

The Spirit and the Gifts Are Ours (Ephesians 4:7-13)

... Through Him Who with Us Sideth

The title of this morning's sermon comes from Martin Luther's triumphant hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is our God," which takes the image of God as the refuge, strength, and fortress of His people from Psalm 46 and interprets it through the lens of redemptive history and the gospel of Christ. The result is a majestic portrait of the victory of God in Christ over all who oppose His kingdom, whether the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places or the kings and princes who sit in the earthly halls of power. Verse 3 depicts Christ's victory over the spiritual powers that oppose His reign:

And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us.

The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure, for lo! his doom is sure;
one little word shall fell him.

Verse 4 then celebrates Christ's victory over the earthly powers:

That Word above all earthly powers no thanks to them abideth;
the Spirit and the gifts are ours through him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
the body they may kill: God's truth abideth still;
his kingdom is forever!

Luther must have been meditating upon Ephesians when he wrote this final verse, for the theme of Christ's victory over the opposing powers (both heavenly and earthly) occurs frequently in this letter. For instance, in 1:20–21 Paul speaks of the great power

that [God] worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him with him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. (1:20–21)

And in today's text, Paul pictures Christ ascending on high, leading a host of captives in his train, having first descended to win the victory through His life, death, and resurrection. And in addition to conquering the opposing powers and leading them as prisoners of war to His throne, where He will keep them in bondage until the time of judgment (Rv 20:1–3), the victorious Christ also bestows gifts upon His faithful servants.

Therefore it says,

*“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men.” (4:8)*

Thus, “the Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him who with us sideth.”

What are these gifts, and to what purpose are they given? As we will see, these gifts of Christ are less like the titles and land that were the gifts of victorious medieval kings to faithful subjects in the aftermath of battle, and more like an abundant supply of arms and munitions, provisions and supplies, dropped behind enemy lines to those still engaged in the battle. These gifts are given to aid the church in the resistance against Satan and his domain of darkness. For in the already/not yet nature of Christ's kingdom, the decisive victory has been won, but the battle continues to rage. Christ's elect have been redeemed, but they are not yet raised out of this present evil age. We are like resistance fighters in occupied territory. News has come of Christ's victory and of Satan's defeat. Long ago and far away, the King entered into this kingdom that Satan has occupied and ruled since the fall of man, and He crushed the head of the serpent by His death and resurrection. But rather than ending the war then and there, which He had sovereign power to do, He returned to His heavenly throne, taking prisoners of war with Him. Why? Why did He postpone His conquest? Because of mercy. He left behind a small band of resistance fighters who were tasked with winning over the citizens of this occupied land, those who have

sworn allegiance to Satan and willingly acquiesced to his wicked reign. If they will repent and swear their allegiance to Christ as King, they will be forgiven their rebellion and receive an inheritance in the coming kingdom. For the last two thousand years, that small band of resistance fighters has grown into an innumerable company, though the church is still vastly outnumbered by those still loyal to Satan. The day is coming when the King will return with power and great glory to complete His victory and to realize His reign. This is the picture that Paul is painting, the image that Luther puts to verse. “The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him who with us sideth.” They are gifts of grace, given for the purpose of resistance, to undermine Satan’s kingdom and to win His subjects to the cause of Christ. And the weapons Christ has given us are not swords or guns to be wielded in violence, but truth wielded in love (4:15). Against this backdrop, let us look at Ephesians 4:7-13 and observe four truths:

- The *gifts* of grace.
- The *ground* of grace.
- The *guides* of grace.
- The *goal* of grace.

The Gifts of Grace

Throughout vv. 4-6, Paul has been highlighting the unity of the church.

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (4:4–6)

But even though all the members of the church are part of the same body, have the same Spirit, share the same hope, submit to the same Lord, confess the same faith, receive the same baptism, and are in the same relationship to God as Father, yet unity does not mean uniformity.¹ There is a vast diversity of gifts represented in the one church.

¹ The δὲ at the beginning of v. 7 is contrastive. Stott writes, “We are not to imagine that every Christian is an exact replica of every other, as if we had all been mass-produced in some celestial factory. On the contrary, the unity of the church, far from being boringly monotonous, is exciting in its diversity. This is not just because of our different cultures, temperaments and personalities (which, though true, is not Paul’s point here), but because of the different gifts which Christ distributes for the enrichment of our common life”; John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, TBST (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1979), 155.

