



Christian Origins #65 - Ephesians

by Ronald L. Dart

Funny things happen to us whenever we try to organize ourselves. I guess it's just in the way we're made. Even *cows* do it. When they start back in from the field at milking time, they follow a regular path, and I'm told they line up in order. You let one of those Bossies get out of line and one of the other ones will put her where she belongs. And chickens *must* do it. Otherwise, where'd we get the expression "pecking order"? I think it comes from the fact that one chicken pecks another, another one pecks another one, and you don't want to peck out of order.

It's odd, but it's the same way in church. We all have our pecking order, and sometimes the whole thing gets out of hand. We say we love order. We want things organized. We like structure. And we put together *hierarchies* with pecking orders, from archbishop to bishop to priest to minister to deacon. And there's even an effort to *find* these hierarchies in the Bible...or, rather, to name them after biblical terms, because you'll never really find them in the Bible. The fourth chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a case in point, where Paul says in verse 11:

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AKJV

¹¹ And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;

And some people look at that and say, "There. There's a hierarchy." Actually, I don't know anyone who strictly follows this as a hierarchy but, never mind, they *think* they do. The odd thing about it is that this passage is of *no value at all* in establishing ranks in the clergy. That's not what it's about. If you want a hierarchy, you need to look somewhere else. So what *is* this passage about? Well, it's about a project, and how the project is going to get done, and about the tools to be used in getting it done. Here's Paul, in the fourth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians. Chapter 4, verse 1:

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¹ I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that you walk worthy of the vocation with which you are called,

² With all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love;

Not to put too fine a point on it, but this is not about being driven around in stretch limousines. It's not about uniform. It's not about rank. It's not about being carried in in a sedan chair with bearers walking you into church. It *is*, as an next verse says, about *work*.

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² With all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love;

³ Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

So this work—the endeavor—is to keep the unity...Not just any unity. Not a *coercive* unity. Not a top-down, “You’ve got to do it my way or else”-type of unity, but a unity of the spirit. Paul says:

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⁴ There is one body, and one Spirit, even as you are called in one hope of your calling;

⁵ One Lord, one faith, one baptism,

⁶ One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

Why is he saying that? Well, in Ephesus there were two blocks of members; there were Jews and there were Gentiles. And they were acting like salvation was a different thing—a different process—for one group as opposed to the other. I guess there was a Jewish baptism and a Gentile baptism. At least, that’s the way people were *acting*. And Paul says, “This isn’t the truth, folks. There aren’t *two* faiths here. There isn’t a Jewish faith and a Gentile faith. There’s *one* faith, just as there’s”:

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⁵ One Lord, one faith, one baptism,

⁶ One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

Notice, not “in some of you”—not in the Jews only, not in the Gentiles only—but “in you all.” And that Jew–Gentile struggle is right at the basis of what Paul’s driving at here.

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⁷ But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.

⁸ Therefore he says, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.

Now, what this passage is about is gifts of the spirit for the sake of the task. Think about it this way: You probably have a toolbox someplace in your garage. You *may* even know where it is. Some of your tools may even be *in* that toolbox. But in spite of everything, sooner or later you’re going to find yourself with a job to do and without the right tool to do it. (Now, if you’re one of those people that always has a place for everything, and everything in its place, and always knows where to lay your hand on everything, why don’t you go get yourself a cup of coffee and come back after I explain this to everybody else.)

The thing you’re going to do will require a Phillips screwdriver, and all you’ve got is a blade screwdriver. Now, I have tried this a lot of different ways. I have tried to stick a small blade screwdriver into a Phillips slot because I can’t find my Phillips. I have even tried to use the point of a pair of scissors to get that job done. I’ve even tried to get needle-nose pliers around the head of the thing, to get the job done, because I couldn’t find what I needed. And if you’ve fooled around with stuff like this for very long, you have found yourself trying to tighten a bolt with a pair of *pliers* in an awkward place. You’ve gotten irritated, you’ve busted your knuckles, you’ve rounded off the nut, and made a complete mess of the job. And then you watch a skilled mechanic, with the right tools, zip right through the same job. And you say, “Wow, it’s sure nice to have those tools.”

