



Reconciled in Christ: Ministry in Light of Ephesians*

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Ephesians is worth two months of study and reflection for what it has to say about ministry if not for what it specifically has to offer for preaching. Whether counseling or teaching, administering or evangelizing (see 4:11), there is much here to shape our ministries. The one who wrote this knew that his ministry to the intended recipients was God-ordained. Yes, more than that, he had received a revelation concerning a heavenly mystery, God's election of gentiles to share in Israel's inheritance through Christ. Such good news could not be kept. It was meant to be shared, and so Paul became an evangelist to gentiles. (We will consider Paul as the author of this letter, though today that is no longer so certain.) This good news brought an end to the age-old hostility between Jew and gentile and made possible a church comprised of both. To achieve this unity Paul became an overseer, a kind of bishop, over a far-flung conglomeration of mixed (Jewish and gentile) congregations. He repeatedly assures the "Ephesians" (whether the epistle is addressed to the Ephesians we are not sure either, but we will call the book Ephesians) of their own inner unity and their unity with all God's people. They are now reconciled to God at God's invitation and so know the model to follow in being reconciled to each other. Apparently the church then possessed structures for the custom of mutual exhortation. For the health and well-being of the congregation, the truth was boldly spoken by one member to the other, though in love and kindness. This type of soul-care or counseling encouraged the inner growth of the body of Christ. Prayer with and for each other shaped the life of the church. Life in the world is portrayed as a battle for which spiritual resources are provided by Christ for his own. But these persons must help each other to know how to use these defensive and offensive weapons.

*This essay was written after extended conversation with David E. Fredrickson and Paul K. Hanson of the Luther Northwestern Seminary faculty and Carolyn M. Keller, associate pastor at Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church, Minneapolis.

I. UNITY

Let us begin by looking more closely at the theme of unity in Ephesians. If actually addressed to the church of that city, then this epistle speaks to a very cosmopolitan audience. In the eastern Mediterranean only Alexandria and Antioch were Ephesus' rivals. Here Orient and Occident met with all that this meant culturally and religiously. Preaching the gospel of Christ normally began among the Jews (Acts 18:19; 19:8), and so they were probably well represented among the converts. But, as the Book of Acts shows us, this normally led to conflict, to expulsion from the synagogue, or even to violence and imprisonment for the evangelist (9:23;

13:45, 50; 14:2, 5; 17:5-7; 18:6-12; 19:9). Then, if not before, attention was turned to the larger population of various pagans (Acts 13:46). Bold preaching in both contexts brought confessions of sin and anxious cries of “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30). Converts may have tended to be from among the lower levels of society, but some people of means such as Philemon, Onesimus’ slave owner, were also among them. In Corinth apparently the wealthy could afford gluttony at the common meal while the poor went to bed hungry (1 Cor 11:21-22). No racially or economically diverse modern congregation had anything on the church of Ephesus. Its diversity was apparently not just a cause for celebration, however, but also the occasion for division and conflict. Yet in Christ they are all one body. All are creatures of the same Creator. All are saved by the same death and blood of Christ. All appropriate this free gift of God the same way, by faith. All are brought into the church by the same sacrament, baptism. All are servants of the same Lord, Jesus Christ. What human differences there are ethnically, racially, economically, and socially are not counted by God. All people are alike before God. All have been built into the same building, grafted as members into the same body of Christ. There the functions and gifts of each, while diverse, can be used to build up the one body to which they all belong. There is unity in this diversity, because all of it is God’s creation. But not everyone shared Paul’s vision of unity of Jews and gentiles in the one church. Peter (Acts 10) and James (Acts 15) both waffled and opposed the idea of one unified church of Jews and gentiles, exemplified by one way of life, until they had been shown that it was of God. And even when the apostle most devoted to this unity has founded the church, as in Ephesus, it is not necessarily visible in the world to the degree it should be. So the people need to be reassured that this oneness exists in reality, in Christ, and thus should manifest itself in relationships, in actions and in behavior.

What Paul said to the Ephesian church with all its diversity should provide theological foundations for modern church unity as well. The motivation to express this unity in every way possible arises from this fundamental oneness in Christ. Behavior which fractures this unity or fails to express it is inappropriate and may require pastoral counseling of a directive type. Church structures, constitutions, and conventions need to reflect this unity in diversity which is asserted so strongly in Ephesians. Separate but equal, apartheid, perhaps even quotas, will not do it. We are all one in Christ, and differences of color, age, sex, and social stratum should become invisible when we become church members. People with power, money, eloquence, education, etc., on their side may need

to be reminded that their gifts are welcome and should be freely exercised so long as they do not destroy the unity of the body of Christ.

