

The Spirit and The Church

Trinity CRC, November 5, 2017 PM

Evening Reformation Themes for 500 Anniv. – IV; John Calvin

Ephesians 4:1-16

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Dear Church of Jesus Christ,

Most of us may be familiar with the popular line from John F. Kennedy's inaugural address on January 20, 1961. President Kennedy reminded the people of the USA that the blessings they enjoy come from the hand of God Almighty. And these blessings require people to do what is right for the sake of their brothers and sisters in the world. In the course of that speech he made that now famous statement, "And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country."

The Apostle Paul 2000 years earlier taught something similar with respect to the church when he wrote the words that begin Ephesians 4: "... *I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.*" As JFK called his people to take up the responsibility that comes with national freedom, Paul calls the church to take up her responsibility as people set free from sin through Christ and joined together for service by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Last week was the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther publishing his 95th theses to spark debate in the Roman Catholic Church. We've spent several sermons considering Christian doctrines given new birth at the time of the Reformation, and particularly Martin Luther's effect on them. Today we are considering the impact of another great church reformers of the 15th and 16th century, John Calvin, who was born 500 years ago and is considered a second generation reformer. The focus of the sermon is obviously going to be from the Bible but it will highlight a part of Calvin's work—the importance of the connection between the Holy Spirit and the Church.

First of all, let us consider that the church is a gift from our Lord.

The Gift

How often, if ever, do we stop to think that Christ loved us so much that he gave us the church? Oh, we ought to regularly meditate on the fact that he loved us so much that he gave his life for us. But after dying and resurrecting, he returned to heaven and sent us the Holy Spirit who has come to build the church. Of course, we must rejoice in our personal salvation. But salvation is not about a bunch of individuals. It's about the body of Christ, the church, made up of individuals but united in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. That's why Paul says in vv. 3&4,

Eph 4:3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit...

Some would argue that it seems rather ironic for John Calvin to be an advocate for church unity when he was responsible for splitting the church of his day. But the truth is that John Calvin—like Martin Luther before him—never worked to split the church. He worked hard to keep it together and to reform it from within. He made every effort to open the Bible to the church leaders and help them see the glories of life in Christ, the wonder of being saved by grace alone and the comfort of being drawn to Christ through

the power of the Holy Spirit. But, despite his good efforts, he was kicked out of it; he did not split the church.

One highly respected Calvin scholar wrote, Calvin “believed that there are fundamental articles of the faith which should be recognised by everyone.” And Calvin himself said those fundamentals include things “such as God is one, Christ is God and the Son of God. Our whole salvation,” he argued, “rests on God’s mercy and the like.” Paul reminds the Ephesian church and us too,

Eph 4:4 “There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope when you were called-- ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

You see, congregation, Christ died to save **the church**. We confess Jesus as Lord with all true Christians worldwide. There is only one faith when you boil it all down. You believe in Christ and live! Or you don’t and perish. Only through Christ can we know God as our Father. This is the unity that the Spirit has given us with all believers. And therefore we are called not to make the unity but to keep it!! Christ has made it possible and the Holy Spirit working in our hearts binds us together around Christ, even if we don’t always recognize it or appreciate it.

There are things which are not negotiable—the fundamentals of the Christian faith. But Calvin, in the interest of church unity, would say that we need to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit, as he shapes and moves the church. We must learn from church history and be open to the moving of the Holy Spirit then and now. He argued that “excessive rigidity” is foolish. No church is pure enough to be meticulous on non-fundamental issues (Wallace).

And yet almost every church knows the pain of a member who makes something non-essential into a new standard for being a Christian or being orthodox. Congregations today by and large, regardless of denomination, testify that their members are not loyal. We have a growing depreciation for the local church. We less and less appreciate the unity of the Spirit that we have been blessed with in our local congregations because people want their own way more often. So while it is true that the Spirit has united us through faith in Christ with other Christians, we as individual Christians must take seriously our closest connection to the brothers and sisters in Christ in our local congregation.

Calvin didn’t say God is calling us to blind allegiance to “a church that can do no wrong” or a church that has no room for improvements or changes. Certainly not! But if we start from the place that the church—and our own congregation included—is a Spirit-given gift, then we shall be very, very slow to condemn, criticize and leave it. Instead, we will work with the Spirit’s blessing and power to keep the unity and build up the church where we are.

