

## **Church: Loving as Jesus loves**

by Scott Grant

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### **The beautiful bride**

We are given much to complaining, so much so that we even complain about beautiful things. God's most beautiful creation is often the target of our most bitter complaints. His most beautiful work is not the tallest mountain, the noblest creature or even man; it is men and women united together in a great and beautiful mystery - the church.

How can this be? How can an institution that unites people often more bent toward harboring grudges than dispensing love be called beautiful? The book of Ephesians provides several answers:

- Christ loves the church. He gave himself up for her, he nourishes and cherishes her that she might be ... beautiful (Ephesians 5:25-29). And beautiful she is, for the sins that stained and wrinkled her wedding gown have been removed by the blood of her adoring husband, Jesus.

- Through the church, believers see the love of Christ. Only "with all the saints" is one able to comprehend "the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ, which surpasses knowledge" (Ephesians 3:19). The colors of the love of Christ can be seen only in community. Those living in isolation choose for themselves a black-and-white existence. Sanctification without community is not sanctification. The Chronicler reports that when God's people praised him together, the glory of the Lord filled the temple (2 Chronicles 5:11-14). The Lord is visible in the community of the church.

- Through the church, God makes his "manifold wisdom" known to the entire spiritual world (Ephesians 3:10). In Christ, God unites people of different races, backgrounds and interests into one person, something no one else can do. The church is full of dignity, being an expression of his triumph over wickedness and an offer of peace to a conflict-ridden world.

What God has declared beautiful, let no one declare ugly. And what God has declared beautiful, let no believer castigate or shun. Rather, let us participate. For the church is the fulfillment of the promise made to the prophet Jeremiah: "I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33). Let us allow God to display each of us in his rainbow of the church so that we will shine forth as a glorious testimony of the love of Christ.

### **The painful glory of participation**

Participation, though, can be frightening, because people can be frightening, and because numbers of people together can be especially frightening. And the church, though beautiful, is usually disappointing, because it will never live down to our lowly expectations of pain-free relating. If the church fulfilled our supposedly lofty vision for it, it would never fulfill the purpose for which God created it, for no one would mature and no church would mature. Life would be easy, and there would be no need for God. Somehow, in the midst of a struggling community, God allows us to find him.

Larry Crabb writes: "True community exists only in a group of people committed above all else to relating well who admit they have very little idea how to go about it. They therefore study the Bible in search of whatever principles are there to follow, and they do their best to follow them, but they know that for the principles to actually yield true community, a miracle is required. They therefore pray. And they pray a lot. In fact they depend more on prayer than on seminars or books. They expect confusion, and they painfully rejoice when it

comes, because it drives them to new levels of brokenness and humility, which in turn enables them to pray better. They ask questions no one can answer. And the effect is to pay less attention to plans for good relating and more attention to the one Person who can empower them to relate as he does. They feel alive in the middle of conflict, not with anger but with anticipation. Smooth times are welcomed and enjoyed, but conflict is valued as a gate into the mystery of relating with godly power."

So there is joy in the journey, strength in the struggle, and God in our midst. So let us give thanks that the Lord, who loves relationships, who in fact exists in three persons who relate with each other, and who has given us a community of pilgrims to journey and struggle with as together we await the great day when we shall all worship him together in the heavenly city.

Until that day, the Lord will lead us forth, as he matures us together as a body. Paul describes this community and individual growing process in Ephesians 4.

### **Other-centeredness**

Ephesians 4:1-6:

*(1) I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, (2) with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, (3) being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (4) There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; (5) one Lord; one faith; one baptism; (6) one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.*

The "manner worthy of the calling" concerns unity, which is maintained by humility, gentleness, patience and forbearance. All of these dispositions concern other-centeredness. Other-centeredness, though, comes through a brokenness that leads us to trust the Lord, not ourselves. And it is other-centeredness that establishes unity.

This, of course, was demonstrated in Christ. His greatest miracle may be the one mentioned by Peter: "... and while being reviled, he did not revile in return; while suffering, he uttered no threats, but kept entrusting himself to him who judges righteously" (1 Peter 3:23). Our Lord, though suffering unjustly, "did not open his mouth" (Isaiah 53:7).

We are more prone to jump to our own defense, if not verbally than internally, instead of trusting the Father. And as we do, we mount an attack on the beautiful bride of Christ. The way to grow in other-centeredness is to bring our brokenness to the Father, who causes us to trust in him. Then, though we must acknowledge the hurt inflicted by those who wounded us, we will learn to forgive their foibles and even their outright attacks, and they will be much more objects of open compassion than veiled contempt. And we will also be diligent to preserve the unity.