I'll never forget the time whenever I went through a knuckle-busting tire change with the tools that were in the back on my car. And took the thing down to the guy to change the tire, and put it all right. And he's there with his pneumatic lug-nut removers, and he goes through that job so fast it makes your head swim. The right tools for the right job at the right time. Believe it or not, that's what Paul's driving at. In verse 11, he says this:

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¹¹ And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;

¹² For [*And here's the job.*] the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

¹³ Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ:

And all these apostles and prophets and stuff? They're just tools to accomplish a task. And the task is clearly defined.

Now, I know this is crazy, but we all do it. We end up giving our attention to the tools, and we forget about *the job*. Long ago, I subscribed to what I call the "toolbox theory" of how God works. It was while I was teaching at a Bible college in England. I saw a group of *very* talented teachers—highly competent men who worked *very* well together, in spite of the fact that they were really as different as daylight and dark. They were really a remarkably diverse bunch of men, but they *complemented* one another. I think it's a truism that the stronger a man is in one area of his character, his talents, his abilities, the weaker he tends to be in others.

And it makes sense. We're all human, and we have limits. In order to be *great* in one area, we have to focus ourselves. And that *inevitably* takes away from other areas. I hate to say this, but the *truly balanced* man is apt to be a bit mediocre. But we need balanced people, we need ordinary people, we need steady hands from time to time. But you do need to understand that sometimes, when there's a specialized job to be done, you need specialized tool. And that tool won't be worth much at all on *any other* kind of job. So I concluded that God has a toolbox. And when there's a job to do, he reaches down into his toolbox and he selects the tool he needs for the job.

Saul of Tarsus (who you and I have come to know as Saint Paul), the man whose letter we are here reading, was a particular *kind* of man when Jesus knocked him down on the road to Damascus [Acts 9]. He was *aggressive*, he was *argumentative*, he was *in your face*. He was also *brilliant*. He was the debater of the first water. And everywhere Paul went, he stirred up strife and discontent. So when God knocked him down on the road to Damascus and said, "I've got a job for you to do." I think we have to presume that God knew what he was getting and he knew what he wanted.

Now, when God wanted a prophet in the Old Testament to speak to the *worst* king in Israel's history (his name was Ahab), he did not choose an eloquent man like Isaiah. If you go back and read the book of Isaiah, he uses a lot of words. And he's a poet, he's a *fine* poet, and his work is absolutely *brilliant* and it has a tremendous impact. He's eloquent. He didn't choose a man like that. He chose a man named Elijah.

Elijah was a hairy man, and given to wearing leather. And Elijah would never use two words when *one* would say it. He was abrupt. He was blunt. And he also had a corrosive wit about him. When we're introduced to him, he has this curt prophecy:

1 Kings 17

AKJV

¹ [...] As the LORD God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word.

Period. End quote. And Elijah disappeared and no one heard from in 3 1/2 years. I wouldn't call that eloquent; I would call that...what shall we say, *a hammer*. When the nail is there; and it's time to drive it in with one good, strong stroke; you want a *big, strong hammer*. And that was Elijah. (Oh, by the way, it didn't rain for 3 1/2 years. And I would say *that* was pretty eloquent.)

So here is God's toolbox. He's got in there some apostles and prophets and evangelists and pastors and teachers, and he's ready to reach down and grab a tool. What's the job? The job is:

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¹² For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying [*building up*] of the body of Christ:

Did you catch the image? Here the church is called "the body of Christ". Elsewhere, it's a building. Actually, Paul, in a way, is mixing his metaphors. Because we're talking about *building up* the body of Christ. In the center, if you'll visualize it, is a building under construction. Around this building are all the workers with their tools—all the apostles and prophets and evangelists and pastors and teachers. And there's hammering of nails, and sawing, and the sound of power tools as the church—the building of Christ—is being built up; everyone using their gifts of the spirit to get this job done.

Okay, now contrast this image with another one. Visualize a situation where the apostles and prophets and evangelists and so forth are the *center of attention*, and the church circles and revolves around *them*—serving *them*, somehow helping and looking to *them*. Which of these images is closer to what Paul is talking about in Ephesians 4? It's a no-brainer, isn't it? It's easy to understand that the church is at the center. And all of the apostles and prophets and everything else are the busy little workman around the sides, and inside and out, and going around *doing* the job of building this thing up. Paul says, "We do this":

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¹³ Till we all come in the unity of the faith, [...]

Not just *any* unity. Not the unity somebody gets by beating us over the head. The unity of the faith.

