

## God's Strategy for Presenting Every Person Complete in Christ

### *The Truth about our Life in Christ*

**Ephesians 4:7-16**

Pastor Bryan Clark

It's hard to imagine a more treasured gift in this world than the gift of life. Yet it would be my opinion that the majority of people will squander this gift, spending their lives on things that ultimately don't really matter. But we're encouraged to realize it doesn't have to be that way. God has offered to us what we might call the *Great Invitation*, to connect with what He is doing and invest ourselves in things that will still matter ten thousand years from now. That is a remarkable concept. I know many of you have heard this before, but imagine a line that goes as far to the south and the north as you can imagine, and that represents the timeline of eternity. And then imagine taking a razor blade and making the tiniest little slash on that line, which represents the duration of your life. It's really hard to tell, in light of eternity, the difference between twenty years, fifty years, eighty years, or one hundred years. That slash is all we have in relation to eternity and yet, remarkably, God has offered us the invitation to—within that slash—connect with that that will matter forever. It's a remarkable invitation. It is so confusing to me why so many Christians seem virtually uninterested in that invitation. It causes me to ask the question, "Do we think we have something more important than that to do?"

One of the things that really encourages me about the people of Lincoln Berean is: we get this. We have a very involved, rigorous, service culture. We have so many people who week in and week out get this and invest their lives in the things that ultimately matter. This morning we want to remind ourselves what this is and to encourage ourselves again why this matters. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Ephesians, Chapter 4. If you're visiting with us this morning, we've been working our way through the book of Ephesians. We find ourselves in chapter four talking about the unity of the body. Now oftentimes when we talk about the unity of the body and the body functioning together, which is the metaphor that Paul often uses, we often refer to it like a team, which is basically an athletic metaphor. But I want to change up the metaphor this morning and think of it more in the sense of an orchestra—understanding each of us has been called to pick up an instrument and supernaturally play the masterpiece of God—the music of the ages for His glory. Each of us is called to play an instrument, to play our part, in order to make this beautiful music that will reverberate through the heavenlies forever.

Last week we looked at verses one through six and we reminded ourselves that we are, as believers in Christ, supernaturally, perfectly unified in the heavenlies, and Paul implores us, he begs us to preserve that unity as the church on earth. We ended that conversation by raising the question: What if every person, regardless of their denomination, regardless of their ethnic background, regardless of their story—every person who is in Christ—turned bright green? And we would have this sense at work, in the neighborhood, at home—everywhere we go—when you see someone who's bright green, you would be reminded that regardless of the denominational label or anything else, in God's economy we are perfectly unified in the heavenlies, and the call is to preserve that on earth. Just imagine how dramatically that would change our behaviors.

The text that we study this morning moves from the unity of the body to the diversity of the body. Verse seven opens with the word **but**. So there's been a discussion about everyone unified, and the

danger would be in thinking that *unity* means *uniformity*. Uniformity, in the sense of an orchestra, would be every single person playing the same instrument, playing the same note, all the time—a very unappealing song. Within unity there is great diversity, so he moves to that discussion in verse seven.

**But to each one...so from *everyone* to *each one*...each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.** (\*NASB, Ephesians 4:7)

Now what does that mean? A lot of people identify Ephesians 4 within the greater conversation of spiritual gifts, and you hear some of that language here. It would be my contention that as an evangelical church across the country, we have really misunderstood and confused this whole conversation of spiritual gifts. I would suggest to you that a spiritual gift is not a miraculous, special gift that you get at the moment of salvation. I would suggest to you that it's not something that needs to be distinguished from your talent, which is also God-given. I would suggest to you that it has nothing to do with discovering it, defining it, or labeling it. I don't think it has to do with any of that. That's something that we have kind of read into those texts. The word *spiritual* is a reference to the Holy Spirit and a reminder that the Spirit of God empowers us to fulfill our calling.