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. (4:7)

Paul does not here elaborate upon the identity of these gifts; he is much more concerned with their purpose. But there are three other passages in the New Testament that give us a representative glimpse (though not a comprehensive list) of the spiritual gifts that Christ has given to His church. Let's look quickly at those three passages, and then we will draw some conclusions. First, in Romans 12:3–8:

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, 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: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Rom 12:3–8)

In 1 Corinthians 12:4–11:

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. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. (1 Cor 12:4–11)

And finally, 1 Peter 4:10–11:

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pt 4:10–11)

As I was writing this portion of the sermon, a church member came in and we were talking about Ephesians. I told him I was working on this passage about the spiritual gifts, and he asked me, “You’re not going to throw anything new at us like last time, are you?” No, there will be no discussion of tongues or prophecy, of miracles or healing, this morning. Again, Paul’s purpose in Ephesians is not on the identity of these gifts, but on their purpose. So let me briefly make a few observations about the gifts of the Spirit, and then we will move on.

First, every passage I just read is clear that every believer has received a spiritual gift. “But grace was given to *each one* [ἐνὶ ἑκάστῳ ἡμῶν]” (Eph 4:7). “... *each* [ἑκάστῳ] according to the measure of faith that God has assigned” (Rom 12:3). “To *each* [ἑκάστῳ] is given the manifestation of the Spirit” (1 Cor 12:7). “As *each* [ἑκάστος] has received a gift” (1 Pt 4:10). There is no ungifted Christian; every Christian is a charismatic. If you are in Christ, if you have been born of the Spirit, you have received a gift from Christ by the Spirit.

Second, the gifts are as diverse as the needs of the church. I do not believe we are meant to combine the various lists of spiritual gifts and total them up, as though there were eighteen gifts, or twenty-two gifts, or twenty-seven gifts; the exact total depends upon who you ask, and few agree. A precise accounting of the number of gifts misses the point. The point is their diversity, which is suited to the needs of the church. Jesus supplies His church with whatever it needs to fulfill its ministry.

Third, the purpose for which these gifts were given is the good of the church and the glory of God. They are given “for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7), and are to be employed humbly (Rom 12:3) and faithfully (1 Pt 4:10), “that God may be glorified through Jesus Christ” (1 Pt 4:11). They are not be used to exalt one member over another.

Fourth, not all members have the same gift (Rom 12:4–5; 1 Cor 12:29–30), which means that all members need one another (1 Cor 12:14–21). Just as there are no ungifted Christians, so there are no dispensable church members. You are gifted, and you are needed.

Fifth, the gifts are distributed according to God's sovereign plan. The gifts are given "according to the measure of Christ's gift" (Eph 4:7). "... each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned" (Rom 12:3). "But as it is, God has arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose" (1 Cor 12:18). Which implies that the gifts God supplies to the church are sufficient for the ministry to which God has called the church.

Sixth, the gifts are not static; new gifts may be pursued. "But earnestly desire the higher gifts" (1 Cor 12:31). "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy" (1 Cor 14:1). And 1 Corinthians 14 makes clear that a gift is greater in proportion to its ability to edify the congregation, which is why Paul disparages tongues and encourages prophecy (1 Cor 14:19). If a need arises in the church, let the church pray that God may grant the gifts to meet it.

The main point to be gleaned from this survey, as it pertains to Ephesians 4, is that there is a diversity of gifts within the one body of Christ, each member of Christ's body has received a gift(s), and this gift is to be deployed for the good of the church and for the glory of God. Furthermore, the gifts of the church are sufficient for the ministry of the church.

The Ground of Grace

In vv. 8–10, Paul provides the ground for the assertion he has just made in v. 7, which is why he begins v. 8 with "therefore" (διὸ). On what basis does Paul claim that every member of the church has been gifted by Christ for the ministry of Christ? Paul finds evidence for this in Psalm 68:18:

Therefore it says,

*"When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to me."*

(In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had 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.) (4:8–10)

At the outset, we must admit that Paul has changed the text of Ps 68:18, which actually reads:

*You ascended on high,
leading a host of captives in your train
and receiving gifts among men,
even among the rebellion, that they LORD God may dwell there. (Ps 68:18)*

