

“Growing Up Into Christ”
Ephesians 4:1-16
December 16, 2001

Text Comment

This is a passage full of minor complications. It is typical of Paul’s writing both to move about, flitting from thought to thought not necessarily in logical order, and to soar with high-flying expressions that are not easily brought down to earth. And we have both things here. For example, vv. 8-10 are something of an afterthought, though wonderful as we will see. Or, “fill the whole universe” at the end of v. 10 may be just another more extravagant way to say the same thing Paul says more prosaically elsewhere in his letters, or he be expanding his thought.

We considered vv. 1-6 last Lord’s Day morning, but we will read them again to set the context.

- v.7 This unity that is to mark the life of God’s people is a unity in diversity. Christians have different gifts and callings from the Lord. This point, as you know, is made in greater detail elsewhere in Paul’s letters, most notably 1 Cor. 12 and Rom. 12.
- v.8 Paul’s use of this quotation from Psalm 68:18 is complicated by the fact that, in the Psalm, we read that “he *received* gifts from men” not “he *gave* gifts to men.” In Psalm 68:18 the Lord ascends as a victor loaded with the spoils of his conquests. Paul’s thought seems to be that the Lord then distributed those spoils among his people. He took spoils only to redistribute them. Remember, we read in Isa. 53:12 that the Messiah would “divide the spoils with the strong.” Paul sometimes interprets in this way the citations he takes from the Old Testament.
- v.10 There has been a long debate about the meaning of the phrase Paul uses here: “the lower regions of the earth.” Some have thought it referred to Hades or Hell, but that does not seem likely. Rather it is simply a reference to the earth viewed as a place far, far below heaven from which the Lord Jesus came. That is the way the NIV takes it in its translation and that is widely thought to be the correct understanding. Viewed in this way “he descended to the lower earthly regions” is a reference to the incarnation, the Lord’s coming down to us, but to a coming down that involved a great lowering of himself. The thought of vv. 9-10, then, is like that of John 3:13: “No man has ascended into heaven, except the one who came down from heaven, even the Son of Man.

But, what does he mean by “in order to fill the whole universe”? This text is very like the famous passage in Phil. 2 where we have the same movement. The Lord comes down to earth, humbles himself, and then ascends to the highest place in order that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.” That may be Paul’s thought here as well, or he may, in the context be thinking more of Christ filling the universe with his blessings or his gifts. That is what he has been talking about, the Lord, from his heavenly throne, distributing his gifts to men.

- v.11 These four gifts are, of course, only a selection. There are many gifts that the Lord bestows on Christians for the benefit of the church as a whole. Longer lists of those gifts can be found in 1 Corinthians and Romans. As he said at the outset in v. 7, “*to each one of us* grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.” However, it is not insignificant in the context that the gifts that Paul mentions are those having to do directly with the life of the church as a body. These are the gifts that Christians benefit from when they are together. We no longer have apostles but we have their writings in the NT and we have pastor/teachers to explain them to us, and so on.
- v.12 The NIV’s translation of v. 12 has become very popular, perhaps, in part, because it sounds so modern, so American. The pastor is an enabler, *his* job is to help others do *their* jobs well. It lays stress on the universal priesthood, the priesthood of all believers, which is a doctrine more congenial to modern Americans than that of the special priesthood or Christian ministry. Ask a young seminarian nowadays what he thinks the ministry is for and he is very likely to tell you that it is for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry. Of course, no one doubts that that is part of the work of the ministry, if only a part of it and not the primary part. However, there are reasons to believe that the KJV rendered the verse more accurately, more in keeping with Paul’s Greek and with his intention in the context. The new, large and fine commentary on Ephesians, which I have been carefully consulting in my preparation of these sermons, rejects the NIV’s translation as grammatically unlikely. It’s author, A.T. Lincoln, even wonders aloud if the reason so many prefer the NIV’s translation is that they are “motivated by a zeal to avoid clericalism and to support a ‘democratic’ model of the church.” [253] It is wiser to read v. 12 this way: [the Lord gave these various gifts, the four mentioned in v. 11] “for bringing the saints to completion, for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ.” [cf. Lincoln, *WBC*, 253]

I am not denying, of course, that every Christian is a minister in a general sense, and that there is a general priesthood as well as a special priesthood. We all have gifts, we all have a ministry to perform. We will see that taught in this very text, in v. 16.