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¹³ [...] and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ:

It's interesting. He switches his metaphor again, in a way, because this *is* what the object is. You know, it *really* is not just a matter of building the church. It's a matter of the building of a *perfect man*—of turning *losers* into *winners*. The fact is that the individual—the *person*, the man, the woman—is the object of God's work. It's the object of salvation. We don't get baptized a whole church at a time. This isn't the way God works. We're baptized one *person* at a time. We're not saved as a group. We're not saved because of who we belong to. We're saved because God saves us, each and everyone *personally*.

And so the object of all this hammering, and nailing, and putting things together, and cutting things off, is the creation of a perfect man in the stature and the fullness of Christ.

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¹⁴ That we from now on be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive;

Let's see. While we're building this building, and while we're all working like a bunch of beavers, we've got some jerks coming in there and trying to tear things down and throwing rocks through the windows, right? Afraid so. He says:

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¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:

¹⁶ From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, makes increase of the body to the edifying of itself in love.

Oh, what a beautiful image that draws in my mind. It wasn't very long ago; I was up in New England and I visited a furniture factory. And it was marvelous to go through there and look at some really fine-quality work and notice the way in which it was (with the use of the right tool for the right job) fitly framed together—so that every joint fit *perfectly*, so that it was put together by the the best efforts of the craftsman's art. From “the whole body”, “fitly joined together”, and sort of “compacted” (like you would a joint in furniture—tapped down with a little wooden mallet, with the glue in place, and the pegs in between.

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¹⁶ [...] by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, [...]

The *whole thing* has to work. And what do we do? We:

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¹⁶ [...] makes increase of the body to the edifying of itself in love.

The *entire* church of Jesus Christ is involved in this. It isn't just apostles or profits that do this job. It is *every single joint, every finger, every fingernail, every toenail, every part* of the body makes its contribution to the building up of the church. Paul said:

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¹⁷ This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you from now on walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind,

¹⁸ Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart:

And I think there's a connection to this thing of people who will tear things down—people who will come in and do things that would destroy the work that God is trying to do—that people *will* lie in wait to deceive.

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¹⁹ Who being past feeling have given themselves over to lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.

²⁰ But you have not so learned Christ;

That's typical Paul. It's an understatement, as it were, for effect. "You just haven't learned that from Jesus, have you?" "What haven't we learned from Jesus?" "Well, lasciviousness and uncleanness and greediness, of course."

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²¹ If so be that you have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus:

²² That you put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts;

²³ And be renewed in the spirit of your mind;

Now, this is a beautiful statement that Paul makes here, and I don't know if we fully understand what he's trying to tell us to do. When he says you've got to put certain things off, he's talking about decisions you have to make. This isn't something somebody else is going to do for you. It's not something anybody else can do in your place. It's not worth a *fig* if somebody has to force you to do it. This is something you have to consciously *do*. You may need to pray about it a while, you may need to sit on a rock somewhere and stare into space and think your way through it, but there's some things in your life that are going to have to be *put off*—taken off, thrown away like an old coat. They are things that are corrupt. They are things that are deceitful. There are things that are deceiving *you* in your own lust, and you need to be *renewed* in the spirit of your mind.

And by putting it this way, he isn't just saying that "*I'm* going to renew you in the spirit of your mind." (Although without him you'll never make it.) The point is he expects *you* to renew yourself in the spirit of your mind. That goes right alongside of what he said earlier about the church, and all the parts, like busy little beavers, working together to the building—the church *builds itself*. Even so, with Christ's help—the decisions that we make, the prayers that we make, the devotion that we do—we *renew* ourselves in the spirit of our mind.

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²⁴ And that you put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.

²⁵ Therefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor: for we are members one of another.

Now, you know, of *all* the things that Paul could have said, of *all* the commands he might have given, of *all* of the demands—like "stop committing fornication", "stop chasing another man's wife"—the place Paul starts is "*stop lying*" and speak the truth with one another. And I'll tell you this: There is no turning of your life around without truth. The truth is, we lie to ourselves first. We deceive ourselves about who we are, and what we are, and what we're doing. And then we lie to others about who we are, and what we're doing. And it's only when we *finally tell the truth*—when we finally speak the truth to

ourselves—that we’re able to start making some of these turns in our lives. I remember, once in a crisis in my own life, I had to face a situation where someone had been lying to me. And I had been denying it and denying it and denying it. And you know what? My denials were all lies. And it was only when I sat alone in my room, and forced myself to say the words out loud, “That’s a lie. He is a liar.”, only then was I able to begin to deal with it.