In the original Psalm 68:18, the LORD God, depicted throughout as a victorious warrior, ascends to His throne after descending to defeat His enemies (“God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered; // and those who hate him shall flee before him!” [Ps 68:1]), leading his captive enemies in His train, and it is the LORD who receives gifts from men, who are clearly His rebellious enemies that are now subjected to Him. So in Psalm 68:18, it is the *LORD* who *receives* gifts from His *enemies*, yet in Paul’s quotation it is *Christ* who *gives* gifts to His faithful *subjects*. This discrepancy has caused all manner of debate, but the solution is fairly simple. Paul is taking Psalm 68:18, combining it with Psalm 68:35, and interpreting both Christologically—that is, through the lens of its fulfillment in Christ. Psalm 68:35 reads,

*Awesome is God from his sanctuary;
the God of Israel—he is the one who gives
power and strength to his people.
Blessed be God! (Ps 68:18)*

Paul clearly affirms the original of Ps 68:18, that Christ will receive praise even from His defeated enemies, for he says in Phil 2:10–11,

*so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
(Phil 2:10–11)*

But it is not the tribute that Christ will receive from His defeated enemies that Paul wishes to highlight in this section of his letter, but the power and strength that the victorious Christ gives to

His people—i.e., the gifts of the Spirit. Thus, he combines Ps 68:18 and Ps 68:35, and interprets both through prism of the gospel of Christ.²

In vv. 9–10, Paul draws an inference from his quotation of Psalm 68:

(In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had 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.) (4:8–10)

Throughout the long history of the church, many have understood these verses to speak of Christ’s so-called *descensus ad infernos*, His descent into hell. Bolstered by their reading of 1 Pt 3:19 (“in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits now in prison”) as well as three other oft-cited passages (Acts 2:27; Rom 10:6–7; 1 Pt 4:6), advocates of this view believe that Christ descended into hell between His death and resurrection. This view gained widespread approbation when it was included in medieval version of the Apostles’ Creed, and ever since, Western churches have confessed that Christ “was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead.” But not only is the idea that Christ descended into hell between His crucifixion and His resurrection biblically and theologically problematic (What did Jesus mean in Lk 23:43 when He said to the thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in paradise?” What did Jesus mean in Lk 23:46 when He said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit?” What did Jesus mean in Jn 19:30 when He cried out from the cross, “It is finished?”), but the phrase “He descended into hell” was not added to the Apostles’ Creed until AD 390, and even then, the author did not regard it to mean that Christ descended into hell, but merely that He descended into the grave (i.e., was buried). Then, the phrase does not reappear in the Apostles’ Creed until AD 650; from that time on it appeared in the major Western texts. In other words, the phrase “he descended into hell” is not in the earliest forms of the Apostles’ Creed, which means that the early church did not confess such to be the case.³

² For extended discussions on Paul’s use of Ps 68:18, see S. M. Baugh, *Ephesians*, EEC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2016), 321–26; Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 264–68; Stott, 156–59; Bryan Chapell, *Ephesians*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 188n7.

³ See Wayne Grudem, “He Did Not Descend into Hell: A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles’ Creed,” *JETS* 34.1 (March 1991: 103–13); Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020; orig. 1994), 725–36.

The question is, to where did Christ descend, and from where did Christ ascend? What are “the lower regions, the earth” (τὰ κάτωτερα [μέρη] τῆς γῆς)? More specifically, does Paul mean “the lower regions, the earth” (genitive of apposition [ESV, NIV,]) or “the lower regions of the earth” (genitive of possession [KJV, NKJV, NASB])? The question cannot be determined from grammar alone, for both translations are equally plausible. Neither can vocabulary determine the question, for the most important word in the phrase—“lower” (κάτωτερα)—occurs only here in the NT. Thus, we are left to the *analogia fidei*—the analogy of faith. Is there another passage of Scripture, especially from the pen of the apostle Paul, that might shed light on what Paul means? I think there is. You will note the same descended/ascended motif in Phil 2:5–11, written about the same time as Ephesians:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:5–11)

That is the movement I believe we see in Eph 4:9–10. The eternal Son of God, who has always existed in the form of God, descended from heaven to the lower regions, that is, the earth, in His incarnation. If “the lower regions” does signify something lower than the earth, it most likely has a reference to the further humiliation of death and the grave. Then, having completed the redemptive work assigned to Him by the Father, God highly exalted Him far above the heavens, that He might fill all things, that is, that He might extend His sovereign reign throughout every square inch of the cosmos (cf. 1:20–23), for which purpose He has given gifts to His church. We are the instruments of His conquest.⁴

⁴ For detailed and contrasting discussions of this passage, see Thielman, 268–73, who argues in favor of Christ’s descent into hell; Baugh, 326–31, who argues that the “lower regions of the earth” is a reference to Christ’s death by crucifixion. Stott, 158–59, argues that Paul has in mind Christ’s incarnation, as does Bryan Chapell, *Ephesians*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 189.