II. COUNSELING

Now let us look at the way in which this counseling seems to have been done in Ephesus. One often hears today of Christian congregations which are resistant to change, and which refuse to follow their pastoral leader. Usually we hear only one side of the story. It is logical that, since so many of our friends are seminary graduates, the side we hear is that of the pastor. Thus the stories of this type that we hear are of stubborn, unbending church members and faithful, hardworking, unappreciated pastors. We are rather in the same position when we read the Pauline

epistles. We hear Paul's side, not the congregation's. The fact remains that about half of each letter is exhortation, seeking to get people to remain faithful or to change. Whether they heeded the exhortations or not, certain persons must have valued the letters enough to keep them.. Where Paul wrote a second letter to a congregation, as to the Corinthians, we get some assistance in answering the question as to how successful he was in getting people to change. In that particular case he seems to have met with a fair degree of success (2 Cor 2:2-9; 7:8-13).

Ephesians is such a general letter that one really needs to read between the lines to see what problems are being addressed. For the moment, let us put it in general terms: Christians are not living up to the level of their high calling (4:1). The writer urges them to do so, and we expect that he at least got a hearing.

The reason we can say this is that the author here begins by trying to establish his credibility. Typically, he does allude to his calling from God as an apostle (1:1). But then the readers receive a lengthy rehearsal of the rich tradition and treasure they have in Christ. It is according to the eternal plan of God (1:4, 5) that people like them are fashioned into the body of Christ, the church (2:19-22). They have been redeemed (2:4-9), reconciled to God (2:13), and sealed by the Holy Spirit (1:13). Moreover, the assertions concerning the way Christ is at work among and in them honor their essential Christianness and do not begin to question or dispute their love of Christ. Paul even lets them have a share in this suffering for the gospel, his imprisonment (3:1; 3:13), and solicits their prayers on his behalf just as he promises to continue his prayers for them (1:16; 6:18). Without establishing credibility, Paul could scarcely dare to speak as he later does to husbands, wives, children, and slaves. Even if we read with great openness and grant Paul all the points he is making, we may still not be fully able to endure the specific exhortations he makes. We are a long, long way from first century family and community life! But Paul's authority as an apostle, the weight of his credibility, ought not too easily be brushed aside. He has earned the right. Yes, more than that, the Lord of the church has given it to him, and so we owe him a hearing.

And we who may be convinced that our calling, including our letter of call, empowers us to speak boldly to congregations, we too need to carefully earn our right to speak. Too often we neither lay a sound theological foundation, nor wait until a level of trust has been built sufficient to tolerate our counsel. Paul knew that his bold speaking would probably result in some resistance and possibly

even hostility. He had been around long enough to know that. And so he began by establishing his right to speak.

But he also makes much of the need for the members to deal gently, lovingly, kindly with each other. One must say that the counseling which Paul does in Ephesians is done with a gentle hand. He does not come on strong as in 1 Corinthians or Galatians. Even though he expects persons to speak the truth with each other, it should be in love. Paul goes out of his way to set a good example with his gentle tone. Nor is it just Paul's example. It is Christ's, yes God's example, which church members should follow in relating to each other. For the well-being of the body, some exercise of counsel may be needed, but it is a positive, not a negative, task. It is not done to hurt people, but to help them.

We can all probably recall instances where "the truth" was brought home to us or used

against us in an unloving way. There are those for whom the truth seems to be more important than the people to whom it is being applied. This is not the spirit in which Ephesians was written. No harsh, cruel, demeaning use of the truth against people who are precious to Christ is present here. If Paul's frequent passionate love and effusive friendliness are absent from Ephesians, so is the heat of anger. A more irenic spirit pervades the whole.

