

To the fullness of Christ: The flowing together of the Christ Gifts

Introduction

This brief study will focus on various aspects of why and how the gifts of the ascended Christ, which we usually call Ephesians 4 ministries or Ephesians 4 gifts, function or flow together. However, instead of these usual descriptions I have used the term 'Christ gifts'. This has been done in order to emphasise their relationship to Christ; to their origin or source; their oneness or corporate nature; their purpose; and their ultimate goal, which is to prepare the mature corporate man, the church, to attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Flowing From One Source

The very first thing to establish is that all the Christ gifts have their origin in one source: Christ himself. They all flow out from the will and eternal purpose of the Godhead and are the particular remit of the Eternal Son: '*It was **he** who gave some to be...*' (Ephesians 4:11). Unlike the gifts of Spirit, which the whole Body is encouraged and urged to seek after and use, no one can make or appoint himself a Christ gift; it is the sole prerogative of the ascended Christ to make that person a gift to the Body. Such matters are determined and decided by Christ before the foundation of the world. For example, Paul said of himself:

I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when God, who set me apart from birth [or from my mother's womb] and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man. (Galatians 1:14-16)

The sovereign choice by Christ of his ascension gifts to men is also different from the honourable aspiration that any man can have to eldership:

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. (1Timothy 3:1)

All true Christ gifts will understand the implications of this: their very existence is not merely predicated on their salvation in Christ. They have also been called to be a particular manifestation and function of Christ within and to his Body. Their apostleship or evangelist-ship is not a positional function as is eldership (the use of the word 'office' in the AV is not in the text): it is *who* they are. Christ gave them to **be**. This is the controlling force of each and every breath, thought, word and action. It governs everything they see, because they have had a revelation of Christ and of the corporate mature man, the prepared bride, the heavenly Jerusalem.

The fact that there is the one common source for all Christ gifts means that there is an inherent unity among them. They are one. They are given by the Son who is in

complete unity with the Father and the Holy Spirit; the Son does only the will of the Father, and the Holy Spirit has no agenda but that of the Father and the Son. In like manner, all Christ gifts are given not only to the Body, but to each other. They are expressions of the oneness of the Godhead. No genuine Christ gift, therefore, will view himself independently of the Body or of any other of the Christ gifts to whom God has joined him. He will not function independently of other Christ gifts. To attempt such a thing would be a denial of who that man is. No one man on his own can minister all of Christ. The corporate man can be produced only by corporate Christ gifts, flowing together in practical application of that unity.

Flowing With One Purpose to One Goal

One of the problems in Corinth appears to be that the church was attempting to divide between the various Christ gifts. In doing so they were trying to divide Christ himself:

'I follow Paul; I follow Apollos; I follow Cephas; I follow Christ'. Is Christ divided? (1Corinthians 1:12-13)

Paul reminded the Corinthians that the Christ gifts all have one common purpose:

The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose. (1Corinthians 3:8)

It necessarily follows, then, that all the Christ gifts flow together with one common purpose towards the one goal, since the undivided Christ has only one purpose and goal for them:

*He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe. It was he [the ascended Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 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. Then 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. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things **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. Ephesians 4:10-16*

Let me draw attention to some key words and terms in this passage so we can discover what the function and aim of the Christ gifts is in and towards the Body:

Mature – Telos:

Completion; Perfection; Final step; Crown; Goal; Maturity; Result; Conclusion; Finally; fully; totally.

*And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then **the end will come**. (Matthew 24:14)*

*Then **the end will come**, when he [Jesus] hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. (1Corinthians 15:24)*

Infant – Nepios:

Small child up to ten years old; Not just a child – teknon/paidia; Childishness; Immature; Foolish; Infantile behaviour; Foolish confidence in luck; Living in unreality; one who ignores advice of the wise.

