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Sermon by Rick Lanning

WHAT MAKES THE BODY OF CHRIST DISTINCTIVE

Ephesians 4:11-14

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NKJV 11 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, 13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting”

Lesson:

The title to my lesson is quite straight-forward. “What Makes The Body Of Christ Distinctive?”

The answer should be obvious to all of us who have lived as members of the body of Christ for any length of time. For if you have truly lived as “*the salt of the earth*” and as “*the light of the world*” (Matthew 5:13-16), you already know WHAT makes us distinctive. We stand out like a sore thumb due to our distinctiveness. A righteous man, who has exceeded the righteousness of the Pharisees (Matthew 5:17-20), will be marked as totally different than the world. Yes, even the religious world.

The world, both secular and religious, will think us “*strange.*” Peter said so.

*“Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, 2 that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. 3 For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles--when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. 4 In regard to these, they think it **strange** that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you.”* (I Peter 4:1-4).

I’ve often said, if Jesus had just been a good man, a law-abiding moral man, the Jews would have given Him the keys to the city of Jerusalem and honored Him with a parade. But because He was a “righteous” man, they crucified Him as a threat to their popularity. He exposed them for the hypocrites they were (Matthew 23). Jesus was clearly showing a line of distinction between living to please men and living to honor God. A disciple of Christ, who follows in the footsteps of Jesus, will show their true colors. You will know them by their fruit (Matthew 7:20). The church will be called a “sect.” Synonyms for sect include clique, faction, or cult. It is taken from the Greek

word *HAIRESIS*, from where we get our word heresy and heretic. Note the first century church took notice of the Lord's church by calling them a sect:

They will be "*a **sect** of the Nazarenes*" (Acts 24:5).

They will be "*the Way which they call a **sect***" (Acts 24:14).

They will be "*this **sect**... that is spoken against everywhere*" (Acts 28:22).

In other words they will be Different. Noticeable. Conspicuous. ***Distinct***.

1. THE BODY OF CHRIST IS DISTINCTIVE BY: WHO THEY LISTEN TO AS THEIR STANDARD OF AUTHORITY

Ephesians 4:11 "*And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers*"

The Lord's church has its very foundation resting on the apostles and prophets.

Ephesians 2:20 "*having been built on the foundation of the **apostles and prophets**, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.*"

Ephesians 3:5 "*which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy **apostles and prophets.***"

The apostles and prophets wrote the New Testament, our standard of authority. The apostles Matthew, John, Peter and Paul; along with the prophets Mark, Luke, James and Jude, are the writers of our New Testament. What they wrote was inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16-17) and was for all time settled as God's final word until the coming Day of Judgment (Jude 3; Hebrews 1:1-2).

The cry of the restoration movement leaders was "We speak where the Bible speaks, and are silent where the Bible is silent." That was taken from a paraphrase of the apostle Peter: "*If any man speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God*" (1 Peter 4:11). The only sure way to religious unity was by every Christian agreeing to throw out all man-made creeds and doctrines and take the Bible alone as their creed.

Here is how they approached restoring the church to its original pattern. They started with Ephesians 4:1-6. "*The unity of the Spirit*" was not negotiable. There could be no compromise on the seven-step program outlined by the apostle Paul.

One Father. One Lord. One Spirit. One Faith. One Baptism. One Body. One Hope.

The Holy Spirit said there can be no true unity until all seven of these principles are clearly defined and believed by all Christians. The authority of the apostles and prophets left no wiggle room or negotiation of these doctrinal positions. You either accepted all of them, or none of them. You cannot do what the religious world today has done and find the lowest common denominator in order to create a false unity. It is not the Spirit's unity unless you accept by faith all seven of these doctrines.

The denominational world of the Reformation Movement had been created by continual compromises. While most were solid in believing you cannot be a Christian without accepting the “Trinity” (Father, Son, Spirit), there was soon found negotiations when it came to one “*faith ... baptism ... body ... hope.*”

One could be saved and still have:

A different understanding of *faith* (i.e. doctrinal positions of all shapes and sizes, like Calvinism, Millennialism, etc.).

A different understanding of *baptism* (i.e. sprinkling, pouring instead of immersion; as an outward sign of an inward grace, not “for the remission of sins.”).

A different understanding of *church* (i.e. Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal, etc. – thus dividing churches into sects).

A different understanding of *hope* (millennialism’s heaven on earth – not above).

