

Walking the walk: Ephesians 4.1-16



“Eats shoots and leaves!” Somebody wrote a book with that title a few years ago. It was all about punctuation and why it matters. If I remember rightly, the point was that the title — which sounds like a description of the diet of the giant panda — could mean something completely different if you put a comma in (just try it!). There’s a famous comma in this section of Ephesians that makes a BIG difference. (Try reading different Bible versions of verse 12 and see if you can spot it.)

But first, where are we up to in the letter? Many of Paul’s letters home in on a problem in the church — a question they’re asking, or something that seems to be going wrong. (1 Corinthians 1.10 is a good example.) The “problem page” is often sandwiched between the “praise page” (Paul’s opening prayer of thanksgiving) and the practical bit — the “exhortation” section, which says, Come on, let’s see how we can work this out.

But Ephesians breaks all the rules! This isn’t a letter that focuses on problems — just on praising God for his blessings and responding to those blessings by seeking to grow into his likeness. It’s a letter so caught up in love and praise that the first three chapters — the first half of the letter — make up one extended prayer, moving from blessing to Thank You! to Please God This isn’t a church focused on problems but a church founded on praise.

1.3: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places ...

1.5 He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

1.16 I never cease giving thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers

3.16 I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, God will strengthen you in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love ...

Praise and prayer is a great antidote to being so focused on ourselves and our problems (or somebody else's problems) that we forget all that God has done and is doing for us.

But that doesn't mean being too heavenly-minded to be any earthly use! Now we come to the big THEREFORE (4.1), the hinge that tells us we're moving into the more practical section of the letter — the bit about walking the walk. We've been adopted into God's family — freely and by God's grace. We didn't have to earn our place. But now we need to learn to behave as what we are, to learn the habits of our new family.

4.1 Therefore, as a prisoner of the Lord, I urge you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, in all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace.

A new-born baby learns by imitation — learning to smile, learning to talk, reflecting back the love and delight that it sees in its parents' eyes and unconsciously assimilating their values, their way of talking, their whole way of life. An adopted child learns the same way — though they may have to do some un-learning as well. So here are some of the basic family values of God's family: humility (thinking more of other people than yourself); patience; forbearance ("long-suffering"); maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace. This isn't just about God and me: it's about God and me and my new brothers and sisters (and that's often the hard part!).

But unity doesn't mean uniformity. Every member of the family has different gifts, contributes in a different way to the whole glorious richness of individuals that makes up a family, each expressing the family DNA in a different way. We're used to the language of "gifts" (cf. 1 Corinthians 12.4-7), and we often talk about "my gift" as something that needs to be developed. But Ephesians reminds us that these are God's gifts — literally, God's gifts to the church: an outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit from the ascended Christ (vv.7-10).

But what are the gifts for? This is where the comma comes in. My NRSV Bible says this in verses 11-12:

“The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”

Sounds quite straightforward? But check it out in your Bible, which may say something slightly different, like the old Authorized Version:

“And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”

Did you spot the extra comma? Not a mistake — the problem is that the original Greek manuscripts didn't use commas very much: they relied on the people reading the letter to put in their own. And *where* you put them in makes a big difference. So in the AV, the gifts of the apostles and so on are given to the church for three reasons:

- *for the equipment of the saints,*
- *for the work of ministry,*
- *for building up the body of Christ.*

But in the NRSV there are only two:

- *for the equipment of the saints for the work of ministry,*
- *for building up the body of Christ.”*

Which means that “the work of ministry” is what the “saints” (that is, all God's people) are being equipped *for*. “Ministry” (serving God through the work of his church) isn't just something you can leave to the church's official ministers, the apostles and pastors and so on: it's something we're all being trained and equipped to do.

But in that case, what does “ministry” mean? That's a bit of a hot potato in the church today (answers on a postcard please!). But I don't think it makes any sense if we only think of “ministry” — serving God — as something we do in church on Sundays. It includes that, of course: serving God in the ministry of praise — whether we're preaching or praying or singing or cleaning up after the service — is the centre of everything we do, and it's the work of the whole church, not just the select few.

But “the work of ministry” has to be something wider than that: surely it's about how

we serve God in the whole of our lives, Monday to Saturday as well as Sunday? It's precisely in how we "walk the walk" in our everyday lives — at work, at school, in the shops, in the street — that the secret work of God's Kingdom comes to be visible in the world, not just in church on Sundays. So at the end of our Sunday worship we are "sent out" in the power of God's Spirit to live and work for his praise and glory, re-energized and re-equipped for our ministry in the world: as it says in one of our service books, "Our service in church is ended; our service in the world is just beginning." I like to think of the two as breathing in and breathing out: you can't have one without the other!

God bless,
Loveday

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