In summary, the ground of these gifts is the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ; the foundation of these gifts of grace is the victory of Christ over sin, death, and hell. In other words, it is the gospel. Friend, if you have come here this morning, perhaps you were invited by a member, perhaps you are searching for truth, perhaps you are not quite sure why you have come today... whatever your situation, this is the truth we would most like you to take away from all that you have heard this morning. There is one, eternal, triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who created the heavens and the earth and everything in it, and everything He created was good, a radiant reflection of His glory. But the last and greatest of His creation, the most radiant reflection of God's glory, was a man and a woman whom He created in His image, to rule and reign over His creation and to live in a relationship to our Creator of glad and faithful obedience, of worship and joyful fellowship, and to fill the earth with the sons and daughters of God who would do the same. But this man and woman turned from their faithful obedience, rejected the worship of and joyful fellowship with God, and sought to establish their own kingdom, to be their own god. Their sin brought down God's curse upon themselves and all their descendents, as well as all of creation, such that all mankind is born into a fallen creation as fallen creatures, born in a state of sin and guilt, born under judgment and condemnation.

But in His mercy, God sent His eternal Son to secure the redemption of His creatures and of His creation. The Son of God descended to the earth in His incarnation, taking on human nature, fully God and fully man in one person, the Lord Jesus Christ. He lived a perfect life of righteousness, and died an atoning death upon the cross. He rose again from the grave on the third day, and ascended above the heavens to fill the cosmos with His rule and reign. He will return at the end of this present age to raise and gather His people, to judge the wicked and rebellious, and to remake a new heavens and new earth, where the eternal Triune God will dwell forever with His redeemed and holy saints, who will reign and rule over His creation, who will live in a relationship of glad and faithful obedience, and who will dwell in worship and fellowship with our God. Jesus descended in order to redeem; He ascended in order reign; and He will descend again in order to renew all of creation. If you would partake of that new creation, you must embrace Christ as your Savior and King. Trust in Christ as your only comfort in life and death. Make this the sincere confession of your soul:

I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has delivered me from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, also assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him. [*Heidelberg Catechism*, 1]

That is what it means to be a Christian, and that is what we pray you leave today knowing.

The Guides of Grace

Third, in vv. 11–12 Paul lists the guides of grace, those special offices which Christ has given to the church in order to steward His gifts of grace, to train the church and lead it in the deployment of those gifts in the work of ministry:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry... (4:11–12a)

I think Frank Thielman has captured the flow of the text perfectly when he comments,

Christ, who has extended his victory over all opposing forces and his sovereignty over all creation, is the very one who (αὐτός, *autos*, he himself) now equips the church to join him in his sovereign reign over all creation (cf. 2:6; 4:15). He does this through giving gifts to discrete groups of people (v. 11) so they, in turn, can equip others to serve and edify the church (v. 12).⁵

These four-fold offices/gifts are to function as guides for the rest of the gifts of grace that Christ has bestowed abundantly upon the church. To borrow from the military analogy again, it is as though Christ has gifted the resistance force (the church) with a massive armory, and has given various officers to command the resistance force in the use of that armory.

⁵ Thielman, 273.

So who are these commanding officers, and what are the functions of their office? Let's begin with "the apostles" (τοὺς ἀποστόλους). The apostles were those men who were individually, specially, directly appointed by Christ to speak for Christ and to form the foundation of the church of Christ. This was a foundational office granted to a limited number of men—the original twelve (with Mattathias replacing Judas [Acts 1:26]), plus Paul, James the Lord's brother (Gal 1:19; 2:9) and His other brothers like Jude (1 Cor 9:5), and Barnabas (Acts 14:14), and perhaps others. This office and this gifting no longer exists, for it required being an eyewitness of Christ's resurrection (Acts 1:22) and a direct appointment by the risen Christ (Mt 10:1–4; Acts 26:12–18). But apart from their foundational work of proclaiming the risen Christ, receiving the apostolic doctrine, and writing it down as Scripture, there would be no church, and no authoritative guide for how the church should deploy its gifts in the work of the ministry.

