

New Generation Community – Raising up a new generation (Ephesians 4v1-16)

I wonder if some of you are thinking “I am used to hearing preachers talking about the need to get ready to go to heaven, now all you are talking about is changing the city”? The problem is that a wrong emphasis came into Christianity when it lost its connection with its Jewish roots. Jesus and the Jewish apostles constantly spoke about the coming of the kingdom of God on earth. But later church leaders, whose roots were in Greek philosophy, started to emphasize the need to escape from this evil earth and go to a spiritual heaven. We need to get back to the Jewish roots of our faith and understand that we are saved in order to prepare the way for the coming of the kingdom and to prepare ourselves to be part of the kingdom. That is just what “raising up a new generation to change our city” is all about. It was this “vision of the new generation community” that we studied two weeks ago from Ephesians chapter 1.

Last week our subject was the Unity of the new generation community. We saw from Ephesians 2 how important this unity is to God our Father. Today we are going to study Ephesians 4v1-16, to see how to raise up the new generation that will change our city. We begin with verses 1 and 2:

¹As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

In these verses Paul tells us that the wonderful things we have learned about God’s purpose should affect our everyday lives. They are not just to be theoretical ideas. The fact that we, undeserving people, have been brought into God’s family, as Paul has told us in the first three chapters, means that we should be humble and patient with each other and should love each other because God has loved us.

Paul then returns to the theme of unity in verses 3-6:

³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

He tells us to make sure we preserve the unity we have been brought into. Let’s think of the example of marriage. God says that when a man and women get married they become one flesh. But then they have to work hard to keep that unity in the coming years. Keeping the unity in a church also requires work. There have been changes in recent months and maybe some of them you have not liked. We can each have our opinions about what we like and what we don’t like but we should not let these things divide us. We need to focus on the vision we have in common, just as Paul in verses 3 to 6 points to the things Christians have in common.

In verses 7 to 10 Paul changes focus from unity to diversity.

⁷But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ⁸This is why it says: “When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.” ⁹(What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? ¹⁰He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)

Paul quotes from Psalm 68, which tells of a king in a victory parade giving out gifts. When Jesus had triumphed over the power of Satan on the cross, he rose from the dead and forty days later he ascended to the place of all authority, which he shares with his Father in heaven. The Father then gave the Holy Spirit to Jesus to give to his followers on earth. The Holy Spirit enables us to serve Jesus and each other by giving us each special gifts, as we read in verses 11 and 12.

¹¹It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹²to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

The five gifts Paul mentions in verse 11 are generally called “leadership gifts” because people who are equipped in this way usually end up leading churches. In his letters to the Corinthians and the Romans, Paul lists many other spiritual gifts. We may not all be leaders in churches but each of us is given gifts with which we can serve others. These gifts are called “spiritual gifts” because they come from the Holy Spirit. They may be supernatural gifts like prophecy or tongues or they may be natural gifts that Holy Spirit breathes new life into such as helping, giving or teaching.

What is the purpose of these abilities he gives us? Verse 12 tells us. It is very important we read this correctly. The leaders in a church are not there to both prepare the people *and* to do the work. Leaders are to prepare the people to do the work. That is why our vision is not to “change our city” but to “raise up a new generation”. It is this new generation that, when properly trained and motivated, will change our city.

It is not just church leaders who should raise up the new generation, group leaders should have the same aim. A group leader’s job is to motivate and train the group members to discover what they can do to change the city and then lead them to do it together. That is why, if we want to see our city changed, we each need to be part of a group, either by joining an existing group or starting a new group.

Maybe some of you are thinking, I am not a church leader or group leader so this message is not me. But it is for you also because all of us are given gifts by the Holy Spirit. We should all have the aim to lift up others by our words of encouragement, financial giving, practical service or whatever God calls us to. Not one of us is unnecessary and not one of us should be passive. We should each do what we can to help raise up, and be part of, the generation that will change the city.

Paul continues in verses 13 and 14:

¹³until 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. ¹⁴Then we will no longer be 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.

If we use our gifts to build up each other, we will become united in our faith and our knowledge of Jesus. The whole church will grow in maturity and this will protect it from being vulnerable to false ideas, confusion and division.

Moving on to verse 15 Paul writes:

¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

This is a difficult verse to translate. Some English versions translate the first part as “Speak the truth in a loving way” but the Greek means more than this. We are to live in a truthful way. However, speaking is an important part of living.

The last part of the verse leaves us a bit unsure if the aim is to become better connected with Christ or to become more like Christ. Either is a good aim though probably the second is what Paul had in mind.

Our contact with each other, what we do and how we speak, must be truthful. However, we must do this in a loving way. Some of us are too eager to speak truth without thinking of the effect of our words on others. Don’t say something negative to someone if you have not said positive things first. Sometimes we are so concerned to unburden ourselves that we do not consider how those we are speaking to will be made to feel by what we say. Many of us have been brought up not to speak positively at all, we just keep quiet until there is something negative to say. That is a major reason why so many feel lonely and depressed in this city and its churches. We all need to hear a lot of positive things. With the help of the Holy Spirit we can change our habits.

Make yourself a checklist with two questions:

Have I said something positive to encourage someone today?

Have I said something that has hurt someone today?

Go through this list everyday as part of your prayer time for three months and I am sure you will see a difference. This discipline has helped me in recent years.

There are two aspects of modern life that are really destructive: isolation and mistrust. We isolate ourselves from each other because we are afraid others will hurt us by saying negative things to us or behind our backs. Maybe they feel the same about us. We have to learn to consistently communicate with each other in a loving and encouraging way. If we do this, we will start to trust each other more and come closer to each other without fear of being hurt. Let’s leave behind the negative lifestyle we have learned from our society or even, unfortunately, from our church, and become a new positive generation. Such a generation will change our city.

¹⁶From 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.

In verse 16 Paul He uses the picture of the human body in which the connections between the various parts both hold the body together help each part to grow. We all know that if a part of our body is cut off, it dies. We cannot grow properly as Christians without the support and correction of others. But we cannot be close friends with everyone. If we just attend worship services, we may feel that no one really cares for us. Certainly we should greet each other when we meet and use the coffee times to socialize with others. That is why the coffee time is an important part of every service; we are not trying to promote coffee drinking but contact with each other! The prayer ministry at the end of services is another way of helping each other. But to have deeper long-term contacts where we can use our gifts and really give something of Christ to others, we have to be part of a smaller group of people that meets, talks and prays regularly.

However, better social contact and better communication links will not alone build up the church. We need to make sure that we are each in daily contact with God our Father and Jesus our Lord through the help of the Holy Spirit. It is only as we have a living connection with Jesus the Head of the Body, that we will receive from him the life and love and gifts we need to build up and encourage each other.

Let us leave behind the old way of thinking that is focused on just attending meetings once a week and having a private faith the rest of the time. Let us obey the teaching the Holy Spirit has given in this letter to Ephesians. Let us get connected with each other in small groups, let us use our gifts to encourage each other and let us all take part in raising up, and becoming, a generation who will change our city.

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