

A Responsible Community

August 26th, 2012

Ephesians 4:7-16, Romans 12:3-8

"¹¹And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until 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..."

A couple of months ago I was speaking on the phone with a member of this church, who was suggesting that our church get involved in a specific ministry opportunity. Many of the details are fuzzy now, but one thing stood out. In his proposing our involvement in this opportunity, he said something along the lines of, "It seems like something you should consider getting involved in...I mean, *we* should consider getting involved in."

I was very grateful for that shift in pronoun; it communicated something wise and biblical about this member's attitude toward the church. The shift was from a mindset of, "Ministry is your job, Larry, not mine, so get on this opportunity," to "Hey, we're all in this together. The ministry of the church isn't *your* ministry, it's *ours*." That's the heartbeat behind this particular point of the church covenant that we'll consider today: to share in the responsibility and ministry of the church.

To put it another way (and link this message with last week's): the call to virtues like humility, patience, forbearance, indicates that as we dig into life in the church, we will see things that need to change (like, for instance, the fact that a significant number of members who don't "fit the mold" at JCF feel relationally disconnected, and that no one seems to care about them). Whose problem is that? Who is responsible to fix that? That's what this part of the church covenant is about.

From these two texts I'd like for us to consider: what is the responsibility of the church? Who is responsible for it? How has God

equipped and empowered us to accomplish what we are responsible for? These overlap, but I'll try to keep them distinct.

Our Responsibility: The Pursuit of Christlikeness

So, in our covenant, members commit to sharing in the responsibility of the church. What is that? What are we responsible for? What is the goal or aim of all the ministry that takes place in the church that we all share in? I think we could sum up the answer to these questions in one word: Christlikeness. God has given each one in the church (v.7) gifts, and among them He has given certain leadership/teaching gifts (v.11), which are used to equip the saints (every Christian) for ministry (v.12).

What's the goal of that? "¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until 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." We have been given to one another for this purpose: that in every way we might grow up into Christ. That as each part is working properly (that's our responsibility), the Body might be built up in love (v.16). We must work hard to not let the individualistic bent of our culture twist the text. The aim of your ministry as a Christian -- your responsibility -- is to build up the Body as a whole, not just yourself.

Three Aspects of Maturity

Now if this is what we're responsible for, we need a clear understanding of what this means. What is this maturity? I find it helpful to think of it in terms of head, heart and hands. Let me show you what I mean from the passage.

Head: Discernment in Doctrine

The first way Paul helps us grasp this maturity is by contrasting it with spiritual infancy: "¹⁴so that we may no longer be children (infants), tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of

doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes." Babies are not discerning. Put three bowls in front of a one year-old, and say, "This is good food, this is bad food, and this is poison." And they'll just plunge for it all indiscriminately. There's no discernment. That's how spiritual infants are too (and being an infant isn't bad; but *staying* one is!): they can't discern between good teaching and bad teaching, they have no idea, it all sounds good.

But spiritual maturity is growing so that you gain the discernment that you lack. It's being sound in the Word, knowing the truth, and being able to detect sound teaching from error. It's knowing your way around the Bible and being theologically astute.

Heart: Character Formation

But maturity isn't only having deep head knowledge; the knowledge of God is meant to shape our hearts, so that our character begins to resemble Jesus more and more. Each part, when it is working properly makes the Body grow so that it builds itself up "*in love*" (v.16). The verses at the beginning of this chapter show that a life worthy of our calling is one that abounds in humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with each other in love.

Babies aren't like that, are they?! They're incredibly self-centered. They want what they want, and they want it *now*! You have to train them to learn that they aren't the only humans on the planet, that their desires are not the only desires that there are. It's the same way with spiritual babies. They're always thinking of themselves: always getting your feelings hurt, always feeling slighted, always worried about how others are looking at you or treating you, always absorbed with self. All the knowledge of God in the world is worthless if it's not changing you and making you a more *loving* person (1Cor. 13).

Hands: Helping Others Pursue Maturity

Paul says that all the saints are to be equipped for ministry, specifically the ministry of building up the Body (v.11-12). Then he says that building up and growth happen as we "speak the truth (that is, gospel truth, truth about God and Christ) in love" (v.15). Maturity is not just you as an individual learning and becoming more pure in spiritual disciplines and personal holiness. It's you learning how to help others grow into maturity. This will look differently for different Christians based on gifting, but every Christian is called to the ministry of building up the Body with truth in love.

Exhort, admonish, instruct, serve, comfort, bear burdens, show hospitality, welcome, "one another" are not suggestions to people gifted in those specific ways. They're commands for the whole church, imperatives which show that ministry is not the work of an elite few, but of the whole Body. We will not be healthy and mature without "the whole body" (v.16) sharing in this responsibility of ministry.

Who is Responsible? The Whole Body

Now I've dipped into the second point, which will be short because it should be obvious by now. If the responsibility of the church is our pursuit of maturity (that is, Christlikeness), who bears responsibility for that? Whose job is it to grow and build up the Body to maturity?

"¹⁵Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from 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."

The clear answer of this text is: everyone. God has designed His church in such a way that it is interdependent, like the human body: "⁴For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." So we all have a function in the church, like the different parts in a body. Every part

matters, every part contributes, every part is responsible, for the health and the flourishing of the whole.

