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**Sermon Title: *The United Church: Gifted and Growing***

**Manuscript written and sermon preached by Roger Roberts**

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## ***The United Church: Gifted and Growing***

### **Introduction:**

Open your Bibles with me to our text, as we continue our study of Paul's Letter to the church in Ephesus, intended possibly also for the surrounding churches of Asia Minor. Last Sunday, as we considered the first six verses of Ephesians 4, we realized the indispensable unity and fellowship that we are given by God in our life together. We have the gift and the responsibility of life together in the unity of love and our common new life through the Holy Spirit.

In today's text, we will see how our united life together includes a vast and diverse array of differently gifted people, God's people who are both uniquely gifted and also growing together in this miraculous unity that God alone can give us.

Follow as I read **Ephesians 4:7-16**.

I know Belgium and also my home country have unemployment problems; but could it be that we also have them here at IBC? Belgium's unemployment rate jumped from 6.5% in 2008 to 8.2% by the end of 2009, and that rate is higher in my home country, the USA. The government here is trying to keep factories from closing, which would mean more people losing jobs and entering the ranks of the unemployed.

As God's people, we should be concerned about the economy and the need for people to have jobs to support themselves and their families. We ought to especially care about and seek to do something to help those in our church family who are jobless and in need of financial help until they can return to work and earn the support they need.

If the Apostle Paul were here this morning, he would look around and ask how many are part of God's employed, meaningfully lending support to the work of Christ in building up his body, the church. Working to earn a financial wage is important for all of us and is an important part of our life in the kingdom. Paul says that those who are deliberately refusing to do physical work for a financial wage have forfeited the right to eat (2 Thessalonians 3:6-10). And also we are admonished to earn as much as we can in order to give to others who have need and certainly not to hoard for ourselves (2 Corinthians 8:8-9:15).

But beyond working for a wage, Paul says we all have an even greater work before us, and everyone is employable and ought to be employed in this greater work. As we noted last Sunday, we've been given a life together in the family of God, the body of Christ, the church. In this united church there is a task for every one of us. We at IBC are united, not primarily by the use of the English language, but by and in the Triune God, and as a united church we are, first of all...

### **Gifted (verses 7-13)**

Paul reminds the church that every one of us has been gifted...

*By grace (7-10)*

We've noted in our study of Ephesians the new life that God has made available to us through faith in Christ. And this new life is by God's grace alone, undeserved by us and yet so desperately needed by us (Ephesians 2:1-9). Grace is the unmerited favor of God, and Paul says in verses 7 through 10 that each one of us has been given a grace gift with which to serve him by serving one another.

Paul quotes the mysterious verses from one of the "most difficult and obscure" psalms in the Bible (Hoehner, 525), Psalm 68 (verse 18). It seems that Paul is quoting this verse to remind us that Christ was incarnated, suffered the cross, descended to hell for us, was raised and then ascended back to heaven as a gracious descent and ascension for us. He did this, not primarily to simply rescue us from hell, but also to transform us into his redeemed people who now are to glorify him by loving, enjoying and serving him in his everlasting kingdom.

Paul tells us that Christ Jesus went to a lot of trouble to give us his gift of eternal life, with the forgiveness of sins, making us a new creation to

fellowship with him but also to serve him forever, beginning right now. And he doesn't ask us to serve him without his giving us the resources. Paul says he's given each one of us at least one gift with which to serve him. This gift is called a grace gift, literally "a grace" (Mohrang, 2003) again, something that's totally undeserved.

Every one of us can join the ranks of God's employed because we all have at least one spiritual gift. One thing we must do is distinguish between spiritual gifts and church offices. You may not have a church office, that is, a title given by the church for a ministry or leadership position, but you have at least one spiritual gift. What we have in the New Testament are several lists of spiritual gifts, and these seem to be general categories of gifts of leadership, teaching or service/ministry. Some of the gifts mentioned in our text and in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 may have been useful in the first century before the established canon of the New Testament Scriptures. And there may be gifts that God will use today that were not needed in the first century, such as gifts in technical skills and know-how. (I was excited to hear someone say he was trained and has great interest in sound and audio technology, for example!)

But everyone has been gifted by the crucified, risen and reigning Christ with at least one spiritual gift that probably falls within Paul's categories of service, teaching or leadership, and because Christ paid a huge price to give you that gift, you must not neglect it or be envious of the gift(s) of others. Gifts are given for a purpose and your gift(s) are important in the united church and its mission.

Some of us are gifted...

