

On A Mission From God: Becoming a Missional People From Fearful to Courageous

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

On A Mission from God: Becoming a Missional People — From Fearful to Courageous

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: John 3:35-36; Colossians 1:15-23; Matthew 28:16-20; Ephesians 4:7-16

Introduction

Our mission is not to change the world, but it is God's mission to do so. The mission is not about what God does *for* us, but rather what He does *through* us. We cannot build the kingdom, but we are to build *for* the kingdom. God sent His Son into the world that the world might live through him. The singular achievement of Jesus was to die for our sins and to rise for our vindication. Our mission is not to *duplicate* the achievement of Jesus — we surely cannot and must not try — but we are called upon to *implement* it.

"As the Father sent me," the resurrected Jesus instructed his disciples, "so send I you" (John 20:21). Those words evoke a sense of privilege but also of fear. How can we be sent *in the same way* the Father sent Jesus? My previous paragraph suggests the caveats to that mission, but the mission remains. Throughout the Old Testament, when Yahweh called His prophets or servants to embark on His special mission, He often needed to allay their anxieties with the words, "Fear not!":

- Abraham (Genesis 15:1)
- Hagar (Genesis 21:17)
- Isaac (Genesis 26:24)
- Moses to Israel (Exodus 14:13)
- Joshua (Joshua 8:1; 10:8)
- Gideon (Judges 6:23)
- Israel in exile (Isaiah 41:10)
- Ezekiel (Ezekiel 3:9)
- Daniel (Daniel 10:12)

The New Testament followers of Jesus often heard the words "fear not":

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:28).

But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the ruler of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe" (Mark 5:36).

Perhaps this encouragement from Jesus stands out most clearly: "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). The kingdom mission fills the Gospels, acquires legs in the book of *Acts*, and shapes the teaching of the letters. Again, the followers of Jesus confront fear and must take courage, as embodied in Paul's words to his young "son in the faith," Timothy:

⁶ For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, ⁷ **for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.** ⁸ Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, ⁹ who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰ and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, ¹¹ for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, ¹² which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me (2 Timothy 1:6-12).

"Not a spirit of fear," the apostle writes just days before he is scheduled to face the executioner's sword. "Do not be ashamed," he adds, as he faces the hour of his death. For Paul the "mission" was a "holy calling" to proclaim "the gospel" which "brought life and immortality to light." His mission was an "appointment." It

would mean "suffering." God had begun a "purpose before the ages began" and that purpose had reached its grand climax in "the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus who abolished death." The very content of the Gospel (Good News) that Paul proclaimed created courage in both the preacher and the audience. Paul's courageous confidence appears in the words "I know whom I have believed." That is, the transition from faith to courage takes place in the person of Jesus Christ where Paul put his trust. Courage, Paul tells us, comes from being convinced that Jesus Christ "is able to guard" until the Second Coming, that which has been entrusted to him.

From another of Paul's letters comes this daunting question: "Who is sufficient for these things?" (2 Corinthians 2:16), to which he would later respond, "Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, ⁶ who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant" (2 Corinthians 3:5-6). Fear sometimes proceeds from a sense of insufficiency. Paul agrees, but then confidently places his trust in God for the competency of his mission.

This week we will study more closely this Jesus who is the guardian and guarantor of the God's mission in the world. He is our sure foundation and through him we can courageously join the mission!

All Things Given to the Son (John 3:35-36)

35 The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. 36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

Coming as it does from the Gospels, this brief passage sets the theme for this week's study. As we will see in the other passages which follow, the phrase "all things" dominates the subject matter. Embarking confidently on our mission from God, we rely wholly on the authority of the risen Jesus who is described here as the "Son" whom the "Father loves" and into whose hand the Father has given "all things" (*panta*). *The supremacy of the Son secures the certainty of the mission.* Several key points deserve closer attention.

1. **The love of the Father for the Son.** Ours is a mission born out of love. Earlier in John 3, we hear the words of Jesus, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son.." (3:16). In that case, God's love for the world is in view. However, 3:35 reveals a deeper truth: that the mission of God for the world is rooted in a prior covenant between the Father and the Son — one grounded in love. Later in the Gospel, Jesus tells his critics: "For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel" (5:20). That love is reciprocated by Jesus when he tells his disciples: "But I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us go from here" (14:31). Also, in 16:27, the Father's love reaches the disciples, even as they reciprocate the Father's love back to Jesus: "...for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God." Of special importance to the followers of Jesus — those called to the mission — are these further words from 15:9: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love."

The love of the Father for the Son, the Son for the Father, the Son for his followers, and his followers for the Son reach a grand climax in Jesus' high priestly prayer (John 17), where the elements of this mutual love combine in furtherance of God's mission to the world:

²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. ²⁴ Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (17:23-26)

The outstanding topic sentence of this paragraph strikes us immediately: "that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me..." *Mission* and God's contagious *love* are eternally woven together. God's love is generative: bringing into existence the perfect unity of His creation, by uniting all things under the authority of Jesus — the authority of his love for the world.

2. **Belief in/on the Son: the trust of mission.** We have noted in other studies that the biblical idea of "faith" or "belief" goes far beyond naïve acceptance or intellectual assent. It is sometimes misleading to translate the Greek word *pisteuō* as "believe in" since the deeper understanding is "believe on." That latter meaning which substitutes "on" for "in" shifts the emphasis toward placing one's full weight on the foundation of Jesus Christ. The Hebraic understanding of faith as "reliance" or "trust" comes from words like: *'āman* which graphically refer to "leaning on" a strong support; *yāḥal* which refers to trust in the midst of trouble; *bātaḥ* which connotes casting something on another. The Hebrew often uses these words in their *hiphil* form which implies "cause to believe," suggesting that God goes out of His way to create the proper environment for trust (see Genesis 15:6, Exodus 14:31, Numbers 14:11, Deuteronomy 1:32, 9:23, 2 Kings 17:14, 2 Chronicles 20:20, Psalm 78:22, Isaiah 43:10 and Jonah 3:5). According to John 3:35, God has placed the question of everyone's eternal life in the hands of the Son. By implication, it is the mission of Jesus to awaken in the lives of human beings trust in God. He does this, first and foremost, by demonstrating the love of God through the cross: "...while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8; 2 Corinthians 5:14), thereby showing "if God be for us who can be against us" (Romans 8:31).

The ground of faith is Jesus dying for our sins and rising again. God has entrusted the mission to Jesus precisely through sending him into the world to achieve salvation for all who will put their whole weight on him — the literal meaning of "believes in the son."

3. **Rejection and God's wrath.** This is the more difficult half of the sentence in 3:36. Given the whole-hearted commitment of a loving God to rescue His world and restore His creation, how do we account for the loss of *anyone* from His eternal kingdom? Theologians have scrutinized this question for centuries, arriving at a variety of different answers. *Universalists* manage to see everyone as ultimately part of God's eternal kingdom. They arrive at this understanding because they cannot see how God could be God and allow anyone to be lost ultimately. For them the *love of God* overrules all of His attributes, including His *justice*. In other words, Mercy trumps wrath. Reading 3:36, from Jesus' own lips, makes this conclusion inconsistent with the teaching of Jesus. In the Old Testament, we hear these encouraging words: "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live;" "Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 18:23; 33:11). Does Jesus desire the salvation of all human beings? Yes, absolutely, much as we hear Peter telling us: "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." (2 Peter 3:9). But even after writing these words, Peter continues with this: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief..." (2 Peter 3:10), followed by an explicit statement of what we call "the final judgment."

Jesus acknowledged the free will of *every* human being, and saw as his mission to provide for their salvation. However, the decision to accept and trust the achievement of Jesus — to take up his agenda and reject one's own — remained in the hands of *each* human being. It is instructive to keep the "each" and the "every" carefully separated in this regard. The salvation accomplished through the mission of Jesus is for *everyone*; but the acceptance of that achievement remains the responsibility of *each one*. We are happily *universalists* when it comes to the *provision* for salvation, but are *particularists* when it comes to the *reception* of salvation. By handing the matter of eternal life over to Jesus, the Father placed the mission on the basis of trust and saving faith in Jesus the Savior and Lord.