There's a beautiful unity in diversity in this picture, but Paul goes even beyond this when he says, "and individually members one of another." Our unity is more profound than just belonging to the same body; he says we belong *to one another*. My foot and my back and my hands are not just part of the same body; they are members of one another.

If I get a spasm in the arch of my foot, my back arc backward instinctively because of the pain, my eyes shut, my hands begin to move toward the foot to press at the point of pain. The parts of my body belong to one another. The eye and the back and the hands are not hurting, but they react to the pain of another member of the body, as if the pain was happening to them. So it is in the Body of Christ: "²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together." It's truly a staggering thing to be a part of the Body of Christ! What a privilege, and responsibility.

God's Provision: Spiritual Gifts

So, the responsibility of the church is the corporate pursuit of Christlikeness, and all of us who make up the Body are entrusted with that responsibility and share in a profound interconnectedness. Now, the way this interconnectedness comes together to produce the growth of the church is primarily through spiritual gifts. I say primarily, because there are responsibilities that we all have that contribute to our growth, like financially supporting the ministry and attending Sunday gatherings for instance. Those responsibilities are an expression of our investment into being equipped for ministry.

But the main strategy God has for this whole-body engagement in building up the body is spiritual gifts. We see that in the next verses of Romans 12. In fleshing out the body metaphor, Paul writes:

"⁵[so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.] ⁶Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them..."

We see this in Ephesians 4 as well (v.7-8). Let us not take these gifts lightly! They are "grace-gifts", measured out to us wisely and generously by God, at great cost to Him! They are manifestations of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:7), and how has the Spirit come to reside in us? In John's Gospel He tells us: Jesus told His disciples that for those who believed in Him, rivers of living water would flow from their hearts. "³⁹Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified."

You could not receive the Spirit until Jesus was glorified, and that is a reference to His death and resurrection: "²³The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Because Jesus was crucified for your sins, and rose from the dead triumphant over sin and death, and because God moved in your heart to awaken faith in His grace, only because of that have you been baptized into the Body of Christ and filled with the Spirit and uniquely empowered to manifest Him with your spiritual gifts.

Three Hindrances to Using the Gifts

It is a great, magnificent, wise plan that God has for the growth and maturity of His Body. We all have a part to play. But there are some hindrances that make the carrying out of this vision difficult, and I want to close by briefly addressing three of them.

Conflict Over the Gifts

Paul addresses this in 1 Corinthians 12, the dangerous, Body-killing ailments of self-pity and self-sufficiency. But what we have just seen in Romans should heal that ailment: "⁶Having gifts that differ according

to the grace given to us, let us use them..." The differences between us are the fruit of grace, and that grace is blood-bought grace. There is no grounds for pity or boasting, because every spiritual gift is just that, a gift, bought by the blood of Christ, which reminds us simultaneously of the love that He has for you (which removes pity) and the horror of your sin (which removes pride) which required Him to die for you.

Confusion about the Gifts

But before the issues of pride or self-pity come in, often there's confusion about the gifts; namely, what are mine? How do I know how God has empowered me to help the Body mature? The text in Romans is again helpful. Of the seven gifts mentioned, five are virtues expected of all Christians (service, teaching, exhortation, giving, mercy).

What do we make of that? To start, don't give yourself a breakdown trying to determine what gift you have; obey the commandments to love in all the ways God has called you to. And where your heart is especially stirred for some of those specific commands, and you find that grace is fruitfully passing through you into the lives of others, you have found your gift. "Spiritual gifts are the shape of grace flowing through your individuality." They may change; they come in varying measures. Pour yourself into the "one another's", and you will find where God has uniquely gifted you to spread His grace to others.

Context for the Gifts

One final hindrance is: how (in what context) does this vision of whole-body, gift-expressing, members-of-one-another ministry actually take place? All this talk about the body working together through grace-given gifts in deeply interconnected ways is empty talk if all we are is this gathering on Sundays. If this is all we are, we are disobedient to the vision of ministry we've been observing in these texts. If you're not in an intimate web of relationships where this sort of ministry can happen, then I'm wasting your time.

That is why we are committed to Life Groups as being the primary way we experience what it means to be the church, in the ways envisioned by these texts. Can we possibly create enough programs and events for all the people in this church to use some gift for the upbuilding of everyone else? Should we even be trying to? Or does Paul envision a regular experience of church life being something small and intimate enough, so that every member can minister to the others with the unique gifts God has given us?

This is especially hard in our culture, but I'm committed to not allowing our culture to determine my level of faithfulness to Scripture! So we'll keep exhorting you to move towards a kind of togetherness experienced at a level of smallness that enables this sort of interpersonal ministry to happen. I can't make sense of all this biblical talk (and thus, of church membership) without something like Life Groups.

The sum of the matter is this, and I pray that we would marvel at it like little children: "⁵so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." The human body is an infinitely complex mystery in which even the smallest, most insignificant parts are a vital part of the healthy functioning of the whole. The body of Christ is no different, and we are that body. Let's use the multi-layered grace that He's lavished upon us to share in the responsibility of the church: to pursue her health and vitality and maturity, to the praise and glory of our great Head: Jesus Christ.