

KING JESUS AND HIS CHURCH: The King Gives Shepherds

Ephesians 4:1–16

Main Idea

King Jesus lovingly shepherds His church by giving shepherds who equip His saints for ministry so His body grows into maturity and carries out His mission.

Introduction

Last Sunday we began where every conversation about the church must begin. We began with Jesus Christ.

Before we discussed pastors and elders, deacons, church members and ministry, we asked one simple question. **Whose church is this?**

Scripture's answer was unmistakable. The church doesn't belong to me. It doesn't belong to you. It doesn't belong to a denomination. It doesn't belong to a committee. It doesn't even belong to some perceived "golden age" in the church's history. **The church belongs to King Jesus.**

Paul tells us He is the Head of the Body. Peter calls Him the Chief Shepherd. Jesus Himself declared, *"I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."* (Matthew 16:18) Everything we discuss over these four weeks rises and falls on that one truth.

Jesus Christ is King over His church.

If Christ is not King, then nothing else we're about to discuss really matters. But if Christ truly is King, then every question we ask should begin with Him.

Not, *"What do I prefer?"* Not, *"What have we always done?"* Not, *"What seems to work?"* But, **"What does King Jesus desire for His church?"** That changes the entire conversation.

We're no longer asking what is most comfortable or familiar. We're asking what is most faithful.

Throughout this series I've asked you to remember five simple words.

Christ. Shepherds. Servants. Saints. Mission.

Those five words aren't simply an outline. They're a picture. A picture of how King Jesus lovingly builds and cares for His church. Last week we looked at the first word. **Christ**.

Everything begins with Him. Today we come to the second word.

Shepherds.

Now before you think this sermon is going to be all about pastors, let me tell you where Paul is taking us. This passage isn't ultimately about shepherds. It's about **the Body**.

In fact, one of the most surprising things about Ephesians 4 is that Paul gives only one verse to shepherds. The rest of the passage is about what Christ wants His whole church to become. The shepherds are not the destination. **The Body is.**

Healthy shepherds don't exist to make themselves indispensable. They exist because King Jesus loves His church enough to equip His people. That's Paul's concern. So, let's hear God's Word together.

Read Ephesians 4:1-16.

I. Christ Unites His Body

(Ephesians 4:1-6)

One of the first things that strikes me about this passage is what Paul **doesn't** do. If I were writing a chapter about church leadership, I probably would have started with church leadership. Paul doesn't. He begins with the church itself.

Listen again to verse one. *"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called."*

That little word **therefore** is carrying tremendous weight. Paul has spent three chapters reminding believers who they are in Christ. They were dead in their sins. Now they have been made alive with Christ. They were strangers and aliens. Now they are fellow citizens with the saints. They were separated from God. Now they have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

They were divided by Jew and Gentile. Now Christ has made one new humanity. Only after spending three chapters explaining what God has done does Paul finally say, "**Now...walk worthy.**"

That's the rhythm of the Christian life. The gospel always comes before obedience. Grace always comes before growth. Identity always comes before activity. We don't obey in order to become God's people. We obey because, through Christ, we already are His people.

Now notice what kind of walk Paul describes. He doesn't begin with giftedness. He doesn't begin with leadership. He doesn't begin with ministry positions. He begins with character.

"...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

That ought to catch our attention. Before Paul ever tells us **how** the church is organized, he tells us **how** Christians are to treat one another. Before structure, comes character. Before offices, comes obedience. Before leadership, comes love. Why?

Because the greatest danger facing the church has never been the absence of the right organizational structure. The greatest danger has always been pride.

Proud people can turn even the best biblical structure into a battlefield. But humble people can preserve unity even while working through difficult questions together. That's why Paul begins with humility. Not because humility is merely admirable. Because humility is essential.

Walking Worthy

What does Paul mean by "walk worthy"? He's not talking about earning God's love. He's talking about living in a way that reflects the calling we've already received.

Imagine a firefighter wearing the uniform. The uniform doesn't make him courageous. But it should reflect who he is. Likewise, we bear the name of Christ.

Paul says, "Live in a manner worthy of that name."

That means our relationships, both inside the church and outside the church, should reflect the gospel we've received.