The denominational concept of “Christendom” (all churches claiming to be “of Christ”) pays lip-service to respect for Bible authority. For instance, most churches claim they believe in apostolic authority, yet how many practice what the apostles taught and showed by their example? I challenge you to think of other churches of mainstream Christendom who believe and practice what the apostles revealed about:

a. The Lord’s Supper. The inspired apostles and prophets taught that Jesus wanted us to partake of His body and blood “often” (I Corinthians 11:25-26), and then showed by example that they broke bread “on the first day of the week” (Acts 20:7). Who takes the Lord’s Supper weekly anymore? The Lord’s church is distinctive when we “break bread” every Sunday.

b. Baptism. The inspired apostles and prophets taught that baptism is a “burial” and is for “the forgiveness of your sins” and “to put on Christ.”

Colossians 2:12 “*buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God*”

Romans 6:4 “*Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death...*”

Acts 22:16 “*Arise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord*”

Galatians 3:26-27 “*For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.*”

Name a religion that accepts this teaching as it is written, without twisting it to fit their own practices of sprinkling, or as an outward sign of already being forgiven?

c. Singing. God’s preference in the kind of music He wants from His people is clearly A-Cappella. That word is taken from Italian ***a cappella*** meaning “in chapel or choir style.” *Cappella* is the Italian word for “chapel”. The choir sang in chapels and always sung without the use of instruments. A simple reading of the New Testament shows the reader that God authorized singing, not playing. Everyone agrees we should “sing” to God (Matthew 26:30; Acts 16:25; Romans 15:9; I Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 2:12; James 5:13; Revelation 15:3), but where is the authority to “play.”

The vast majority of denominations rejected instrumental music until the past 250 years. Martin Luther rejected it. John and Charles Wesley (Methodist) rejected it. Charles Spurgeon (Baptist) rejected it. But now it is front and center in most every modern church in America. The music ministry of most denominations, with full scale bands, is what draws the crowds, especially the youth.

What would the apostles and prophets think and say about all of these doctrinal changes?

One more point on this verse. We are distinct from others when we believe the evangelists are gospel preachers, and the pastors are the elders, overseers, bishops, or shepherds of the local flock. It amazes me that brilliant minds who know Greek and can preach circles around me with their scholarship and eloquence, somehow accept the idea that a preacher is a pastor. A simple study of a few scriptures can easily dismiss this false idea.

Acts 20:17 *“From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the **elders** of the church... 28 “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**, to **shepherd** the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”*

Acts 14:23 *“So when they had appointed **elders** in every church...”*

1 Peter 5:1 *“The **elders** who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: 2 **Shepherd** the flock of God which is among you, serving as **overseers**, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; 3 nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being **examples** to the flock”*

1 Timothy 3:1-f *“This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a **bishop**, he desires a good work. 2 A **bishop** then must be blameless, the husband of one wife ... how will he take care of the church of God? ...”*

Titus 1:5 *“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint **elders** in every city as I commanded you -- 6 if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife...”*

It is very clear from these verses that an elder is also an overseer (i.e. bishop), and is also a shepherd (i.e. pastor). They are all one in the same man. Also, there are to be a plurality of elders *“in every church”* or *“the flock of God among you.”* There is never once seen a Pastor system where the preacher is called the pastor and is to shepherd the flock. A Pastor is an Elder who must meet all the Spirit-inspired qualifications found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 and 1 Peter 5. A young (*“not a novice”*), unmarried (*“husband of one wife”*), with no children (*“children who believe”*), man cannot be a pastor (elder, overseer, shepherd). We are distinct when we say a pastor is an elder, and an evangelist is a gospel preacher, whether he is local or travels around to preach.

2. THE BODY OF CHRIST IS DISTINCTIVE BY: THEIR SINGULAR FOCUS ON SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Ephesians 4:12 *for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ*

There used to be a commercial for the Gerber's baby food company that stated: "Baby's Are Our Business, Our Only Business." The first century church could likewise be identified and defined with a motto that might say: "Souls are our business, our only business." Scripturally the church can build a motto around the following verses:

*"but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, **the pillar and ground of the truth.**"* (I Timothy 3:15) Other translations highlight this distinctiveness:

"it is the pillar and foundation-stone of the truth" (Weymouth Translation)

"it is the pillar and mainstay of the truth" (Montgomery Translation)

"the pillar and support of the truth" (New American Standard)

"a pillar and buttress of the truth" (English Standard Version)

When one thinks of a "pillar" you think of a Roman or Greek architectural column that holds up the roof. When Samson pulled the pillars of the Dagon temple down, the whole structure collapsed. Do you remember reading this: *"And Samson took hold of the two middle **pillars which supported the temple**, and he braced himself against them, one on his right and the other on his left. Then Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" And he pushed with all his might, and the temple fell on the lords and all the people who were in it."* (Judges 16:29-30). Just like a building's pillar has one main job – to support the building from falling, so the Lord's church has one main job – to support, buttress, be the mainstay or foundation of the Truth. Our job is to teach the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God.

