

Its Investment

Rediscovering Church:

Ephesians 4:7-13

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I read an email on *Changing a Light Bulb the Christian Way*. (Please see this in good fun. I cringe because of the bite in some descriptions, but don't take it seriously or draw conclusions from what is said.) How many Christians does it take to change a light bulb?

Presbyterians: None – lights will go on and off at predestined times.

Roman Catholics: None – candles only.

Baptists: At least 15 – one to change the light bulb, and three committees to approve the change and decide who brings the potato salad and fried chicken.

Episcopalians: 3 – one to call the electrician, one to serve refreshments and one to talk about how much better the old one was.

Mormons: 5 – one man to change the bulb; four wives to tell him how to do it.

Unitarians: We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey you have found that light bulbs work for you, you are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your light bulb for the next Sunday service, in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, 3-way, long-life and tinted, all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence.

Nazarene: 6 – one woman to replace the bulb while five men review church lighting policy.

Pentecostal: 10 – one to change the bulb, and nine to pray against the spirit of darkness.

Charismatic: 1 – hands are already in the air.

Lutherans: None – Lutherans don't believe in change.

Amish: What's a light bulb?

United Methodists: Undetermined – whether your light is bright, dull, or completely out, you are loved. You can be a light bulb, turnip bulb, or tulip bulb. Bring a bulb of your choice to the Sunday lighting service and a covered dish to pass.

I shared this joke not to offend everybody in the Christian family, but to make a point.

There is diversity in this world and in Jesus' Church; and some of it is planned.

Understand that there is also a lack of diversity: there is only one body of Christ – not many, one Spirit who instructs – not many, one hope to which we all are called – not many, one Lord who is obeyed – not many, one faith to trust – not many, one baptism into life – not many, one God to be honored – not many and one Father who is over all, through all and in all – not many (Ephesians 4:4-5). It is God’s will that diverse people grow into a unity of “faith in” and “knowledge of” Jesus, and that together we become completely like Christ (Ephesians 4:13). Unity rather than diversity is the focus. Jesus wasn’t all over the map. He wasn’t schizophrenic. He can’t be followed by people working at cross purposes. He can’t be obeyed by people who do not love each other. He can’t be clearly and fully seen in this world unless his family, the church, walks in unity. Unity is the focus.

However, diversity rather than unity is his gift.

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: “When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.” (Ephesians 4:7-8, NIV)

The Apostle Paul wrote that Christ gave gifts, plural, and apportioned some to each believer. He supported that statement by paraphrasing a Psalm of David. In Psalm 68:18 David sees God leading a procession of captured enemies. He pictures God coming in a parade or procession like a victorious warrior-king, to rightfully ascend the throne in formerly occupied territory. Walking behind this king are his enemies in chains. The people are so grateful that they shower on this king gifts. Even rebels, the king’s enemies, offer gifts in tribute. Paul sees this fulfilled in the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Dark princes and powers are led captive behind Jesus as he takes his rightful place of leadership. However, instead of us showering Jesus with gifts, we receive them. The scholar Paul, noticing ambiguity in David’s Hebrew, interprets that the gifts are *for* men rather than *from* men. And that is exactly what the

king of kings is doing with us. He is showering his liberated subjects with gifts. Like a king dividing plunder with his subjects, Jesus pours into his followers through the Holy Spirit gifts of freedom and truth. In other words, an innate ability like music, mechanics, management or speaking is not a spiritual gift unless individuals, having been freed from the kingdom of darkness and living under the rule of light, now help others with that ability to embrace or live in freedom and truth. All the gifts Jesus apportions bring greater measures of freedom and truth.

Suppose you walk into worship and an usher greets you. She smiles and says, "I'm glad you are here. Where would you like to sit?" As you enter the pew, she hands you a bulletin and says, "If you have any needs, let me know," or she says, "I prayed that God would bless you today and I expect it." What would you experience? Wouldn't you taste a little more of God's truth: namely, that you are loved and served by Jesus."

Suppose you enter the nursery and find an attendant rocking your baby. He conscientiously cares for the child and you see him smiling and cooing to your child: "It is such a privilege to hold you; our heavenly Father longs to hold all his children in his arms." A baby may not understand those words, but he or she will sense the attitude. Little ones can receive warmth, and in that they experience a taste of God's kingdom of freedom and truth.

On the other hand, we can usher or attend nursery and do little for the heart and spirit of those we serve. We may have legitimate abilities in music or speaking but lead people into greater bondage and darkness through our attitudes and craft.

Thus the investment God makes directly relates to our deliverance, to Christ ascending to the throne and to the enemies of our soul being captured. Christ reveals himself through a changed people who now love their neighbors. Christ reveals himself through a humble people who have experienced salvation and use their innate and new abilities to serve others.

Lately God has been reforming the church so that his people notice his investment. People use to see the pastor as some kind of medicine man who would dispense the spiritual medicine while the congregation organized into committees to run the church. Most of those congregations are dying or have died. You see when the king ascended his throne, the medicine was given to all of his subjects to dispense with their special abilities. Together believers are a priesthood. Individually we are priests with a royal appointment to use our special abilities to dispense the medicine. There are not two classes of believers. There is not professional and lay, clergy and congregation. Indeed, those distinctions are artificial and deceptive. That is why I don't wear vestments (you know... a robe). My vestment from God is no different from yours. We are given the Holy Spirit, and with the Holy Spirit we are given a special call that relates to both innate and new abilities we receive.

When Paul wrote of Christ giving gifts to humanity, he wrote:

It was he 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. (Eph 4:11-12, NIV)

Christ's gifts to his followers include apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. In other words, among the gifts that Christ gave and continues to give are people. Christ doesn't just give us the Holy Spirit by depositing him in our hearts. He also gives us the Holy Spirit through other people, so that we are prepared for our own service. You miss the Holy Spirit and your own preparation if you isolate yourself from his gifts of people.

Have you rejected some of the gifts the king of kings has given you? Have you walked away from them in unbelief? Who are the apostles, prophets, evangelists and teachers in your life? Do you have any clue as to what those gifts mean for you? How will you realize your potential and fulfill your purpose if you ignore the investments Christ is making in you?