### **What unity is**

If unity is something we wish to preserve, it would help to know what it is. First, it is not uniformity; it is not being the same or thinking the same. It concerns gathering around the same things and being bound together because of them. Moths are attracted by the same light. People are drawn together by the same interests. The same goal can rally numbers of diverse people.

Is there any greater list of common interests than the one Paul gives us in verses 4 through 6? The word translated "unity" comes from the word for "one," which is used seven times in verses 4 through 6. Each of these Christian "interests" all believers have in common. Verses 1 through 3 tell us how to preserve unity, and this section gives us motivation for preserving it.

Actually the list is based on, and derived from, three listings within it: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The church throughout the ages has marveled in the mystery of the trinity. And what better illustration of diversity within unity than that of God himself, expressing himself in three persons?

First, we all believe in the Holy Spirit, who is responsible in this context for the body of Christ. Together as the body of Christ, we are a temple of God, and the Spirit dwells within this temple (Ephesians 2:22). We are members, then, of each other, so if we damage another, we damage ourselves (Romans 12:5). And if we damage each other, the Holy Spirit grieves as well (Ephesians 4:30).

Second, we all believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, who is responsible for the hope of our calling, faith and baptism.

Hope concerns our eternal reunion with Christ. Although believers differ over the details of the return of Christ, we are in agreement that we will be with him together forever. We'll all be worshipping him together in unison forever, so why not stop arguing over the manner of the events leading up to Christ's coming and get on with bowing down before him together?

We all share one faith. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8). We all believe that the blood of Jesus Christ is all that qualifies us for a relationship with God. And if we have all been saved by grace through faith, no one has any greater standing than another, for the cross has made equals of us all. So what need is there for competition?

Baptism concerns our identification with Christ and his body of believers. We were all dead in our trespasses and sins, but our baptism into Christ made us alive together with him and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:1-6). This is an unfathomable common experience, the depths of which we could never plumb in conversation. So who needs to spend time haggling over the different methods of water baptism that represent this great spiritual reality?

Finally, there is one God and Father of us all. That means we are all members of one family. Family members have their disagreements, but wise and loving earthly fathers can often bring disagreeable siblings together. And brothers and sisters will even come together "for Dad's sake." Our heavenly Father is perfect in his wisdom and love, and he is over all (in authority over all of us), through all (ministering through us) and in all (residing in all of us). He can bring us together. And we can come together "for his sake."

This is the ultimate basis for unity: We are all members of the Father's family. "Common doctrine isn't the basis for fellowship; common heritage is," writes Neil Anderson. "We're all children of God, and that's enough to bring us together in peace."

### **Let us come together**

So we all believe in the Father, the Son and the Spirit, God's love for us and his work on our behalf. Are the great components of this common faith enough to persuade us to drop the petty concerns of our earthly kingdoms and worship the one true King together? They are enough only insofar as they are important to us.

There is a large oak tree in front of the high school that I attended. A number of years back, school officials decided to cut it down. They didn't think it was very important. When my mother presented some research that showed that the tree was more than 100 years old, the officials changed their mind, and then everyone was in agreement that the tree shouldn't be cut down. But they did so only when they recognized the tree was important.

How important is God to us? If we deem him not quite as important as the other concerns of life, if he is akin to a common tree, unity will be hopeless. But if he himself is our most important concern, more akin to a stately oak, then we will gather around him and worship together.

Unity is not only important for our sakes and the sake of the body; it is important as a testimony. Sixty-five percent of America's Fortune 500 corporations use "diversity consultants," who help people of different backgrounds work together. In a world that has never known peace, people want to know: Is there someplace - anyplace - where people get along? The unity of the body says, "There is such a place, and it is a place where people do more than get along; it is a place where people love. It is a place where you'll be loved. Come and see."

But unity isn't the whole story. The goal of the body is not unity. Unity itself is boring. Unity for a purpose is exciting. Unity enables the body to fulfill its goal: maturity. And strange as it seems, diversity, in addition to unity, plays a key role in maturity. Let's see.

## **The costly gifts**

Ephesians 4:7-10:

*(7) But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. (8) Therefore, it says, "When he ascended on high, he led captive a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." (9) (Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that he also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? (10) He who descended is himself also he who ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)*

Verses 1 through 6 concern unity. Verse 7 indicates a change in Paul's flow of thought with the word "each." Grace has been given to each of us. This grace concerns gifts for service he has given to each believer. And these gifts differ, because they are "according to the measure of the gift of Christ." In other words, they differ because Christ has distributed them differently.