*For equipping (11-12)*

There are leadership and teaching gifts in the church, and some of these, such as apostles and prophets, may have been superseded by the authoritative teaching of the completed New Testament. The apostles of the first century church were recognized for their authoritative messages to the churches by spoken and written word and for their planting of new churches. Prophets communicated God's truth which seemed later to be replaced by written Scripture (Hoehner, 541f).

But the second pair, evangelists and pastor-teachers, are "required in each generation" (Bruce, 85). Evangelists proclaim the gospel and have a unique giftedness for leading people to follow Christ. The writers of our four gospels are referred to as evangelists, whose purpose was to introduce Christ to their readers (Luke 1:1-4; John 20:31). The word "pastor" literally is the word for "shepherd," and the word "teacher" could well be hyphenated to read "pastor-teachers" as some translations do. The likelihood is that Paul is emphasizing that all pastors are to be teachers, but not all teachers are called to be pastors (Hoehner, 544). And in our text Paul is speaking of spiritual gifts and not offices of the church (Hoehner, 539). One of the offices of the church is that of elders, and a qualification for an elder is the ability to teach (1 Timothy 3:2).

So there are pastors who teach and elders who teach but also there will be teachers in the church who may not be elected to any leadership or official ministry position in the church.

But God gifts some to be evangelists and teachers for the work of preparing God's people for works of service (11f), what are "foundational gifts" (Hoehner, 551). This word translated "prepare" is a word that was used in surgery for setting a broken bone and also one used for fishermen mending their nets and preparing them for work, as in Matthew 4:21 (Wood, 58).

I realize you probably think you deserve better, but as your pastor-teacher I'm God's gift to you to help you as a representative of your Great Physician, your surgeon of your souls, and also am called to help prepare you for your works of service. But God has also given you other teachers to minister to you the word of God for the good of your soul and to enable you to better serve the Lord.

I believe also that the teaching you receive from the sermon and possibly a Sunday School lesson is not all that God's wants you to receive. The other elders and I are engaged in a discipleship course together, seeking to help one another better understand the dynamics of being and making disciples. I believe also that IBC should be leading all the small groups in our church to be teaching and caring groups for mending souls and making disciples. To that end we would like to see the growth of prayer groups (such as the women's Bible studies are doing and such as the worship teams could/should become) and the addition of more home groups. I believe that the teaching done in smaller groups, where there can be sharing, caring, ministry and greater accountability, is the best context for "mending broken souls" and preparing each other for works of service.

John Piper relates an account of the power of a small group's ministry to a couple with a troubled marriage:

A visiting pastor in Auckland, New Zealand, was asked by the pastor of a church to come to a small group to help it understand its function. He came early for dinner and the husband was not there. The wife was embarrassed and explained that the husband owned a construction company and worked late.

The group arrived after dinner and the visiting pastor taught for a while on how to use spiritual gifts to build each other up. Then he asked them to get alone for a few minutes to seek God for how each one might channel God's grace to the others for their upbuilding.

When they came back together, he assumed they knew each other's needs because they had been together for several years. The husband came home, showered, and joined them in a few minutes. When the opportunity was given to speak or to pray for each other, there was an awkward silence. They had never done anything like this before—seeking the Lord for how he might want them to minister to each other in that moment to build each other up.

The visiting pastor felt a fiasco was on his hands and turned the meeting back to the pastor to close. The pastor asked if anyone had a special problem they would like prayer for. The hostess said yes and showed the group the rash all over her arms. She

said that the doctors had prescribed medicine but it hadn't helped. They invited her to put her chair in the middle for prayer. And as they prayed, Christ, the head of the church, did his ministry. The pastor said, "I sense in my heart the Lord is telling me your problem is the result of great anger."

She was silent for a moment then began to cry softly. Then she confessed, "I am so angry at my husband. He promises to be home for dinner, but night after night we eat without him . . . He's broken his promises to me over and over, and I feel I am a widow as I raise our children."

There was an awareness that something had just been revealed that two years of small group meetings had not revealed. And the husband was blushing with embarrassment. To make the story shorter, several of the men began to speak about how they had wrestled with the same problem in their homes and had almost ruined their marriages. One in particular spoke of a deep meeting with God in such a crisis and how God had made everything new.

By the grace of God the husband knelt down in front of his wife and wept into her lap, as the group prayed for them more earnestly than they had ever prayed. The visiting pastor commented later, "The Lord had invaded His Body, and the gateway into the supernatural world had been crossed by us all."

The following Sunday the visiting pastor was to preach and saw the small group gathered on the parking lot outside the church. When they found him inside, the woman pulled up her sleeves and said, "Look, no rash anywhere!" The husband approached and said, "I've cut back my workday to eight hours. I took the kids to the zoo yesterday. We have a new home." (Neighbor, 161–164).