4. **What is "Eternal Life"?** Trust in the Son leads to "having eternal life," the text tells us. The Greek phrase *zōēn aiōnion* literally means "life age-long," and parallels the Hebrew idea of *ḥay 'ōlām*. The notions of "eternal" or "eternity" are fairly abstract within Greek thought and largely do not exist as Hebraic ideas. Simply extending something infinitely into the future does not quite grasp the Hebrew concept of "life age-long." The emphasis is more on the long duration, antiquity or futurity. Among the Greeks (compare

Plato), eternity is not time extended endlessly (quantitative), but timelessness (qualitative).¹ By contrast, we might properly speak about "God's time" as the true meaning of eternity rather than the "absence of time." That is why the Greek word *aiōn* gets applied to life and refers to the "life of God Himself." The Bible, then, contrasts, God's age with the human age. When we speak of the eternal God we mean He who is, was, and is to come (Revelation 1:4), and not the God who has no relationship to time whatsoever. With the coming of Jesus, time underwent a radical transformation, such that we can now refer to the "present age" and "the coming age," where "coming" means "God's futurity" or the age when God brings His purposes to their completion, to their fulfillment. The cross and resurrection bisected time and brought the blessings of the future into the present. Therefore, we may confidently say that the mission of God offers the "life of the coming age" to those who will receive it by faith. When Jesus rose from the dead, eternal life became a reality with human existence.

In Ephesians 1:21 Paul writes about "this age" and "the age to come." The writer of the *Hebrews* refers to the powers of "the age to come" (*mellontos aiōnos*). Jesus himself made the same distinctions (see Matthew 12:32; Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30). Both *Mark* and *Luke* place "age to come" and "eternal life" in parallel. What the mission of God promises is the forward moving of time toward God's future as well as God's future breaking into our time, offering the hope of God's life. The down-payment for this future life is called "the firstfruits" and refers to the resurrection of Jesus (see 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23).

"Eternal life" is God's kind of life made available to human beings.

5. **What about "the wrath of God"?** Our English word "wrath" is tough and severe, but it is not far off the mark from the Greek word *orgē* which commonly refers to the "anger" of God. At first glance, it may appear to have a capricious and impulsive connotation, but when applied to God's attitude toward His fallen creation, it is anything but arbitrary. God has a settled attitude toward anything which mars or harms His good creation: He hates it and wants to see it removed. In perhaps one of the more incisive texts in the New Testament, Romans 1:18-32, Paul begins with the words, "The wrath of God (*orgē theou*) is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness..." What provokes the wrath of God is "godlessness and wickedness." What God hates is sin, while reserving His love for the sinner. However, the sinner remains responsible for *believing* the truth or for *suppressing* the truth. God's will is to make plain to human beings what He requires from them, and He does so in various ways (1:19-20). As Paul explains in 1:21ff, human beings may choose to ignore what they *know* and invent their own way of life. When they do, they bear full responsibility for the outcome. Such inventions the bible calls "idols," and human beings by choosing to trust in these instead of trusting in God, attract the wrath of God — justly poured out. After all, we become what we worship. Persons who worship, trust and rely on something *less than God, less than human* lose the image of God and their humanness at the same time. When human beings become something *less than human*, they thereby risk eternal life.

This final point, the precarious nature of human life lived apart from God, makes the mission of God revealed through Jesus Christ even more essential.

All Things Reconciled to the Son (Colossians 1:15-23)

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him **all things** were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities- all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. ²¹ And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach

¹ Oscar Cullmann's insightful work, *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964 [revised edition], pp.61-68), offers considerable help in our understanding of the biblical notions of time and eternity.

before him, ²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

The world in which St. Paul traveled, outside the familiar boundaries of Israel and within the Roman Empire, was a world filled with competing religious claims. Many people were disillusioned by the traditional Greek and Roman gods, having long doubted the truthfulness of the ancient mythologies. More importantly they found the questions of their own lives untouched by the ritual celebrations of the cult temples. In desperation they turned to the equivalent of "new age" ideologies, and they reached backward to the mysterious practices of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Names like Mithra and Isis suddenly took on prominence. But so did new versions of Greek philosophies, such as that of Plato. Very early forms of what would later be called "Gnosticism" appeared in Asia Minor, and Paul found them in cities like Colossae. Some listeners to the Jesus message found ways to accommodate Jesus to their own beliefs, making him an "archon" (divine ruler) within the "pleroma" (fullness) of their picture of the universe. But this was not the Jesus Paul preached.

His letter to the Colossians incorporates not only straightforward teaching about the person of Jesus, it also includes coded language intended to counteract the false teaching of those who claimed to have special in knowledge of God. To them, Paul declares: "He [God] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins" (1:13-14). Like John's Gospel, Paul sees the world as a battleground between light and darkness, with God's saving work in His Son as the decisive event, which rescues us from the dark kingdom and establishes us in His. Unlike the pre-Gnostic beliefs that see the world as good and evil eternally arrayed against each other, with no clear winner, the message Paul proclaims assures the reader that God has won. The victory of God is found in the Son of God, the anointed one of God. And on this claim, he grounds *the mission* of the church.

Now we come to the text before us, written as an elegant hymn, no doubt sung among the early Christians as a "Christ-hymn" (the following "versification" comes from Eduard Schweizer, and has much in its favor):

Stanza One

15 He is the image of the invisible God, (1)
the firstborn over **all creation**.
16 For by him **all things** were created (2)
in heaven and on earth,
visible and invisible,
whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities;
All things were created by him and for him. (3)

Stanza Two

17 He is before **all things**, (1)
and in him **all things** hold together. (2)
18 And he is the head of the body, the church; (3)

Stanza Three

He is the beginning (1)
and the firstborn from among the dead,
so that **in all things** he might have the supremacy.
19 For God was pleased to have **all** his fullness dwell in him, (2)
20 and through him to reconcile to himself **all things**, (3)
whether things on earth or things in heaven,
by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

If one were to imagine a musical setting for this Christ-hymn, he might hear the choir singing the foreground text, following its various stanzas. But then, behind this foreground, he hears other voices, rhythmically chanting "all things, all things, all things!". Perhaps this best captures what Paul says in 1:18, "So that in *all things* he [Christ] might have the supremacy." Who is this One who, in *all things*, has the supreme place?