Ephesians 4

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²⁵ Therefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor: for we are members one of another.

I am surely glad that Paul did not come along next and say, “Don’t you *ever* let yourself get angry.” Because I don’t think I could ever make that. I don’t get angry easily, but there are times when a person really *ought* to be mad. He says:

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²⁶ Be you angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down on your wrath:

Now, I think that’s a kind of proverb. I don’t know that he has much to do with sundown, but the point is that there is a time to be angry, but you should *get over it*, and you should get over before sundown. That is, it should not carry over into a new day. The simple reason being that anger can eat you up. And isn’t necessarily going to hurt anybody else (although it may), but one person it is *surely* going to hurt is *you*. And there’s another one of the apostles that makes an interesting statement. He says:

James 1

AKJV

²⁰ For the wrath of man works not the righteousness of God.

So don’t ever kid yourself that being angry, and having God’s wrath, will enable you somehow to be more effective in serving God. No, the wrath of man does not work the righteousness of God. We’re almost *certain* to get it wrong. Paul says:

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²⁷ Neither give place to the devil.

Now, that’s an interesting expression, and I’m not sure that I understand *all* of the implications of it. But I do know I had an old friend once who used to say that if the devil can’t get at you any other way, he will *waste your time*. And, you know, I think that’s one of the most telling illustrations of the way in which we give place to him. The temptations come our way. We make room for them. We push things out of the way and say, “Here, sit down here.”, and we indulge ourselves. Oh, I’ll grant you that we don’t have to fill every waking moment with something absolutely productive. Nobody’s that good. But the point is: Don’t consciously give place to the devil. When you’re aware of it, don’t let him waste your time.

Ephesians 4

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²⁸ Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labor, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needs.

The work is not for selfish things; it' to be able to *give* to somebody else.

It's kind of funny, in a way, to hear Paul writing something like this to the church. He's telling them, "Don't lie. Don't steal." It makes you wonder what sort of things were still hanging on in their lives, but you just realize they were *human beings*. They did *stupid things* from time to time. In verse 29, he says:

Ephesians 4

AKJV

²⁹ Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace to the hearers.

In another place, it's said that our speech should be:

Colossians 4

AKJV

⁵ [...] always with grace, seasoned with salt [...]

We should learn how to speak *graciously* to other people. And speaking graciously is the opposite of "corrupt communications". I assume corrupt communications would include lying, profanity, the dirty joke, the kind of thing that we seem to like to indulge ourselves in from time to time. He says, "This isn't taking us anywhere."

Ephesians 4

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³⁰ And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby you are sealed to the day of redemption.

And to understand what he means, look at the next verse.

Ephesians 4

AKJV

³¹ Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice:

Now, that's a list of interesting attitudes—all of which are basically related. And you know what? When you understand that this is written to a church that's in the middle of its own conflicts; that you have two power blocks—Jewish and Gentile—who are struggling with one another, standing off from one another, it's not surprising that there should be in that environment bitterness, anger, evil speaking, and malice. Well, Paul says:

Ephesians 4

AKJV

³² And be you kind one to another, [...]

That's a fundamental Christian grace. Just plain, ordinary *kindness* being shown from the one *group* to the other—from the one *person* to the other. Paul says, "Be":

Ephesians 4

AKJV

³² [...] tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you.

What kind of people are we, having been forgiven by God, to find it almost *impossible* to forgive other people. And then, in the first verse of the fifth chapter, he gives us this little vignette. He says:

Ephesians 5

AKJV

¹ Be you therefore followers of God, as dear children[.]

You know, I had an old friend many years ago when I was teaching in England—a faculty member—who had been injured when he was younger man. And he had a *peculiar* gait; he was rather bow-legged, and he walked funny as he walked across campus. He had a son—a lovely little boy—in his old age (he was an older man when his boy was born). And I remember one day watching him walk across the campus, his little boy walking right behind him, imitating his father's limp and awkward, bow-legged gait, because he wanted to be like Dad. There wasn't a thing wrong with the kid; he just wanted to be like Dad. And I thought: That's a *dear child*. And Paul says to us: Imitate God like *dear* children. And, you know, I really think it's in imitating God that we get turned from losers into winners.

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