The next group listed are "the prophets" (τοὺς προφήτας). This group is not so easy to identify and define, for the terms "prophecy" (προφητεία) and "prophet" (προφήτης) are used in different ways in the New Testament, and perhaps even within the letter to the Ephesians. For instance, in Eph 2:20 and 3:5 the prophets are linked together with the apostles; one definite article binds the two nouns together: the church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ προφητῶν), and the mystery of the gospel has been revealed to the holy apostles and prophets (τοῖς ἀποστόλοις καὶ προφήταις). But in Eph 4:11, not only are apostles and prophets distinguished by the presence of two definite articles, but they are placed in contrast in a μὲν-δέ (one the one hand—on the other hand) clause: Christ has given on the one hand the apostles, and on the other hand the prophets (τοὺς μὲν ἀποστόλους, τοὺς δὲ προφήτας).⁶ So I understand the prophets here, not as a reference to that foundational group that together with the apostles founded the church and wrote the New Testament (as in 2:20 and 3:5), but rather as those who, having the gift of prophecy (Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 12:10, 29; 14:1–40) exhort and encourage the congregation in the deployment of its gifts of ministry. I think we find a prime example of this prophetic function at work in Acts 11:

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over

⁶ See Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, rev. ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 200; orig. 1988), 340–46.

all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:27–30)

The church at Antioch had gifts (generosity, mercy, etc.), but did not know how to deploy them until instructed by the prophets.

The next group Paul lists are “the evangelists” (τοὺς εὐαγγελιστάς). In the Southern Baptist tradition in which I grew up, evangelists were travelling preachers who (in my experience) recycled the same four or five sermons in every church during a scheduled “revival.” Such men were not evangelists in the biblical sense of the word; they were revivalists, and “revivalist” is not a biblical office/gift. What, then, is the biblical office/gift of evangelist? This particular noun is used only two other times in the NT, once of Philip, who is called an “evangelist” in Acts 21:8, and once in 2 Tm 4:5, when Paul instructs Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist.” Neither of those two usages are terribly enlightening as to Paul’s meaning here. But, if we take the related words “evangelism” (εὐαγγέλιον) and “evangelize” (εὐαγγελίζω), a much clearer picture begins to emerge. For these words are used throughout Greek literature to refer to a messenger (an evangelist) who travelled great distances to proclaim (evangelize) the good news (the evangel) of military victory or of the ascension of a new king to the throne. In other words, it seems that an evangelist is one who travels great distances in order to proclaim the gospel, a usage that certainly fits both Philip and Timothy. Evangelists, then, are church-planting missionaries.⁷ And, of course, without church planting missionaries, the gifts of Christ cannot be deployed within and by the church of Christ.

The final group Paul lists are “the pastors and teachers” (τοὺς ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους). I say “the final group” because I think “pastors” and “teachers” are grouped together.⁸ There are three reasons for this:

- First, both “pastors” and “teachers” share a single definite article (τοὺς ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους).

⁷ See Thielman, 274–75. Thielman writes, “‘Evangelists,’ then, are probably those whom God has especially equipped to travel from place to place with the good news of peace through Christ. . . . Paul, then, probably thinks of ‘evangelists’ as similar to apostles but without their authority because of their lack of direct connection to the historical Jesus (Friedrich, *TDNT* 2:737). The evangelists proclaim the message to which the apostles have been eye- and ear-witnesses (cf. Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 5.10.2; Schnackenburg 1991: 181)”; *Ibid.*

⁸ Contra Thielman, 275–77; Baugh, 331–36.

- Second, both “pastors” and “teachers” share the same δέ in the μὲν-δέ construction (τοὺς δὲ ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους).
- Third, teaching is a function performed primarily by pastors (1 Tm 3:2; 4:13–16; 5:17; Ti 1:9).

So I understand this final group to be the elders (overseers, pastors [cf. Acts 20:17, 28; Ti 1:5, 7; 1 Pt 5:1–5]) of the local church, whose responsibility it is to “equip” (καταρτισμὸν—used just this once in the NT, with the meaning of “prepare,” as in the arrangement and preparation of troops for battle⁹) the saints to deploy the gifts they have received in the work of ministry.¹⁰

The Goal of Grace

Finally, what is the goal of these gifts of grace that Christ has bestowed upon the church? The goal, the purpose, of the spiritual gifts is stated in vv. 12–13:

... to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 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... (4:12–13)

The goal, the purpose, of the spiritual gifts is the spiritual maturity of the church, which Paul describes by means of three coordinate prepositional phrases.¹¹ This morning, I am merely going to mention these three aspects of congregational maturity. Next week, we will return to unpack them and explore how the congregation attains to these three aspects of maturity in actual practice.

