



Ministry Worthy of Our Calling

Ephesians 4:1-16

Grace Church | 1.2.21

Almost 15 years ago, Willow Creek Community Church, one of the largest churches in America with over 20,000 attendees each week, released their internal study of their church culture called REVEAL. The aim of the study was to see if their goal of “developing fully devoted followers of Christ” was really working. Their answer? It wasn’t. For the last 10 years, they said, they had been effectively ministering to those who said that they were “exploring Christianity”, and yet completely missing those who self-reported as “close to Christ”. A quarter of the mature Christian group said they were “stalled” in their spiritual growth.¹ Millions of dollars were spent into a modern, attractional model of ministry, and they admitted something was wrong. It is safe to say that thousands of other churches modeled their ministry nearly exactly after Willow Creek due to its numerical success. They all received the news—and yet, nothing really changed that much. Maybe a few internal changes happened, but certainly nothing drastic. The kind of ministry that Willow helped to create—which is sometimes called attractional or “seeker sensitive”, for its emphasis on tailoring everything to those who are interested in Christ but not yet really following him—carried on. What was deemed 15 years ago to appear to not really work in helping true believers reach true maturity was never truly abandoned.

I’ll stop there, because my aim is not to critique Willow Creek Community Church or churches like it. I could do that I think, but every church is imperfect, and that would not be a very good sermon. My aim in this example is actually to self-reflect. If we were to create a robust, internal survey of our church, or even our particular kind of church—say Acts 29, our network—what would we find? Would we find a church of maturing, loving, disciples, or shallow, interested seekers? And would we be willing to change if we deemed our model of ministry incapable of meeting the Biblical example of a healthy church?

Well, it’s not a year long poll of a megachurch, but Ephesians 4:1-16 actually provides for us this morning the possibility of a diagnostic test. We find the diagnostic question in **verse 1**. Paul, as both one uniquely sent by God as an apostle and as a prisoner for Christ, urges us—that word means an authoritative, even a royal exhortation—to walk in a manner *worthy* of the calling we have received. What is that calling? Well it’s no less than the content of Ephesians 1-3; the calling of being sons and daughters, heirs of God, being made a holy temple before God, made alive in God, and the calling of existing as a new humanity together in the church. Our calling is all the great theological realities we spent weeks on last semester—that identity of the church, expressed

¹ Gathered from Jared Wilson, *Prodigal Church*



most succinctly in 2:22, that in Christ “we are being built together into a dwelling palace of God by the Spirit”. That is the identity we have been called to. So the rest of Ephesians will be urging us, showing us, teaching us how to walk and live as worthy of that calling. So again, the diagnostic question: Is the ministry—that is, the work of our church and our people—worthy of the calling of Jesus Christ we have received?

In this text we see a blueprint for a ministry that is worthy of our calling in Christ. In verses 1-6 notice the grounds of our ministry, in 7-12 the practice of our ministry, and in 13-16 the result of our ministry.

The Grounds of Our Ministry: Ethical and Theological Unity

Are we worthy of the calling we have received? When you build a building, start with the foundation, and the foundation of long-term worthy ministry is unity. The reason I can say unity is the foundation of worthy ministry is because of Paul’s emphasis in this text. There are two kinds of unity being presented here. The first is ethical, look at **verse 2**. Humility was thought to be a vice, not a virtue, in the ancient world. The connotation is humiliation—that act of being so weak that you consistently find yourself mocked and ridiculed. Only through the perfect example of Jesus is humility redeemed to the height of virtue. To be humble towards one another is to be willing to be low, to be humiliated, ridiculed, made less of—for the sake of another. Literally it means “lowliness of mind”, thinking of others first, humility leads to servant-heartedness. Humility is paired with gentleness. Again, we think of Jesus, who self-described as “gentle and lowly”. Gentleness, often described also as “meekness” in the Greek, is the virtue of being completely in control. It’s a kind of disposition we so often lack with one another. Paired with humility, a kindness, a gentleness, is the first stone of unity.

Patience is that virtue in relationships that allowed us to be longsuffering—to bear with one another when we all make dumb decisions and continue to deny Christ. Longsuffering is at the heart of God, it’s part of his great mercy to be patient with sinners, desiring all reach repentance. And it fits well too with “bearing with one another”. All of this is bound up in love—the root of all our unifying action. No ministry can survive without true, genuine love for one another. Do you love your fellow church members? Do you think highly of them, often of them? Are you patient with them, bearing with their weakness gently and meekly? This is what it takes to be *eager* to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, **verse 3**. It’s a zealous love.