*When I was a child, I talked like a **child**, I thought like a **child**, I reasoned like a **child**. When I became a man, I put **childish** ways behind me. (1Corinthians 13:11)*

Grow up – Auxano:

To bring to growth; Promote; Raise one's position; To rise in reputation and power; Increase; Make great.

*...we will in all things **grow up** into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. (Ephesians 4:15)*

Measure – Metron:

Measure; Proportion.

*Give, and it will be given to you. A good **measure**, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the **measure** you use, it will be **measured** to you. (Luke 6:38)*

A Metron-ome determines the pace/tempo of a piece of music. Christ is the metron-ome: the determiner of the pace/tempo of the Body and its progress to fullness.

*....attaining to the whole **measure** of the **fullness** of Christ. (Ephesians 4:13)*

Fullness – Pleroma:

From *pleres*: full; filled to overfull; Used of a fully laden ship; Rich fullness; Totality; Consummation; Fullness of quality; Perfection in amount and quality

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, **full [richly full]** of grace and truth. (John 1:14)*

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in

heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Colossians 1:15-20)

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:9-12)

*And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is **his body, the fullness** of him who fills everything in every way. (Ephesians 1:22-23)*

Flowing Together from Within

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers... (1Corinthians 12:27)

It is impossible to be a Christ gift outside of the Body of Christ. All Christ gifts, first and foremost, are part of the Body. They are believers, sons of God, members of God's household, joined together in the covenant community of the King. They belong to specific communities and have real relationships with their brothers and sisters in Christ. All the Christ gifts flow with the rest of the Body in the life of Christ. They do not belong to a separate 'clergy' class or order of Christian which relates only to other Christ gifts and to whom the other members of the Body do not relate or communicate with directly. Elders, therefore, are not the interconnecting link between Christ gifts and the people of God, although a healthy and vibrant relationship between elders and specific Christ gifts is of paramount importance. Note what Acts 13 says:

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers. (Acts 13:1)

Even though Christ gifts are given before time they emerge from within the community of God. The gestation period for any Christ gift is within the house of God. This is vital, because we shall see in a moment that all Christ gifts are given to the whole Body and not to be confined to or within the localised expression of that Body. When Paul and Barnabas had completed their first missionary journey they returned home to their own:

From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. And they stayed there a long time with the disciples. (Acts 14:26-28)

Flowing Together In Order

*And in the church God has appointed **first** of all apostles, **second** prophets, **third** teachers, then... (1Corinthians 12:28)*

There is an order for the Christ gifts to flow together. They don't converge from separate, isolated tributaries or other sources. Neither do they diverge to separate unrelated functions, merely notifying one another of their various activities. They have to flow in order. It is extremely unwise to attempt to build a roof before the foundations have been laid. Rooms are furnished after they have been decorated. The house of God is built in the right order with the right materials by the right craftsmen. Christ gifts understand the proper order of things in the house of God; they have no interest in filling their diary with preaching engagements or 'ministry trips'. They are establishers and builders, concerned with permanency, with what lasts. Some Christ gifts are planters, others are waterers. The planter needs the waterer to water what he has planted. The waterer needs plants to water! A Christ gift might be a planter in one aspect of his gift, but a waterer in another. Paul understood that he alone, while remaining the Father of the Corinthian church, needed other gifts like the teacher Apollos to water what he had planted: Christ. But Apollos could not water until Paul had planted.

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labour. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. (1Corinthians 3:5-9)

This principle of one planting and another watering is not a one off occasion for a church. Many different aspects of Christ have to be planted at different times, just as there are different seasons for planting in the natural. Once that particular plant of Christ has been put into the soil of the church, another Christ gift will be needed to water it. That process continues until the whole measure of the fullness of Christ is attained.

