

GOD'S GIFTS TO THE CHURCH

Ephesians 4:7-16

This is a copy of the sermon preached by Dr. Paul Mims, Pastor, Cornerstone Baptist Church, January 22, 2012

A service club in Myrtle Beach invited the local pastors to an annual luncheon that remembered and paid tribute to the four army chaplains who gave their lives to save many soldiers who were on their way to the European conflict during World War II. It was an inspiring time for me and the other pastors. Here is their story.

It was the evening of Feb. 2, 1943, and the U.S. Army Transport Ship Dorchester was crowded to capacity. Hans J. Danielsen, the ship's captain, was concerned and cautious. He knew they were in dangerous waters; German U-boats were constantly prowling these vital sea lanes, and several ships had already been sunk.

The Dorchester was only 150 miles from its destination, but the captain ordered the men to sleep in their clothing and keep life jackets on. Many soldiers sleeping deep in the ship's hold disregarded the order because of the engine's heat. Others ignored it because the life jackets were uncomfortable.

On Feb. 3, at 12:55 a.m., a periscope broke the chilly Atlantic waters. Through the cross hairs, an officer aboard the German submarine U-223 spotted the Dorchester and fired. One torpedo hit--striking the starboard side--far below the water line. Moments later, the Captain gave the order to abandon ship. In less than 20 minutes, the Dorchester would slip beneath the Atlantic's icy waters.

Panic and chaos had set in. Men jumped from the ship into lifeboats, over-crowding them to the point of capsizing. Through the chaos, four Army chaplains brought hope in despair and light in darkness. Those chaplains were Lt. George Fox, Methodist; Lt. Alexander Goode, Jewish; Lt. John Washington, Roman Catholic; and Lt. Clark Poling, Dutch Reformed.

Quickly and quietly, the four spread out among the soldiers. There they tried to calm the frightened, tend the wounded and guide the disoriented toward safety. One Army Private found himself floating in oil-smearred water surrounded by dead bodies and debris. "I could hear men crying, pleading, praying," He recalled. "I could also hear the chaplains preaching courage. Their voices were the only thing that kept me going."

Another sailor, PO John Mahoney tried to reenter his cabin, but Rabbi Goode stopped him. The sailor concerned about the cold Arctic air, explained he had forgotten his gloves. "Never mind," CHP Goode responded. "I have two pairs." The rabbi then gave the petty officer his own gloves. In retrospect, Mahoney realized that Rabbi Goode was not conveniently carrying two pairs of gloves, and that the rabbi had decided not to leave the Dorchester.

By this time, most of the men were topside, and the chaplains opened a storage locker and began distributing life jackets. It was then that Engineer Grady Clark witnessed an astonishing sight. When there were no more lifejackets in the storage room, the chaplains removed theirs and gave them to four frightened young men.

"It was the finest thing I have seen or hope to see this side of heaven," said John Ladd, another survivor

who saw the chaplains' selfless act. Ladd's response is understandable. The altruistic action of the four chaplains constitutes one of the purest spiritual and ethical acts a person can make. When giving their life jackets, Rabbi Goode did not call out for a Jew; Father Washington did not call out for a Catholic; nor did the Reverends Fox and Poling call out for a Protestant. They simply gave their life jackets to the next man in line.

As the ship went down, survivors in nearby rafts could see the four chaplains —arms linked and braced against the slanting deck. Their voices could also be heard offering prayers.

When the news reached American shores, the nation was stunned by the magnitude of the tragedy and heroic conduct of the four chaplains.

"Valor is a gift," Carl Sandburg once said. "Those having it never know for sure whether they have it until the test comes." That night Chaplains Fox, Goode, Poling and Washington passed life's ultimate test. In doing so, they became an enduring example of extraordinary faith, courage and selflessness.

These Chaplains were some of God's gifts to his people. Today, we are going to focus on the gifts of leadership that he has given to his church. In this same line of teaching, we have studied the seven essentials of unity and the seven essentials of belief that are required for a healthy church. In this same chapter of Ephesians 4, Paul explains the human leadership of the church and why it is so essential for the health of the Body of Christ. First, we shall look at

THE GIVER (vv.7-11).

The other side of the doctrine of the unity of the church is the diversity of the church. Each person is unique and a spiritual gift is designed for the personality and abilities of each individual. There are no two members who are exactly alike nor do they have the same function as someone else. Christ is pictured here as descending from the glory of heaven to the lower parts of the earth – Bethlehem's manger, the cross, and the tomb. But he also ascended back to heaven having completed the work of redemption in conquering Satan, sin, demons, and death. Now as the ascended and reigning head of the church, he gives spiritual gifts to those who serve him. These gifts are twofold: they are empowerments to serve in the church and they are men appointed to certain areas of service in the kingdom.