John Piper quotes the above story as an example of the ministry power of the Holy Spirit working through a small group that is doing more than just superficially socializing or simply engaging in academic Bible study (3-5). Teachers in our small groups don't have to be elected church officers, such as the pastor and elders, but should be those whom God has gifted to teach his word and help "mend" and "heal" and equip the members of the body. Such teaching should be for the purpose of "setting broken bones," leading the body of Christ to minister healing and encouragement. We are gifted to minister to one another...

#### *With a goal in view (13)*

This is so "that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (12b-13). The maturity which is our goal as followers of Jesus is attainable in this life. The word "teleios" Paul uses is used to refer to an adult (Robertson, 537), someone who is completely mature and grown-up in the faith and not sinless-ly perfect, a state we will reach only when we see Jesus face to face (1 John 3:2).

Our goal as pastor and teachers with the foundational gift is to "present everyone perfect (mature/complete) in Christ" (Colossians 1:28). What this says to me is that we all have the same potential, to be fully mature followers of Jesus Christ. That doesn't mean we'll be without all sin in this life, but it does mean we'll all be seeking to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18) and that we'll be seeking after God's fullness

of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), and that we seek daily to walk in step with the Spirit, who produces more of the fruit of the Spirit every day of our life (Galatians 5:16-25). When we compare our growth chart with each other, we might be tempted to feel proud of ourselves and contemptuous toward others. But when we measure ourselves against Christ, we realize how far we need to grow toward the goal of being like Jesus in every way.

Our foundational teaching gifts are for that very goal. Paul says we're a united church because we are gifted and also because we are...

### **Growing (verses 14-16)**

In verse 14, Paul contrasts the growing, mature follower of Christ with...

#### *The alternative (14)*

The alternative is the immature, childish babe in Christ who fails, indeed who refuses to grow. The mature disciple is strong and steadfast, but the alternative is an immature, childish believer who is vulnerable to false teaching and is stuck in the rut of perpetual immaturity. Paul is describing in verse 14 those with a childish understanding who are spiritually vulnerable and intellectually indefensible against false teaching (Hoehner, 560f).

The word picture Paul gives is of little boats on a stormy sea. Those of childish understanding, who have failed to grow in understanding and faith, are spiritually unstable children in the faith, who "never seem to know their own mind or come to settled convictions. Instead, their opinions tend to be those of the last preacher they heard or the last book they read, and they fall an easy prey to each new theological fad" (Stott, 170).

This vulnerability to trickery and deceitfulness leaves the immature as an easy target for "present day cults," with their "trickery and deceit in their use of Scripture" and in the way they "confuse the immature believer who lacks a proper understanding of God and his Word." These false teachers of cults don't usually bother trying to convert the mature disciple of Jesus (Hoehner, 564).

One of the most disheartening experiences of a pastor is to discover that one of his congregation, and possibly even someone who has sat in Sunday School and been in worship services for years, has fallen into false teaching and become entangled with a heretical cult or sect. We need also to realize the need to keep on growing. No one can remain static in the Christian life. We're either moving forward or we're falling backwards and declining in our spiritual strength and maturity of faith. We must keep on growing in our knowledge of the Word and maintaining and growing in our walk with Christ and our service to one another.

Paul speaks next about...

### *The atmosphere (15)*

The atmosphere we need for spiritual growth is the atmosphere of love. Instead of being vulnerable children in the faith, we are to be growing adults, nurtured in the atmosphere of truth and love.

John Stott thinks Paul put these verses 14 & 15 together to contrast the two dangerous alternatives to spiritual growth. One is the childish naiveté that is indifferent to God's truth, leaving the immature vulnerable to error. The other extreme is the person who loves to delve into doctrinal truth but does so without love, and is quick to argue with and to censure anyone who doesn't agree on every minor point. Such a person, says Stott, seems to enjoy nothing more than a fight (172). That's speaking the truth without love. And some Christians would rather win an argument than keep a friend, or more importantly, than to restore or retain a brother or sister in Christ.

In the atmosphere of God's truth, spoken and taught in love, we will grow up into the likeness of Christ, bearing resemblance to the One who is the Head of his church, his body on earth. It's the love of Christ that's the distinguishing mark of the church, without which our doctrinal teaching is just a noisy gong or clanging symbol (1 Corinthians 13:1). This love that makes us kind to and gentle with one another and submissive to one another is "the body's lifeblood" which is the energizing power within the church and which is the church's "witness to the surrounding society" (Lincoln, 266 & 269). Jesus said our love for one another would be our distinguishing mark to the surrounding, watching world (John 13:35).