Here is our ethical unity. Without it, our ministry is completely undercut, it loses all credibility and all power. Why? Because no one cares what we believe, no one cares what we teach, no one cares what we say, what care we bring, unless we love one another. If we fail to unify around a common love for another, our entire church will be like the clanging gong or the crashing cymbal in 1 Corinthians 13: a loud, brash, annoying, out of tune nuisance.



Now, we must remember that our actions do not qualify us for ministry in God's kingdom. He is the one who in the first place made us alive when we were dead! There is no way to love one another without the unity of *the Spirit*, without God's power. God has made us worthy of the calling we have received. This is the concept of *theological unity* in **verses 4-6**. Why should we be eager to maintain unity? The answer is very simple: because God is one. The word "one" is used 7 times here. And notice the Trinitarian nature of **verse 4-6**. Because there is one Spirit, there is one body and one call. There are not multiple holy spirit's calling multiple churches and indwelling them as multiple bodies. God's Holy Spirit creates the church: when the Spirit comes at Pentecost it is a singular act. And because there is one Lord, that is Jesus Christ who Paul refers to as the Lord, there is one hope, one faith, one baptism. We are baptized into Christ, we put our faith in Christ, our hope is due to Christ's work and his second coming. He is not divided. Finally, there is one family of God because there is one Father of all, meaning all Christians.

What does all this mean? It means that the unified, Triune God works in history to create a unified church. God is one, and his church is one inwardly, is unified, has been made into one new body, regardless of differences. It means that if you confess the Triune God revealed in the Scriptures and come to him only by faith in Christ for your hope and your baptism into a new repentant life, by his Spirit you are his body and part of his family. End of story—we are linked inseparably with Christians of all denominations and stripes who meet this description, throughout all ages and places. This is spiritual reality, we can no more change it than we can cause the sun to stop shining. As one author puts it: "it is no more possible to split the church than it is to split the Godhead."² Our unity is a theological reality rooted in the unity of God himself.

All of this then can be a bit confusing. If this is true, then why would Paul urge us to live in unity, if it is already our reality? Because although we are *inwardly* worthy by God, we have a role to show ourselves as *outwardly* worthy. The truth is that something can be true and we fail to live in light of it. Think of a family who is tied by inseparable blood bonds and shared experience. The mother and father may divorce, the sons and daughters move all across the globe. But they are still family. This does not mean, however, that we should not urge them to *act* like a true family! Just because their inward reality has not changed does not mean they cannot be called to reflect that in their outward actions.

In fact, it's this showing of outward worthiness that constitutes our ministry. The ministry of the church is about displaying God's mystery of the gospel outwardly, which is why it's so vital that our outward actions match up with our inward renewal. But neither is this about individual moral excellence, as if to walk worthy of God's calling as a church is to create a bunch of rule followers. No, the primary way we display the mystery of the gospel together is not in our personal walk, but our corporate walk—it's in how we relate to one another. In our unity we show that the gospel is creating one new human race, full of love for one another. Without an outward showing of our inward, theological unity, we've nullified our ministry as a church. So let me urge you with a gentle gospel call: Jesus Christ suffered to make you his, and to bring you to his church. He is gentle and

² John Stott, *Ephesians*.



lowly, patient and long-suffering. He is full of love, and if you come to him you are welcomed into his Father by his Spirit too. That's your family pedigree, alongside your brothers and sisters. So seek peace, seek unity. Don't burn bridges, don't hold grudges. A meeting between Christians should be the most peaceful and loving place in all the world. Why? Because God is there.

The Practice of Our Ministry: Words from a Victorious Christ

The simple reality is that if we have true love we will have true unity, and therefore display the unity and love of the Trinity. That's an incredible ministry to be a part of. But what does it look like practically? What does the displaying of the mystery of God look like on the ground? See **verse 7**. The word for "Grace" in this verse is "charis". Usually, when Paul speaks of spiritual gifts, he speaks of "charismata", which is a play off of *charis*, kind of like saying "grace gift". It's where we get the word charismatic. The same concept is at play here: we are all given grace, not just for salvation, but another kind of grace that is a gift of Christ.