- v.13 Remember, Paul has already brought up the thought of the saints growing up in the knowledge and the love of God and Christ at the end of chapter 1 and at the end of chapter 3. In 1:23 Paul has already referred to the church as “the fullness of Christ.” Again, as so often in Paul, we have the interplay between the indicative and the imperative. The church *is* the fullness of Christ and *must become* more and more that fullness. The Church is the dwelling place of Christ’s attributes and powers and more and more room must be given for the exercise of those attributes and powers. [Lincoln, *WBC*, 257]
- v.14 This is Christian maturity presented in the negative: what it is not.
- v.16 This is Christian maturity in the positive: what it is.

Christian theology has for centuries presented the Bible’s doctrine of the Person and Work of Jesus Christ in terms of what were called “the two States.” The two states were the state of

humiliation and the state of exaltation. The state of humiliation began when God the Son took to himself a true and authentic human nature in the womb of his virgin mother. It ended in the tomb on the third day. The state of exaltation began with the Lord's resurrection, continues today, and shall continue forever.

When Paul speaks of the Lord descending and ascending, he is speaking of these two states. All through the OT prophecies of the coming Messiah we find this two-fold emphasis: on the suffering he will undergo for our salvation *and* on his triumph. One of many such texts, cited often in the NT, is the one from Psalm 118: "the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone." There are the two states in a nutshell. His rejection, his mistreatment at the hands of his own creatures, their failure to recognize him as the Son of God, and, finally, his suffering and death on the cross – all of this was his humiliation. But his resurrection, his triumph over his enemies and over the Devil, his ascension to the Right Hand where he rules over all things, his coming again to be vindicated publicly before the entire race of mankind, this is his exaltation. Remember how Peter says that the OT prophets searched intently to understand "both the time and the circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted *the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow*." [1 Pet. 1:11]

Well, that is what Paul gives us here in vv. 8-10: the whole movement of salvation. The King of Glory came down to earth. He left the courts of heaven. He could not bring us to heaven until he had dealt with our enemies: our own sins and the Devil who held us in bondage. And so he came down into our dark, sinful, world of death. And here, among us, he dealt with our enemies at terrible cost to himself. Through his love and power he conquered all his and our enemies decisively. As J.B. Phillips reminds us, "We must never allow anything to blind us to the true significance of what happened at Bethlehem so long ago. Nothing can alter the fact that we live on a visited planet."

O loving wisdom of our God!
 When all was sin and shame,
 A second Adam to the fight
 And to the rescue came.
 [John Henry Newman]

Paul's statement in v. 10 amounts to saying that the Lord did all that he intended to do while he was in this world. Every enemy that enslaved his people he routed, every obstacle to his people's everlasting life and happiness he destroyed. And, then, having completed his work, he ascended back to heaven. And now, there in heaven, head over all things for the church, he fills the whole universe with the blessings he brought back with him as spoils of his holy war.

Think of the 5th chapter of Revelation and the scene painted there of the book with the seals on it, the book of history, and everyone is weeping and wailing because there is no one strong enough to tear off the seals, no one in heaven or on earth big enough to control history. But when all seemed lost and hopeless, there comes "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, who has triumphed. He is able to open the book with its seven seals." The Book is handed to him and he tears off the seals one by one. The Lord Jesus is the Lord of history. He sits at the Right Hand of God until all his enemies are made his footstool. [Lloyd-Jones, *Ephesians*, iv, 165-166]

And they *shall* be made his footstool because he has already vanquished them when he was in the world.

Most people, I find, are happy to think of Jesus Christ as one or the other, as the meek, suffering Savior, or as the Lord Almighty. But they do not want him to be both at one and the same time. As Savior they want him to love them and forgive them and then leave them to their own devices. As Lord they want him to protect them and deliver them from their troubles, but they do not want him to be bleeding for their sin and guilt. But Christianity reveals to the world the incarnate Son of God who is both the Savior of sinners, the redeemer of his people, *and* the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, a Savior whom we must both trust *and* obey, love *and* worship.