1. **He is the image of the invisible God.** Once more we encounter the theme originating in the Gospels: Jesus is the revealer of God. Much of the popular religion Paul encountered wrote and preached about all sorts of things happening "behind the scenes". Though unseen, the powers of the universe engaged in eternal conflict. Into the deep, dark places, the truly initiated followers of the religions could discover secret, special knowledge. But there is none of that with Paul's understanding of Jesus, God's beloved Son. This Jesus has brought the invisible God out of His hidden place and into the light of all creation. Paul uses the Greek word *eikōn*, translated here as "image". By using this term, Paul means to say that Jesus "embodies" God by doing two things: 1) representing Him, and, 2) revealing Him. Jesus doesn't merely talk about God or give us ideas about God: He, in his own person, truly expresses who God is. He participates in a real way in the God he makes known. One writer puts it this way: "...he is the objectivization of God in human life, the 'projection' of God on the canvas of our humanity and the embodiment of the divine in the world of men" (Ralph Martin).
2. **He is the firstborn of all creation.** Here Paul uses the Greek word *prōtotokos* to further explain the relationship Jesus has to all created things. The word implies that Jesus is not part of the creation itself. He stands in an exalted relationship to creation as "agent", "Lord", without any competition or peer. Unlike the pre-Gnostic interpretations of the world, with their archons and other lesser rulers, Paul does not countenance any subordinate role for Jesus within the world. **Prōtotokos** ensures that we don't misunderstand him. No being with this rank can be "a being among beings", but, as Paul Tillich once stated it concisely, "The Ground of All Being". Paul explains this title by beginning the next verse with the word "For":
 - a. He created all things: The Agent of Creation
 - 1) wherever they are found: heaven or earth
 - 2) however they exist: visible or invisible
 - 3) whatever they are: thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities
 - b. All things were created for him: The Purpose of Creation
Paul is generous in his use of language. Behind words like "visible / invisible", "thrones / dominions / rulers / authorities" lie meanings well understood by his readers. He is describing the world as a philosopher or pre-Gnostic might, but instead of accepting the philosopher's own meanings, Paul proceeds to place Jesus over all of these as their Creator and King. And, this same Jesus also gives meaning to everything that exists, expressed in Paul's use of the phrase "all things... for him"
3. **He is before all things.** Paul doesn't want his readers to think that God's beloved Son depends in any way on the creation he made. His existence is "before" creation itself. Philosophers often make a distinction between something being "before" in a chronological sense and being "before" in a logical sense. Since time itself is *part of creation*, we would confuse the argument to say that Jesus was *before* creation in the chronological sense. That leaves the second option: that Jesus logically precedes the creation, and he creates not only all *things*, but the *time and space* in which they reside. This makes possible another role:
4. **He holds all things together.** Jesus is no absentee landlord. Having brought the created world into existence, he maintains it as well. Once more, philosophers might point out, "the power to create is also the power to sustain". Does God really take responsibility for the well-being of His world? Having created all things, does He sustain them? Watch over them? Take care of them? It doesn't require much effort to recall the words of Jesus about God's taking care of the falling sparrow, the lily of the field, the hairs on our heads, and, most importantly, his care for each of us (see Matthew 10:29-31; Luke 6:28-30; 12:6-7). Among the countless things Jesus "revealed about God", perhaps this one struck the sweetest chord with his audiences: God does care for His people, despite the troubled world around them. He has not forsaken them. He, like the conscientious shepherd, leaves the ninety-nine sheep and risks the dangers of the hills

and valleys to find the one sheep that was lost. He, like the loving father, runs to meet his lost son who is now found. Paul echoes these Gospel stories with this simple sentence: "He holds all things together". **And as Christians, we belong to him.**

5. **He is the head of the body, the church (ekklesia).** In a single poetic line of this stanza, Paul suddenly shifts attention from the limitless cosmos and "all things", to the very particular and specific work of building the community of God.
- Within the context of "all things" are some very special things, special creatures, with whom he has **so united himself** that he names them "the body", his body.
 - While the word "head" might mean for us "the one in charge" or "the boss" in the directorial sense, the linguistic evidence for the Greek word *kephale*, used here, shows a much richer meaning. Unlike modern anatomists, the contemporaries of Paul did not view the "head" as the source of reason or thought. Instead, they reserved those unique capacities for the "heart". There is a considerable body of literature on the connection between human physiology and "spiritual ideas". The most we can say here is that when Paul uses "head" in this way, he is putting the emphasis on Jesus as "the source" of the body: that from Jesus, the body, the community, the *ekklesia*, draws its life and identity.
 - By speaking of the "body" (Greek: *soma*) as the *ekklesia*, Paul carries forward ideas he develops elsewhere in his letters. The church as the "body of Christ" is more than a metaphor. The language expresses the deeply connected relationship between Jesus the revealer of God and those who "belong to him". **Being a Christian, then, means being part of the body of Christ,** the body for which Jesus is the source. Jesus holds the body together, just as he holds the universe together. From this we can safely conclude that our identity as **Christian** cannot be isolated from our connection to the body. Jesus becomes the source of our life as a community, not only as individuals. It is, therefore, completely appropriate to speak of the community of God's people, collectively, as "Christian". Insofar as the body draws its life from Jesus the source, it can boldly see itself as Christian. But when the body fragments, and its members divide into factions, some deriving their source from things other than Jesus, they run the risk of losing their true identity, their true self as Christian in any meaningful way (see 1 Corinthians 1:10-17 for a case study of this sort of fracturing within the community, and how deadly it can be not only to those who are members, but also to the honor of God and the Gospel).
 - To embrace the name Christian, then, means acknowledging the place Jesus has for us in his body. In this truth we are maintained. And without this truth, our separateness as churches or denominations may actually become a scandal to the body of Christ. That is why any institutional labels, even those like "Nazarene", must never ultimately undermine the singularity of our connection to Jesus. Each time we affirm, "he is head of the body, the church", we must take note that the nouns are singular, and that whatever value we may suppose exists in our divisions, must not challenge the source of our unity who is Jesus our "head".
6. **He is the beginning.** Readers of the Old Testament are familiar with those words "in the beginning", found in Genesis 1:1. With Paul's ascription of "beginning" to Jesus (using the Greek word *arche*), he offers those readers a fresh look at that text. If Jesus is "the beginning", and, if "in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth", then we can safely say that in Jesus God made all things. Of course, that's been Paul's argument throughout this hymn. But now the third stanza carries the reader down a new path. We might draw out Paul's intended meaning, first, by looking at what he promises us through this Jesus who is "the beginning": 1) resurrection; 2) incarnation; 3) reconciliation. Each of those represent great "movements" in God's symphony of salvation history. And they represent "new developments", surprises in the divine purpose. The Beginning is for Jesus and his work, a "new start". Having celebrated Jesus as the **full expression of God in creation,** Paul now sharpens the details even further by celebrating Jesus as the **full expression of God in redemption.**
- The work of Jesus in redemption belongs, logically, to his role as the "holder-together-of-all-things". When the world goes astray (and it has), when God's good creation falls into decay (and it did), when God's human partner violates His covenant in God's good garden and then goes off into hiding (and he did), this Jesus, who holds all things together, makes a new start, a fresh beginning.

- b. **Resurrection.** Paul gives us the good news first: God's beloved Son becomes not only the *prototokos* (firstborn) of all creation (1:15), he becomes the *prototokos* (firstborn) "out of the dead ones". The very thing that rose up in revolt against the living creation of God, namely its **death**, has now met its match. For the creator of all things will not stand by idly and watch God's good creation fall into disrepair. This Jesus becomes the giver of resurrection life. But how?
- c. **Incarnation.** No act of redemption from the faithful God can omit His full participation in His creatures situation. "In him (that is, in Jesus) God was pleased to have His fullness dwell (Greek: so as to take up residence within a building)." That building was, of course, his human body, completely a part of the creation he made, but now the instrument of its redemption. Jesus becomes human, as we have already seen in John's rendering (John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and pitched its tent among us"). Same metaphor as here, somewhat different language. By causing the fullness of God to live within the human (that is, "incarnate") Jesus comes near, joins himself to fallen, broken, sinful humanity, and in so doing, turns on the light so that we could see the true character of God.
- d. **Reconciliation.** But the matter of death's defeat is still in abeyance in Paul's singing of the hymn. We are left to reflect one more significant "movement" in the divine symphony. For the goal of the Jesus who is "image of God" is reached only in surrendering himself to the "blood of the cross". Within the world he made, he met a hostile and angry creation, bent on destroying even its own creator. To do battle with darkness (to borrow the words from both John 1:5 and Colossians 1:13) Jesus has taken up residence within the world he made. He freely gave himself to the cause of the reconciliation (Greek: *apokatallasso*, "to change one thing for another, again") of all things so that peace might rule in God's creation. Paul is fond of the idea of "reconciliation", and here he compounds the ordinary word with a preposition indicating that it is done "again" (*apo*).
- 1) For Jesus to be the one "holding all things together" places him in the role of "reconciler" from the very moment of creation. All things are, by their creation, arranged and placed in proper relationship to one another: state of reconciliation; a state of "peace" (*shalom*),
 - 2) But now, with the intrusion of sin and death into God's good creation, he who is "The Beginning" steps into the world he made to effect reconciliation, a second time. Through the agency of "the blood of his cross", new life is brought into the dying world of sin and death. Restoration comes. Peace (*shalom*="wholeness", "completeness", "well-being") prevails.
 - 3) His reconciliation is no half-measure. He begins with "his body the church" for whom he becomes the source of forgiveness and new life. The church (*ekklesia*) is the community of the resurrection, gathered around Jesus, drawing its life from him. But what God has accomplished through the church, he intends to do for the whole world. And for anyone to call themselves **Christian** means committing themselves to that larger purpose as well. **To be Christian is to be part of the community of reconciliation.** It is not only being "saved" for oneself, but, in connection with each other and in belonging to Christ, the Great Reconciler, we, too, become instruments of God's reconciling work throughout all his creation.

