

FOR BUILDING UP THE BODY OF CHRIST

Ephesians 4:7–16

Key Verse: 4:12

“...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...”

Why do you go to church? Some might say, “Somebody pushed me.” Others will say, “It’s my habit—I always go.” Or, “It’s my duty.” Some may say, “I get so much when I go.” Other honest people might say, “I don’t get much, so I don’t *know* why.” Many go church-shopping, moving from place to place based on their personal needs or job offers. Some get disillusioned and become skeptical. Many think they can be spiritual without getting involved in any church. But in today’s passage Apostle Paul teaches that committed participation in church is Christ’s plan for every believer. Paul also makes it clear why we all need to be participating in church. Why? It’s to build up the body of Christ. But what does that mean? In this study let’s learn how Christ equips us to participate in his church, what it means to be equipped for the work of ministry, and discover God’s ultimate goal for us all. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words.

At the beginning of chapter 4 Paul taught the unity of the church. It can be real as we learn to walk “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love” (2). It can be real as we are “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (3). God himself gives us this unity. He unites us all into one local body, he gives us all one Spirit, and one heavenly hope (4). He’s given us one Lord, Jesus Christ, one faith, only in his grace, and one baptism, into his suffering, death and resurrection (5). And God himself unites us because he is the Father of us all; he is over all and through all and in all (6).

Look at verse 7. “But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” Here Paul turns from our unity to our diversity. At first it sounds unfair, like Christ is giving grace in various measures to people, arbitrarily. But what Paul is really saying is that Christ makes us unique based on his grace. In verse 11 Paul lists some of the special gifts Christ gives to his church. But for now, he’s emphasizing that they are gifts of grace from Christ himself. These gifts of grace can include both natural abilities and gifts of the Spirit (1Co12:7). The word “gifts” teaches us that we don’t create or earn or deserve them; we receive them only by his grace. Paul supports this teaching with a verse from the Old Testament. Look at verse 8. “Therefore it says, ‘When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.’” This quote, which summarizes all of Psalm 68, predicts how Jesus, the one who “ascended on high,” gave gifts to his people. “He led a host of captives” means he conquered sin and death and Satan in order to save us. And his ascension made him our Sovereign Lord, the one worthy to give any measure of gift to any person as he sees fit. The starting point of finding and using our gifts is accepting his sovereign will and grace in our lives.

Paul says more about this. Look at verses 9–10. “(In saying, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean but that he also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)” What is Paul’s point here? In one sense he’s telling us that Jesus has the right to give gifts because he ascended far above all the heavens and fills all things. In another sense, he’s telling us how Jesus our Lord set the pattern and example for us. He first descended to the lower regions, and then he ascended. It implies that in finding and using our gifts, humility comes first. It’s easy when we have gifts to think we’re superior to others. But in Christ we can see that these gifts are only his grace, and his humble grace makes us humble like him.

Look at verse 11. “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers...” This is a list of gifts that Christ gives his church. These are not church positions but people whom Christ has gifted. This list in verse 11 reflects gifts given in greater measure. In 2:20 and 3:5 Paul also mentioned “apostles” and “prophets” as foundational to the church. Why does he start with these? Basically, he wants people in the church to earnestly desire these “higher gifts” (1Co12:31). And what do these gifts mean? Today, apostles are people who go into places where Christ is not known and get a church started (Ro15:20). They focus on the teachings given by Christ’s original apostles and can be overseers of many other churches. Prophets are those empowered by the Spirit for the upbuilding, encouragement and consolation of God’s people (1Co14:3). Evangelists are people who share the gospel with unbelievers and bring new people into the church (cf. Ac8:26–40; 21:8). Shepherds are those who watch over, minister to and guide people in the right way, setting a good example (1Pe5:1–3). Teachers are those who teach people sound doctrine (1Ti1:10; 4:6; 6:3). Certain people may be strong in one of these gifts, or they can overlap, meaning they can have a combination of them. But Paul’s point here is that these people are such a great gift to the church of Christ. They are a team, meaning spiritual leadership was never meant to be a one-man show. It’s a genuine cooperation and collaboration. What’s more, these specially gifted people are the ones who need to learn Christ’s “descension,” his humility, most of all.

And what’s the purpose of these Christ-given gifts? Read verse 12. “...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...” Whatever gifts God has given, he wants us to use them not to promote ourselves or our own glory, but to equip his holy people. Here the word “equip” implies training and discipline so that people can be more effective. Effective for what? It says “for the work of ministry.” What does this mean? Basically, it’s the work of serving one another. God wants us all to be growing as better, more Christ-like servants. “The work of ministry” includes going to make disciples of all nations and helping people learn how to obey what Jesus our Lord taught us (Mt28:19–20). Not all of us can go to all nations. Not all are gifted for disciple-making. But together as one body in Christ, we can do so much more than if we tried to do it alone.

The last part of verse 12 says, “...for building up the body of Christ...” As we’ve seen in Ephesians so far, Paul stresses that the church is Christ’s body (1:22–23; 2:16; 3:6; 4:4). He continues to do so from today’s passage onwards (4:12,16; 5:23,30). What’s the point in saying we’re the body of Christ? It’s to emphasize our unity. But it’s also to emphasize our diversity. Just

as a body has many parts, so the church has people with various gifts. As a body needs all the parts, so we need all the members in our church to be actively learning to use their God-given gifts among us. And this diversity is really healthy. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:4–6, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.” We may have the gifts of healing, helping or administrating (cf. 1Co12:28). When we dismiss those with certain gifts or overemphasize other gifts, we create divisions among us and stop caring for one another (1Co12:25). In the body of Christ, everyone has a place to participate. Everyone belongs. Everyone needs to be built up.

Based on today's key verse, all our members need to be equipped for the work of ministry, using whatever God-given gifts they may have. “Building up the body of Christ” needs to be our goal in going to church. We need to ask God to change our mindset, from trying to get something to trying to give something. We need to be asking God to show us what I can do in my church to make a difference and be a blessing.

To help us, Paul goes on to describe what this looks like. Look at 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...” We need to be unified in our faith in and knowledge of Jesus our Lord. This should always be our goal in ministry, building up one another's faith in and knowledge of Jesus. This is the source of real maturity. It's not just a personal maturity; in this context it's referring to a unified, mature church body. And for the third time in this letter Paul mentions “the fullness of Christ” (1:23; 3:19). Christ is the fullness of God. When we're all participating under his Lordship and using our God-given gifts, he's the one who fills the church.

Look at verse 14. “...so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.” This is a very unstable situation. Frankly, it's the alternative when not everyone in the church is active and growing in their faith and knowledge of Jesus. How can we avoid this in our church? Look at verse 15. “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...” Sometimes the truth can be harsh. So we all need to be not only speaking the truth in love but also living the truth in love. This is how we inspire one another to grow up in every way into Christ our head.

Look at verse 16. “...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.” The point here is that we all need to be connected with Christ our head so that we too can be joined to one another. This verse again shows Christ's sovereignty among us. He's the one who carefully fits us to each other and holds us together. In this verse, “joints” means our “contacts” or “connections” with one another. Such personal contacts or connections are the way we can practically support one another. This is why isolation in a church is never healthy. We each need to be “working properly,” using our God-given gifts to serve others. When we're all connected and actively serving, Christ works among us so that we build ourselves up in love. How beautiful!

Read verse 12 again. May God help each of us get connected to Christ and connected to one another. By his grace may he help us find the gifts he's given us and use them humbly to build up Christ's body among us. May God help us all to be equipped for the work of ministry and actively be working, doing our part in truth and love.