Here is the foundation of reality. The same Jesus who bled for us and our salvation, now sits enthroned above all powers, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The same Jesus whom the world rejected, the man of sorrows, shall come again and have the hosts of heaven in his train.

“This same Jesus!” Oh, how sweetly
 Fall those words upon the ear,
 Like a swell of far-off music
 In a night-watch still and drear!

He, the lonely Man of Sorrows,
 ‘Neath our sin-curse bending low,
 By his faithless friends forsaken
 In the darkest hours of woe, --

“This same Jesus!” When the vision
 Of that last and awful day
 Bursts upon the prostrate spirit,
 Like a midnight lightning ray;

Then, we lift our hearts adoring –
 “This same Jesus,” loved and known;
 Him, our own most gracious Savior,
 Seated on the great white throne.

Now Paul already said all of this in chapter 1. There we read of God’s mighty power which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given... And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” [1:20-22]

Jesus Christ, the Lord of creation, the Lord of salvation, the Lord of everything, is *the head of the church, which is his body, his fullness*. Now, it is that last thought that Paul elaborates here in vv. 11-16. The church is Christ’s body. He is caring for it, showering gifts upon the church, in order that it might grow up into that fullness of Christ, which is to say, in order that it may come

more and more to experience and to practice what it is, the fullness, the body of Jesus Christ. It is a powerful image. But it is a mixture of metaphors. He is the head, we are the body, but we also – the entire body – grow as a result of our connection with him. Sometimes Paul speaks of the church as the body with Christ as the head; sometimes the church is the entire body including the head. He uses both figures here, it seems. But they both are meant to express the same reality: We who believe in Jesus are connected to him. And, connected to him, we are connected to one another, as are the various parts of a human body. There is a vital union and communion between himself and us. We are of supreme interest to him. He regards our lives as vitally important to himself. He is now exercising his rule on our behalf. By his Spirit he is present and active in our lives to accomplish his will in us. His union with us and ours with him is the great object of his work now that he has ascended to the Right Hand. He rules over all things *for the church*.

And our lives are to be lived in the light of these facts. When Paul speaks of our growing up to maturity until we attain to the full measure of the fullness of Christ, he is saying that our aim and our hope is to be as fully occupied with Jesus Christ as Christ is occupied with us, as fully committed to him as he is to us. Paul puts it more memorably in Phil. 1:21 where he describes himself as having come to the place where “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” To live is Christ. That is the idea. Or, as Horatius Bonar put it in a hymn:

So shall no part of day or night from sacredness be free,
But all my life, in every step, be fellowship with thee.

That much is clear, though we hardly know how wonderful this truth is or how all consuming this aim must be or how magnificent it will be to attain it.

But there is that other dimension here that we must carefully observe and then must embrace in our lives. The members of Christ’s body form an organic, living, functioning whole or unit. This is Paul’s emphasis here. Do you see how Christ’s gifts are given to and for *the church*? Even the gifts that are given to individuals, are given to individuals *for the church*. Do you see here how his work of building up the saints has for its aim the unity of his body and the spiritual maturing of the saints *together*? It is the church he said in 1:22 that is the “fullness of Christ” and here, in v. 13, we Christians become mature as we grow up *together* as that fullness. And then he repeats the point explicitly a few verses later when he describes the condition of spiritual maturity as like a body in which all the members or parts grow together so that the body can work effectively.

In v. 14 he defines spiritual childishness in terms appropriate to our common life as Christians. It is a picture of people who believe virtually anything they are told, who are easily swayed by false teaching, who eagerly seek after the dramatic and the entertaining in their church life. In this case, they do not serve the body. They are drawn away from the body. And in vv. 15-16 he describes spiritual maturity likewise in terms appropriate to the life of the Christian congregation, working together in love and truth to promote the cause of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul’s vision of spiritual maturity is not an individualistic vision. It is very much a corporate vision. Ecclesiology, or the doctrine of the church, is supreme in Paul’s view of the Christian

life. And it is supreme in Paul's thought because it is supreme in Jesus' thought. He said, "I will build my church," not "I will build up each believer and let him live for me as he wills."