All Things Under the Authority of the Son (Matthew 28:16-20)

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

1. The label, "Great Commission", is appropriate because in this passage we see Jesus in his role as Lord of heaven and earth. His resurrection had vindicated his claims to be God's Son and Messiah. Now he was about to assume his new role as God's kingdom Lord, the prophesied "Son of Man" in Daniel's ancient prophecy (Daniel 7). His followers were being "authorized" by their Lord to bear the kingdom message.

And so the "mission" passes to the Christ followers who operate under his "authority": he in heaven and they on earth, his authorized agents of the mission.

2. Scholars point out that the "commission", when read in Greek, has only one command, namely, "make disciples of all nations".
 - a. Even though the English text makes the word "go" appear to be an imperative, it is not. Literally, we read: "Going (*poreuthentes*), make disciples (*matheteusate*) of all nations, baptizing (*baptizontes*) . . . , and teaching (*didaskontes*) . . .". One command, accompanied by three participles.
 - b. The real mission is the making of more Christ followers, the multiplication of Jesus' original mission. The prerequisite for doing so is seen in the "going". The process of doing so is found in the baptizing and teaching.
 - c. We might freely translate the text: "Whenever you go, make disciples through baptizing and teaching."
3. By carrying out the Great Commission the followers of Jesus are, in a real sense, fulfilling the spirit of the Lord's Prayer by doing the will of God on earth as it is in heaven.
4. Baptism brings new converts into an identification with Jesus: they re-enact his death, burial and resurrection through this ritual. Baptism is a powerful symbolic action, witnessing to the transforming work of Jesus Christ in a person's life. This sacrament is a powerful punctuation mark within the profession of a new Christian. Through baptism, a new follower goes on record as belonging to Jesus, as one who is a Christian.
 - a. In the days of the early Church, baptism could be a risky event. It's a bit like changing national citizenship, leaving behind old loyalties and publicly assuming new ones. For many people, it was making the clear pronouncement to the world: Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not.
 - b. Baptism brought people into a new relationship with God in His tri-unity, His Trinity, by declaring allegiance to not just any god, but to the true God as revealed in Jesus Christ and presently experienced through the Holy Spirit who lives within and among us. To be baptized "in the name of", meant not merely using the right words during the baptism ritual. Rather, it meant to cast one's lot with *this* God, and no other one. Other gods may once have claimed the new convert's soul, but now their own loyalty lies with *this* God. Even as Jews, they may once have followed what they *thought to be* the one true God. But now, they have seen Him afresh in the face of Jesus Christ. All of which carried risk of alienation from old ties of family and nation.
 - c. Baptism, then, was the public symbol administered by the leaders of the mission. It is their way of asking people, "Will you follow Jesus?" And when the convert responds, it is their way of saying, "I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back."
5. The Great Commission of Jesus carries with it a promise to the heralds of its message: "I am with you always (Greek, literally, "all the days"), until the end of the age (literally, *tes sunteleias tou aionos*, "the completion of the age"). This mission reaches for completion, which is to say, there is work to be done, and you are just getting started. But no matter how long it takes, Jesus promises to be with his followers until the work is finished.
 - a. The presence of Jesus during the mission comes from the Holy Spirit. Jesus makes this clear in several texts in the Gospels:
 - 1) "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever-- 17 the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. 18 I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:16-18). For Jesus to be "with them" is precisely equivalent to having the Holy Spirit "with them". The Greek word, translated Counselor, is actually *parakletos*, from *para* ("alongside, with") + *kaleo* ("to call"). This one is "with you forever" ("into the age"), the faithful Spirit who once lived with them (in the work of Jesus), but will soon be in them (when the Spirit comes after Jesus returns to heaven).
 - 2) "...he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven'" (John 20:22-23). The forgiving or retaining of sins is part of the mission. The proclamation of the Gospel is the offer of forgiveness.

Where it is declared, the sinner may be forgiven; where it is not declared, sin remains a problem to the sinner. The Spirit empowers the messenger for the work of forgiveness.

- 3) "When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. 27 And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning" (John 15:26-27). Notice the dual witness: **the Spirit about Jesus**, and through the Spirit, **the Christian about Jesus**. The expression "from the beginning" is important, for it identifies an important class of witness. Scholars call this the "apostolic" witness, since the apostles were with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry and could testify to his life, death and resurrection. The word "apostle", in Greek, means "one sent", and, in this case, in a special, authoritative sense. The Holy Spirit became the indispensable guarantee of the message's reliability, as he lived within and spoke through the messenger. The mission required authentication, and the Holy Spirit supplied it. Which leads to yet another important text about the Holy Spirit's role in the mission...
- 4) "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. 13 But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. 14 He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. 15 All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you" (John 16:12-15). As authoritative messengers of "the mission", the followers of Jesus in the first century needed confirmation of their message, that is truly was the message of Jesus and not their own. This, too, was the work of the Holy Spirit. As time passed, the assured results of the Holy Spirit's work would become the text of the New Testament, written down by these original witnesses. At its heart, then, Scripture is true "missal", the mission of God in written form. The Bible is a missionary document, sent by God, carried by His messengers into the world, but authenticated by the continuing work of the Holy Spirit.
 - b. We do not carry the message alone. Through the Spirit and the Word we have reliable companions on our mission. This was the meaning of Jesus' promise when he said, "I am with you..."

All Things Reaching the Fullness of the Son (Ephesians 4:7-16)

⁷ But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸ Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." ⁹ (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) ¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up 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 mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Grace For Each One of Us (4:7-10)

The section just discussed placed emphasis on "unity" through **virtue** and **verity**. The focus is on what should be true "of all", held together in a vital unity. The introduction to this new section, 4:7-10, includes a significant shift in emphasis as Paul uses the words "Now **to each one of us** is given..." Notice the nuance: "to each one" (Greek: *heni de hekastō hēmōn*. **Unity** is not, Paul tells his readers, a dull, flat **uniformity**. There are no "cookie cutter Christians" in Paul's theology of the church. God has given to "each one of us" His *charis*, that is, His "grace", the special gift of His Spirit, an endowment with power for His service in the world. We are each "graced". Here we see an **individuality** of ministry without the danger of an **individualism** of ministry. There is a great difference between the two. Knowing our unique creation as His children, made in His image from birth, God crafts for each of us His special grace, drawing into a careful alignment our abilities and

passions, applying them to the greater purpose of building up His living temple, the body of Christ, in the world. Grace, used in this sense, certainly includes the idea of "unmerited favor", but it has the expansive sense of "endowment", *freely* given and *appropriately* given.

Paul offers an explanation of how this gift of grace comes to each one.

1. "The grace has been given" (*edothē*, the aorist form of the verb, passive voice--an accomplished fact performed by an agent). Paul calls it "the grace" (*hē charis*), probably to underscore the uniqueness and succinctness of the gift. It's *just the gift for us!*
2. "According to measure of the gift of Christ" (*kata to metron tēs dōreas tou Christou*). This prepositional phrase modifies the verb "has been given", telling "how" it has been given. The word for "measure" implies that God endows different measures of grace and faith to different persons. This is similar to Christ's parable of the "talents": to whom much is given, much is required (Luke 12:48)! Similar language appears in Romans 12:3 and is applied to "faith". All giftedness and faith appears in the community to further the mission, both to the world and for the common good (see 1 Corinthians 12). Gifts, contrary to popular belief, are not primarily to enrich the self, but to enrich others, with personal growth the by-product, not the primary purpose. God blesses us as we bless others. Witherington reminds the individual Christian: "Believers must operate within the context of the body of Christ. Only then will they be properly expressing their gifts and be complete" (p.287).