In **verse 8** Paul quotes from Psalm 68:18, and he is doing something very interesting here. Psalm 68 is a psalm all about God's triumph over his enemies. In verse 18, the ascension is about ascending the mountain of God. The idea is that God has come out and conquered, and now he returns up to his mountain, ascending with a host of captives in a victorious train and with glorious plunder. The difference between the text in Psalm 68:18 and Ephesians 4:8, is that in Psalm 96 it says that God "receives" gifts, but in Ephesians Paul quotes it as "gave gifts." What's going on? No, Paul isn't just misquoting David. Rather, he is interpreting the psalm in light of Christ, as if all along it points to Jesus.

This is made clear by **verse 9**. Much ado is made by whether Paul means that Christ descended to the palace of the dead after his death to proclaim his victory, or if his descent is simply his incarnation and death. Either way, the idea is that in order to "ascend" he must "descend". In order to come back victorious, he must march out. So Paul is saying that the very same one who descended to us, which is Jesus Christ, is the one who ascended back to God. Jesus is the one who marches from the mountain of Heaven into battle and comes back victorious to God's throne. And when he comes back, look what happens. He does not come back empty handed. Psalm 68 is right, he *receives* gifts or tribute. But part of the tribute he is bringing back to Heaven isn't just the spoils of his enemies, but the very enemies he has made into his own holy people! The idea is simple: Christ descends in order to make you his, and ascends back with you up the mountain of God. But before he can do that, before he can have you as his gift, he must give himself as your gift. He offers himself up, he is the very grace of God—he offers himself and then gives his own Spirit to equip the church to attain unity and holiness, so that then he can take her back with him to God. So in this sense, Paul is not re-working or misquoting David in Psalm 68. The gospel is God's victorious descent to give the gift of his Son, in order that his Son might ascend with his church as God's own gift. His conquest involves both receiving and giving, here Paul simply highlights the giving.



So rest assured, here is good news. All grace is a gift from the victorious Christ. None of it is unsure or unsteady. He is coming back, but he won't leave you here empty handed. He will give his people gifts: of himself, and of his Spirit. And here is how those gifts get to you: apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers. I want you to notice that this is not a text about spiritual gifts in the same way we find in 1 Corinthians 12. Paul may have in mind spiritual gifts like he outlines elsewhere, but he doesn't mention them. Instead he mentions certain offices of the church, certain roles, to show ministry is meant to flow from Christ to his people.

Apostles refers to those who are commissioned by Christ directly, it means "sent". In this case Paul is referring to those like himself who had seen the resurrected Jesus and were given the message of the gospel directly from him. In this context, prophets are those who are given direct revelation from God, who are able to say: "thus says the Lord" without error. These include old testament prophets and also new testament prophets which God used to establish his scripture that was confirmed by the witness of the unified church and compiled into a trustworthy canon. He is not speaking here of those who we might say "speak prophetically", as in seem to speak on behalf of God in a spiritual but not ultimately authoritative way, but about those who have the office of prophet. This is an office that I believe no longer exists, similarly to the office of apostle. Why? I know this is what Paul is speaking of because already in the letter he has talked about the church being built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets. Foundations don't change, or else the whole building collapses.

What do all of these offices have in common? Why does Paul choose to highlight this here? All of these offices are offices of the Word of God. Remember that the goal of the ministry of the church is to reveal the mysteries of God. How is that going to happen practically? What is the victorious Christ's plan to make his enemies into a holy dwelling of God? He gives his Word. Jesus is the start, he is the incarnate word of God, the fulfillment of all the prophecy and action of God before him. The apostles are credible witnesses to Jesus, the Word. They spoke and received their mission from him directly and they pass on his teaching. Then the prophets confirm this teaching by hearing from God by the Spirit, they act with the apostles in laying the foundation of God's word for the church. They hear from God concerning Christ. Because that foundation has been laid, this is why the office of apostle and prophet no longer operates as it did in the time Ephesians was written.

The evangelists then spread the message of the Word. They go out into the world to make sure everyone hears. Until everyone hears, we will have evangelists among us, commissioned by the people of God for this specific task. Think those of God's people who are sent by his church to the places where Jesus is truly not named or known. The pastors then administer the Word to God's people, making sure it is understandable, applicable, they apply it in their care and their oversight of the church and people. Then the teachers make sure the word is understood, that it can be understood after it is proclaimed and as it is administered. This is distinct in some way from the pastors, who teach God's word, but linked. Some teachers of God's word may or may not administer it in the same way as pastors. But they are linked, since part of shepherding is teaching.



All of this is God's planned way to give us his word. And what does that Word do? Here is the practicality: it equips the saints for the work of ministry, **verse 12**.