We ought to ask ourselves whether we treat the church like a gift brought about by the Holy Spirit or more like a commodity for us to use and enjoy. People who are disgruntled with their congregation today leave and start “church shopping.” What is that? Is that a move of the Holy Spirit among us to keep the unity of the church? Or is it another sign that individualism and consumerism are being used by Satan to bring about disunity among Christ’s people?

I like what Eugene Peterson said about the church. "The church is not what we organize but what God gives, not the people we want to be with but the people God gives us to be with...." This reinforces Paul's emphasis in Ephesus on the unity of the church. God wants us to do everything we can to keep every limb and joint together and make every part of the body work in cooperation with the whole.

Since becoming the pastor of Trinity, I have seen and experienced the joy in this church. Those who have been here a long time, have weathered some storms and faced hard times. But together they have come through the struggles and are enjoying this fresh chapter of unity and joy over the past decade. They know this is not something to take for granted. It's not something that comes automatically. It often takes hard work and perseverance.

Every church goes through a time of dissatisfaction, but church-hopping isn't necessarily the answer. Most ministers can tell you that people who start church hopping often become chronic church shoppers and hoppers. They settle down in a new church for a few years until they discover the problems there. Then they move on to the next one, never really putting down deep roots and therefore never really learning to work through the struggles of church life. And consequently they will not experience as much joy when the church is going through a good period. In that way, not putting down roots leads to missing out on some of the blessing the Holy Spirit gives. After all, he is the glue who has brought us together under Christ to work together to bring more glory to God's name!

This is why Paul pleads with the Ephesians,
Eph 4:2 "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love".

You and I ought to think seriously about that. Think about what we hope to gain and what we stand to lose when we break the unity that the Holy Spirit has already given us. Never doubt, then, that the Holy Spirit is Christ's gift to the church to bring us to greater unity in Christ. Likewise, seek his help to keep the unity of the church he has created.

The Means

Secondly, let us consider the means the Holy Spirit uses in the church to draw us closer to Christ and to one another. In v.7 Paul says,

Eph 4:7 "But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it."

That grace he is speaking of refers to individual spiritual gifts. Just stop and think about that. When you think your own church is weak, you may well be right. But v.2 reminds us that spiritually mature people are humble, gentle and patient so they tough it out in love. And here's why: they realize that *grace has been given as Christ apportioned it*. In other words, the church may not be perfect, she may not meet all of my felt needs or desires but she has what she has because that's what Christ has given her. And if you are a part of that church, specifically this—or your own congregations if you are visiting with us—then you are part of what Christ has given that church. That's true for young people and older ones.

Every church is full of potential and you are part of that potential. Christ, through the Holy Spirit gifts each individual believer with certain gifts. And those gifts are given to

help each church become what Christ has in mind. So it may well be that your frustration with the church is due to the fact that you are not using your gifts within the church!

In a book *The Wonderful Spirit Filled Life*, we read,

You cannot walk in the Spirit apart from functioning in the body of Christ. You can't. It won't work. It has never worked. It wasn't designed to work that way. Spirit-controlled Christians do not function as Lone Rangers... Instead, they actively pursue relationships with other believers. They look for ways to be involved. They don't sit back and let others do the work. Spirit-filled men and women jump at the opportunity to carry their fair share of the load.

[In other words,] You always need other believers. Not because you are weak. Not because God isn't sufficient for you. On the contrary, God planned it that way. It is by His design. Walking in the Spirit is not a solo mission. It is not an excuse for you to become detached and isolated from other Christians. A believer who pulls away from the pack to do his or her own "spiritual" thing cannot be walking in the Spirit. (pp. 127, 126, paragraphs reversed)

That was the sentiment of Calvin. To walk in step with the Spirit, can be hard work. It involves reading the Bible and praying, to be sure, but it also involves getting off your seat and doing something in the church. You and I must use our spiritual gifts, our talents and resources for the good of the church. We can't say, "I don't like you, I don't like what you do and I don't like how you do it" and then walk off like a spoiled child who takes his toys and plays by himself. No, my dear sister and brother, please understand that the Holy Spirit has placed you in your church to strengthen it. To each one of us grace has been given—including your gifts—as Christ apportioned it.

Another wonderful Calvin scholar urges us to think about the powerful work of the Spirit in putting us into a church. He says, "only when the church recognizes its unity and strives more and more to preserve it, each member co-operating with all the others, will the gospel move mightily forward among [all peoples], will the church itself rejoice, will Satan tremble, and will the name of God be glorified" (NTC, 188). The short of it is that we need each other! We may not always agree on everything, but we need each other to be the strongest church we can be. That's the Spirit's means of strengthening the church for God's glory and the good of the world.