Markus Barth (p.429) reminds us that "the gift of the Messiah is the measure, and cites Romans 8:32 as a fitting parallel to this passage: "He [God] who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give all things?" This is, of course, precisely what Paul told his readers in 1:6, that God, through Christ, has poured out his grace on us. *James* similarly reminds us that is the giver of "every good and perfect gift" (1:17). Thus, Paul used familiar language in Romans 12:6 when he wrote, "We have different gifts of grace according to the grace given to us". That is why in Ephesians we heard Paul speak of the "unfathomable riches" found in Christ (3:8), so now God has opened His great storehouse and issued these special endowments to "each one of us". The Messiah is, to use Barth's reading of 1:10, the "plenipotent administrator" of the grace of God (see also 1:6, 8; 3:2, 7, and elsewhere). **If the storehouse of God means the riches of Christ, then when the gifts are given to God's people they become His most precious investment!** Because of Christ's finished work on the Cross, proclaimed in the Gospel, the body of Christ is God's great investment in the world, where it builds and grows.

At this point in his *Exhortatio*, Paul needs to draw from Old Testament material in support of his claims. While the existence of the church is a new *development* in the purposes of God, it still has *roots* in the ancient people of God Israel. Paul's text is Psalm 68:18. The way Paul *reads* the text and the way he *interprets* it have both constituted major challenges to commentators. The table below illustrates, by comparison, some of the issues:

ESV	Hebrew: Literal Trans	Greek OT (LXX)	Paul's Translation
You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there.	You have gone up on high; you have led captive captivity; you take received gifts among humanity, even among the rebellious so that Yahweh God might dwell (there).	You have gone up on high, you have led captivity captive, you have received gifts for man, indeed, for they were rebellious, that you might dwell among them.	When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men...

- a. We notice that Paul changes the person from "you" to "he" in his citation. This might appear a problem only if we assume Paul is "quoting" rather than referencing the text. If we read Psalm 68 in its entirety, which "good" Bible students ought to do (!), the psalmist himself changes person in the middle of his own text, speaking first about "you", referring to Yahweh, Israel's God, and then to God in the third person.

- b. For Paul, the subject (whether "you" or "he") is Christ, whereas for the psalmist it is Yahweh. But then we have plenty of other cases where language ascribed to Yahweh in the Old Testament is used of Christ in the New Testament, including the familiar "I Am" title found in Exodus 3:14 applied to Yahweh, but used in John's Gospel to refer to Christ (see John 8:58 and elsewhere). After all, Christ is the "fulfillment" of the Hebrew Bible, Torah, Prophets and Writings.
- c. According to the background text of Psalm 68, found in 68:17, God has moved from Mount Sinai, figuratively, of course, and taken up His residence in Zion. That is, the God who gave Torah on Mount Sinai, and made His presence known to Moses and Israel, has now come to live among His people in the tabernacle (or temple), in Jerusalem. For Paul, Christ first came down and pitched his tent among us, but then went up to his heavenly throne from which he poured out his gifts on the church.
- d. Then there is the question, "Which came first: the ascent or the descent?" And, further, what happened in each movement?

A few observations and some background are in order here. Psalm 68 belongs to a group of psalms celebrating the enthronement of Yahweh as Israel's King, and was used also to honor Yahweh's earthly king who ruled on David's throne. The idea of God becoming king, year after year, can be seen in such passages as Psalm 93; 96-99 and Isaiah 52:7-12. When a king of Israel, on earth, had his enthronement festival each year, Yahweh was honored simultaneously as *the* King of Israel. After all, the earthly king was God's plenipotentiary and vice-regent who sat on "God's throne". For New Testament Christ followers, all of this has a familiar ring to it, since Jesus is God's Messiah and King who, having descended "to earth" in his birth, life, and death, also ascended in his resurrection and ascension to sit at God's right hand "in heaven". Of course, Paul's Ephesian letter reverberates with all of these themes, as we have already seen. Jewish expectation leading up to Jesus' coming would have understood Messiah's role much as they would have understood the role of ancient Davidic kings.

So what is Paul doing with Psalm 68? He is performing a special form of Jewish interpretation on it, known as *midrash*, from the Hebrew word for "seek" or "interpret" or "study". Since the days of Ezra the scribe (6th century B.C.E.), after the Babylonian exile, the reading of Torah and the giving of its explanation were common staples of community worship, and evolved into synagogue practice. In Paul's case, he simply takes up a "reading", which likely included the entirety of Psalm 68, and zeroed in on this one verse, read in its larger context. In so doing, he likely relied on existing interpretation, including the shift from "you" to "he", and the application of the whole passage to God's descent and ascent in the person of the Messiah.

One of the key ideas behind Psalm 68 was that the **God who gave the law at Sinai** (see Psalm 68:17) is **the same God who now has taken up his residence among His people in Zion**. It is of some interest that by Jesus and Paul's time, the feast of Pentecost (also known as "Feast of Weeks" or *Shavuot*) had become a festival celebrating the giving of Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai, a gift which, in turn, Moses gave to the people. Keeping that in mind, we turn to the New Testament and discover that in Acts 2, Israel, when it celebrates Pentecost after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, witnesses God's giving of the Holy Spirit "from on high" (see Jesus' language in Luke 24:49). Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as God's "gift" in Acts 1:4. The implications are hard to miss. The descending Christ, who becomes a human being, living, suffering, and dying" is also the ascending Christ who, as God the Father's vice-regent, rises from the dead, thus "taking captive captivity" as the Psalm suggests, and sits on God's throne in the heavens, "on high", and from there gives the Holy Spirit to the New People of God.

Armed with this fresh and vital interpretation of the Psalm, Paul proceeds to draw out further significance. Christ's gift of the Holy Spirit, in the form of the "gifts of grace", the endowment of every believer in Christ, is a fresh experience of the New Sinai and the New Torah. Just as Yahweh intended to rule the whole world from Zion, through the people He had chosen, so now, in Christ, he endows His people in such a way as to, in Paul's words, "fill all things" (4:10) (Greek: *hina plērōsē ta panta*). This has been Paul's great message in *Ephesians*, reaching back to the key passage where Christ is said to "sum up all things" in himself (1:10).

We are now being told by what means that will be done, namely, through the gifting of the church with gifts which exceed those of Torah alone. Christ's ascension "on high", "in the heavenlies" puts him in a position where he can now pour out the graces and thereby "fill all things". David has not yet ascended, as Peter reminds us in his famous Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:29, 34), and so the Psalms are taken as prophetic markers, pointing to Messiah, who has come in the person of Jesus Christ, who is now Lord of heaven. God is, Paul explains in this passage, making his presence felt among His people precisely in His giving and their exercise of the gracious gifts. **Through the gifting of the church with the endowments of God's grace, the poverty of the world will be filled with the riches of Christ.**

Grace Through Each One of Us (4:11-16)

1. We now come to 4:11 where Paul will detail the content of the gracious gifts poured out by the ascended Christ. One of the notable contrasts of this "list" found in *Ephesians*, compared to other such lists in Paul's writings, is the emphasis on "gifts" as not only personal endowments, which Paul certainly has affirmed so far, but also as the actual people Christ endows. "Gifts as the people Christ gives"--this is the theme taken up here. Barth notes:

Gift and institution, or charisma and office, are not mutually exclusive alternatives; they are combined and inseparable. The ministries exerted in the church are, as it were, immediately given from above. Christ gives the church the officers she needs, not vice versa. Her constitution is distinguished with utmost brevity and clarity from the list of unilaterally dependent or mutually competing church offices to be found in Canon Law or other books of Church Order. God appoints Christ to be the head over church and world (1:10, 20-23); the exalted Christ will fill all, and he appoints ministers to the church (4:8-11). That is all! There are no references to bishops, general secretaries, district superintendents and the like, and no utterances on the authority of higher ministers over a 'minor' clergy or over their ordination. One thing is clearly stated: Christ himself appoints the special officers. He who despises their ministry would condemn God and reject his gift. [p.435]