The picture here is of Christ reigning in heaven overseeing the work of his church that he has unified by his Spirit. When the body strives to preserve this unity and each member co-operates with all the others then the church moves forward against the gates of hell. This diversity of gifts does not hinder unity but strongly promotes it. Just like the four chaplains mentioned above who were true to their calling and resulted in the cause of righteousness advancing in the earth, those who are true to our Lord see their role in the church as just as vital. A stark contrast to these four men was the captain of the cruise ship that ran aground off the coast of Italy last week and deserted his ship, crew, and passengers.

THE GIFTS (VV.11-13).

There are four leadership gifts that Jesus has placed in his church. The first is **APOSTLES**. You say, "We do not have an apostle at Cornerstone nor do I know of one in any other church." You are right. This was a gift for a limited time in the beginning of the church. These were the founders and there were only thirteen of them composed of the twelve disciples who became apostles and also Paul who was chosen to be an apostle. Apostles were men who were directly appointed by our Lord to spread the gospel to establish churches. The requirement for an apostle was one who had seen Christ in his

resurrected glory. Acts 1:22 says, “For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.” 2 Corinthians 12:12 says, “The things that mark an apostle – signs wonders and miracles – were done among you with great perseverance.” This was a spiritual power to confirm the message that they preached. Their ministry was foundational to the church. In Ephesians 2:20 Paul says, “...God’s household built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.”

The second category of gifts is **PROPHETS**. This does not refer to the Old Testament prophets, but to those the Lord called after his ascension. These were the preachers that received direct revelations from God and proclaimed them to the church. Today, we call them preachers. Of course, not every preacher is a prophet, but there are times when a pastor is in the role of prophet when he proclaims the Word of the Lord. There are also times when a pastor fills the role of priest such as when he administers the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

The third category of gifts is **EVANGELISTS**. There are evangelists such as Billy Graham and thousands of others who have the special anointing to win the lost to Christ. They diagnose the sinner’s condition, probe the mind, present the truth, and call for a decision, and offer assurance to the converted. They also help the new believers find their way into a church where they can be nourished and grow in the faith.

The fourth category of gifts is **PASTOR-TEACHER**. This is one who leads a local church in worship and in the ministries of the congregation. He is like a shepherd leading his sheep and caring for their needs. He feeds them a healthy diet of God’s Word and interprets for them what it means and applies it to their lives.

THE GROWTH (vv.12-16).

The purpose of these leadership gifts is to develop the personal spiritual gifts of the congregation. Notice how the scripture outlines it: “...to prepare God’s people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” Here is the progression: The gifts equip the congregation – the congregation then serves each according to his or her spiritual gift – the church is built up and the Kingdom advances.

One year, I was privileged to be president of the Virginia Baptist Pastor’s Conference and the annual meeting was held in the Virginia Beach Convention Center. I invited an evangelist, the late Dr. Vance Havner to be a guest speaker. He said, “We sing ‘Standing on the Promises’ while most of what we are doing is sitting on the premises.” He also said in another setting, “Every Christian is commissioned for every Christian is a missionary. It has been said that the Gospel is not merely something to come to church to hear but something to go from church to tell – and we are appointed to tell it. It has also been said, ‘Christianity began as a company of lay witnesses. It has become professional pulpitism, financed by spectators!’ Nowadays we hire a church staff to do full time Christian work and we sit in church on Sundays and watch them do it. Every Christian is meant to be in full time Christian service. There is indeed a special ministry for pastors, teachers, and evangelist – but for what? For the perfecting of the saints for their ministry.”

Notice the ultimate goal our Lord had in mind when he gave these gifts to the church. “Then we will be no longer infants, tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the

truth in love, we will grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

God’s gifts to the church are designed to help the church overcome immaturity, instability, and gullibility. When a congregation is well grounded in the Word, they will not be open to the theological fads that come along and deceive so many. If Ephesian 4:1-16 were applied to us, what would Cornerstone look like?

- We would be a church of significant Bible knowledge growing in our understanding of the scriptures so that we could apply them to our lives.
- We would be a church where our members had a daily quiet time in which we would read scripture, pray, meditate and study the disciplines of the Christian life.
- We would be a church where the majority of our members are faithful in worship each week.
- We would be a church where our members regularly share their faith with unbelievers.
- We would be a church where many of our members are discovering their spiritual gifts and are engaged in using them to advance the cause of Christ.
- We would be a church where missions are the very fire in our souls.
- We would be a church where giving to the Lord’s work is a joy not to be missed.
- We would be a church where personal relationships are so strong Satan cannot break them asunder.
- We would be a church where the community would know we are Christians by our love.
- We would be a church involved in the community with compassion for the needy.
- We would be a church that stands for Biblical values and social justice for all.
- We would be a church that could occasionally hear the clapping of nail-scarred hands.
- We stand on the threshold of a whole new era in Cornerstone’s life. If we become the kind of church that our Lord’s wants us to be there are exciting days ahead. If we pledge afresh ourselves to Jesus, to each other, and to our mission, the windows of heaven will open and such blessings will be poured out that there will not be room enough to receive them.

Praise Be To His Name!