

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## The Epistle to the Ephesians: Ephesians 4:1-16 - The Unity of the Spirit and Gifts

My granddaughter is nearly two years old. I have been amazed at the developments which have taken place in her young life since I first saw her only a few minutes after her birth. I ask myself the question, "How much have I developed spiritually in the last two years?" Paul was constantly concerned about his own spiritual progress and that of his fellow believers. Ephesians 4:1-16 is about development in the Christian's individual life and also in the church. We can divide it into four sections.

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|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. The Christian's Walk     | Ephesians 4:1-2   |
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| 3. The Gifts to the Church  | Ephesians 4:7-11  |
| 4. The Building of the Body | Ephesians 4:12-16 |

### 1. The Christian's Walk (Ephesians 4:1-2)

Ephesians 1:1-3:21 is devoted to his teaching on the Church of Christ. Ephesians 4:11-6:20 is concerned the practical implications of that teaching in the life of Christians. This is not limited to our personal responsibilities but includes how we act in fellowship together.

In Ephesians 4:1, he appeals to the Christians at Ephesus to "walk worthy of the calling with which you were called". In other words to live a life worthy of the One who had called them. In 2 Timothy 2:4, we have a similar example. Paul writes about the soldier's commitment to "please the one who enlisted him". Also in 1 Corinthians 6:20 we read, "For you are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's". This consistency between our *calling* and *conduct* is very important. If we do not live lives which are consistent with our faith, then our Christian testimony fails. The extent to which we appreciate how much God has done for us will determine how well we live for Him.

In Ephesians 4:2, Paul outlines some of things which should characterise our behaviour: humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another. These are not things which have a very high priority in today's aggressive world. However, they are features which we see in the life of the Lord Jesus. In Matthew 11:29 we are reminded of His gentleness and humility, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart". His patience and willingness to bear with His disciples are demonstrated, for example, by the way He dealt with Simon Peter's denial (John 18:15-27) and Thomas' lack of faith (John 20:25). Even Paul before His conversion discovered His forbearing love, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?" (Acts 9:4)

The clearest marks of spiritual progress are features of Christ displayed in the life of a believer. This is the work of the Spirit of God. This progress is not only of value in the personal testimony of a Christian, it is also necessary to Christian fellowship. Christianity should never be viewed simply in terms of personal experience. As a Christian, I am a member of Christ's body and with all other true believers form the Church on earth. In Ephesians, Paul describes the Church and its relationship to Christ in a wonderful way - a way which helps us to appreciate our privileges and responsibilities as members of that Church.

### 2. The Unity of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:3-6)

The unity of the Spirit does not mean Christians with common ideas or sentiments meeting in fellowship with each. *Unity* is not *uniformity*. Neither is *diversity*, *disunity*. The unity of the Spirit is the oneness of all the members of the body of Christ established by the Holy Spirit. Christ is the Head of the church and every true believer is a member of the body of Christ. The human body is a good illustration. It is controlled by the head but all the parts are diverse but necessary, such as the eye and the ear. The link between the brain and the various parts of the body is the nervous system which ensures the body operates in complete unity. In the same way, the Holy Spirit links us to Christ in heaven and also to one another. That is why it is called the unity of the Spirit.

When the Lord Jesus promised the Spirit of God in John 14, He said, "He dwells with you and shall be in you" (John 14:17). In Exodus 26:1-37, the building of the Tabernacle is described. It is a helpful picture of the unity of the Spirit and how we are to keep it. The walls of the Tabernacle were made of wooden boards overlaid with gold (Exodus 26:26-36). Each board stood on two silver sockets and had four rings. Through these rings ran four external poles. The purpose was to connect the boards. A fifth bar ran through the centre of the boards. It was unseen but held the structure together. This fifth bar, which ran unseen through the centre of the boards, is rather like the Spirit of God: unseen but establishing unity. The four external poles illustrate our responsibility to act to keep, in a practical sense, the unity which the Spirit has produced.

This is why the features of Christ, which Paul describes in Ephesians 4:2, are so necessary. It is only when we act with lowliness, gentleness, longsuffering and bear with one another in love that the unity of the Spirit is maintained in a practical way. It should be noted that these features of Christ are part of the fruit of the Spirit described in Galatians 5:22-23.