How structurally to reinstitute the loving counseling which seems to have been a part of the Ephesian scene is not easy to imagine. Does anyone know of a congregation which today possesses such gentle oversight of its inner life? It sounds like the sort of thing a board of deacons under pastoral leadership is intended to do. To succeed, it would need broad congregational support and understanding. One can immediately think of inherent dangers: lack of confidentiality, a legalistic following of a set of rules, a sense of moral superiority, abuse of power. Yet the absence of real attention to spiritual problems brings its toll too: lack of spiritual growth in the parish, moral laxity, the sense that nobody really cares. One suspects normally that a movement in the direction of soul care will have to come from the pastor. In this the author of Ephesians provides a fine model. The motivation is a sense of divine calling, a love for the church and its people born of the love of God, a humble, gentle spirit, willingness to listen as well as to speak boldly, and a profound sense of being less than perfect or full-grown oneself. One asks not only, how does one preach that way, but also, how does one minister that way? Nothing less than the mind of Christ will do (Phil 2:5; 1 Cor 2:16).

In Ephesus there appear to have been quite a number whose Christian pilgrimage was a rather recent venture. They can still recall all too clearly their lives in heathendom. Paul uses many vivid images to remind them what that life was like and what their anticipated future was going to be: you were spiritually dead (2:1); you once followed the ways of this world, Satan, and the lust of the flesh (2:2, 3); you were without Christ, without a covenant relationship to God, had no hope, and actually knew no God worthy of the name (4:12); you were far away from God, were foreigners, gentiles, strangers to God and the people of God; once you not only were *in* the dark, you *were* darkness (5:8). Looking to some who are still there, the writer says: they are people of the world, with minds set on worthless things, with no sense of right and wrong (4:17-19). The new life in Christ is sharply contrasted with this as light is to darkness, citizenship to alien status, riches to worthless things, yes, as God is to demons. There

is something fascinating about such abrupt, dramatic conversions out of heathendom into the life in Christ. We see it all too seldom, although the potential for it must be as great today as in Ephesus long ago. This post-Christian era finds the number of professing Christians down in our western world. The prevailing anti-Christian culture threatens to dominate, so strong is it. For all its shallowness it appears enticing and attractive to church people too in spite of the negative way in which Paul or we might describe it. It appears that so many church members have become acculturated that they cannot see the difference between light and darkness or tell which are the real, which the phony values.

III. EXHORTATION

We come at last to the actual moral exhortation. It can be surprisingly general: live lives worthy of your high calling as Christians (4:1). Or it can be very specific: women obey your

husbands (5:22). Neither type is easy to hear or follow. The general exhortations, while they may easily gain our assent, may also divide us when brought to bear on specific issues. The specific exhortations, like the obedience of wives to husbands or slaves to masters, are also bound to divide us. We may know exactly what Paul said, but rebel at the thought of it. How could he fail to see that his general statements elsewhere (that we are no more male or female, slave or free [Gal 3:28]) contradict his specific advice in Ephesians? Would he blame us for acting on his more general exhortation by setting slaves free (was not this his specific advice to Philemon [v. 16]) and living as equals in our marriages? What are we to do with the exhortations, especially since they comprise so large a portion of the book and an even larger part of the eight pericopes assigned in the lectionary?

First of all, proclamation and exhortation are not gospel and law here, or two separate distinctive functions of the Word or types of messages. They are united and one. The good news is: Christ has made the church a unity, and he heads the body which expresses that unity in concrete, visible ways. Christ is the one who gave his life for all people. The call to respond to that by living in a self-sacrificial way is as natural as are muscles responding to an impulse from the head. Christ indwells and gives life to the church. That is the church's joy. It is unthinkable that the church would choose to be cut off from its source of life. Individuals may need to think this way too, but Paul is here reflecting on the health and well-being of the church, the body of Christ. The Ephesians are encouraged to do what comes naturally when everything is in order in the body of Christ. The power which raised Christ from the dead and placed him in a position of sovereignty in the universe is at work among believers (1:19-22). What Paul exhorts the church to do is not to be done in their own strength by human effort. The Christian life and good works are God's workmanship (2:10). This power of God works from within (3:15-20), and thus the exhortation is not part of some external compulsion under which Christians labor. The specific areas in which members of the body of Christ will function depends upon which gift God has given each of them (4:8-12). A few church vocations such as apostles, pastors, and teachers are named, but the list is hardly intended to be exhaustive. Whatever the gift God has given, it is intended to upbuild the body in love (4:16). The limits on the positive side are to imitate God (5:1), which surely is

beyond attaining, and not to grieve the Holy Spirit (4:30). It is the Spirit whose indwelling makes a response to the exhortation possible.