A church can fail to "get it right" in a lot of ways, but a lot of love covers over a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8). And the converse is true. We can get the truth of doctrine and Scripture right, but if we forsake our first love, or the love we had at first, we must repent or experience God's judgment. Obviously, after a period of time this very church in Ephesus failed to heed Paul's warning about keeping the priority of love. They fell under the censure and rebuke of the risen Christ for forsaking the way of love (Revelation 2:4f).

Paul closes our text with a reminder of...

### *The aim (16)*

Let me read another translation of this final verse, since the NIV is a bit awkward:

"He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love" (*New Living Translation, Second Edition*).

We need each other in this great work, aiming at pleasing Christ, the Head of this church, who has called us to live and to love together and to join him in his kingdom work. It's a great work with a great aim—the glory and pleasure

of God, who has called us to the work of making disciples, encouraging one another in the work of making followers of Jesus.

You have a gift God wants you to use. Maybe it's a foundational gift like teaching or evangelism. Your gift would be useful in home groups or outreach projects, or joining Rocky as part of a youth ministry team. Maybe it's a quiet gift like serving behind the scenes, or worship leading or music team participation, sound or video equipment operating; or maybe your gift is intercessory praying in faith, or serving on the missions team. Maybe it's hospitality and you'd be a gracious host for a new home group. Maybe it's showing acts of mercy, and you could take meals to those in need of help or encouragement. It might be the gift of giving, which would inspire and challenge others to give and our church to give beyond what we've ever done. Maybe it's some administrative gift that would help us put together our next church directory; or give support to our physical property by your maintenance or gardening skills. Perhaps you're teaching area would be to teach one of our English classes or support that ministry on our hospitality team.

If you don't know your gift, the best place to discover it is in the context of service. Just let one of us elders, Rocky, deacons or team leaders know your willingness to serve and we'll invite you and make a place for you. God will then make known to you how and where he has uniquely suited and gifted you. Take your gift and then allow God to use it for the common aim of mutual up-building of the body of Christ in this place.

### **Conclusion:**

If you need a job to support yourself or your family, I pray you find one and perhaps we can give some encouragement, help or even some temporary financial gift to you until you can take care of that important need.

But there are obviously many here today who are unemployed or perhaps even underemployed in the body of Christ, the temple of God called IBC Brussels.

Some may not have connected with this sermon because you are not yet "employable" in the kingdom of God. You have no desire to grow and to serve because you don't yet have the work of grace in you. So you obviously cannot have his grace-gift for service in the body of Christ. First you need to be joined to Christ by his saving grace.

Perhaps God is calling someone here today to step forward in answering a call that has been echoing in your mind and heart in recent weeks, perhaps months or even years. I received a letter this week from one of our families who were members here while the husband and father was a student at ETF. Now they are in the UK preparing to go to the mission field in Thailand. Also, I wrote a letter of reference for another couple in our church which is in the process of application for mission appointment. I wonder if there isn't yet

another family like that or an individual whom God has gifted and will send forth as his evangelist or pastor-teacher in another place of ministry.

In a moment we'll hear a song in preparation for the Lord's Table which will challenge us to examine our relationships with Christ and with one another in the body of Christ. Ask God to search your heart about relationships and if there is some reconciliation that needs to take place, resolve in your mind and heart that you will make that phone call or visit to be restored in that relationship. It will be a great work of healing a wound or "mending a net" and enabling a brother or sister to fellowship with and to follow Christ.

May we also resolve, as we take the bread and the wine that are expressions of Christ's gifts to us, that we will use the spiritual gift(s) he has given us for his pleasure, service and glory. Don't think your gift is insignificant. It's a gift that Christ gave you at a great cost to him. As we partake of the symbols of the gift of Christ's body and blood, we're reminded of the debt of love we owe. And he calls us to use our gifts for precious and loving service with him and for him in a united church.

There's indeed a great kingdom of God employment opportunity for every one of us.

**Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:**

1. What do you think is your spiritual gift, or your gifts (plural)?
2. What is the best way for you to discover your gift(s)?
3. How can you develop your gift(s)?
4. What should be the result and benefit of your gift(s) to the church?
5. How can so-called spiritual gifts become divisive to the fellowship of the church?
6. Define spiritual maturity as Paul speaks of it (verse 13).
7. What are some of the marks and dangers of spiritual immaturity?
8. Spend some time reflecting on your spiritual gift(s) and how you are currently using them to help strengthen the church. Ask God to lead you to better develop and use your gift(s) for the good of the church and his glory.

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