

The Grace You Have Been Given

Ephesians 4:1 -7

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Good morning. I bring greetings on behalf of trustees, faculty, staff, and students of Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University.

The text that I have chosen, Ephesians 4:1-7 is much loved by Disciples of Christ, as it contains a call to “*maintain* the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Disciples have long believed that Christian unity is not something we create, but something we are given by the Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ. Disciples have also believed that it is through the unity that the Spirit gives that the world will believe that Jesus is the Christ, Son of the living God. Disciples value what Barton Stone called “fire” union—the unity of the Spirit that “leads us to love God and his children—to love and pray for all humankind.”¹

Disciples also value careful study of the Scriptures. Gene Boring, who is now retired after having taught at Brite for many years, and Warren Carter, who currently teaches at Brite, both published introductions to the New Testament in 2013. Both conclude, following earlier scholars, that the sentence structure, vocabulary and content of Ephesians indicate that the author of Ephesians, and hence the

author of this text so loved by Disciples, was not the Apostle Paul, himself, but a second generation follower of Paul’s who sought to apply Paul’s teaching to the church in a new era. According to this commonly held scholarly view, there was nothing dishonest or deceitful about such a practice. On the contrary, in the ancient world, this was an accepted way to honor the legacy of an esteemed teacher.

I would like to suggest that that this scholarly thesis regarding the authorship of Ephesians is not merely an interesting deduction, of interest only to scholars, but rather a critical insight that may help us to hear a word from God as we face difficult issues in church and society.

The first three chapters of Ephesians set the stage for Chapter 4. In these first three chapters, the writer of Ephesians has Paul give thanks to God for what God has done through Jesus Christ for Gentiles (non-Jews) to whom this letter is addressed. You see, in Paul’s time, the most difficult issue in the church had been the question of whether Gentiles, who did not practice circumcision or observe the Jewish food laws, could be included in the body of Christ.

The first Christians, of course, were Jews. When Paul had begun welcoming Gentiles into the church, without requiring that they be circumcised or observe the food laws, other Christians had charged him with abandoning the law. But, that conflict over the inclusion of Gentiles in the church had been largely resolved by the time this letter was written. Indeed, the writer of this letter has Paul declare to the Gentiles: “Surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation. . . as it has now been revealed to [Christ’s] holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become

¹ *Christian Messenger* (October, 1833): 314-315.

fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

When we read this letter as a whole, we discover that at the time that this admirer of Paul was composing this letter in Paul’s name, new issues were arising for the church as it sought to witness to the mystery of God’s grace made known through Jesus Christ in the midst of the diverse and often brutal and oppressive cultures of the Roman Empire; an empire that crucified its perceived enemies as a public warning to others; an empire in which the only person who had any human rights was the free male who could have as many wives and slaves as he could afford and do with each and all of them as he would.

This is the context in which the writer of Ephesians declares: “But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift.”

Did you hear that? I think I heard this writer saying that each of us, who, like Paul, have received the Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ, has, like Paul, been given grace by which we are to contribute to the further revelation of the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God. The goal of this further revelation is described just a little later in verses 12 -14, as the “building up of the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”

What is the grace that God has given to you? What is the grace that God has given to Christian Temple in the midst of the current racial tension that can be experienced not only in Baltimore, but across this nation?

In 1963 the National Council of Churches appealed to the churches to confess their sin of

failing to uphold the truth that every person is a child of God. The Council called the churches to mobilize resources for securing civil rights for all Americans. NCC president and Disciples lay leader J. Irwin Miller declared that “racial discrimination violates Christian love and is man’s denial of God’s rule.”²

Gaines M. Cook, Executive Secretary of the Disciples International Convention, in the office we call today, General Minister and President, expressed full support of the National Council’s appeal. With authorization from the Convention’s Administrative Committee, Cook recommended that all Disciples agencies, boards, and institutions take immediate action.

Christian Theological Seminary responded by sending eight students to Washington D.C. to participate in the Theological Students’ Vigil. In 1965, CTS dean Ronald E. Osborn participated in the now legendary Selma-to-Montgomery voting rights marches.³

Five hundred and sixty-one ministers pledged to work for passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and ten served as National Council of Churches observers during a voter registration drive in Canton, Mississippi.⁴

Not all Disciples, of course, supported the Civil Rights Movement. A number of regions and congregations cut their support of Unified Promotion, what we now call the Disciples Mission Fund.

In 1966, city officials in Dallas, Texas tried to prevent Martin Luther King from speaking at the International Convention, which was to be held

² Quoted in D. Duane Cummins, *Dale Fiers: Twentieth Century Disciple* (Fort Worth, TCU Press, 2003), 117.

³ Keith Watkins, *Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis: A History of Education for Ministry* (Zionsville, IN: Guild Press of Indiana, 2001), 151-152.

⁴ Cummins, *Fiers*, 121-122, 124.

in their city. Dale Fiers, then the Convention's executive secretary, told the local arrangements committee that if King was not coming to Dallas, neither was the International Convention. At length, a compromise was achieved: King was not a featured speaker, but appeared on a panel moderated by J. Irwin Miller.⁵

These memories from an earlier day are a reminder that when we act on the grace that we have been given there often will be controversy. But this should not surprise us, for as the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:19, "there must be factions [some translations say "differences"] among you, so that those who are approved [some translations say "genuine"] may become evident among you."

We elected a black president and some people thought the issue of race had been resolved in this nation. Truth be told, the jury is still out regarding the issue of race and the related issues of class and gender. It is black men that are most often killed by police; not black women. There are, of course, many issues on which the jury is still out: the issues of immigration, the environment, and same sex marriages, to name just a few. Sometimes it takes a while for the church to discern God's will, as it did in the case of the full inclusion of the Gentiles; as it did centuries later in regard to the institution of slavery. But it does happen. The plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God is revealed.

In the meantime, the unity of the Spirit can be threatened. This does not mean that we should be timid; afraid to act on the grace we have been given. But it does bring us to those verses of our text in which the readers of Ephesians—which now includes us—are called to lead lives

worthy of the calling to which we have been called, [not with pride and arrogance, but] with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Two years ago our General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) called for the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, and transgender persons in the life of the church. It legislated nothing, because our Assembly's call for reflection, prayer, and action, but legislate nothing.

The elders of one of our west Texas churches met to discuss this resolution in advance of the Assembly. One elder was quite convinced that this resolution represented the will of God. Another was equally convinced that it stood squarely in opposition to God's law. They argued long and hard. At the end of the meeting, the elders observed communion, according to their custom, coming forward to the table, two by two, each serving the other. And, yes, the two elders who had been locked in an impassioned argument came to the table together and each served the other.

These two elders seem to have understood, at least for that evening, that "there is one body and one Spirit, just as we were called to the one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." May it be so throughout the church of Jesus Christ!

⁵ Ibid., 119.