Look at the progression. Humility. Gentleness. Patience. Bearing with one another. Maintaining unity. These aren't random virtues. Each one builds on the previous one. Humility says, "I don't have to have my own way." Gentleness says, "I don't have to force my own way."

Patience says, "I'll wait while God works in others." Bearing with one another says, "I'll continue loving imperfect people because Christ continues loving me." The result?

Unity. Now notice something very important. Paul never says, "**Create unity.**" He says, "**Maintain the unity of the Spirit.**" Why?

Because Christ has already accomplished our unity through His death and resurrection. Our responsibility is not to manufacture unity. Our responsibility is to protect what Christ has already purchased.

Healthy shepherds don't create that unity. Healthy shepherds help protect it.

The Seven "Ones"

Then Paul gives us seven anchors for that unity. One Body. One Spirit. One Hope. One Lord. One Faith. One Baptism. One God and Father of all. Notice what he doesn't say.

He doesn't say, One preference. One personality. One worship style. One opinion. Our unity is rooted in something far deeper than agreement over preferences. It is rooted in the very character and saving work of God.

Unity is not the absence of differences. It is the proper ordering of our differences under the lordship of Jesus Christ. That's biblical unity.

Before we ever discuss shepherds, before we ever discuss servants, before we ever discuss congregational responsibility, Paul asks every one of us a more important question.

Am I helping preserve the unity Christ died to create? That's a question for pastors. For elders. For deacons. For Sunday School teachers. For church members. For teenagers. For senior adults. For every believer.

Because if Christ purchased our unity with His blood, we ought to treasure it with our lives.

Now here's where Paul's argument takes a beautiful turn. After emphasizing everything we have **in common**, he begins talking about how Christ gives **different gifts** to different members of the Body.

Unity does not mean uniformity. The same Christ who unites His Body, also gifts His Body. Look at verse seven.

"But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift." Did you notice the subject again? **Christ**. Paul keeps bringing us back to Him. Christ unites His Body.

Christ equips His Body by giving gifts. Did you notice the subject again? **Christ**. Paul keeps bringing us back to Him. Christ unites His Body. And now, **Christ gives gifts to His Body**.

II. Christ Gives Gifts to His Body

Ephesians 4:7–11

Now Paul makes what seems like a surprising turn. He has just spent six verses emphasizing everything we have in common. One Body. One Spirit. One Hope. One Lord. One Faith. One Baptism. One God and Father. Then verse seven begins with **"but..."**

In other words, unity does not erase individuality. Christ unites His people without making every believer the same. Listen again to verse seven.

"But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift."

Notice that phrase to **each one of us**. Paul has moved from emphasizing **one** to emphasizing **each**. The Body is one. But every member matters. Every believer has received grace. Every believer has received gifts. Every believer has received a calling.

Paul is not describing a handful of extraordinary Christians. He's describing the ordinary Christian life. Church family, there are no unnecessary members in Christ's Body. No spare parts. No extras. No one sitting on the end of the bench hoping they'll someday matter.

If you belong to Christ, then Christ has intentionally gifted you.

The Ascended King

Now Paul does something fascinating. Beginning in verse eight he quotes Psalm 68. At first it almost feels out of place. Why suddenly talk about ascending and descending? Because Paul wants us to understand something about Jesus.

In the ancient world, when a victorious king returned from battle, he didn't simply celebrate his victory. He distributed the spoils. His victory became the blessing of his people.

Paul says King Jesus has done something infinitely greater. He descended. He entered our broken world. He took on flesh. He humbled Himself. He suffered. He died. He rose again. He ascended. And now, from His throne, He continually gives gifts to His people. Don't miss what Paul is saying.

The ascension did not distance Christ from His church. It increased His ministry to His church. Sometimes we picture the ascension as though Jesus simply went away. Paul says exactly the opposite. The ascended Christ is actively caring for His Body.

The King who reigns is also the King who gives.

One of Those Gifts Is Shepherds

Then we arrive at verse eleven. *"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers..."*

Again, notice the subject. Who gave these gifts? Christ. Whose idea was this? Christ's. Shepherds are not the invention of churches. They are the gift of King Jesus. That's a profoundly different way to think about leadership.