Within verse 7 are two crucial points. First, if grace has been given to each of us, that means no one is without a gift. Some may feel that they must have been asleep when the gifts were handed out, because they don't see their lives having much of an effect, but that's not true. Second, if grace was given according to the measure of the gift of Christ, each is tremendously gifted. In surveying the gospels, does Jesus strike us as the kind of person who is stingy with gifts? No, he has lavished grace on each one of us, and that includes gifts for service. Some may acknowledge the truth that they have been gifted by Christ but that they got shortchanged, but that's not true. Each is gifted, and each is tremendously gifted.

These gifts are valuable, because they came at a tremendous price: the death of our savior. This is Paul's point in verses 8 through 10.

In verse 8, he quotes from Psalm 68:18, which refers to the Lord's triumphal ascension to his throne on Mount Zion, in Jerusalem. In the imagery, he is pictured as leading defeated enemies, who were the nations that opposed Israel. A conquering king would then distribute the booty to his people. Christ's victory over spiritual enemies in his death, resurrection and ascension to the throne in the heavenly Zion is the fulfillment and continuation of this picture (Acts 2:33-35, Ephesians 1:19-21). And like a conquering king, he distributed the booty - spiritual gifts.

The important thing to note in all this is Paul's commentary on Psalm 68 in verses 9 and 10, where he makes mention of Christ's descending into the lower parts of the earth. Interpretations differ about what is meant, but similar language in Romans 10:7 refers to the death of Christ. Descending into the lower parts of the earth, then, would simply mean his death on earth. In order to ascend to his heavenly throne, Christ first had to take on human flesh and absorb the wrath of God in his death as a man. This he was willing to undergo. And this he had to undergo in order to ascend to his heavenly throne and distribute spiritual gifts to us. So these gifts in us are especially precious. That means we, too, must be especially precious. Therefore, let no one despise the gifts God has given him.

Within the diversity of gifted members of the body are four that can be described as "equippers." Paul lists these (verse 11) in the following section, in which he also describes the equipping of the body as a whole (verses 12 through 13), the equipping of the members of the body (verses 14 and 15) and the way the members and the entire body work together (verse 16).

Ephesians 4:11-16:

*(11) And he gave some as apostles and some as prophets and some as evangelists and some as pastors and teachers, (12) for the equipping of the saints for the work of service to the building up of the body of Christ,*

*(13) until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ. (14) As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; (15) but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into him, who is the head, even Christ, (16), from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.*

## **The equippers**

In verse 11, Paul lists not gifts but people. It is gifted people whom Christ gives as gifts to the body. Four types of gifted people are especially foundational: apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers.

The apostles of Christ were his 12 disciples (Matthias replaced Judas), plus Paul, James the brother of Jesus and a few others. They were personally chosen and commissioned by Jesus. An apostle had to be a witness of the risen Lord (Acts 1:22). Thus, there are no more apostles.

Prophets in the Old Testament received direct revelation from God and were able to say with conviction, "Thus says the Lord." The New Testament seems to offer no change in that description. In fact, earlier in this same book, Paul refers to New Testament prophets as receiving revelation from the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 3:5). Nothing in the New Testament precludes the possibility of such prophets today. Practically speaking, however, it would seem that such a gift would seem rarely - if ever - necessary, now that God's word is complete.

Because there are no more apostles and there may be no more prophets, how can the church possibly benefit from such gifted people today? They have left the body the word of God, the greatest gift of all, save Jesus himself. Like Abel, though they are dead, they speak (Hebrews 11:4). And the word of God is "living and active" (Hebrews 4:12).

Evangelists would seem to be people especially gifted to present the gospel.

Grammatically, there is a link between "pastors," or shepherds, and "teachers," which would make this one person. Teaching is part of shepherding, as illustrated in the life of Jesus: "And disembarking, he saw a great multitude, and he felt compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things" (Mark 6:34). Because their need for a shepherd moved Jesus, he taught them. So a shepherd must be a teacher, though it would seem that one could be a teacher without being a shepherd, for teachers are listed without any reference to shepherds (Romans 12:7, 1 Corinthians 12:28).

So alive and active today in the body of Christ are the apostolic and prophetic word, evangelists, pastor-teachers and teachers. As the fabric of truth runs through each piece of the armor of spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:10-20), so the blood of truth runs through the veins of each of these gifted people. Evangelists, pastors and teachers dispense the truth of the word. It is through their ministry of the word that Christ equips the saints, or holy ones, meaning every believer in the body of Christ.