Apostles: the Catalysts of the Flow

To facilitate and administrate the orderly flow of the Christ gifts to the Body, and that the house is built in the correct manner, God has ordained that the catalyst for the other Christ gifts is the apostle. An apostle is able to draw together all the other Christ gifts necessary for the completion of the 'building programme' of which God has given him the blueprint. He is an architect, a wise master builder. Paul described himself in these terms:

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. (1Corinthians 3:10)

An apostle is also a matchmaker: he is arranging the marriage between Christ and his bride:

I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. (2Corinthians 11:2)

As the matchmaker, the apostle as catalyst for the other Christ gifts, who also have the same marriage and finished house as their aim, is able to bring those other Christ gifts that God has given him together so that they pragmatically put into effect on the ground what they have seen in the Spirit. They are able to equip the saints more effectively. An apostle is able to discern which Christ gifts the church needs at any time, and what kind of a particular Christ gift: what kind of prophet? What kind of teacher? We must always bear in mind that even within the various Christ gifts there are varieties. Paul utilised those Christ gifts with him, dispensing them to various places for various reasons, or travelling with them, calling on their own gifts:

Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. "After I have been there," he said, "I must visit Rome also." 22He sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he stayed in the province of Asia a little longer. (Acts 19:21-23)

He [Paul] was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia. (Acts 20:4)

Therefore I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church. (1Corinthians 4:16-18)

Are the other Christ gifts also able to discern which gift or gifts are needed in a church? Most definitely: part of the process of the Body coming to maturity is the maturing of the Christ gifts themselves. They should be able to make increasingly considerable judgements concerning their own usefulness and function to the Body. However, in all this their measure in that regard is not to the measure or revelatory ability that is inherent in apostleship. Part of the flowing together is an ability to appreciate not only one's own strengths, limitations, measures of faith and maturity, but also those of one's fellow labourers.

In practice: this does not mean that Christ gifts just sit around like some WWII bomber crew, awaiting orders from Bomber Command to go on their next sortie. No, each of the Christ gifts has to grow from being a novice in that gift to a place of maturity. They will need to be disciplined by the other Christ gifts in their own Christ gift. Subsequently, they will be increasingly able to understand their own 'times and places' and those of their fellow workers. They will be free to take initiatives within their own Christ gift, but always with a corporate understanding of the brotherhood they represent.

We can see this in the example of Judas and Silas, who were entrusted by the Jerusalem council to take the decision concerning circumcision to Antioch. They did this dutifully and faithfully. However, once they had completed what they had been sent to do, they had a freedom and maturity within their own Christ gift (they were prophets), to move within that gift without recourse to Jerusalem.

Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers... 'We are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing...' The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers. After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. But Silas decided to remain there. (Acts 15:22-34, extracted)

Note especially that last sentence: Judas returned to Jerusalem, but Silas decided to stay in Antioch. He felt a freedom to remain. I believe this was of the Holy Spirit; during this time he grew close to Paul and began to flow with him in the localised expression of the Body at Antioch. The Spirit was preparing them for something that could not be confined within the church at Antioch. This flowing together grew to such an extent that when Paul and Barnabas had their disagreement over John Mark, Paul decided to take Silas with him (see Acts 15:40). It was no fit of pique by Paul; Christ had brought two key gifts together.

Further, note that at the end of his letter to Corinth, Paul mentions Timothy again, indicating that he might take a visit to them on his own imitative:

If Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am. No one, then, should refuse to accept him. Send him on his way in peace so that he may return to me. I am expecting him along with the brothers. (1Corinthians 16:10-11)

The company of the Christ gifts are also able to take corporate decisions as to which of them is to undertake certain responsibilities. When Paul encouraged the Corinthians to share in relieving the financial needs in Jerusalem, we find Paul informing the church:

*So **we** have urged Titus, who encouraged your giving in the first place, to return and encourage you to complete your share in this service of giving. (2Corinthians 8:6)*

Clearly, those accompanying Paul (he was probably in Macedonia) were involved in the dialogue and decision-making process that resulted in Titus being urged to return to Corinth. It is also possible that the 'we' included those who were not Christ gifts. The manifold wisdom of God is not confined to them.