Sometimes people imagine leadership exists because churches became too large. Or because organizations require management.

Or because someone has to make decisions. Paul gives a completely different answer. **Christ loves His church.** Therefore, **Christ gives shepherds.**

Shepherds are not evidence that Jesus has stepped away from His church. They are evidence that Jesus still lovingly cares for His church. Every faithful shepherd points beyond himself to the Great Shepherd.

Why "Shepherds"?

Paul could have chosen many words. He doesn't say executives. He doesn't say managers. He doesn't say administrators. He says **Shepherds.**

That image carries an entire theology with it. A shepherd knows the sheep. Feeds the sheep. Protects the sheep. Searches for wandering sheep. Binds up wounded sheep. Stays with the flock.

Immediately our minds go to Psalm 23. "The Lord is my Shepherd." Then John 10. "I am the Good Shepherd." Then 1 Peter 5. "When the Chief Shepherd appears..." Everywhere in Scripture the picture is remarkably consistent. The shepherd exists for the good of the sheep.

That's why Jesus gives shepherds. Not because His church is a problem to manage. Because His church is a treasure to protect. Christ purchased His church with His own blood. He is not indifferent to how His people are cared for.

But Don't Stop at Verse Eleven

Now let me encourage you not to stop reading here. Because if we stop at verse eleven we'll misunderstand the entire passage. Verse eleven is not the destination. It's the bridge.

Notice what Paul does. He gives one verse to shepherds. Then he spends the rest of the passage talking about the saints and the Body. Why? Because healthy shepherds are never trying to make themselves indispensable. Healthy shepherds are trying to help the Body become mature.

The measure of faithful shepherding is not how indispensable the shepherd becomes. It's how mature the Body becomes.

That's why Christ gives shepherds. Not to perform all the ministry. Not to become the center of the church. But to prepare God's people to become everything Christ intends them to be. And that brings us to what may be the most important verse in the chapter. Verse 12.

"...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ."

III. Shepherds Equip the Saints

Ephesians 4:12

Now we arrive at what I believe is one of the most important verses in the New Testament for understanding the life of the church.

"...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ."

Notice what Paul **doesn't** say. He doesn't say Christ gave shepherds **to do all the ministry**. He says Christ gave shepherds **to equip the saints** for the work of ministry. That is an entirely different picture.

What Does "Equip" Mean?

That word "equip" is rich with meaning. It was used for mending fishing nets. Setting broken bones. Preparing an army for battle. Restoring something so that it can accomplish the purpose for which it was made. Think about those pictures.

A fisherman doesn't mend his nets because he enjoys repairing nets. He mends them because they're meant to catch fish. A doctor doesn't set a broken bone because the X-ray looks better afterward. He sets the bone so the body can function the way it was designed.

Likewise shepherds don't merely transfer information. They prepare God's people to function as God designed them to function. Knowledge that never becomes obedience has missed Paul's point.

Don't Miss Paul's Flow

Now notice the progression. Christ gives shepherds. Shepherds equip saints. Saints do ministry. The Body is built up. Every step matters.

If we remove shepherds the Body suffers. If the saints refuse to minister the Body suffers. The point isn't merely having the right offices. The point is that every part fulfills the role Christ has given it.

Notice the difference between the way many churches operate and the way Paul describes the church. Everything is moving toward one goal. A healthy Body.

Calling Is Bigger Than Opportunity

Now let me pause and make an important distinction. Because I don't want anyone to misunderstand what I'm saying. Healthy shepherds absolutely encourage people. Healthy shepherds identify gifts. Healthy shepherds invite people into opportunities.

Jesus did that. Paul did that. Barnabas did that. Faithful shepherds should continue doing that. But here's the distinction.

There is a difference between being invited into a ministry opportunity and being called into a life of ministry.

Those are not the same thing. A shepherd may invite you to teach a class. Serve in children's ministry. Lead a Bible study. Serve as a deacon. Those are wonderful opportunities. But those invitations do not create your calling. **King Jesus already has.** That's Paul's point.