IV. THE TEXTS

Pentecost 8: 1:3-14. Here God is blessed as when Israelites blessed God prior to a meal. Modern Jews are encouraged to bless God a minimum of 100 times a day for specific ways in which God has blessed them. "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, Sovereign of the Universe, that you have given me the gift of friendship with John whom I see coming my way just now." In Ephesians Paul blesses God for putting into action an eternal plan only recently made known: fallen humans are, in God's love through Jesus Christ, forgiven and adopted by God as beloved children. This radically alters their lives now and forever. This great mystery was kept a secret until the proper time for it to be revealed, the very time in which the Ephesians are privileged to be living. Do two millennia or constant repetitions of it make such news old? Spontaneous joy

over salvation can hardly be held back when we realize the scope and eternal dimensions of God's saving work in Christ. A festive liturgy or a sermon of praise might be a modern counterpiece to these verses.

Pentecost 9: 2:13-22. This portion of a larger pericope (2:1-22) is proclamation addressed to gentiles reminding and assuring them of what marvelous privileges now are theirs as Christians. It was very different for pagans looking in from the outside on the privileges God assigned to Israel. So great were these blessings seen to be that numerous converts and near converts (God-fearers) attached themselves to the synagogue. A full convert was considered entirely Jewish, and that involved every privilege and responsibility. But now God's amazing goodness has prepared a new way for pagans into full citizenship in God's household. It is the blood of Jesus, the cross of Christ, which breaks down the barrier between those inside (Israel) and those outside (pagans). Now those who enter the church via this God-given route find the barriers between Jews and gentiles removed, as is the barrier to God. Christ has removed both. Today our barriers between people are of many kinds: racial, ethnic, economic, social, and generational. People who continue to hold on to these differences have failed to recognize that in Christ they are actually gone. They are artificial barriers which have no force, since we are one in Christ. Every member has equal access to God; all are equally children of God.

Pentecost 10: 4:1-7, 11-16. Paul looked at the human person (body, mind, spirit, and will) as a marvelous unity created by God. As such it is a fit metaphor for the church and Christ, its head. If we impose our own subdivisions (mental, psychological, physical) and retain only the physical level of the image, we make a one-dimensional human into a symbol of Christ and the church. On the other hand, if we recall all the aspects of a human being such as birth, growth, maturity, coordination, emotions, will, work, speech, and thought, we see how much can be conveyed by one symbol. On the negative side, the possibility is for humans to be led astray by heeding alien, dangerous voices or leaders. Was the early church more plagued with cults and heresies than we are? The normal thing is for persons to use their heads, for body parts to follow the instructions sent them from the brain, for children to grow up as well as grow. There are

endless possibilities here to illustrate how the members and the body function. Perhaps the most telling identification of all is with Christ and the head. Are mergers like organ transplants? The unity of the body is given by the Creator. Yet exhortation to use it, exercise it, and feed it properly is in order. A congregation, like an individual, may be strong, healthy, joyful, friendly, and cooperative; or it may be weak, ill, morose, unfriendly, and uncooperative. It depends upon how well the members relate to each other and to the head.

Pentecost 11: 4:17-24. Life in Christ is life as the Creator intended it to be. Hints of this, rumors of angels if you will, must have been present in every age in every culture as they are in our day also. But their motivation and their capacity to make good on the promise are flawed in a fallen humanity. In this pericope the dark side of human performance outside of Christ is portrayed in all its ugliness as a totally unredeemed way of life. I do not think that is all there is in the world outside of Christ, for it is still God's world. But Paul is here apparently not claiming any of it for Christ, even its acts of heroism and selflessness. The contrasts are here intended to be complete as he calls for high moral conduct from Christians. Christ is the example, and he is perfect. That is our high calling too. But how does it work? We have recently seen that a couple

of the most well known TV evangelists have fallen from the level of conduct they demanded of others and claimed for themselves. So we may well ask whether the moral conduct of Christians is any better than that of other people. Is there any use exhorting them as Paul does the Ephesians, or is it a lost cause? We may not agree as to the answer, but thankfully that is not the way we tell a Christian from a non-Christian. For that we listen to the person's confession of faith. And we keep hoping, praying, exhorting, and pointing to Christ in the hope that being a Christian does make a difference in conduct too.

