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Ascension-b
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Christ Builds Up His Body Ephesians 4:7-16

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The Word from God through which the Holy Spirit draws us to Jesus is Proverbs 3:

Now to each one of us grace has been given according to the measure of the gift of Christ. Therefore it says, "Ascending on high, he led captivity captive. He gave gifts to people." What does "He went up" mean, except that he also went down into the lower regions of the earth? The One who descended is the same as the One who ascended above all the heavens to fill all things.

He himself gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, some as pastors and teachers to equip the saints for works of service for building up the body of Christ, until we all arrive at the unity of faith in and knowledge of the Son of God, at the mature man, at the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we are no longer infants tossed around by waves and blown about by every wind of teaching connected to people's trickery, to their craftiness in scheming to lead astray, but so that we, speaking the truth in love, grow in regard to all things toward him who is the Head, namely Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by the support of the ligaments according to the operation of each individual part in measure, produces growth for the body for building itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:7-16)

This is the Word of our Lord.

Dear friends in Christ, fellow saints washed clean in the blood of our risen Savior:

"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8 NIV84), Jesus told the disciples. Then he ascended, disappearing from their sight. How would he build the church if he was no longer visibly present? How would he instruct and direct them as he had for his three years of ministry on earth?

We, though, can look back and see Jesus at work through his Apostles to build up his church. Ten days later We hear Peter preaching the Good News of Jesus on Pentecost, and three thousand are baptized. We see persecution break out. Stephen's stoned. Yet the church spreads even more. Christians like Philip spread the Gospel to wherever they go. We follow the Apostle Paul on his missionary journeys. Christ builds up his body. In the centuries after Bible times, the Christian faith continued to spread. There were dark times, times of false teaching and

scandal. But the Lord of the church raised up true teachers of his word like Luther and Walther. Today Christianity is the largest religion in the world penetrating every corner of the globe.

Yet as we stand at this moment in time and look forward, we may well wonder whether Christ is still building up his body, the church. So many who claim to be Christian have wandered far from Christian truth. The influence of Christianity in our own country dwindles even though more Christians live in the United States than in any other country. Yet, even here fewer and fewer are even claiming to be Christian. A recent poll by the Pew Research Center showed that those who said they were Christians declined from 78.4% in 2007 down to 70.8% in 2014. That's dropping at about 1% per year. What's happening? Is Christ still building up his body?

To calm our fears and worries, we have something much better than statistics or polls. We have our Lord's promises. Ephesians 4 promises that our ascended Lord is building up the church. Christ builds up his body. But that does not mean that he promises growth in numbers, growth in finances, growth in influence, or the like. He builds up his body in ways that we cannot see or measure. He builds up his body by giving us those who speak his word and by anchoring us in his truth. May the Holy Spirit assure you through these words that Christ is building up his body.

A. By giving us those who speak his word

First, the Apostle Paul in these verse assures us that our ascended Lord has the power and desire to give the gifts to build up his body, the church. Quoting from Psalm 68, Paul writes, "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men" (Ephesians 4:8 NIV84).

Do you wonder about his desire to build up his body? Look at what he who ascended did first. He first of all came down. He came down to defeat sin, Satan, and death for us. We confess with Luther: "Fast bound in Satan's chain I lay; Death brooded darkly o'er me. Sin was my torment night and day; In sin my mother bore me" ("Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice" Christian Worship: 377:2). But he came down and broke those chains. He defeated Satan. We could not. We did not have that power. "With might of ours could naught be done; Soon were our loss effected. But for us fights the valiant one Whom God himself elected. You ask, 'Who is this?' Jesus Christ it is, the almighty Lord. And there's no other God; he holds the field forever" ("A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" Christian Worship 200:2). He even descended into hell itself to parade in victory through Satan's capital. Even as his descending from heaven proves his love, so his ascension proves his power.

Yes! What love and mercy! He came down from the glory of heaven for filthy sinners like you and me. He did this for us who rightly deserve death and damnation. What grace! Don't doubt his desire to build up his body. He has proved

the depth of his love by sacrificing himself in your place. And don't doubt his power to build up his body. For he has defeated Satan. He has risen from the dead. He has ascended on high far above all power and authority.

And now as our ascended Lord, what does he give his church to build it up? Not armies or swords or guns or bullets. But what does the text say? "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers" (Ephesians 4:11). These are all people that speak his word. They are gracious gifts from our ascended Lord, gifts that build up his body, the church. The Apostles were the ones to whom Jesus directly revealed his word. They not only spoke it but wrote it down. That's how Christ's gift of the Apostles still blesses us today. We have their written testimony, the Holy Scriptures. Prophets proclaim what God had revealed through the Apostles. Evangelists share that Good News to those who have not yet heard it. Pastors and teachers keep on feeding God's word to the flock he has called them serve.

And as they teach God's word, our ascended Lord is at work "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" (Ephesians 4:12, 13 NIV84). The work of building up the body of Christ is not just for the called workers who teach God's Word. It's not just for pastors, but for each of you as well. For through the teaching of his word, Christ prepares each of you. He prepares you for works of service to build up the body. What kind of service? He prepares you to show Christian kindness, love, and forgiveness toward others, which gives you the opportunity to tell others about Jesus. He prepares you to generously support the gospel work with your prayers and offerings flowing from grateful hearts that rejoice in the great things our Lord has done for us. He prepares you to speak words of Christian correction and encouragement to draw others closer to Christ or to bring them back to him. He prepares you to faithfully care out the responsibilities he gives you in your home, in your work, in your community, in your school, in your church so that you serve not as people-pleasers but as children of your heavenly Father who do all, even the boring, menial tasks, for his glory.

How does he prepare you for all this and more? Through his word. For as we learn his word, it builds us up in that unity of faith and knowledge. For his word unites us so that we grow more and more in line with Jesus in all that we do, maturing to be like him. As your faith and knowledge of the Son of God is built up, Christ's body is built up. And that's why it's so important for us to stay anchored in the truth.

B. By anchoring us in his truth

Listen to the picture Paul uses. "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” (Ephesians 4:14 NIV84). You see, a childlike faith does not want to remain childish. It retains that childlike trust and humility but also eagerly grows in knowledge to know Jesus better, to mature in our understanding.

How important that is in a world where so many winds of false teaching blow in every direction! Do you really want to remain helpless like an infant? Do so many ideas blow around you that you don’t know what to believe any more? Or do you imagine that most Christian churches say basically the same thing so why be all that concerned about what a church teaches? What a lie that is! For if churches actually taught the same thing, there would not be all these denominations and divisions. For the truth unites. But so many waves toss us around that many just assume that whatever wind is blowing must be OK. Do you want to remain a helpless infant blown around by every wind of teaching?

Rather stay anchored in God’s truth. Stay anchored in the Scriptures. Go to his Word. Go there to learn the truth—not just what this or that denominations claims is the truth, but what God himself says is the truth. The deeper you dig into God’s Word, the more firmly you are anchored in his truth. The more God’s truth fills your heart, the more you grow so that you are no longer are an infant. The more your faith and knowledge is built up on God’s truth, the more you can build up each other. Like supporting ligaments in a body, we build up and support each other. So the body of Christ is built up. The body is built up not only when others are brought in but also as you who are already members are strengthened in Christ.

We can look at statistics and numbers, and they do have their place. But remember the Lord of the Church. He makes his body grow. Don’t let bad numbers worry you. Don’t let good numbers inflate your pride. Rather look up to the One who has ascended on high. He came down and won the war for us. He has ascended over all and now he builds up his body. He builds up his body by giving us those who speak his word and by anchoring each of us in his truth. Amen.

The peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.