The eldership of a church should also be able to recognise what their people need in order to grow to fullness. While this study does not deal with the flow between elders and Christ gifts, that in itself is a vitally important study.

This free-flowing use of the Christ gifts to the Body is a major facet of the church being the manifold (beautifully varied) wisdom of God (Ephesians 3:10). The church should be exposed to the wide variety of Christ expressed through the different gifts; the different varieties within each gift. At a certain time a church might need prophets of sign; at others prophets of word. The permutations are as varied as Christ wants them to be. He is not producing a monochrome church; he is the God of the rainbow.

Flowing Together to the Whole Body

All Christ gifts are given to the whole Body, not only to localised expressions of the Body. A Christ gift cannot confine his activity and function solely within one aspect of the Body; that Christ gift in the person is needed across the whole Body, depending on the maturity of that Christ gift and where and when it is needed. Admittedly, the Christ gift is schooled within a localised expression; it gestates there. But no Christ gift will mature to what Christ intends for him by confining himself to one localised community. The consequences of such actions are extremely serious. Let me highlight some:

1. He himself will go to seed and decline.
2. Other emerging Christ gifts of the same calling within his local community will not have the opportunity to grow. He becomes the cork in the bottle.
3. He will begin to move in a gift he does not have, or attempt to make a secondary gift his primary one, to the detriment of his primary one.
4. The apostle no longer has available to him a vital part of his building and marriage preparation 'company'.
5. That Christ gift's fellow workers, especially those who are of the same gift, are spread wider and thinner as they have to make up his absence from the field. They become less effective.
6. They also become vulnerable because of the risk of violating the two by two principle. They cannot travel alone, so they too risk become locked up.
7. It gives the devil opportunity to fill the vacuum with the counterfeit.
8. The wider Body of Christ suffers loss.
9. Most importantly: Christ himself is disobeyed and dishonoured.

Flowing Together as Iron Sharpening Iron

Finally, an important aspect of flowing together is that the distinct Christ gifts need to be with the other Christ gifts:

Is Christ divided? (1Corinthians 1:13)

It's interesting to note that in Antioch that it was not just one group of Christ gifts that were meeting together:

*In the church at Antioch there were **prophets and teachers**...while **they** were worshipping the Lord and fasting... (Acts 13:1-2)*

I believe this is a very important aspect of the success of flowing together. The Christ gifts should never be departmentalised into separate and unconnected functions. Teachers, for example, because of their particular role, need to be constantly exposed to the environments of the apostles and prophets, in which revelation comes and doctrine is established. The teacher needs to experience that environment of the revelatory gifts, so he can furnish the house of God according to the pattern. The greatest danger to the early church was not false apostles or false prophets: it was false teachers. A careful reading of the New Testament will show that the apostles constantly had to deal with false teaching, even from those from their own company who went out with unauthorised teaching, as was the case in Acts 15:

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." (Acts 15:1)

The letter that Judas and Silas took to Antioch began:

*We have heard that some went out from us **without our authorization** and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. (Acts 15:24)*

Each of the Christ gifts brings to the table a particular facet of Christ and his administration of his plan for the fullness of his people. They see the same thing through different eyes and from different angles. Each one has strengths and God imposed limitations, indicating their absolute need of one another. As they flow together in the presence of the Holy Spirit, praying, studying the word, listening to one another, challenging each other, seeing each other in action, travelling together, laughing together, sharing life together and learning from each other, their individual facets are shaped by every other Christ gift so that what is produced is whole: A beautiful bride, prepared for her husband.

That is what Christ will return for.

How wonderful and pleasant it is when brothers live together in harmony! For harmony is as precious as the anointing oil that was poured over Aaron's head, that ran down his beard and onto the border of his robe. Harmony is as refreshing as the dew from Mount Hermon that falls on the mountains of Zion.

And there the LORD has pronounced his blessing, even life everlasting. (Psalm 133)

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