The word **gift** is a form of the word *grace*, which reminds us that it is on the basis of God's grace and God's grace alone that we have received the *Great Invitation* to invest ourselves in something that will matter forever. The idea is that every single person who has trusted Christ as Savior has a calling and your calling is *high and holy*. I refuse to use the word *volunteer* to describe people that serve in the body because I believe it's misleading. When I say *volunteer*, that implies that, for you, it's optional. Trust me. One day when you stand before God and give an account, you're going to find out your calling was not optional in God's economy. You can't on one hand say your calling is high and holy and on the other hand say, "But, by the way, it's optional." You just can't. It's one or the other and I would suggest to you the Bible is very clear. Your calling is high and holy. God has called each of us to play our own instrument, supernaturally trained and empowered, to be part of this grand orchestra to make the music of the ages. The language in verse seven is very consistent with what I've just described. It's the language that Paul used in chapter three to say he, himself, on the basis of God's grace, has received a stewardship, a calling, to steward the gospel of grace to the Gentiles. **But to each one of us, grace was given, [this is God's gift], according to the measure of God's gift.** Verse eight:

**Therefore it says,  
"WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH,  
HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES,  
AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN."**

That's a quote from Psalm 68. Paul is saying that, basically, Jesus the Messiah was the fulfillment of what was discussed in Psalm 68. It's basically a psalm that celebrates the victorious King who led His people out of bondage in Egypt to Mount Sinai to receive the Law, and then from Sinai to the land of promise and ascended into Jerusalem as the victorious King in order to celebrate victory. So: **When He ascended on high he led captive a host of captives.**

There's quite a bit of discussion around: who are the captives? A lot of people would say it's the demons and the devil, the principalities and powers, and that may be, but I personally don't think that's correct. I think the idea is, in Psalm 68, they would be the prisoners of war, but the application to Christ would have to do with those who *were* dead, those who *were* lost in their sins,

those who *were* in bondage to the enemy, who were captured by Christ and were His hosts. When he ascends, they ascended with him. Ultimately we are seated with Christ in the heavenlies. That will become clearer in just a second. At the end of verse eight he says...**and he gave gifts to men.**

If you read Psalm 68, it says the King *received* gifts. Paul edits it a little bit to say the King *gives* gifts. That's really not so different. The King received the spoils of war in order to redistribute them as gifts to His people. Paul's just, in essence, looking at the other side of the same coin. Verses nine and ten then provide a commentary on this verse from the psalm:

**(Now this *expression*, “He ascended,” what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.)**

Now there are those who would take the position that what those two verses are describing is that Jesus, when he died, actually descended into hell. Some of the early church fathers took that position, but it was not a position that was widely held for a long period of time. The majority of scholars down through the years and today would say that that is not the case. There is virtually nothing in the text that would indicate Jesus went to hell. As a matter of fact, there's nothing in the Bible that would in any way suggest that Jesus went to hell for any period of time. The logic of verses nine and ten are basically this: How could Jesus ascend when He was already the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? He was as high as possible. The answer is: he had to first descend, referencing the incarnation. John uses this exact language in John chapter three to describe the incarnation of Jesus, what we sometimes refer to as the *Humility of Christ*. Philippians would say that He subjected Himself to becoming a man, to subject Himself to death, even death on a cross, His burial, and then His resurrection. So it's referencing that in order for Christ to ascend and for us to ascend with Him, He first had to descend and go through the incarnation and the death, burial and resurrection to make this possible and then ascended to the right hand of the Father. And in Ephesians one and two we learned that we, in Christ, ascend with Him and are seated with Him in the heavenlies. That's why I think *we* are the captives that he's referring to.

So, what are the gifts? If you look at the end of verse seven, he refers to **Christ's gift**, the end of verse eight he talks about **gifts**, now verse eleven...**And he gave**. So, these are the gifts:

**And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers,**

The answer is the *gifts* are *people*. He took captive a host of captives, seated with Christ in the heavenlies, but He turns right around and gives people back to His church in order to accomplish the mission. The idea starts with **apostles** and **prophets**. When we talk about apostles, it gets a little bit confusing because the term is used different ways in the New Testament. On a couple of occasions, apostles basically describe all of us because we're all *sent ones* of God. On other occasions it has to do with those who are officially sent by the church, what we would think of as missionaries—sent *out* ones. But there's also a use, and maybe most often, a use referring to this very narrow sense of these apostles that were authoritative and called out by Christ. It would be the twelve apostles, plus a hand full of others like Paul. In Acts chapter one, it states that in order to be one of *these* apostles, you have to have seen the resurrected Christ yourself. So, obviously, that classification of apostle would not go on indefinitely. There was a limited number of those people. They spoke, authoritatively, the Word of God which they had received from Jesus himself.