Who does the ministry? The saints, all of them. You can join a gym, and never go to work out. But you cannot join and be a member of Christ's body without receiving a call to ministry. Jesus is currently ascended and at the right hand of God. But he is not idle. He is interceding for God's people and gifting them with leaders who equip them for ministry. You are the ministry. Not the pastors, not the leaders, not the teachers. It's you—God's people. God's plan to make his church holy and through his church make his mystery and majesty known everywhere: that happens through you. Ministry is not for you when you figure everything out, when you get a degree or some paid experience. Ministry is not for you when you learn the answers to all of your burning questions. Ministry is for you *now*. Hold me accountable in all the ways I fail to equip you, and I will hold you accountable when you fail to minister the gospel.

And this is not that daunting, because Christ himself equips you. You are a minister of the gospel not according to all your actions for the church, although those are part of it. You are a minister of the gospel in the way that you represent the church. The work of ministry is building up the body, see in **verse 12**. The work of ministry is nothing less than discipleship. You do ministry when you greet on Sundays, when you run slides, when you teach children the gospel, when you give to the church freely, but you also do ministry when you confess your sin at community group, when you encourage a brother or sister in discipleship group, when you take a meal to share with a brother or sister in Christ, when you are patient with a church member who is hard to be patient with. You minister when you stay home to care for your children and train them in righteousness, when you represent Christ in your workplace and your classroom. Anyway that you can build up the body of Christ is ministry. It's not for professionals—it's for you. A loving, unified, congregation of believers is Jesus' plan A for his kingdom. You aren't alone—he has given you his word, mediated to you through the apostles, the prophets, through missionaries, through pastors, and through teachers. That is your ministry! How do you make disciples? You live according to his word, encourage with his word, proclaim his word, treasure his word.

And when we learn together the ministry of the Word of God, we will learn the ministry of Jesus, the incarnate word. And here is what will happen: maturity into Christ. It doesn't happen overnight—it happens slowly and surely. But we begin to show Christ.

The Result of Our Ministry: Maturity into Christ

What is a mature church, worthy of her calling? Here are 5 markers, which could be a sermon in and of itself.

1. A mature church knows who she believes in (unity of Faith and the knowledge of the son of God...)



Do you really know Jesus? Do you know him doctrinally, worshipping the right Jesus and not your own creation? And do you know him personally? We must be unified in worshipping the true Christ.

2. A mature church looks like who she believes in (mature manhood, the measure of the fullness of Christ...)

Jesus is the true man, and we are being built in him into a new mankind.

3. A mature church is ready for any storm and any scheme (tossed too and fro...)

Maturity means we can weather storms together without fracturing, it means we can major on the gospel and work out in love any secondary disagreements. It means that we are convinced by the popular ideology of the day.

4. A mature church speaks the truth in love (rather, speaking the truth in love..)

We must speak truth to each other, we must be so loving that we are unafraid to be unapologetic. And we must do it lovingly, gently, compassionately, and tenderly.

5. A mature church makes sure every part works (joined and held together...)

That man is mistaken who desires his own separate growth. For what would it profit a leg or an arm if it grew to an enormous size, or for the mouth to be stretched wider? It would merely be afflicted with a harmful tumour. So if we wish to be considered in Christ, let no man be anything for himself, but let us all be whatever we are for others. This is accomplished by love; and where love does not reign, there is no edification of the Church, but a mere scattering.³

Let me end with this exhortation. I want to say church, that I love you. As we have grown some this year, some of you may not know me that well. But I thank God everyday he has given me the grace to be one of your pastors, to shepherd you by administering God's word to you. You are a beautiful congregation. I have no doubt God is working maturity in you, I see it everyday. I pray for it constantly. Yet sometimes I fear: is it all in vain, all the ministry worthless? Am I doing it wrong, are we failing our mission? Will we look back and wonder how we could be so lazy, so foolish, so divided, so microscopic?

But here is where we must turn for assurance that one day we will reach the full height of Christ's stature and stare him in the eye. Not to us—this church will not last forever. This building will fall. Not to our works—they are feeble at best. We must turn to Christ. He are growing not to be better versions of ourselves, but to be like him. He alone has the great grace to sustain us. He

³ Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians*



alone endured the cross to bring us to God, He alone descended to the depths of death to bring us back to life. He alone deserves all the glory and honor and praise for building his church. But he will. He has promised it. It's as good as done. We may not always have the best model for displaying him. But here is where we can start: trusting him, and not our models of ministry. When we do that, we will walk worthy of our calling.

