# Gifts from on high

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

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Ephesians 4:1-16

## Introduction

We are in the second of three teachings on Ephesians 4:1-16. Last time, we looked at what it means to *forebear with* or *put up with* one another. It is a good word for us to remember in the midst of difficult discussions going on in our denomination and in our churches. Today, we are going to look at *gifts for the church*, which will provide some respite, I hope, from difficulties as we concentrate on the *grace* God has shown the church. In my next teaching, I hope to look at the notion of being *mature* in the face of the blowing winds of change.

So, let’s read these verses.

## Oneness

Paul reminds us of all the things we have in common, all these ones: one love, one Spirit, one Lord, one Father (do you see the Trinity in this?); one faith, one baptism. And of course we have one another. These are all things we have in common; they are the same for every Christian. And this oneness, this unity, is precious, but always in danger of being broken. We might love some people, and disdain others. Some of us might look to the Triune God as the very ground we walk on and the air we breath, but others of us will forget. And some of us will forget what our baptism is for, or dispute over matters of faith ­­– well, honestly, probably all of us do that disputing.

So, the danger of losing our oneness is constant and real; so what is to be done? Last time, we discussed one thing we can do, which was to simply put up with one another, to forbear and be patient with one another.

This week, we look at something God has done for us.

## Christ the Victor

One thing that I think all Christians must believe; it’s the earliest confession of the church: *Jesus is Lord*. When the early church proclaimed this, and when we proclaim it, we are saying that Jesus, who was murdered and put into the earth, rose from that death, escaped from his tomb, and returned to be with God the Father.

This passage in Ephesians focuses on that ascension. Jesus Christ is presented as the victor of victors. He not only escaped death, he captured death and made it his own. (I’m sorry, but I can imagine Jesus taking death by the collar, slapping it around a bit, and saying, “Who’s your daddy?”)

* Jesus is the Victor of victors: he captured captivity.
* Jesus is the Victor of victors: he killed death.
* Jesus is the Victor of victors: he defeated defeat.
* Jesus is the Victor of victors: he ruined ruination.
* Jesus is the Victor of victors, he rejected rejection.
* Jesus is the Victor of victors, he confounded confusion.
* Jesus is the Victor of victors, he vanquished failure.
* Jesus is the Victor of victors, he destroyed destruction.
* Jesus is the Victor of victors, he imprisoned confinement.

And to the victor goes the spoils, and to those whom the victor favors, goes the spoil. In his victorous travel “from the grave to the skies,” he “lavished all strange gifts” to humanity.

## The many gifts

Paul gives several lists of gifts that Jesus lavishes on us in his letters: here in Ephesians 4, but also in 1 Corinthians and Romans 12. There’s a list in 1 Peter 4, too. In this passage, he mentions leadership gifts–that is, gifts that lead to others changing their lives for the better.

*Apostles*, in the early church, provided central leadership in the early church. Interestingly, for most of the apostles, this mean *leaving the center*, and being sent out to the edges with the message of good news. The origin of the word, as you may know, comes from this sense of being *sent out*. They didn’t all huddle up in Jerusalem, remaining in that upper room. Rather, they took the command of Jesus to preach to Jerusalem, to all of Israel and Samaria, and go to the ends of the earth. Does God still gift of apostleship to the church anymore? I guess I don’t really know, but I do know we need leaders who lead beyond the parish of the local church, and who need to seek new areas for spreading the kingdom into new territories, both physical territories and into new cultures.

*Prophets* are people who seem especially sensitive to the Spirit’s work and able to translate that to those in the church. They just seem to “get it,” to know what needs to be said.

*Evangelists* are people who are especially gifted in telling others the good news about Jesus, and evoking a response in them towards Jesus and his call–hopefully a positive one!

*Pastors and teachers* are people who care for and teach people, especially at the local church level. I’ve grown in my understanding of these roles as I have been officially listed as our church’s leader; more recently, I’ve been willing to adopt the title “pastor” for myself. And of course we have pastors that work in other settings (like chaplains) and teachers who specialize (like in teaching our children).

Now I want to say: we all have some gifts for these roles. We need to be teaching each other. We need to be caring for one another. We need to be quick to share the good news about Jesus to anyone who needs it. We need to be sensitive to the Spirit’s work, and speak that to one another. We even need to step in when there is a leadership vacuum at national and international levels. And this, too, seems like a graceful gift. After all, Jesus said *the last shall be first and the first shall be last*, and *the kingdom of God belongs to little children*.

And futhermore, all those in leadership need to look at their leadership as a gift, and not as a right.

And Paul hints at here that everyone plays an important part in who we are together: “the whole body [is] joined and knit together by every ligament … as each part is working properly.” And of course, he emphasizes this in his first letter to the Corinthians.

But still–Jesus does gift some of us with gifts of leadership.

## Building up the body

The important thing is why God has done this. And Paul makes this very, very clear: to build up the body of Christ. And remember what this means in this context. It doesn’t just mean, I don’t know, just helping people be their best selves or whatever. When the church is fully built up, when the church is fully formed and mature, we will be “filled with the fullness of God.” We will be “the full stature of Christ,” which sounds a lot like we, the church, will so God-like, so full of God that it will hard to tell where we end and where God begins.

So think about that!

## Summing up

Let’s sum up: Christ is victorious over all defeat, and in his victory he broadcasts gifts to his church. These gifts are not given for the benefit of the recipients, but for the church as a whole. Among these gifts are gifts of leadership: apostles, evangelists, prophets, pastors, teachers, each doing in the large what each of us should be doing in the small. We are *one*, but we have *many* gifts.

Are there future apostles, evangelists, prophets, pastors, or teachers among our children? Let’s keep watching. Is there a leader you should encourage today, a note of thanks, perhaps? (I say that because I just wrote a birthday thank-you note to my first pastor). Are there ways that you act as a leader in this way, and you need a reminder *why* you are exercising this gift? Are there other leadership roles we haven’t talked about?