Pentecost 12: 4:30-5:2. The soul-care of which we wrote earlier is here at its best. It is so clearly to be done in a humble, loving spirit. Yet the goal is explicit too: no bitterness, anger, wrath, or slander. These are all inner dispositions but one, and that one is a sin of the tongue. The model is God, and Christ whose love and self sacrifice on behalf of fallen humans is complete and perfect. The power to imitate is supplied by the Holy Spirit. What could be more hopeful, more realizable then? Apparently lapses are to be expected, for the counselors are urged to be kind and forgiving. Instead of living in tune with the Spirit, apparently there will be those who will grieve the Spirit—a deep tender note. The relationship to the Holy Spirit is so intimate, the love for each other so tender, that the sharpness of the exhortation retreats. How can anyone resist such gracious treatment? It is not as if anything goes. No, the appeal is for self-sacrificial living of the highest kind. It does matter, often a great deal, how we respond to each other and to God. But neither the counselor nor God rides herd on the flock. We can all probably recall some glowing, gentle spirit who exemplified this mien. Yet that most saintly type would be last to say, “I have arrived.” That remains for the consummation of all things as 4:30 tells us.

Pentecost 13: 5: 15-20. Wisdom and psalmody, two of the main streams in the third part of the Hebrew canon, provide the background of this exhortation. Aphorism and song express the Christian life too. Christ is our wisdom and joy. Can one fake wisdom or rejoicing? Its opposites are the fool and the crank. But one can try to substitute motivation. Instead of the Spirit one can resort to spirits

(alcohol, drugs) for a false high. Our present society is hooked on this one to the tune of billions of dollars a month. Wisdom which counts in the market place and in the lecture circuit is much in demand. We are not knocking it when we suggest that there is an even higher kind, one which seeks to comprehend the deep things of God. Human sexual love is sung all day long on a dozen channels from every major city. Such song blankets our globe. We do not berate that either. But the hymns we sing in church praise a still higher love which is never fickle, which never fails, and which is totally unselfish. Christians really shouldn't have to be exhorted to sing the praises of our Lord and of his Christ. It should happen spontaneously everywhere as God's people reflect on the overwhelming expression of God's love which saves us now and eternally. There is no way we could woo or win such love to our side. What a marvelous surprise then to learn that it is God's gift! Who would play the fool and give up such a bonanza for a poor substitute? One can hardly imagine it, but it does happen.

Pentecost 14: 5:21-31. We could hardly wait for this one! If you're the least bit liberated, it will make you grind your teeth. If you dare to read it aloud at worship, expect a few to walk out permanently. Those who do not feel stuck with this text may want to substitute something for it. For those who will have it printed on the bulletin in full view and for the brave, let us have a hard

look. Culturally, first century Asia Minor was along way from 20th century North America. But then so are a lot of places in the third world and in backwater America too. Most paragraphing begins a new section at 5:22, while we begin at 5:21. Rightly or wrongly, it is a good place to begin: with mutual subordination. Neither partner is to play the tyrant. Each is to serve the other out of reverence for Christ. Further, husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church, that is, being willing to suffer even a horrible death for their sake. Let us suggest that, until husbands reach that level of self-giving love, they have no right to expect spouses to obey them. The authority which Christ has over us is the persuasive power of his sacrificial love, not the coercive power of a dictator.

Pentecost 15: 6:10-20. In these days of Rambo, the look-real toy guns for kids, and war video games, do we need this chapter? You could probably get the Star Wars fans, the NRA, and the video game crowd to listen, but is this the kind of encouragement they need? If you have a congregation of wimps, you may try the message of these verses to get some life into the pews. And relative to the arch-enemy of our souls, that is probably what we are—wimps. Over 90% of Americans believe there is a God, not that they believe in or trust God for their eternal salvation. The devil undoubtedly fares worse, which plays right into his hand. My suspicion is that few people believe there is a devil, and even fewer take him seriously. What the Scriptures sometimes refer to as “the world” is also not of much concern. Neither is seen as a hostile force seeking to cut us off from God and our salvation in Christ. But this writer takes them both with increasing seriousness. The defensive weapons to use in remaining safe in God’s care are truth, righteousness, the Good News of the gospel, faith, salvation, the Word of God, and prayer. Such protection never hurt anyone—and surely would not make the church a force to be feared except by Satan. Yes, we do need this text, particularly now! Get the members to exhort each other regarding this matter too. God wants to protect us, but we have to use the armor.