But look around at the many churches in America. They are trying to make the church "all things to all men." They have ministries for everything under the sun. They have turned from their mission of teaching and preaching the Truth, to appealing to the social gospel to change the world. They now cater to the flesh, not the spirit. Youth ministries, Educational ministries (Pre K thru High School), Benevolence ministries, Social issues ministries (women's rights, children's rights, racial rights, gender rights) are what now defines the missions of most churches.

Jesus said "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Jesus' church, for which He died, should be doing exactly the same thing. Paul, in our text of Ephesians 4:12, forever clears up any possible misconception of what the church should be doing. It has the mission of using its teachers (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers) to equip the saints (i.e. members) with the necessary tools to do its work of ministry. That's it. That's why the Lord gave these special "gifts" to the church – to be used to equip the saints for ministry.

“Equipping of the saints” carries the idea of giving Christians everything they need to reach their full potential for Jesus Christ. Some translations use the word *“perfecting”* the saints. This means they grow to full maturity only when they have been fully taught by the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.

To be properly equipped to be a doctor, or lawyer, engineer, tradesman or any other profession requires teaching and training. It means more than just book knowledge, but also hands-on practice (i.e. residency, internship, apprenticeship). A surgeon doesn't walk straight from the classroom to the O.R. and perform a heart transplant. He must go through years of residency where he is supervised by superiors. A skilled trade like a carpenter, electrician, plumber, or pipefitter requires they go through an apprenticeship before they become a journeyman, then eventually a master craftsman. It is a process the world understands, but many Christians do not.

Saints are to be mentored just like others who wish to learn a skill. Christ gave such mentors in the gifts of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. Paul said, *“Imitate me even as I imitate Christ”* (I Corinthians 11:1). He said, *“The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you”* (Philippians 4:9).

Evangelists are to make full proof of their ministry by being *“an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity... Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.”* (I Timothy 4:12-16). By preaching, then practicing what they preached, they mentored others toward salvation.

Pastors (elders, shepherds, bishops) were also to be mentors. Their very qualifications (I Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) showed younger believers what a Christian should be. They were to be *“examples”* to the flock (I Peter 5:3). As pastors they were leaders who constantly fed the sheep the words of the Chief Shepherd. The Bible says to all members of the church: *“Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.”* (Hebrews 13:7). That is mentoring at its highest level.

Do you get Paul's point here? God never intended for there to be a clergy system. The apostles Paul and Peter, along with the prophets James and Jude (both step-brothers of Jesus), began their epistles with these words:

“Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle” (Romans 1:1; also see Galatians 1:10, Titus 1:1)

“Simon Peter, a bondservant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:1 – note, he claimed others had “like” – the same – precious faith he did).

“James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” (James 1:1)

“Jude, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James, To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ”

Yes, they had authority to preach God’s word, but they, along with the evangelists and pastors, were never allowed to “*lord it over*” any saint (I Peter 5:3).

Instead, they were to serve as examples and mentors to those new to the faith. Their God-given mission was to give each saint the necessary tools for their faith, and patiently guide them along until they could stand on their own, reaching closer and closer to “*the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, to a full grown man.*”

Early in their faith they would be “*children*” who could easily be tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine (verse 14). But if they were properly and patiently mentored, they would then be brought to maturity.

Is this not what Paul had in mind in Titus 2:1-8? Read it carefully and see if you don’t agree Paul had mentoring in mind here:

“1 But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine: 2 that the older men be sober, reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in patience; 3 the older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things -- 4 that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, 5 to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed. 6 Likewise exhort the young men to be sober-minded, 7 in all things showing yourself to be a pattern of good works; in doctrine showing integrity, reverence, incorruptibility, 8 sound speech that cannot be condemned, that one who is an opponent may be ashamed, having nothing evil to say of you.”

If every local church would practice these verses, the church would be truly a city set on a hill as a guiding light to the world (Matthew 5:14). By speaking sound doctrine, and showing yourself as a pattern of good works, the older men and women would mentor the younger and the world would stand up and take notice! We would be distinct!