And in one single, sweeping statement, Paul lays out "the plan" when he writes, "and he gave...":

- a. "Some, the apostles" (*apostoloi*). As noted in a previous study, this group represents, along with the prophets, the foundation of the New People of God. Witnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, they also are the first to proclaim this message to the Israel and the world. Their work also includes the production of New Testament Scripture.
- b. "Moreover, the prophets" (*prophētai*). Beyond the role as witnesses, these gifted persons help the early church understand the meaning of the Scriptures for their own times, especially showing how the coming of Christ was the fulfillment of the Hebrew Bible in all its parts. Like the apostles, they were inspired by God's Spirit to begin the process of writing authoritative texts which complemented the message of Torah, Prophets and Writings, constituting the books of the New Covenant (or Testament).
- c. "Moreover, the evangelists" (*euaggelistai*). Literally, the proclaimers of the "evangel", that is, of the Gospel. We must not miss the connection with the "Four Gospels" which are commonly called the "Four Evangelists". Of critical importance to the early Christian community was a carefully written narrative of the life, works and words of Jesus. As time passed, that role fell to four distinct human writers who, relying on sources, to be sure, drew together four woven documents which "told the story of Jesus". What more fitting description of an evangelist could we invent? Such persons planted the word through telling the story, not only to Israel, but to the whole world. In so doing, they fulfilled the gifted promise of Isaiah: "**How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns'**" (Isaiah 52:7).
- d. "Moreover, the pastors and teachers" (*poimenēs*). The root meaning of the verb form is "to protect". The ordinary meaning of the noun is "herdsman, shepherd". Even in classical Greek, the idea of "kings and princes" was also referenced. Within the Christ-community a range of meaning existed, including "presiding officer, manager, director" of the assembly. Christ called himself "shepherd" in John 10. Shepherd language appears in 1 Peter 2:26; Hebrews 13:20. In the present setting, Paul has in mind the overseers of local communities of Christians. The role of "pastor" and "teacher"

combines in the grammatical construction of this passage so that we can legitimately speak about "pastor-teachers" or "teaching shepherds". The Old Testament prophets warned about false shepherds and anticipated the day when Yahweh would once more "feed his flock" with faithful shepherds (see Isaiah 63:11; Jeremiah 2:8; 3:15; Zechariah 10:3; 11:3, 5, 8, 15-16). Messiah was called "shepherd" in Zechariah 13:7. Hoehner identifies several pastoral roles in the New Testament: "...ministering to troubled saints, exhorting and comforting all believers, and administering the activities in the local assembly" (p.544).

Once we include the "teacher" in this description, we discover a wealth of usage in the New Testament which uses the word some fifty-nine times, seven of them in Paul's writings (see Romans 2:20; 1 Corinthians 12:28-29; here; 1 Timothy 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:11; 4:3). The "teacher" engages in instruction, communicating facts, developing skills, and encouraging moral improvement. Jesus frequently responded to the address of "teacher" (see Matthew 8:19; 9:11; 12:38; 17:24; 19:16; 22:16; John 3:2; 12:28). He referred to himself in this way as well (John 13:13, "Teacher and Lord"). Gathering disciples around himself, Jesus executed his teaching role much as rabbis would have done, yet his instruction was with "authority", not merely as a scholar quoting others (Matthew 7:29; Mark 1:22; Luke 4:32). Transferring these concepts to the local church means teaching based on the Scriptures, both Old and New Testament, explaining the meaning of the sacred text, illuminating difficult passages, and contextualizing the message in a variety of settings.

Were we to generalize, it would be safe to say that all pastors should be teachers, but not all teachers are pastors. Both are definitely required, their ministries should not compete, but complement. Perhaps the connection of "cathedral" and "academy", so prominent during the Middle Ages, applies here. The local church should be guided by both, each contributing the "grace of God" implicit in their callings.

2. When we reach 4:12, Paul explains the purpose of these gifted persons within the church. In so doing, he sheds new light on old truth. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers are "to equip believers for the work of the ministry for edifying the body of Christ." What is Paul's point? It is simply this: gifted persons, listed in 4:11, are **foundational gifts** intended to equip (Greek: *katartismos*) all the believers to minister (Greek: *diakonia*). By saying this, Paul puts a slightly different twist on the meaning of "minister". The foundational gifts are not intended to be "ministers" in this larger sense, but instead, what we might call "laity" are the true ministers.
 - a. The word *katartismos* means "to adjust, put in order, restore, mend, furnish, equip". It has both **remedial and constructive** meanings, correcting that which is out of place, and also furnishing that which is lacking (see 1 Thessalonians 3:10; 1 Corinthians 1:10; Hebrews 13:21; Matthew 21:16; Luke 6:40; Galatians 6:1; 1 Peter 5:10; Romans 9:22; Hebrews 10:5). What the foundational gifts accomplish is the proper ordering of the church through the application of God's Word to its community life. Moreover, these gifts also "set the agenda", making certain that "main things" remain "main things", that the mission is clear, and the message is communicated. Frequently asking the question, "what is needed" and "what is needful", these foundational leaders prepare the church for its work.
 - b. Using the phrase *ergon diakonias*, Paul makes clear that the "work, achievement, accomplishment" of "ministry" must come from "the saints", not just the leaders. The real work of the church is performed by its "ministers", and these are not limited to those who have foundational gifts. Instead, the majority of the community constitute its ministers, while the minority having the primary equipping function. **The body of Christ in its entirety is "the ministry" and all its members are "the ministers"**.
 - c. Some implications flow from this. Paul nowhere advocates the sharp distinction, evolved over time, of clergy and laity. Titles and offices are not present in the *Ephesian* letter/sermon. Only later, must Paul speak specifically to particular forms for certain congregations, as he does in 1 and 2 Timothy. Present day church structures stand in need of dramatic renewal in this regard, restoring the notion of

gifted persons, instead of church offices, acknowledging that all are ministers and that ordination does not belong exclusively to the hierarchy of the church, but to the gracious gifting of Christ. Ordination should rightfully belong to the whole body of Christ who together constitute its ministry. Churches where "staff" persist in doing "all the work" are not following the pattern of the Pauline churches. No one endowed with the foundation gifts should neglect their primary role: to train the body-at-large for the work of ministry.