The fruit of the Spirit is needed to maintain the unity of the Spirit. Two other things are also needed. The first is "endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit" Ephesians 4:3. The second is "keeping the unity of the Spirit in the *bond of peace*" (Ephesians 4:3). We are to make every effort to ensure we keep the unity of the Spirit. It is easy to divide and to separate but far more difficult to work to keep the people of God together. The Lord Jesus spoke of having "kept" those disciples the Father had given Him (John 17:12). He was the Good Shepherd (John 10:11) and, as such, kept His flock together. Equally, "the bond of peace" is needed. James reminds us that "the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy" (James 3:17).

The theme of unity is continued in Ephesians 4:4-6. Paul outlines this unity in terms of the Holy Spirit, the Lord Jesus, and the Father.

First of all, the body of Christ and the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4: 4), which was described earlier, are linked to one calling and one hope. The calling refers to God's invitation to accept salvation and all its blessings. This is especially powerful in Paul's letter to the Ephesians because he reminded them in Ephesians 2:12 that they once had "no hope" and were "without God in the world". Now they had been called and accepted in Christ (Ephesians 1:6). But in addition to this, they had a single hope. Paul describes this as the "blessed hope" in Titus 2:13. It is the future return of Christ for His church, referred to again in Ephesians 5:27 and explained fully in 1 Thessalonians 4.

Paul then turns to unity in relation to the Lord Jesus in Ephesians 4:5. There is One Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ. There is one faith in Christ and there is one baptism which identifies us with a crucified and risen Christ. Finally, there is unity in relation to the One God and Father of all.

We can think of these three relationships as three circles. The first and smallest circle is the relationship to the One Spirit. This includes all true believers, members of the body of Christ and indwelt by the Spirit of God. The second and larger circle is the relationship to the Lord Jesus. This includes all true believers and also professing Christians. It is not enough, however, simply to be baptised and outwardly profess Christ as Lord. The Lord Jesus warns us in Matthew 7:21 that not all who call Him Lord shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Sadly, there are many who profess the name of Christ and have been baptised but have never truly received Him as Saviour and Lord.

The last and largest circle is the relationship to the one God and Father. God is described as being above all. God is recognised by many people both within and outside of Christendom and as Father in a creational sense. However, it is only within true Christianity that the unity of the Godhead is truly known. The Christian knows God as the God of creation and as Father through the Lord Jesus. The Christian also has faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and through baptism witnesses to the new life he has. And the Christian is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, is a member of the body of Christ having been called by God and has the hope of one day being with and like Christ forever.

### **3. The Gifts to the Church (Ephesians 4:7-11)**

In Ephesians 4:7, Paul explains that every Christian has a gift given by Christ. It is important to see that a gift is just that - something which is given. We can fall into the trap of thinking, or at least acting, as though the gift we possess has to do with what we are. Our gift should be used with humility and in dependence upon the One who gave it.

Ephesians 4:8 is a quotation from Psalm 68:18. Paul uses it to describe Christ's victorious work as the One who had gone into death, defeated its power in resurrection and returned as the Victor into heaven. After battle, victorious kings gave gifts to their servants. In the same way, Christ has given gifts to His people. The purpose of these gifts is given in Ephesians 4:12, "for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." There are three main passages in the New Testament which teach us about gifts and each one has a particular emphasis.

- In Romans 12:3-8, gifts are outlined in relation to the service of God.
- In 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, the gifts are to be used under the direction and power of the Spirit of God.
- In Ephesians 4:7-16, the gifts are linked with the Lord Jesus and the building up of His Church.

In Ephesians, the list of gifted people is quite small but serves to underline the ministries which are important to the foundation and building up of Christ's church.

Apostles and prophets are foundational gifts. In Ephesians 2:19-20 we read, "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone." The foundations of houses in Bible times were based upon a chief cornerstone. The whole structure of the house depended upon the character and dimensions of this one stone. The foundation of the house was laid in reference to this stone; then the builder worked upwards. Paul uses this to explain that the chief cornerstone is Christ Himself. The apostles and prophets were chosen and gifted to undertake the foundational work described in Ephesians 2:19-20. The church gradually began to be built up from this foundation and has continued to this day. But remember the foundation of a house is only laid once. No one can come along today claiming to be an apostle or prophet with fresh revelation and new light. The Bible is the complete record of God's revelation and all that we need for faith and practice.

