

*Church on Fire: Becoming*

**Ephesians 4:1-16**

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We've been exploring the essence of the church in terms of Believing, Belonging and, now, Becoming. In faith, God gives us something to believe, something that will hold at the center. In fellowship, God gives us a place to belong, a family of faith, a community, connections among God's people. God also gives us a vision for what we can become and empowers us to become all that he wants us to be.

We're using the image of the church on fire. Fire is not only for light and warmth, it also generates *power* that can enable work to get done.

When my grandpa was a young man, he worked on threshing crews. They used a steam engine to run the threshing machine. He remained fascinated by steam engines and all kinds of machinery. One year for Christmas, Mom bought him a working model of a steam engine tractor. Being a little kid at the time, I got to play with it. There was a little tank to fill with water. There was a little pellet of fuel to put in the burner and light. The fire would heat the water and produce steam that turned the wheels and this little tractor would move across the floor.

God puts the fire of the Holy Spirit in the church. But it's not just to enlighten us or make us feel warm. It's to empower us and propel us into service. What are we doing with the great power God has given? Locomotives aren't meant to be hitched to little red wagons. They're meant to pull freight trains. The presence and power and gifts of God in the church are meant for transformation, service, and sacrifice.

In this passage we've read, Paul says that God has given grace and gifts to the church to equip God's people for works of service or ministry. The purpose of this service is building up the body of Christ. The body is built up and grows as each part does its work.

Let's see this in its context. The chapter begins with Paul calling Christians to "walk worthy of your calling." He stresses the unity of the church. Then he introduces diversity by saying that each one of us has received grace from Christ. This grace is seen in the variety of gifts Christ

has given in the church. This ties in with what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12 that we looked at last week. As in that chapter, unity and diversity are big themes in this chapter.

Another big theme here is maturity. God's people together are being built up and are growing up into maturity. This maturity is measured by how much we're like Christ. The church, the body of Christ, is growing up into Christ, who is the Head of the church. Our maturity in faith will mean experiencing the fullness of Christ.

How is the church becoming like Jesus? *We are becoming like Jesus in character.* We're taking on the character of Christ. Paul mentions several qualities in the first verses of this chapter—humble, gentle, patient, bearing with one another in love. These sound a lot like the fruit of the Spirit he mentions in Galatians 5. They describe the character of Jesus. These qualities of his character not only rub off on us, but become part of who we are because he lives in us through the Holy Spirit.

*The church is also becoming like Jesus in service. We're becoming a servant church.* Paul says that Jesus, our exalted Lord, has given gifts in the church. The gifts he lists here are slightly different from the gifts in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. Here the gifts seem to be gifted people. But it all ties together. The purpose of these gifts is to prepare or equip God's people for works of service for building up the body of Christ.

In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, we read that all Scripture is inspired by God and is useful in various ways so that the person of God "may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Part of the Bible's purpose is to equip us for good works. The gifts that Paul lists in Ephesians 4 are mainly "word" gifts. Apostles preached and taught as they established new churches. Prophets spoke forth the word of God to God's people. Evangelists proclaimed the word of the gospel in such a way that people heard and responded. Pastors and teachers provided spiritual food and care for groups of Christians. These gifts continue in the church in various ways.

So we have the Scriptures that provide equipment for doing good works. And we have gifted ministries that provide equipment for service or ministry. Both kinds of equipment are inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

God calls all of us in some way. God calls everyone to come to Jesus and receive forgiveness, freedom, and new life. Our response to that call is to come to him and put our faith and trust in him. Included in the call to know Jesus and follow him is the call to be servants. The word for *servant* in the New Testament also means *minister*. So the call to come and receive includes the call to go and serve. And that call doesn't mean just doing church work. Church committees are necessary. But being on a committee isn't the only way—not even the primary way—to be a servant/minister in the church. Our call means serving the Lord in all our work and doing all that we do to bring glory to God.

Your job, your family, your school, your neighborhood are areas of your ministry. One reason we gather (when we can) one day a week is to be trained and instructed, equipped and empowered to serve the other six days. This mainly means doing our work well, giving our best and, in our hearts, offering our work to God as service and praise. God is calling us to become a church of servants and ministers on the job, in our community, in our homes, around the world.

In 1998 the 200 employees of Inland Buildings in Cullman, AL, received news that their plant would have to lay off several employees. One worker, Kendall Smith, began thinking about all the families who would be affected financially. He felt called to pray for them and he invited a few other Inland employees to join him. They took ten minutes of their thirty-minute lunch breaks to pray for specific needs of employees and their families, for the company, their churches, and the nation. They were elated when the layoffs ended in only two weeks.

Yet the group continued to meet for prayer during lunch break every Wednesday. Someone shared a brief devotion or Scripture, and then they prayed. Around twenty-five to thirty employees participated.

The group prayed employees through many trials. One man's four-year-old son went to Children's Hospital expecting treatment for a sinus infection. He was re-diagnosed and had a tumor removed from his brain. The prayer group not only prayed for that family, but also took up a collection to help with their medical bills.

Another worker's seven-year-old son needed a kidney transplant. The family didn't have enough money to pay the deductible for the medication. One night after work, the family found an envelope of money the prayer group had slipped into the man's lunch box.

