

Last week in our notes, we specifically God to raise up leaders (deacons, elders, pastors, missionaries - as well as teachers) - in our local church. It is very proper to direct those prayers to the Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ. For it is Christ who has appointed all offices in the church and given them as gifts to His church (Ephesians 4:10-16). Oh, may we be a church family that treasures Christ's gift of leaders to His church for years to come! And may we respect the offices in our church because we see them tied so closely to what Christ did in His Incarnation and in His Cross.

Mon/Tues: Read Ephesians 4:1-9**Unity from His Humility**

In these verses, Paul turns to an exhortation which he makes in all the churches: that the Ephesians walk in unity, humility and gentleness, patiently "bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Believers can only pursue holiness and propagate the Gospel in the context of church unity. And what is the foundation and source of church unity? There is a two-fold answer in Ephesians 4:8-9. We begin today with the first, Paul's description of Christ's descent in His Incarnation.

Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." (In saying, "He ascended," **what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth?**)
Ephesians 4:8-9

Verse 9 is a penetrating view into Christ's Incarnation, coming down to be our Substitute, suffering and dying to pay the price of our sin:

Christ's descending and coming down, was by taking our nature upon him ... He came and assumed our nature and was here in a state of humiliation.
John Owen, *Works*, pg 440, vol 9

Meditate and Pray: Look at the wealth of verses in John's Gospel that allude to Christ's being sent from above, down into this world to be our Savior – John 3:13; 3:16-17; 3:31; 5:43; 6:29; 6:33; 6:38; 6:46; 6:50-51; 6:62; 7:16; 7:28-29; 8:14-18; 8:23; 8:26 & 8:29. Surely these verses help us believe the great proclamation in John 1:14 that God now by His Son's birth has come to "make His dwelling among us!" The late Rev. James Philips sums up:

The Incarnation brings God back again into His own world and gives Him His rightful place. This the first, and chief note in the gospel message: not primarily that the needs of men might be met, though the gospel does in fact do this, but that God's holy name might be honored and magnified among men, and that He should be first, and have the pre-eminence in all things.

Weds/Thurs: Read Eph. 4:8-9 & 1 Cor. 1:18-25**The Source for Leaders and Followers**

Recall yesterday's reading of Christ's Incarnation, coming down to live a lowly life in our flesh to be our Substitute. In saying, "what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth," Paul underlines Christ taking our guilt and burden from sin on His own shoulders by being born in our nature.

But this verse about Christ's coming down "as low as this" also speaks of His suffering on the Cross in order to give gifts to the church. John Owen said, "The ministry of the church is rooted in the tomb of Christ." In other words, it is only the message of the Cross that builds the church into a body that ministers to each other in Cross-centered unity, even as Paul lays out such church-life in Ephesians 4:1-9!

This Thanksgiving season we are called to give thanks that the message of the Cross has power not only to forgive our sins and to redeem us, but also serves as the foundation which grounds all church leadership and mutual ministry in the self-denying death of Christ. Because of Christ's Cross, all Christians are called to renounce all our natural human strength and wisdom.

... delivered to the glory of the cross, the glory of God's weakness and folly that is stronger and wiser than men (1 Corinthians 1:18-25).

James Hamilton Jr., *God's Glory In Salvation Through Judgment*

Meditate and Pray: In our day, the temptation is to undervalue Christ's gift of leaders for His church. We must learn this lesson in our day when there is a *shortage of ordained leaders*. How we need to implore our Risen and Ascended Lord to again make his Cross bud with fruitful leadership over His flock.

The ministry is a branch that grew out of the grave of Christ: let it be esteemed as lightly as men please, had not Christ died for it, we had not a ministry in the world.

John Owen, *Works*, pg. 441, vol 9

Fri/Sat/Sun: read John 7:25-36; John 5:37-44 & Jude 17-21**Leading in Love**

We began this week by noting the church's foundation of godly leadership in Christ's *descent into this world* (in His Incarnation) and *His descent on the Cross and even to the depths of the grave*. Only from His grave does the fruit of godly leadership and a healthy church arise. And, indeed, how thankful we ought to be that Christ descended to this earth and onto the Cross to shepherd His sheep and *pattern the kind of leadership He requires in the church* – Cross-shaped leadership.

What would we have been left with, if Christ had not taken the lead to shepherd His flock? See how Jesus describes leaders without the Cross as their guiding principle:

- They are of their father the devil (John 8:41-44)
- Though they take pride in searching the Scriptures, they have never seen Him because they have no place for God's Word (John 5:38-40)
- They are false shepherds who only shepherd when they themselves profit (John 10:12-14)
- They seek glory from one another, not God (John 5:44)
- They do not have the love of God (John 5:42)

How tragic if Christ had left us in the hands of such inept spiritual leaders! More than that (for we who are church leaders know all too painfully) *if Christ had left the sheep under our care, only to go back to heaven without leaving His Spirit to guide and inform our leadership*, we would have failed miserably to care properly for His church!

The greatest tragedy for such false leaders is that they do not have the love of God in them (John 5:42) and so they view their calling as a merely human endeavor to get and maintain their own power base. Without the controlling power of the love of God inside us, we as under-shepherds (and sheep!) are in danger of all sorts of spiritual snares and traps.

Meditate and Pray: Jude warns us of the danger of not “keeping ourselves in the love of God” and urges us to remember the warnings which Christ through His Apostles gave the church about false leaders. Sheep are endangered when the love of God does not control all we think, say, and do.

And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, **the love of many will grow cold.** But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Matthew 24:10-13

Lord of the Church, please pour out into our hearts the love of God by the Holy Spirit you have given us (Romans 5:5). Enable us as leaders to boldly care for your flock in love. Help us to be committed, first of all, to your truth, because “Love rejoices in the truth.” Help us to guard the Gospel and the truths of Scripture, because without a firm grip on the Bible, your sheep will starve. Help us as sheep to “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” and to be found consistently at the places where you open your Word to us. May we grow daily in our love to you. Amen.