the congregation ready for action in doing the work of ministry for which God has prepared for them (ref. Eph 2:10).

By what means do the ‘equippers’ mend the saints, preparing them for service? The answer is clear from the key component of the ministry of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. All these equipping gifts involve the revelation, declaration and teaching of the gospel. They are all Word ministries.

The early New Testament church clearly understood that the Word of God is the primary instrument of growth in the lives of Christians. Paul once spoke to the same elders to whom this Ephesian letter is addressed and said to them as he departed with tears: “*And now I commend you to God and to the* ***word of his grace****, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified*” (Acts 20:32) As the end of his time on this earth drew near, the imprisoned Apostle Paul wrote to his son in the faith, pastor Timothy: “*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work*” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Knowing that Timothy was commissioned to be an ‘equipper’ whose primary role was to ‘mend the saints’ through the powerful means of God’s Word, he exhorted this pastor/teacher to: “*preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching*” (2 Tim 4:2).

One commentator (Ray Steadman) has written *“If pastors and teachers ignore the Word, God's divinely-provided instrument of equipping, then they should not be surprised if the saints in their charge are ill-equipped for--and ineffective in--the work of the ministry. That is why so many churches today are little more than spectator arenas where unequipped, unmotivated, uninvolved people sit around, waiting only to be kept amused and occupied”.*

Thankfully in recent years there has been a ‘reformed resurgence’ around the world with a return to Biblical doctrine by churches in many different denominations. In these churches, the value of expository preaching through the books of the Bible has been recognised and congregations are being equipped by the Word of God. Why is this so important? The answer brings us to our third point:

1. **Christ enables unified growth for His church**

James and John were not in the business of net mending; although this was an important ‘means to an end’. They were workers who needed to have their nets ready to be used to meet their objective. They were fishermen. Likewise, equipping the saints for works of ministry is not the ‘end goal’ of the church. Unified church growth is the purpose for which Christ has gifted those who reveal, declare, teach and preach the gospel to His Body. Paul explains this divine purpose of Biblical church growth in verse 13: “*until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ*”.

Members of the church are ‘mended’ by the ministry of God’s Word so that they can grow together in spiritual maturity. We could say that we are to grow up from children in the faith to become mature adults. The spiritually immature do not know the Word of God well and are therefore vulnerable. They are like a ship at sea without an effective rudder. Such a vessel is at the mercy of strong winds and waves. Similarly the spiritually immature are at risk of being deceived by false teaching and so led astray. There is great stability in the truth. Strong churches are spiritually mature churches.

Church growth comes not through adopting a worldly model with corporate business techniques, practices and attitudes, but with well equipped, spiritually mature believers ‘*speaking the truth in love*’ (v15). This is a much-used phrase in Christian circles, but what exactly does it mean? These words convey the manner in which every person who is part of the church is to communicate in order for the church as a whole to grow together in spiritual maturity. Clearly from our text, everybody in the church is to have a ‘word ministry’ in the service of others which will accompany the use of our other gifts.

Firstly we see that the **content** of our speech is to convey the truth to others. As we’ve seen, the ‘teaching shepherds’ in the church (primarily the pastor and elders) are to ‘mend the saints’ by equipping them to know the truth from Scripture and to know how to communicate that truth in such a way that it is good for building up, as fits the occasion so that it gives grace to those who hear it in (Eph 4:29). We are all called to train one another in gospel truth to that we know who God is, what He has done for us in Christ, and how He calls us to live lives of willing obedience to His good will for us.

Secondly, we see that the **motivation** for our speech is to be love for others. Before opening our mouths to speak we therefore need to examine our hearts to determine our motivation for ‘truth talking’. Depending on our personality and background, we may err in different ways when it comes to ‘speaking the truth in love’: We may be so concerned about not jeopardizing our relationship with someone else, not wanting to be rude, or not wanting them to think badly of us that we may not speak the truth that we ought to speak. Alternatively, we may be motivated by anger, bitterness, resentment, hostility, or vengeance, and seek to use our words as weapons to harm, disrespect or disregard people. It’s wise for us to be honest with ourselves and to identify which error we are most prone to; love without sufficient truth, or truth without sufficient love.

Brothers and sisters, all of us we need to continue to mature in this vital church ministry of ‘speaking the truth in love’. We all need to continue to ‘*grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ*’ (Eph 4:15). Christ Himself perfectly spoke the truth in love as Gospel writer John and many others witnessed personally. John wrote: “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14). Brothers and sisters, we are called to imitate our Saviour and to be full of grace and truth.

Last week we saw, from the start of Ephesians chapter 4, the character of the spiritual walk we are called to as we follow Christ; living our lives ‘*with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love*’ (Eph 4:2). The week before that we heard from Ephesians chapter 3 (14-21) about the multi-dimension love of Christ. His love (agape) is unconditional: not depending on any quality in the person loved. His love is sacrificial: it gives so much of the Lover that this love hurts. His love is willing: it is not forced. It is not an act of mere obligation, but of humble, noble, devotion. It is this kind of love that is to motivate our truth-speaking to one another.

It is by means of our speaking the truth in love to one another that the church grows through exercising the varied gifts which Christ has given to her. Paul expresses this God-ordained method of church growth in verses 15-16: “*Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love*”. Brothers and sisters, as we exercise the gifts with which each one of us has been blessed by Christ, speaking the truth in love as we minister to one another, the church will grow in spiritual maturity.

We come back now to the opening question: “*Are you in favour of church growth?*” Church growth in numbers is not to be our main focus, but rather we are called to be faithful in being equipped to speak the truth in love. As we exercise our gifts, speaking the truth in love to those outside the church, the Lord may be pleased to use us as His instruments for the numerical growth of His church.

Whilst the ‘felt needs’ of unbelievers should not be what determines how we minister to those outside the church, we demonstrate our love for the lost when we are willing to modify our ministry without compromising Biblical truth to assist us to speak that truth in love to unbelievers.

Whilst the truth that we teach as a church should not be compromised by a desire to make that truth more attractive to the unbelieving world, we should be careful not to present the gospel in ways that make the truth less attractive than it is. As we exercise such care in how we communicate the gospel, we can all speak the truth in love.

As we close, here is the gospel: God’s truth spoken by Him in love:

1. Apart from Christ, people are dead in their sins (Eph 2:1).
2. But God, being rich in mercy, makes many dead people alive together with Christ (Eph 2:5).
3. He does this by grace, through faith, not as a result of any works which anyone does (Eph 2:8).
4. This ‘saving faith’ is personally believing that Christ is your peace with God; that by dying on the cross He has fully paid the penalty for your sins (Eph 2:16).
5. This saving faith is ‘exercised’ by coming in repentance and faith to Christ as your Lord and Saviour.

The key question for you today is ‘have you come to Jesus?’ Are you one of the released captives who follows your ascended Champion in a ‘victory lap’ of praise to the Lamb of God who has conquered sin and death for you and many others? If the answer is yes, then you have been graciously given gifts by Christ so that you can be joined with others in the Body of Christ. As you ‘work properly’ together with others, this ‘makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love’ (Eph 4:16.) This is how Christ enables unified growth for His church. That is Biblical church growth and I am in favour of it! How about you?

AMEN.