Before the New Testament was written, the word came orally. The **prophets** then were those who spoke the Word of God, divinely inspired by God. But once the New Testament was written, then the truth was defined and there was no longer a need for apostles and prophets in this way to continue.

So it moves then to **evangelists**. Now when we hear the word *evangelist* we think maybe of Billy Graham or people that are exceptionally gifted to share the gospel with someone. But that's really not what the word means. In our language it would be a church-planter or a missionary. It's referencing those who go to a place where there is no church. They share the gospel; they establish a church; they plant a church and they move on, whether that's domestically or whether that's around the world. Once the church is established, then it's the responsibility of **pastors and teachers**. The grammar of the text requires pastor/teacher to be one person. It's not two different people, not specifically referencing teaching like I'm doing this morning but more in the idea of teaching in the sense of equipping, of training. In essence, the pastors are the music teachers that teach people how to play their instrument in order to play in the orchestra...in order to do what? Verse twelve:

**for the equipping of the saints for the work of service...**

[that word **service** is the word *ministry*...to equip the saints to do the work of *ministry*]  
**to the building up of the body of Christ.**

There is a reminder that the job of pastors is not to *do* the ministry. It's to equip the saints to do the ministry. Technically you don't pay me to do ministry. You pay me and all of our other pastors to equip *you* to do the ministry. We're the music teachers and you're the musicians. Almost every week someone will refer to me as a *minister*. Technically that's not true. *You're* the minister. I'm the *equipper*. We often get this turned upside down and we think that the pastors are to do the ministry. Sometimes people will be in the hospital or maybe homebound or something like that and word will come back to the church that nobody visited them. And when we investigate, we find actually a lot of people visited them; it's just that one of them wasn't a pastor. It's very important to understand that the role of the pastor is to be the equipper; it's the role of the saints to do the work of the ministry. We celebrated that last week in baptism. We not only celebrated those being baptized but those that gathered around those tanks who had done the work of ministry and were celebrating the fruit of that in that moment. So, understand that all of us come together to accomplish the mission together. This morning we committed ourselves to these parents and these children, that each of us would be faithful to pick up our instrument and to be equipped, supernaturally through the Holy Spirit, to play our instrument for God's glory—ministry on this campus, ministry out in the community, ministry around the world.

**for the equipping of the saints for the work of service** [or ministry],

**to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith...**

In other words, until we, together, live out what was described in verses one through six  
**...and of the knowledge of the Son of God...**

until we all experience that intimacy with the Son of God that our souls long for. It takes all of us together to accomplish that.

**to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.**

In other words, until we, as believers, measure up to what is true of us in Christ, until our lives are in alignment with what is true of us in the heavenlies. (Vs. 12-13)

Now this text reminds us again that discipleship is not primarily one on one, one on two. That is part of it, but frankly, it's a very small part of it. Discipleship is everything that we do together—coming together to build into one another to create this beautiful music in the heavenlies. It's a very sobering thing to realize that the people seated around you this morning will experience less of what they could experience in Christ if you choose not to take up your instrument and play. If you choose to be a spectator, not only is that affecting *your* life, it's actually dramatically affecting the lives of the people seated around you. Their music could be more spectacular if you chose to pick up your instrument and play. So there is a mutual responsibility and accountability that we do all in our power to get everyone involved for the good of everyone. There's a tendency when people walk through the doors of a larger church to think, "*This is a well-oiled machine; they don't need me.*" That couldn't be farther from the truth, both practically and theologically. We do need you. The orchestra is less than it could be if you're not playing your instrument—everyone coming together to accomplish the mission. What is the result of that? Verse fourteen:

**As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;**

The imagery of **children** carries the idea that children are vulnerable because they're gullible. Children can be convinced of anything; children will believe anything. Children believe this and then they believe that, and then they believe this and then believe that. This season of the year that becomes abundantly clear. We are like that as children in Christ. We're vulnerable to the liars and the deceivers and the tricksters that misrepresent the truth and misrepresent God and misrepresent the gospel. And we can be tossed about like a rowboat on a sea in the midst of a storm. We're just thrown about by every wind of doctrine. Our lives are built on the sand and we feel it under our feet, that there's no real solid footing. New believers are especially vulnerable to the deceit and the tricks and the lies of the enemy. Part of our responsibility together is to make sure that doesn't happen. All of us coming together in order to protect our children, physically our children, but also spiritually our children in order that, verse fifteen:

**...but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ,**

The word **speaking** isn't actually in the Greek text. Of all things, the word **truth** is the verb. Literally the Greek is *truthing*. I actually prefer that because the point is not *speaking* the truth; the point is *living* the truth. So rather than being tossed back and forth by the lies and deceit and the trickery of the enemy, we find ourselves *truthing* our way through life in order to experience the life that God calls us to. At the end of chapter one there was the reminder that the Head of the universe is eminently overqualified to serve as Head over His body the church, but He has chosen to do that. But to do that, He promises to actually crawl inside of us through His Spirit and to dwell in us to supernaturally make it possible. Paul's reminding us that that is true. Verse sixteen,

**...from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.**

Again, a reminder that we have this mutual commitment to one another to each do our part to build one another up to accomplish the mission. The language here is that we're tied together by these muscles and by these ligaments—that we all make up one functioning body. The New Testament

knows virtually nothing of a Christian solo artist. That is just a theology that is completely gone from the New Testament teaching of His church. Now some people justify it under the umbrella of the universal church, or the invisible church—that “*I’m part of the universal church and that’s all that matters.*” But again the New Testament knows nothing of that teaching; it’s just simply incorrect. Over ninety percent of the references to the church in the New Testament are references to the local church. The invisible church manifests itself in the local church, to represent Christ to the world. So there’s this sense in which there are no soloists in God’s economy. We together have a mutual commitment to one another to make up this remarkable orchestra to play God’s music for the ages.

I’m fifty-five years old now. When I turned fifty, I wanted to try something new and different, which is kind of my personality. So I made a list of things and I worked my way through the list and I concluded, “I want to learn to play the cello.” So, for the last five years I’ve been taking cello lessons. Two years ago I played in the Christmas orchestra. A month from now I hope to do it again. It’s been a very enjoyable process. But I have learned something. It is way easier to play by myself at home. (*laughter.*) When I play by myself at home, I’m in charge. I’m the conductor; I pick the music; I always play the melody line; I pick the key signatures; I pick the rhythm. Frankly, I make up my own rhythm. (*laughter.*) It’s harder to tell when I’m out of tune a little bit. If I get lost, I stop and start over. It’s really pretty easy at home all alone. It’s very different in the orchestra. Now I’m not the conductor. I don’t pick the music; I definitely don’t pick the key signature; I can’t make up my own rhythm; I suddenly hear all the places where I’m out of tune. When I get lost, nobody stops and waits for me, and as a cello player, I rarely get to play the melody. I’m almost always supporting the beauty of the melody. It’s way harder. But I would also say it is far more deeply satisfying to play in an orchestra than it is to play all alone by myself at home. To actually contribute to something that is so much more than me that goes from my little beginner music at home, to contributing to something that is so much more wondrous is a very special feeling. It is far more difficult, but it is far more deeply satisfying to come together as one divine orchestra, each of us playing our part to make music that is far more spectacular than any one of us could alone—to come together and supernaturally play God’s masterpiece, God’s opus for the ages, *to the praise of the glory of His grace!*

*Our Father, we’re thankful this morning for this great invitation, this grand invitation, that You, on the basis of Your grace have invited us in to be part of something that will still matter ten thousand years from today. God, for each of us to understand that You have called us to pick up our instrument, that You have promised that we will be supernaturally equipped to play it, to contribute to the music that is so much more wondrous than any of us could possibly accomplish on our own. Lord, may we, to the praise of the glory of Your grace, be faithful. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

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