Sometimes I think we all long for a church where there will never be a problem or disagreement. Sometimes we get tired of other people who we don't agree with or even don't appreciate. Reformed Theological Seminary professor, Steve Brown, reflected on his time as a minister and said lightheartedly, "I never had a problem with any church I served that couldn't be solved with a few funerals!" That might be putting it bluntly but sometimes we all think that solving the church's disagreements would be a lot easier if certain people weren't here!

God designed the church this way. The Holy Spirit has given us to each other. That's the genius of the Holy Spirit's work. He doesn't give us what we want or like. God isn't interested in making life easy for us. He's interested in us working together and learning how to do that better for His glory and honour!! That's one of the things that impresses me about John Calvin. He worked tirelessly to bring different groups of Christians together. He saw that as the Holy Spirit's calling. And today people often turn from each other without a second thought.

Striving to keep the unity which the Spirit has created means giving each other room. Unity allows for diversity of gifts. And this diversity, far from destroying the unity, will promote it as each member works together for the common goal of bringing glory to God.

The Goal

Finally, then, let's consider very briefly the goal for which the Spirit gives gifts to the church. And the answer to that is found in vv.14-16 where Paul basically says the Spirit's goal is to help the church grow up into Christ. That's what the Holy Spirit's work is all about.

A while ago I said that learning to be a part of the body means we don't run off like a spoiled kid when we don't get our way. And that's Paul's point here. I hope that none of us as parents let our children do that because it doesn't help a child grow up to be a healthy member of the family, the classroom or the church. We don't always get our way. And that shouldn't be our goal because that's selfish. Our goal is for the church, and ourselves in her, to become more Christ-like. Learning humility, gentleness and bearing with one another in love.

In v.12 Paul says the office bearers are called to help the body of believers develop and become good fellow ministers or servants in the church. And the more that happens, the more people start to see that every one of us is important and the Holy Spirit can use "little old me" just as well as He uses "big important so and so." The church becomes a light to the world in the way we get along too. The devil leaves the body because he doesn't have a foothold here. People on the outside look at the church and say, "See how they love each other." Paul says we grow and are built up in love as we each do our work, whatever work the Spirit has enabled us to do.

The Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper from the end of the 19th century, following in the steps of John Calvin, speaks about our gifts saying, "They are... to the glory of God. They are lent out as ornaments, that we should show their beauty..." (The Holy Spirit, 193)

My dear friends, think about yourself as part of the body of Christ here or your home church. Think about the high calling our Lord gives us to use our spiritual gifts so that they sparkle and make the whole body look more attractive, just like someone who wears jewelry. It turns heads when it's done well. And that is the kind of effect our Lord wants the church to have in the world as well. Turn heads so that people see Jesus in us.

In conclusion, God might say to you as a member of his church and as a member of this congregation, "Ask not what your church can do for you; ask what you can do for your church." Use the gifts and talents that the Holy Spirit has blessed you with to be a blessing to others. Jesus said, "*It is better to give than to receive*" and that's true also of your relationship to the church.

May the Holy Spirit help each of us to become the best member of the church that we can be, joyfully serving the Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of church, and peacefully working together so that God's name is glorified, the church edified and so the world can see Christ in us.

Evening Worship

November 5, 2017 6:30 PM

This evening we will continue a study of the catechisms and the Reformation.

Note: * indicates please stand if you are able

TURNING OUR HEARTS TO GOD

Welcome

Video on John Calvin by John Piper

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3uJUaAwWC4> stop at 5:20

Opening Prayer

* Call to Worship

* God's Greeting

* Song: *Amid the Thronging Worshipers*

PsH#239

* Confession of Faith: Lord's Day 21, Q&A 54 & 55

p.883

* Song: *Spirit of the Living God*

PsH#424

TEACHING OF GOD'S WORD

Prayer for the Word

Scripture Reading:

Ephesians 4:1-16

Sermon: ***The Catholic Church***

OFFERINGS SONGS AND PRAYERS

* Song: *They'll Know We Are Christians*

LUYH#256

Intercessory Prayer

* Song: *Holy God, We Praise Your Name*

PsH#504:1,3,4

LEAVING TO SERVE

* God's Parting Blessing

* Closing Song: *The Day You Gave Us*

PsH#318:1,2,4

* The offerings will be received at the back doors for:

1. God's Work through Trinity CRC

2. The Deacons Fund