That is very important for us to hear and face because ecclesiology does not usually reign supreme in our thinking in the same way. The church is not the be all and end all of our existence that it is in the mind of Christ himself and in the teaching of his apostles. If individualistic, American Christians were to write this section of Paul's argument, in all likelihood they would have listed other gifts in v. 11 – gifts that were more popular and democratic, gifts that any and every Christian might receive, gifts that didn't imply a difference between the church's officers and her people – and they would not likely have defined spiritual maturity in terms of the place a believer occupies in and the contribution he or she makes to the life and ministry of the church.

But that is the Bible's viewpoint from start to finish. The Bible recognizes the place of the individual, of course, and furnishes us with rich portraits of individual believers, from Noah to Abraham to Moses to David to Peter, Paul, and Barnabas. But, most of the time when the Lord addresses his people in the Word, he addresses them together as a unity. And when he speaks of that which he is after in them he almost always speaks of a life that is lived in the company and communion of other believers and spent for the welfare of other believers.

It is interesting that, so far as we are given to see it in Holy Scripture, the life, the worship of the saints in heaven is a common life, a corporate life, a life together. Indeed, we are often troubled by the statement our Savior made to the effect that there would be no marriage or sexual union in heaven. That is such an important part of our individuality in this world, but it will not exist in the world to come. Why? Surely, one reason is because there, in heaven, in the life of perfection, there is a true and a perfect and a complete community and communion of life with all others. Nothing that keeps us closely connected to but one person will remain precisely *so that we can share our lives with everyone at once*.

You see, there is a very real sense in which spiritual maturity is measured by the extent to which a man or woman comes to see his or her life in terms not of himself or herself but in terms of the church of God, the communion of the saints, the common life of Christ's body that he or she has been both saved and gifted to serve. Most of us, if we are honest with ourselves, think of the life of the body of Christ as an addendum, perhaps an important addendum but still an addendum to our main purpose, namely our own lives and our own walk with God. The Bible does not look at our lives this way. It sees Christ's grace at work in our lives as making us more useful members of the body of Christ.

This is one reason why we are almost invariably addressed *as churches* and not as individuals in the New Testament. Now, don't mistake me. Paul is going to talk about the life of Christian individuals, of husbands and wives, parents and children, and the like. We are largely apart from one another at home and at work. We must be Christians when we are alone, and when we are with our wives or husbands, and with our children, and with our unsaved workmates or neighbors. Absolutely. But, still, see how the focus of the Bible's teaching, see how its emphasis falls on our place in the whole, of our contributing to the life and ministry of what Paul loves to call the *body* of Christ, or, as later in this same letter, the *bride* of Christ. The Bible sees

the individual Christian's experience as something equipping him or her for the sake of the whole body. The church does not exist for us as much as we exist for the church and grace is given to us not so much for ourselves as for the church of which we are members.

As I have often reminded you, there is but one institution, one family that exists in this world that will exist in the next world and forever. And it is not your biological or nuclear family, precious and important as that is. It is this family, the church of God, the body of Christ. Jesus Christ saved you *in* your biological family or, nuclear family, or he saved you *out of* your biological family, but he saved you *for* this family!

When you live for this family, when you are a faithful son and daughter of this family, when you employ the gifts Christ gave you for the benefit of this family, you have grown up into the fullness of Christ, which is what you are and were saved to be: part of his fullness, part of his body. When you live for this family you are living as he would have you live, you are living the life he shed his blood to give you, are living for what endures forever. When you invest your life in his body, in this family, in God's household, the Lord Christ who descended and then ascended, looks down upon you with a heart of thanksgiving and with a smile. This is what *he* lived and died for, that you should live in and for the unity, the holiness, and the happiness of his people, who together are his fullness! When you are living as a blessing to the church, to the community of believers, you are still more and more profoundly a part of Jesus Christ, a member of his own body. It is a metaphor, to be sure, but what a powerful metaphor and what a remarkable truth is taught by it. What more remarkable or wonderful thing could ever be said about a mere human being than that he or she is "growing up into Christ who is the Head." And here, among these people, living for them, living in them, such an extraordinary thing comes to pass. And only here!