

Equipped by Jesus

Ephesians 4:1-16

Consumers in modern Western culture are sometimes referred to as ‘user-choosers.’ We live in a time when there are so many choices that we feel permitted to make. We can choose where we live, what we drive, which radio station we listen to and the newspaper we read. We even get to choose the church we belong to. Within the kingdom of God, however, this sense of independence and freedom is put in its place.

‘You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you,’ Jesus told his disciples in John 15:16. Similar reminders of the call of God, which comes before any response we make, are found on several occasions in Ephesians. The book begins with Paul’s description of the church as those chosen ‘in him before the creation of the world’ (1:4). In the following chapter Paul again evokes the sense of Christians being called by God into a world far bigger than their own: ‘we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do’ (2:10).

This idea of calling appears again at the beginning of this week’s reading. Paul begins by urging the Ephesians to ‘live a life worthy of the calling you have received’ (4:1). The word translated as ‘worthy’ is the Greek *axios* which describes a set scales hinged on a crossbeam, with pans suspended on either end. In other words, says Paul, ‘Live a life that measures up to your calling by God.’ It’s striking that when describing what this ‘worthy’ life looks like in practice Paul immediately writes about a determination to bear ‘with one another in love’ and maintain church unity. The ‘oneness’ language found in verses 4-6 would have resonated with Jewish background believers who recited daily the confessional words of the Shema beginning with Deuteronomy 6:4: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one...’

In verses 11, Paul describes what is sometimes referred to as the ‘fivefold’ ministry, the particular ways God gifts individuals for the service of the church: ‘So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers...’ Although a variety of roles are listed here, a number of modern writers on mission have observed that all too often we focus only on pastoring and teaching. As Alan Hirsch notes, ‘These were eventually instituted as offices in the church and became the principal metaphors for church leadership. The net effect is that the whole system weighed itself in favour of maintenance and pastoral care and that these became hegemonic in practice, and therefore both fragmented and distorted the total mission and ministry of the church in favour of only part of its calling.’¹

Why does God give these gifts to the church? The answer to this question is provided in verses 13-16, a stirring and inspiring vision of a church which is united in

¹ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 2006, 169

obedience to Jesus and made up of people who are becoming mature and moving on from the naivety and instability of their 'infant' faith. This growth will sometimes be opposed. In verse 14 Paul warns that some 'crafty and cunning' people in the church may stand in its way. Instead, maturity comes through the gentle wisdom of those who model Christ to others by 'speaking the truth in love' (v15).

1. It's telling that when Paul writes in verse 1 about a 'life worthy of the calling you have received,' he immediately goes on to talk about 'bearing with one another in love' and keeping 'the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.' Following on from Sunday's sermon, can you think of issues in the life of our church which prevent us being the 'one body' Paul describes in verse 4? What steps can we take to overcome these issues together?
2. Alan Hirsch has suggested (see the above quote) that one reason why many churches in the West have declined in recent years is that our model of leadership is one focussed only on pastoring and teaching. Do you agree? Can you think of ways in which our churches can become ones who make more room for apostles, prophets and evangelists to exercise their ministries?
3. Read together Ephesians 4:13-16. What does Paul see as being the key qualities which will be present in a church of mature Christians?
4. Take time to look together at the 'Spiritual Gifts Survey' which was given out on Sunday. Can you encourage one another about the gifts you see in them which they may not be able to see in themselves?