3. THE BODY OF CHRIST IS DISTINCTIVE BY: HOW THEY WORK OUT THEIR UNITY OF THE FAITH

Ephesians 4:13-14 “*till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting*”

“**till**” is a very important word. It is the Greek word **MECHRI** and stands for a movement forward until a time of completion. It is the time between where you are now and where you will end up. For example, when Jesus said, “*Let both (wheat and chaff) grow*

*together **until** the harvest*” (Matthew 13:30) He was saying the crops are not ready for picking yet, but they will reach a ripe stage and need harvesting.

Every single Christian starts off as a babe. The story is told of a famous Albanian village where many great leaders had come from. A sage who wanted to learn more traveled to this Albanian village and found a wise gray-haired old man and asked, “How many great leaders have been born here?” The old man startled him with this reply: “No great leaders have ever been born here, only babies were born here.” In other words, leaders are made, not born. The same is also true of strong Christians.

The Lord’s church does not automatically reach the utopian state where every member is fully mature and all now “*speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.*” (I Corinthians 1:10). Only in heaven will there ever be such an assembly of people. For in heaven we will finally see the fulfillment of John’s prophecy:

*“Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, **we shall be like Him**, for we shall see Him as He is.”* (I John 3:2).

But while we are still on earth there will never be a perfect church made up of perfect people. The church can be described as a hospital, not a hotel. We are all struggling with temptations and sins, longing for the final redemption of our bodies when we can finally be perfected in Christ. Only in heaven will we finally “*come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man.*”

The New Testament describes Christians in various stages of development. Some are “**babes**” who can only handle “*the milk of the word.*” (I Peter 2:2). “*For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a **babe.***” (Hebrews 5:13). God fully knows this and so gives the gifts of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to feed them milk. Everyone starts as a “*new creation*” (2 Corinthians 5:17) when he is “*born again*” (John 3:3,5) and is “*raised to walk in newness of life*” (Romans 6:4).

But there comes a time when a babe must put away the bottle and begin to eat meat. There is a time when he or she should grow to be teachers. “*For though by this time you ought to be **teachers** ... But solid food belongs to those who are of **full age**, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.*” (Hebrews 5:12-14).

The job of the mentors in the church is to slowly, but surely, lead them from being weak to being strong. After spending an entire chapter (Romans 14) on the weak and strong brother, he concludes in Romans 15:1 with these words: “*We then who are **strong** ought to bear with the scruples of the **weak**, and not to please ourselves.*” Paul said it again in different terms in Galatians 6:1, “*Brethren, if a man is **overtaken** in any trespass, you who are **spiritual** restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.*”

It is obvious that in this life there will always be *strong* members, who have grown in their faith, are now *teachers* and of *full age*. And every growing church that evangelizes the lost and brings sinners out of the world will always have growing pains with many *babes* who are *weak* and *overtaken* in sin. A simple reading of the epistles to churches, or a study of the seven churches of Asia in Revelation 2-3, will quickly reveal that churches will always have “issues” and struggles.

But a church that will prove to be distinctive is one that recognizes these differences and works diligently to bring every single member “*to the unity of the faith*.” We work to move them from the nursery to a “Master’s” degree!

Two such churches that seemed to be mature can be found in Smyrna and Philadelphia (Revelation 2:8-11; Revelation 3:7-13). I would have loved to be a member there.

May it be said of this church as it was said of Rome: “*I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world*.” (Romans 1:8).

Or may we strive to be like the church at Philippi: “*And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ*” (Philippians 1:9-10).

Or pray we will be like the church at Colosse: “*For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God*” (Colossians 1:9-10).

This local church will surely be distinct from many other churches when people notice these growing trends where every member is loved and becoming unified in the faith of Christ. Jesus said it this way: “*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another*.” (John 13:34-35).

May we all become mentors to bring every Christian to a full grown faith.

Summary:

Any church which claims to be “of Christ” will fully embrace the distinctive “stand-out-in-a-crowd” positions taken by Paul’s words in Ephesians 4:1-16. You won’t have to wonder if anyone will notice. The words of our enemies (“radical” “fanatic”) might convince us that we are doing something right. But the words of our friends who will be saved will convince us even more. They will say of us, “This church is not perfect, but it is Christ-like in its love for Truth, and for my soul.”

Let us be distinct, but only for the glory of our Lord.