## **The macro view**

First, in verses 12 and 13, Paul gives us the big picture of the ministry of truth: the macro view of a body equipped. Five developments occur as truth is faithfully ministered, culminating in maturity.

- The work of service. Although many saints are equipped, in the macro view there is only one work of service. This means the body as a whole is equipped to serve God.
- The building up of the body of Christ. The body is growing; it is moving toward the fulfillment of its purpose.
- The unity of the faith. This harkens back to Paul's discussion of unity in verses 1 through 6.

Here unity is seen not as the end but as a means to an end. The ministry of the truth leads us to discard petty differences as we all agree to submit to the head, Christ.

- Maturity. In referring to maturity with the phrase "a mature man," not "mature men," Paul continues his discussion of the entire body. This is the goal of the building up, or growth, of the body. A baby's body grows through the years until eventually it reaches maturity and is able to do that which the head wants. But what does the body of Christ look like when it is mature? Paul answers that with the final development.

- The measure of the stature that belongs to the fulness of Christ. The mature body of Christ looks like ... Christ. The purpose of the body is to carry out the ministry of Christ. His physical body is no longer on earth to minister, but the church as his spiritual body is here. Strange as it seems, the spiritual body of Christ, comprising millions of people, can do greater things than Christ himself as one divine man. We need look no further than the gospels to see what Christ looked like. He bled to death for a dying world. That is Christ's vision for his church today: a body seeking to love until it bleeds for a dying world.

Therefore, ministries to the world should be evaluated and prayed through with such questions in mind: "Is this something Jesus would do? Is this something Jesus wants us to do?"

### **The micro view**

But bleeding is painful. Members of the body are launched into the world, but they get assaulted by a barrage of lies. This can hinder their maturity, and for the body to mature, its members must mature. Paul in verses 14 and 15 gives us the detailed picture of the ministry of truth: the micro view of members of the body equipped.

The enemy of individual maturity, as we have seen elsewhere in our study, is the lie, referred to here as "trickery," "craftiness" and "deceitful scheming" that toss us like the waves and carry us about like the wind. As we would expect by now, the waves and winds of the lie are overcome by the anchor of truth, which is given by the word and explained by equippers. Pastor-teachers must therefore be sensitive to not only the needs of the body as a whole but to the needs of each individual member. They must see the big and small pictures.

The Spirit searches our hearts with the word to show us truth: the truth about the particular lies we have believed to exalt ourselves as our own gods and the truth about the true God who has placed us in Christ, declared us righteous and gifted us to serve.

### **Truthing in love**

But those with equipping gifts aren't the only ones involved with the ministry of truth; they equip members of the body with truth, who then believe truth, live it out and express it through their particular gifts. This is the meaning of "speaking the truth in love," or literally, if we could make "truth" a verb in English, "truthing in love." "Truthing," then, involves two facets: believing truth and living it out.

The truth of God and who we are as children of God is glorious, but it is always painful at first, because it involves a diagnosis of lies we embrace. This is why we all "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18).

Truthing involves a willingness to confront the disturbing truth about ourselves. It means believing the truth of God's word, which the Spirit uses like a cutting sword to testify to us that we have creatively and distinctly endeavored to be gods by controlling our environments to protect us from relational pain.

But it also involves believing that we are forgiven in Christ. Believing the truth of the word - the painful diagnosis and the miraculous cure - sets us free to live out the truth. For Jesus said, "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

What keeps us from living out the truth by serving the body of Christ but the lie - the lie that we're not in need of forgiveness or the lie that we're not forgiven or the lie that we're not qualified to serve, all of which rob us of motivation to serve? But as each member of the body believes the truth, he or she is turned loose to live it out - to serve the body distinctly according to his or her gifts.

The goal of it all, in our dealings in the family of God, is love - believing and living out the truth in love. This means the Lord is giving each of us an outward focus: a vision for passionately loving those in the body of Christ. Thus, the members of the body who get beat up in the world can return to the church and be healed by truthing in love.

In this manner, truthing in love, individual members of the body "grow up in all aspects into him, who is the head, even Christ." In this illustration, the head is mature, but the parts of the body aren't, so the parts must grow to carry out the wishes of the head.

In verse 16, Paul brings together the macro and micro views and gives us the entire picture of the body. The body is dependent on "every joint" and "each individual part." Each gifted member carries out his or her ministry of truth "in love," and the body grows into maturity so that it can fulfill its purpose: loving as Christ loved.

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