- d. What is "ministry"? The word *diakonia* essentially means "servant", and has strong connections with "serving the table", that is feeding the household. When applied to the local Christ community, the word denotes "service to the Lord" for the benefit of his people (see Acts 20:24; 21:19; Romans 11:13; 1 Corinthians 16:15; 2 Corinthians 4:1; 5:18; 6:3; 1 Timothy 1:12; 2 Timothy 4:5, 11). Serve the Lord through service to each other. "The work" is "the ministry" in Paul's construction of this phrase (This is the "genitive of apposition" in Greek, where "of ministry" actually means, "that is, the ministry": work=ministry). The church and its members might well be "busy", but what are they "accomplishing"? This is the question posed by the word *ergon*, "work". For Paul, the chief achievement should be "service to each other, and to the world". In other places Paul spelled out in more detail what this entailed, as he discussed further "gifts" beyond the foundational ones (see 1 Corinthians 12:5).
3. Where does all of this ministry lead? That is the burden of 4:13, as Paul states "the final goal". Put succinctly, the goal of ministry is "maturity" (see Hoehner, p.551-559, for a detailed treatment). The operative word in our text is *mechri*, "until", signaling a critical end-point of the ministry process. How do we know we have reached "the goal"? Paul "narrates" these events:
 - a. "We all reach...". The verb used here is *katantaō* and it appears some thirteen times in the New Testament, four of them in Paul's writings (see 1 Corinthians 10:11; 14:36; here; Philippians 3:11). It means to "arrive, reach, attain" and applies to a destination, state or goal. Otto Michel, in his article on this word in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT), writes: "The goal is set, the end determined, and *katantan* simply denotes the meeting of this set goal and prescribed conclusion" (Vol. 3, p.623). Nor is anyone left out of this achievement, since Paul uses the word "all" (*hoi pantes*) as the subject. Remember the larger "vision" Paul cast in the earlier chapters, especially 1:10, "to sum up everything in Christ". "No one left behind" might be a fine cliché for politicians interested in education, but for Paul it is the dead-serious commitment of Christ to bring all of his people to fullness in him. How does the church know if its work is "done"? By asking the question, "Are we there yet?" Has anyone been left behind, are people falling through the cracks, not being trained, not receiving ministry? Or, are there believers who fail to minister to others? Are those with foundational gifts intent on seeing this final goal? Or are they merely "tracking" an intermediate goal, relying wholly on metrics to do so?
 - b. "...the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God..." Paul's return to the theme of "unity" appears here, along with a strong emphasis on "faith and knowledge". Recall Paul's previous explanation (above) of the "verities", and how he included "one faith" among them. He picks up that concept here and sets as the goal of foundational gifts to so equip believers that they will be strongly committed to "one faith". That means that people will not live their lives with divided loyalties, but "wholly lean on Jesus name", and not place their trust or confidence in any other source of their salvation and spiritual growth. In a world where a myriad voices call upon us for our allegiance, the church must stand firmly on the "solid rock" where "our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus blood and righteousness" (From Edward Mote's hymn, "The Solid Rock", 1834). But it also means that whole congregations must achieve a unity of faith as well, refusing to place confidence in human means for church growth or secular strategies for building up the body of Christ. "Unity of Faith" is, writes Paul, grounded in the "knowledge of the Son of God". Using the Greek word *epignosis*, the intensified form of the verb for "know", Paul stresses not intellectual, but experiential knowledge. How is it that people come to "trust Jesus only"? It is by knowing him fully. Paul calls Jesus "Son of God" in this setting, so that the readers will not fail to grasp that there can be no other object of faith worth having but this One.
 - c. "Become mature". Literally, Paul writes, to the "Man Perfect". The word for "perfect" is our old friend *teleion*, which implies completeness. Just as Paul earlier in *Ephesians* referred to "The New Man", and

connected it with the goal Christ had for the church, so in this case, Paul applies "Complete Man" to the church reaching its goal. **In effect, the body of believers in any local congregation moves from "New Man" to "Complete Man", from "New Humanity", freshly re-born, to "Complete Humanity", finally restored.** How well are we doing?

- d. "Attain the whole measure of Christ's fullness". As if to answer an implied question, "What is the Complete Man?", Paul now affirms that this phrase is found in Christ-at-full-measure. What Christ is, we are destined to become, not only as individuals, but especially as communities. When we are doing the work of ministry, serving the needs of each other and the world, we look most like Christ. The Greek terms underscore this idea beautifully: *eis **metron** hēlikias tou plērōmatos tou Christou*. How do we measure "success" in biblical terms? Paul tells us what the "metrics" should look like. "Are we reaching toward the 'stature' of Christ?" is a far more important question than "How many people showed up in class today?" The model of the early church applies: "The Lord added to their number daily, as many as were being saved" (Acts 2:47). Our metrics follow the "yardstick" of Christ's character, and we leave the statistics to God.
4. "No longer infants" (4:14). We begin as infants, desiring the "pure milk of the Word" (1 Peter 2), but we should not remain in this developmental stage (see 1 Corinthians 3:1), satisfied only with the meeting of our own needs and oblivious to the needs of others. "Solid food" fuels the body of the healthy, growing human being, and this imagery applies equally to the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:2; Hebrews 5:12, 14). "Spiritual lightweights" might also express Paul meaning, since he proceeds to warn about the risks of being "tossed back and forth" by the winds of doctrine that happen to sweep into our communities. The real test of spiritual growth is not an appetite for novelty in theology, but for maturity in service to others. A painful reality of the church in the post-modern world is its propensity to seek out the innovative as though this was the test of vitality. Forgetting the goal (to be like Christ), we pursue relevance rather than revelation. We are reminded of Jesus' own metaphor in Luke 7:32, "We played the flute, but you did not dance..." Ironically, these "winds of doctrine" originate in the minds of people with sinister agendas. Paul writes, "by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming". **Grounded followers of Jesus should be equipped to explain their faith, counter the enemies of the Gospel, and not be led by anyone except the Spirit of God (see 1 Peter 3:15).** Those with foundational gifts fail their flocks when they shrink back from this task. Self-help theology is no substitute for the "meat of the word", served at the appropriate time, with the goal in mind to create stable and mature children of God.
5. "Speaking the truth in love" (4:15a). Truth matters in the plan of God. Jesus called himself "the truth", and proclaimed that truth would "set you free" (John 8:32). "Grace and truth" arrived on earth in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1: 14, 17). Paul uses the verb form for truth, literally, "truthing in love"! This emphasis on the *active nature of truth* shows that Paul was not thinking about abstractions, but instead, about "dynamic truth", the kind which transforms, and never rests. Truth is found in a person: Jesus Christ with whom Paul has already invited his readers to have a deep, personal connection. In Colossians 1:6, Paul told his readers that they had come to "know the grace of God in truth". The Hebrew idea behind "truth" has always been "firmness, solidness, reliability", as in, "a true friend". Paul would probably write, "a truthing friend"! Consistency lies at the heart of truth, and such integrity can only be found in the knowledge of Christ communicated through the foundational gifts expressed in the church.

"Love" is *agapē*, and pertains to the kind of commitment flowing from "the will". As we have studied previously, this kind of love is not easily deterred by circumstances or "un-loveliness", but plods ahead fearlessly, firmly and kindly. The goal of truth is not to "win the argument", but rather to "win the soul", to co-opt a familiar cliché. In fact, it is far more important that God's honor and character be preserved, that the Gospel be maintained with dignity, than for our point of view to prevail. Tempting though it is to "brandish the truth", the body of Christ best serves its members and the world when "truth through love" prevails instead. Love has God's interests for the other person in mind, and not our own. It matters more that people become "one of God's" than "one of ours".

6. "Grow up into Christ" (4:15b). When Paul first spoke about the building growing into a living temple, in chapter 2, he painted in broad, sweeping strokes. But in this passage he becomes personal, applying his

skills as a rhetorician, narrating for his readers what they must become *in their own lives* if the body of Christ *as a whole* is to grow. Once more, Paul invokes the language of "head" and "body". This is odd language for the Western mind. However, in ancient anatomy, the head was not the "seat of understanding", nor was it particularly important as the "control" for the body. Rather, "head" denoted *source* or *beginning*, origin, rather than organizer. True, Paul affirms Christ's role as "Lord", but he prefers to use other terminology to express that. We grow up "into" something, when that "something" is the source, at least in Greek terms. Paul adheres consistently to "source" language when speaking about Christ as "head".

7. "From whom all the body..." (4:16). Christ our "head" is Christ our source. Paul makes that eminently plain by using a different preposition: *ek hou*, "from whom". And he emphasizes the "entire" dependency of "the body" on "the head" with the words "all the body" (*pan to sōma*). "Without me you can do nothing", Jesus told his disciples, comparing them to branches and himself to a vine (John 15:5). We are free to draw the parallel with "head and body". Neither at the corporate level (local churches), personal level (individual Christians), or universal level (the whole body of Christ) can it ever be possible to reserve a part of the church's life for the genius of its members. When we compartmentalize the church's life, drawing *some of our resources* from Christ, and others from our own cleverness and skill, then "all the body" fails to derive its life from Christ, and in so doing we miss the mark and fail to achieve the goal of "The Complete Man".