One man whose wife the group prayed for joined the group and became a proponent of workplace prayer groups. He saw three main benefits of the Inland group. First, the workplace has a Christian witness. Second, the lives of the participants and their co-workers are blessed. Third, the nation is strengthened as the group prays for national leaders.

It's easy to limit faith to Sunday morning. But we're called to live it every day. The group at Inland chose to be a light to the world, a lampstand, a city on a hill. Their pre-Christian co-workers couldn't help but notice how they lived out their faith as they showed their good works for God's glory (Greg Tolle, *Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit* 40-41).

God calls us all because God wants to use all of his people to accomplish his purposes in and through the church. Let's allow God to work through each of us and all of us together. Alive and growing churches allow and encourage people to be in ministry. If you have an idea for something the church needs to do, for some new ministry, I say, "Go for it. You get started on it and let me know how I can support you." I'll do my best to offer resources and teaching and inspiration and training for ministry and service so that each member can do its part. That's part of my role as a pastor-teacher in the church.

The church on fire has to have the fire in both the pulpit and the pew. The whole church needs to be ablaze with God's love and power.

When God calls, God makes fulfilling the call possible. When God guides, God provides. God has given us the *example* of service in Jesus. Remember, we're growing up in Jesus, we're becoming like Jesus as we become a servant church. Elsewhere, Paul writes of Jesus laying aside his glory and becoming a servant. He humbled himself and became obedient, even to the point of dying on the cross (Philippians 2:6-8).

In a scene in the Gospels, two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, come to him with a request to have the places of honor in Jesus' kingdom. Jesus tells them that they don't know what they are asking. He points out

the suffering that goes with following him. When the other ten disciples hear what James and John had asked, they become resentful. So Jesus has to call them all together and explain some things to them. He says that among his people, leadership doesn't mean lording it over others. Instead, the one who would be great must be a servant. The one who would be first must be the slave of all. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:35-45).

To take part in Jesus' mission is to share its cost. Jesus chose the way of a suffering servant and he calls us to follow him. We don't repeat his atoning sacrificial death, but we live in light of it. Our service is an expression of gratitude for what God has done. As Jesus gave himself for us, we give ourselves to him and to others in sacrificial service.

Not only has God given us an example, but he's also *equipped* us for service through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit gives us power to follow Jesus. The Holy Spirit doesn't fill us as we wait in a corner to be "zapped," but when we're using what we have, when we're in the middle of carrying out the mission of God's kingdom.

God gives us the gifts we need to accomplish the service God wants us to do. A young man went out for football and told the coach, "I want to play quarterback." The coach said, "No, you want to play football. Now get out there and we'll see what gifts surface."

God's plan seems to be to get us involved in what he calls us to do, to get us where the needs are. As we get involved in service, we get stretched beyond our capacity to love, care, and help. Now God has brought us to the point where we have to trust Christ to do in us what we can't do on our own. One reason we might lack power and vitality is that we aren't bold and daring enough. We only try to do what we can pull off on our own. But God wants to guide us to dream big, to attempt great things, and to trust God to empower us.

One day in chapel at ORU, a side door burst open, a guy crashed some cymbals and another guy shouted, "Give up your small ambitions!" It was a couple of drama students doing a reading from St. Francis Xavier. I

don't remember the rest of what they said, but that opening line made an impression: Give up your small ambitions!

I've struggled to do that for years. It's so much easier to be comfortable and to stick with what I know I can do. But I keep hearing the call to stretch, to grow, to risk, and to trust God. When I dare to do that, I find God to be trustworthy. God really does provide.

Power is available. God has given the church his Word and Spirit and various gifts of the Spirit to equip and empower us for ministry to each other and so we can minister together in the world. Needs and opportunities are all around us. The Holy Spirit can make us sensitive to people and their needs and the Spirit can enable us to help meet those needs.

Again, see your job as ministry. Get involved in the church's ministries. Help people who are in need. Volunteer your time and talent where they're needed.

Giving financial support isn't a substitute for the ministry God calls us to do. But it supplements our ministry and it helps others fulfill their ministry. So *we are becoming, also, a generous church*. We give to support what this church does right here. We give to support the efforts of many churches in our community. And we give to support what churches are doing all across Oklahoma and the U.S. and around the world. As you pray about your estimate of giving for next year, let God guide you and trust God to provide what you need and to enable you to be generous.

This chapter of Ephesians includes the big themes of unity, diversity, ministry, and maturity. There's another big theme here: love. God's love in us is *the* quality of Christ's character we're growing into. God's love in us is the motive for ministry and service.

A story from the early part of the Twentieth Century tells about an Armenian nurse whose brother was killed by Turkish soldiers. She saw the man who murdered her brother. Later, this same soldier was brought into the hospital where she worked. She recognized him and could have ignored him or mistreated him so that he wouldn't survive. Instead, she treated him as she would any other patient. She cared for him and spared his life. When he was able to, he asked her why. "You knew who I was. Why didn't you kill

me? Why did you treat me kindly?" She replied, "Because I serve him who said, 'Love your enemies and do them good.' That is my faith." And the soldier then said, "Tell me more. I would give anything to have a faith like yours" (cited in Jim Moore, *Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned, but I Have Several Excellent Excuses* 26-27).

What can we do as we follow Jesus that will show our faith and draw others to the Lord we believe in, the Lord whose people we belong to, the Lord who helps us become all that he wants us to be?