However, the building work continues and for this to happen evangelists, pastors and teachers are needed. The evangelist is not simply a preacher, but someone gifted by God to lead people to Christ. Interestingly, there is only one man in the New Testament called an evangelist. This was "Philip the evangelist" (Acts 21:8). In Acts 8:5-40, we read about his evangelism and are given a pattern for the evangelist. The evangelist is one who goes out. He finds people to preach to; he is proactive.

Evangelism was compared by the Lord Jesus to fishing. There are two ways to fish, with a net and with a rod. Philip preached to the whole city of Samaria (Acts 8:6-35), with a net if you like, and many people were saved. Later, he was directed into the desert to meet one man, an Ethiopian (Acts 8:26-40). This time he fished with a rod. There are two ways to evangelise, *publicly* and *personally* and we need gifted evangelists to do this work. The Lord Jesus encourages us to "pray the Lord of harvest to send out labourers into His harvest" (Matthew 9:38; Luke 10:2). We should never lose sight of the importance of the evangelist. Even if we do not possess the gift we can still do "the work of an evangelist", which Paul encouraged his young friend to do in 2 Timothy 4:5.

Once the evangelist has done his work, the pastors and teachers take over. They have responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the people of God. A pastor is a shepherd. The work of the shepherd is to protect and build up the flock. If one of the sheep gets lost, the shepherd finds it. The shepherd ensures the sheep get the right kind of food and that they are also protected from danger. You can see what a powerful illustration the shepherd is of the all the work involved in looking after the people of God. The pastor has to be self-sacrificing and an example to the Lord's people. But it is also a work which is rewarded (1 Peter 5:2-4).

The gifts of the pastor and teacher may well be resident in the same person, but the emphasis is different. The teacher communicates the word of God to the people of God under the direction of the Holy Spirit. The effect is that the listeners grow in their own understanding of and obedience to, the truth. A teacher is expected to demonstrate the reality of what he teaches in his own life. He is also a person who has not stopped learning himself. Paul, for example, could write to the Philippians about how he had learned to be content, Philippians 4:11.

#### **4. The Building of the Body (Ephesians 4:12-16)**

In Ephesians 4:12-16, Paul teaches that the use of gifts benefits all believers and so the church grows. There are several features to this growth. In Ephesians 4:13, we have faith in and knowledge of the Son of God. Faith and knowledge are always connected because it is only as we exercise faith in Christ that we grow in the knowledge of Him. I remember taking my daughter to the swimming baths when she was quite young. She gradually grew more confident in the water. One day, I stood her at the side of the baths and I stood in the water. Then I asked her to jump off the side and I would catch her. She was not convinced! But after a while she decided give it a try. I can still picture the uncertainty in her face as she plucked up the courage to jump. When she did, I caught her. From then on I could not stop her wanting to jump from the side. She had complete confidence that I would always catch her. Her faith had led to knowledge. In the same way, it is only as we learn to trust all that the Lord Jesus says that we grow in our knowledge of Him. This is not a sterile intellectual knowledge but a living knowledge which changes us into His likeness.

This also leads to maturity. God created Adam and Eve as adults not children. Childhood can be wonderful but God looks for growth and maturity. In Ephesians 4:14, Paul uses children as a picture of instability. He compares the effects of false doctrine upon the immature Christian to a rudderless ship, tossed one way, then the other, by winds.

Then in Ephesians 4:15 he explains the antidote to this truth. The pastor and teacher are responsible to lead young Christians into the truth, which is God's word. And we are all to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) to encourage and build each other up in our Christian faith. Truth can be spoken without love and in so doing we can drive away those we want to help. Love does not change the truth but presents it in the most appealing way. The result is that we grow like Christ. It is always heart warming for parents to hear that others see them in their children. It is God's desire to see the characteristics of the Lord Jesus in us.

But we finish with the body of Christ. Christ is the head of the body (Ephesians 4:15). Paul again uses the human body to make his point. Christ is lived out in our lives by the power and direction of the Holy Spirit. We fulfil our different roles in the body by using the gift Christ has given us. In this way not only do we grow individually but the whole church benefits. It grows and is built up in love. It is not simply growing but being built up. Compare two men each weighing fourteen stones. One is short and overweight. One is tall and fit. There are two sides to growing, *food* and *fitness*. It is the same spiritually, we can take in a lot of ministry both individually and as the people of God, but are we living out what we are taking in? This is the challenge of Ephesians 4:1-16 we have studied together this morning. Take a look in the mirror and ask yourself the question I posed at the beginning of this talk, "How much have I developed spiritually in the last two years?"

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