

EQUIPPING THE SAINTS

A little French boy was asked to define a saint. All he could think of were the figures he had seen in the stained-glass windows of the church. So he answered, "A saint is a man the light shines through." How true he was. A saint is a person the light of God shines through.

The Apostle Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians, "To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus." (1:1) When Paul speaks of "**the saints**" he is referring, not to someone who has been canonized by the Church, but to **all** Christians, **all** who believe in Jesus Christ, **all** God's people, including **you** and **me**? **We** are God's "**saints**."

Even as Paul lists some of the special functions which need to be carried out in the church – "some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers" – there is a very real sense in which he intends all Christians to do at least some of each of these things. He indicates that we are able to do them because God has given us gifts that are "a measure of Christ's gift." (4.7)

So let us think together about these words from Ephesians and their implications for those of us who would be 'Saints' of God at Valley.

I - The measure of Christ's gift has been given to us so that we might help prepare one another for Christian service. "For the equipment of the saints for the work of the ministry." The literal translation of the word for ministry is '**deaconing**' and means **service**. In one sense, we are all Deacons. We need to be prepared in the church to carry on the work of service which God entrusts to us. Jesus said, "whoever would be great among you must be your servant...." (Mk 10:43-44) Preaching and teaching are by no means the only work of the church. Practical service in the name of Christ is just as important a part of that work as well. The poor and lonely people, inside and outside the church, have always been a concern of God's people. One of the distinctive marks of the Christian community has been, and ought to be, a willingness to help those in need.

Such Christian service is not done for reward. It is motivated by gratitude to the Son of God who “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mk 10:45) The true church is a fellowship of **lovers** – lovers of God in Christ and lovers of all God’s children. A great bond of fellowship exists in the church when this ministry and service result from the love of Christ. There are a lot of lonely people in this room, and in our area, and in the world. We can serve our Lord well by serving one another in love as friends and helpers. And as we reach out to serve in love, the love of Christ is released in ever greater measure in and through our lives.

We are to help ‘**equip the saints**’ by serving one another in love.

II - The end of this, according to Paul, is “for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith...and to maturity.” (vs 13) Our aim is to strengthen the church to the glory of Christ. Our aim must be to draw the members of the body of Christ into ever closer **unity**. Notice how often throughout this passage Paul speaks in the plural. “**We**.” The fullness of spiritual achievement is not attained by the individual in isolation, just as one part of the body cannot reach its full development except as the whole body continues its healthy growth.

Too often orthodoxy, “right belief,” has divided Christians instead of uniting them. Christian faith requires right belief and heresy is a constant danger to the church. But **faith** in the Biblical sense is a personal relationship with God in Christ rather than an intellectual assent to a “system of doctrine.” Someone has said, you spell faith - **FAITH** - **F**orsaking **A**ll **I** Trust **H**im; we trust God through his revelation in Christ by the Holy Spirit. The “**unity of faith**” of which Paul speaks, then, is the unity demanded by our faith in one Lord. It involves a common trust, a common obedience, and a common listening to the words of the Lord. As the spokes of a wheel come closer together as they draw closer to the

hub, so as we draw closer to Christ we find ourselves closer in spirit if not in detail of understanding.

Where can Christ be personally known? Not in the systems or formulas, but in the **fellowships** of Christians where Christ is personally present in the Spirit. Christ is mediated to us through other persons. So as we find unity in fellowship we find a deepening of the presence of Christ in our lives. Churches everywhere are coming alive as Christians come together for fellowship, instruction, sharing in faith, and prayer. As Christians see that being a Christian makes a difference at home, in business, and in all human relationships, and as they share together their victories and defeats, a unity comes which strengthens all and builds up the body of Christ.

III - The final aim is that members of the Church should reach maturity. God did not intend that we should merely live decent, respectable lives. Jesus said, "Be perfect even as your heavenly father is perfect." (Matt) Now the word **perfect** means whole, complete, mature. We are meant to be examples of whole, complete and mature people. The child-like heart is needed in order to appreciate the "Gospel." But we are not to cultivate childishness or immaturity. "When I became a man, I put away childish things," says Paul. (I Cor 13:11) A childhood level church school education is an important beginning, but it is not enough for the storms of later life. If Christianity were only a few ethical percepts, then no great demand for continuing study and understanding would be essential. One meaning of "**disciple**" is "**student**." Christians are to be life-long students of Jesus Christ. Continuous growth is needed if faith is not to wither away and die.

The secret of Christian maturity is growing into ever deeper fellowship with Christ until we attain "the measure of the fellowship of Christ." The goal of the Church is nothing less than to produce people who have in them the **reflection** of Jesus Christ himself. It is told that during the Crimean War Florence Nightingale was passing one night

down a hospital ward. She paused to bend over the bed of a badly wounded soldier. As she looked down, the wounded lad looked up and said: **“You’re Christ to me.”** Love, joy, peace, kindness, gentleness, patience, self-control. These are the virtues which Christ exhibited in his life and which he desires that we should reflect. A **saint** has been defined as “someone in whom Christ lives again.” And that is exactly what the true Christian ought to be.

But again, let us not forget the plural **“we.”** Paul thinks of maturity as a mark of the whole collective body of Christ. We cannot become full-grown men and women by ourselves. Nothing matures us so effectively as full sharing in the common life of the Christian fellowship, in a fellowship characterized by repentance, honesty, forgiveness, and especially love. Only in the fellowship of believers can we corporately be **transformed** into the body of Christ. There we can “grow in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” (Eph 4:15)

Conclusion

“His gifts were made that Christians might be properly equipped for their service, that the whole body might be built up until the time comes when, in the unity of the common faith and common knowledge of the Son of God, we arrive at real maturity - - the measure of development which is meant by ‘the fulness of Christ.’” (John 15 Phillips)

What a tremendous challenge this is to we who are the people of God in this place. Open to and empowered by the presence of the Spirit of Christ, let us seek to build and maintain a dynamic fellowship, good leadership, sound doctrine, suitable discipline, Christian service, and faithful worship which will enable us together to be equipped to serve our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, at this time and in this place. Let us be those who **let the light of God in Christ shine through us.** Let us be **saints.** May it be so. Amen.

Ephesians 4: 12-13 Valley