Don't confuse a position with a purpose. Some Christians spend years waiting for a position. "If someone would just ask me..." "If someone would just notice me..." "If someone would just give me something meaningful to do..." Paul says something radically different.

Your purpose existed long before your position. Before you were ever asked to teach you were called to disciple. Before you were ever asked to serve on a ministry team you were called to love your neighbor. Before you were ever handed a microphone you were called to proclaim the gospel. Before you were ever elected to an office you were called to walk in holiness.

Your ministry did not begin when someone recognized your gifts. Your ministry began when Christ called you to Himself. That changes everything.

Ministry Begins Before Sunday

Sometimes we unintentionally reduce ministry to what happens inside these walls. Paul never does. If the only ministry you're doing happens during one hour on Sunday morning you're missing the majority of your calling as a follower of Jesus.

Please don't misunderstand me. Sunday ministry matters. Children's ministry matters. Greeting matters. Teaching matters. Nursery matters. Worship matters. Those are beautiful expressions of ministry. But they are not the sum total of ministry.

Ministry is not confined to a building. It is not restricted to a ministry team. It is not limited to a position. And it certainly is not contained within one hour on Sunday morning. One definition of ministry has always helped me.

Ministry takes place when God's resources meeting human needs through loving channels for the glory of God.

Think about that. When God's truth reaches a confused neighbor through your encouragement, that's ministry. When God's comfort reaches someone through your presence, that's ministry. When you pray for your children and grandchildren, that's ministry. When you share Christ with a coworker that's ministry. When you forgive someone that's ministry. When you show hospitality that's ministry.

Long before anyone gives you a title King Jesus has already given you a mission. That's why Henry Blackaby's words resonate so powerfully. Find where God is working and join Him there.

He didn't say, "Wait until someone discovers your potential." He said, "Join God."

Step Onto the Field

Imagine it's Friday night. The stadium is full. The coaches have spent all week preparing. The whistle blows. The game begins. And every player remains standing on the sideline.

The quarterback says, "Coach never told me personally to take the first snap." The running back says, "No one specifically invited me to carry the football." The linebacker says, "I was waiting for somebody to recruit me."

We would all think, "They've misunderstood why they're here."

Now a good coach absolutely teaches. He develops. He encourages. Sometimes he even says, "I think you'd be great in this role." Good shepherds should do that too.

But football was never designed so that the coach has to convince every player to enter the game. The player already knows why he's there. He's there to play.

King Jesus has already called the play. Love your neighbor. Make disciples. Bear one another's burdens. Pray without ceasing. Serve one another. Share the gospel. The question isn't whether Christ has spoken. The question is whether we'll step onto the field.

The Joy of Obedience

When believers are actively obeying the clear commands of Christ they usually have remarkably little time left to complain that no one has discovered their potential. Why?

Because they're already experiencing the joy of being used by God. They're praying. Serving. Encouraging. Sharing Christ. Discipling. Showing hospitality. Bearing burdens. Joining God where He is already at work.

The Christian life isn't primarily waiting to be noticed. It's faithfully following Jesus wherever He leads. I wonder if sometimes we've believed a subtle lie. "If I could just find the perfect ministry...the perfect position...the perfect opportunity...then I'd finally be fulfilled."

But church family that's not the gospel. If Christ is sufficient to save us, then Christ is sufficient to satisfy us.

Paul's ministry changed constantly. His contentment never did. Why? Because his joy wasn't rooted in his assignment. His joy was rooted in his Savior.

Satisfied Christians rarely spend their lives searching for significance. They spend their lives making much of Christ.

Paul isn't asking us to do all of this simply to stay busy. God has a purpose. When shepherds faithfully equip and saints faithfully minister the whole Body begins to grow into the likeness of Christ. And that's exactly where Paul takes us next.

IV. Christ Grows His Body

(vv. 13-16)

Now we finally arrive at the destination of Paul's argument. Notice how verse 13 begins. *"...until we all attain..."* Don't miss those first few words.

Until we all...Not the pastors. Not the elders. Not the deacons. Not the Sunday School teachers. **We all.** It's about the Body. Christ gives shepherds so that the whole Body grows into maturity. That's where Paul has been heading all along.