What does it mean for a church to be spiritually mature? It means it has attained to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God. A spiritually mature church is one that

⁹ Baugh, 339.

¹⁰ There is a long and heated debate over the interpretation of the three prepositional phrases in Eph 4:12. Are the three phrases coordinate, each one building upon the other, such that it is the saints who do the work of the ministry with the result that the body of Christ is built up? This is Thielman and Stott’s view; Thielman, 277–80; Stott, 166–68. Or, are the three phrases syntactically parallel, such that all three describe the ministry of the apostle, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers? This is Baugh’s view; Baugh, 336–40. It is difficult to decide which view is correct, but there is very little difference in the application, for even if the three phrases are parallel, the special offices are tasked with equipping/preparing the saints to withstand false doctrine (v. 14), speak the truth in love (v. 15), and function properly in its proper place (v. 16).

¹¹ “Unlike the three prepositional phrases in 4:12, these phrases do not build on each other but view the same result from different angles”; Thielman, 281.

is unified around a theologically-robust, experientially-vibrant faith in Christ. The “unity of the faith” (τὴν ἐνότητα τῆς πίστεως) refers to the unity of the church’s doctrine, *the* faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). A spiritually mature congregation is a theologically-knowledgeable congregation that is able to recognize and withstand false teaching (v. 14) and is able to speak the truth in love (v. 15). The “knowledge of the Son of God” (τῆς ἐπιγνώσεως τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ) then points to an experiential knowledge of Christ, what modern evangelicals might call a “personal relationship” with Christ.¹² It is not merely knowing doctrinal facts, it is knowing and trusting Christ as a Person. Spiritual maturity is not less than theological knowledge, but it is more than theological knowledge. It is receiving, loving, trusting, knowing, enjoying Christ in living, vital communion (Phil 3:8–10).¹³ And it something to which we must help one another, of which we will have more to say next week.

What does it mean for a church to be spiritually mature? It means that the church has attained to “mature manhood” (ἄνδρα τέλειον). What Paul means becomes clear in the next verse where he describes immature churches as “children” (νήπιοι) who are tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine. A toddler is unstable on his feet, liable to be knocked over by a stiff breeze and sometimes falling over just because he gets off balance. A full-grown man, on the other hand, is stable and strong, able to withstand all manner of opposing forces. A spiritually mature church, then, is one that is stable and strong, one that does not get destabilized by trials, tribulations, or temptations, but takes such things in stride and continues on in faithfulness.

What does it mean for a church to be spiritually mature? It means that the church has attained to “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (μέτρον ἡλικίας τοῦ πληρώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ). What does a spiritually mature church look like? It looks like Jesus. How does a spiritually mature church act? It acts like Jesus. How does a spiritually mature church speak? It speaks like Jesus. Jesus is the metric (μέτρον) of maturity; Christ is the standard of holiness. And He has given His gifts to the church that we might attain to that stature. The spiritual maturity of the church is the church’s responsibility and the church’s ministry, and for

¹² “Perhaps here, then, the compound term ἐπίγνωσις refers to a personal, experiential knowledge of God’s Son”; Thielman, 281.

¹³ Lloyd-Jones wrote, “The Apostle uses a very strong word (epignosis) which means ‘full knowledge,’ something over and above that other kind of intellectual knowledge and apprehension. This is something deeper, something profounder, and as I say, something experimental”; D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:1–16* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980), 217.

this Christ has given the church its gifts. We will return next week to take a deeper look at how the congregation exercises this ministry of maturity.

Let Good and Kindred Go

Luther's confidence in the face of hostile powers ruling a hostile world (Eph 6:12) was not in his own strength; it was in Christ.

Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing,
were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing.

Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he;
Lord Sabaoth his name, from age to age the same;
and he must win the battle.

Christ Jesus descended to secure our redemption by His life, death, and resurrection, and He has ascended on high, far above all the heavens, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion—in fact, He holds these powers in captivity—, and He has given to His church His Word, His Spirit, and His gifts.

That Word above all earthly powers no thanks to them abideth;
the Spirit and the gifts are ours through him who with us sideth.

Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
the body they may kill: God's truth abideth still;
his kingdom is forever!