Paul gets quite detailed in depicting "all the body", and, sometimes in surprising ways, dissects his imagery into a series of puzzling mixed metaphors, including the language of building, physiology and sociology. All three linguistic forms conspire to communicate a single idea: **Christ is at work fitting and joining the whole body together**. Notice his language:

- a. "joined and held together" (Greek: *sunarmologoumenon kai sumbibazomenon*). The first word applies to the preparation of a stone for placement in a building. Mortar was not a common component of masonry construction in Paul's day, and so building blocks had to be "dressed" and smoothed so that they fit together without additional compound. By application, God prepares each member of the body so that it connects with the members around it. The second word means "to bring together, reconcile". Once the stones are placed in the building there still need to be adjustments to adapt stone to stone. So with the body of Christ. **Living at peace with each other, engaged in ministry, serving one another, and speaking truth in love are among the most demanding practical outworkings of body life faced by the church**. Paul gives assurance to his readers that Christ both **prepares the stones for the building, and also, prepares the stones for each other**.
- b. "by every supporting ligament" (Greek: *dia pasēs aphēs tēs epichorēgias*). The metaphor changes and we find ourselves in the midst of an anatomy lesson! Of course, Paul has shown a willingness to write about the church as both building and body in an effort to emphasize simultaneously **the solidity and permanence** of the structure, but also the **living, growing, and sustaining nature** of the "New Man". Unfortunately, our translations stumble over the word translated "ligament" as it appears in this passage. The word *aphē* only rarely means "ligament", but more than likely follows the idea developed in classical Greek by Aristotle when he speaks of "sense, contact, or connection" within the body. As a result, **a better translation would be "every supporting contact"**, that is, of one member in the body with another. "Keeping in touch" is not too far off the mark. Paul urges regular, consistent contact among the members of the body, such that no single member ever goes without a connection to someone else. Paul exemplifies this quality in his use of the "letter" when a face-to-face visit was impossible. Not wanting to lose contact with his churches, he communicated with them in this way. We might apply this to "communication" in the local church, making sure that needs are properly identified and that the "ministering" members supply those needs from the riches poured out by Christ's gracious gift of himself (see Acts 2:45; 4:35; 2 Corinthians 8:14; 11:9; Ephesians 4:28; Philippians 2:25; 4:19; Titus 3:14; 1 John 3:17).
- c. "grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work" ("grows": *auxesin*; "builds": *oikoomēn*; "does its work": *kat' energeian en metrō henos ekastou merous*). "Each part does its work", literally translated would be, "according to (the) work by measure of one, each part". This summation by Paul underscores the importance of the "individual contribution" "measured" out in proportion to the "whole

work" required in the growing, building, and loving church. No one is superfluous, and each person's contribution should be honored and affirmed. The emphasis is not on the importance of the "gift" in itself, as if one's position mattered, but rather on the shared work, appropriately distributed to "each contributing member". Put bluntly, there should be no "big shots" in the body of Christ, but fully vested, participating servants, in touch with each other's needs, and those of the world, supplying what is needed, measured out by the level of resource each has received from Christ. As Christ enables, each one should serve. The cementing force is agapē, "the gift of love", empowering God's people to fulfill God's plan, in the reaching of God's goal--the fullness of the stature of Christ.

Concluding Thoughts

God wants to fill all of His creation with Himself, not merely in the abstract sense of being "omnipresent," but in the transforming sense, so that creation might reflect His glory. As the prophet Habakkuk wrote:

For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea (Habakkuk 2:14).

As we have seen in our study this week, God has raised up His renewed kingdom people so that through them He might implement the achievement of Jesus. Like an angled mirror, we reflect the glory of the Lord, not for our own sake, but for His. While it is true that such an immense mission might give us cause for fear and hesitation, yet we must embrace the truth that the resurrected Jesus supplies hope for the mission. He who raised up Jesus from the dead will raise up all of His creation one day. Far from fear, this should be our source of great joy — the joy set before us as it was set before Jesus (see Hebrews 12:1-2).

In my wanderings this week, I came across a Moravian hymn, and thought it worth sharing with you:

We All Are One In Mission

We all are one in mission, we all are one in call,
Our varied gifts united by Christ the Lord of all
A Single, great commission compel us from above
To plan and work together that all may know Christ's love.

We all are called for service to witness in God's name.
Our ministries are different, our purpose is the same:
To touch the lives of others by God's surprising grace
So ev'ry folk and nation may feel God's warm embrace.

We all behold one vision, a stark reality:
The author of salvation was nailed upon a tree.
Yet resurrected Justice gives rise that we may share
Free reconciliation and hope amid despair.

1986 Hope Publishing Company Dale Wood Rusty Edwards

During the closing days of the Jewish exile in Babylon, a man named Daniel had a vision of God which shaped his view of the future and guided the remaining days of his own mission to the Jewish exiles. The vision began with a magnificent appearance of an unnamed "man" whose radiance left Daniel overwhelmed with weakness and deep sleep. By contrast to the terrifying vision, was the "hand" of the man who touched Daniel and offered him words of encouragement:

"O Daniel, man greatly loved, understand the words that I speak to you, and stand upright, for now I have been sent to you." And when he had spoken this word to me, I stood up trembling. ¹² Then he said to me, "Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your

words have been heard, and I have come because of your words ... O man greatly loved, fear not, peace be with you; be strong and of good courage." (Daniel 10:11-12, 19).

Notice how the heavenly man twice addressed the prophet as "man greatly loved..." and then instructed him to "fear not" but to go in the "peace" of the Lord, full of strength and courage. Considering the significant role of Daniel in the present and future history of Israel, his was no small mission. Nor did he presume to pursue it in his own strength. His courage flowed from the word of God, the hand of the heavenly man, and his own willingness to "set [his] heart to understand and humble [himself] before [his] God." Like Daniel, we "stand up trembling" and pray to the Lord "Let my lord speak, for you have strengthened me" (Daniel 10:19).

Glory to God. Amen.

Digger Deeper: *On a Mission from God: Becoming a Missional People — From Fearful to Courageous*
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *On a Mission from God: Becoming a Missional People — From Fearful to Courageous*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. What do you find most fearful about being "on a mission from God"? Briefly discuss some of the fears you have faced in implementing God's achievement in Jesus. What has helped you overcome these fears?
2. The first reading this week is John 3:35-36. What is its main theme? What does it mean for the Father to love Jesus? What does it mean for the Father to give "all things" into the hands of Jesus? How does this fact help us overcome the fears associated with the mission?
3. According to the second reading, Colossians 1:15-23, Jesus has a certain relationship to "all things." What is it? List the various roles Jesus has within Creation, as Paul discusses them. How is the gospel proclaimed according to 1:23? In what sense does this happen and what part do we have in it? Explain how our understanding of *who Jesus is* gives us courage.
4. What does the word "reconcile" mean in Colossians 1:20, and how does Jesus achieve it? Compare this with 2 Corinthians 5:17-21. What is God's goal in the *mission* of reconciliation?
5. Read Matthew 28:16-20, our third reading. This passage is commonly called "The Great Commission." Why is this an appropriate title? Briefly summarize the main components of this commission. Discuss this statement: "The commission begins the mission."
6. What special promise does Jesus give to His followers in order to alleviate their fears and impart courage (28:20)?
7. Our final reading is Ephesians 4:7-16. After reading it, offer a simple outline based on these two main divisions: 4:7-10 and 4:11-16. In light of our mission, *what* does God give us and *how* does He give it? What do we call this special act of God's giving?
8. In the same passage, what is God's ultimate purpose in "gifting" the church?
9. How important are *people* in God's mission? From 4:11-16 we learn about different kinds of "offices" or "gifted-ministries." List them and see if you can identify their special function within the church. Why are each of these vital to the total mission? In what way are *you* among them?
10. Knowing that God has gifted the church, how does this *challenge our fears* and *strengthen our courage*?
11. Where does this mission-based ministry lead? Carefully re-read 4:13-16, and notice the different purposes Paul identifies. How confident is Paul that God's mission will reach these goals?
12. According to 4:15-16 we are in the process of "growing up into Christ." What does that mean, and what are the results of doing so?
13. For what purpose does God grows the church? Review 4:10 as you offer your answer. Respond to this statement: "God fills the church through Christ so that He might fill the world through the church." If necessary, modify it to make it more accurate.