Christ's Goal Is Maturity

Listen to what Paul says. *"...until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood..."* Notice Christ's goal. Not simply activity. Not simply attendance. Not simply busy churches.

Maturity. Sometimes we measure the health of a church by the wrong things. How many people came? How many programs do we offer? How many ministries are happening? Those things may be encouraging, but they are not Paul's measuring stick.

Paul asks a different question. **Are we becoming more like Christ?** That's maturity. Healthy churches aren't simply busy. Healthy churches are becoming more like Jesus.

Stability Instead of Spiritual Childhood

Then Paul gives us another picture. *"...so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine..."*

Children are wonderful. But children are also easily influenced.

They believe almost anything they're told. Paul says Christ doesn't want His church to remain spiritually immature. He wants believers who know the truth. Who recognize error. Who are anchored in God's Word. Who are not blown from one fad to another.

One of the ways shepherds love the flock is by teaching sound doctrine. One of the ways saints love one another is by growing in sound doctrine. Notice again how both are working together.

Everything grows toward Him. Everything grows because of Him. Everything finds its life in Him. The closer we grow to Christ, the closer we grow to one another.

Every Part Working Properly

Now we reach what I believe is the climax of the entire chapter.

Verse 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."*

Each part. Not some parts. Not the visible parts. Not the paid parts. Not the platform parts. Each part.

Imagine your own body. What happens if one finger stops functioning? The body compensates. What happens if one leg refuses to work? Everything else has to adjust. The body was designed so that every part contributes to the health of the whole.

Paul says the church is no different. Christ's design is not a few people carrying everyone else. Christ's design is an equipped Body in which every believer faithfully fulfills the role Christ has entrusted to them.

Notice something else. Your eye doesn't complain because it isn't the hand. Your hand doesn't envy the ear. Your foot doesn't quit because it isn't the heart. Every part simply fulfills the purpose God designed it to fulfill.

That's maturity. The goal isn't finding the most visible ministry. The goal is faithfully functioning where Christ has placed you.

This Is Christ's Vision for His Church

Now step back and look at the whole picture.

Christ unites His Body. Christ gives gifts. Christ gives shepherds. Shepherds equip saints. Saints minister. The Body matures. The mission advances. Do you see it? This entire chapter is about King Jesus actively building His church.

Not from a distance. Not passively. But lovingly, intentionally, and continually. The church has only one Hero. Everyone else serves His mission.

The Gospel

And none of this would be possible apart from the gospel. The One who now shepherds His church first became the Lamb who was slain. The Good Shepherd laid down His life for His sheep. He bore our sin. He died in our place. He rose in victory. He ascended in glory. And even now, from His throne, He continues to build His church.

If you've never trusted Christ, your greatest need today is not to find a place to serve. Your greatest need is to know the Savior who gave Himself for you. Come to Him in repentance and faith. He will receive you. He will forgive you. And He will make you part of His Body.

Christ. Shepherds. Servants. Saints. Mission.

Five words. Five reminders of how King Jesus lovingly builds His church. Christ is the Head. Shepherds equip. Servants strengthen. Saints minister. The mission advances.

We are not trying something new. We are trying to be faithful to something ancient. By *ancient*, I don't mean old customs. I don't mean preserving traditions. I mean returning to the pattern King Jesus established through His apostles nearly two thousand years ago.

Our goal is not innovation. Our goal is apostolic faithfulness.

We're not asking this church to become something it has never been. We're asking this church to become everything Christ intends it to be.

And that begins with every one of us remembering Paul's words.

King Jesus has already called every believer into a life of ministry. The Great Commission wasn't given only to pastors. The command to love your neighbor wasn't given only to elders. The call to make disciples wasn't given only to ministry leaders.

The call to pray, to encourage, to bear burdens, to speak the truth in love, to show hospitality, to proclaim the gospel belongs to every follower of Jesus Christ.

Shepherds don't give you that calling. They equip you to fulfill the calling Christ has already given you. So don't leave here looking for a position. Leave here rejoicing in your calling.

King Jesus has already called you. Now go join Him where He is already at work. To Christ alone be the glory.