

“How and Who Over What” based on Ephesians 4:1-16, Proverbs 30:1-9
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on August 4, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Caleb Campbell grew up in a strict, rules-based conservative Christian home in Phoenix, Arizona. He said his church focused on “what” a Christian was supposed to do. Or, perhaps better, “what” a Christian was NOT supposed to do. No drinking, no smoking, no Rated-R movies, and more.

But there was a disconnect because outside of church, he saw the people of his church ignoring many of those things. He even went over to the Pastor’s house even, and there was *The Terminator*, an Rated R movie, on the media console by the VCR. He said in an interview on the Good Faith podcast to host Curtis Chang, “I noticed people aren’t living this stuff out.” He added, “It’s not integrated. What they’re saying and what they’re doing is not lining up.”

Caleb said he was done with church and in high school he made new friends. These friends asked him to hang out and they gave him a place to belong. These friends, as it turned out, were Neo-Nazi skinheads. He said we often think people join a group like this, because they have a certain ideology or a particular set of beliefs, and then they go looking for a group or tribe to join.

However, most of the time it is the opposite. People start out seeking safety, belonging and purpose. The ideology, he said, only served his belonging in the community, which came first. He said he joined because the group said they had his back. They said he had a purpose. They told him they needed to preserve the white race, and its power. They kept emphasizing what they believed, repeating it over and over. It was an easy sell for him, being a blonde, blue eyed, 16 year old. He was also scared to death of the world around him. He needed belonging and was looking for some kind of purpose in life.

As he looked at the group, he found another disconnect – another lack of integration. These new friends kept saying they were the master race, and the protectors, but none of them were successful – everyone was getting shot or going to jail. It didn’t feel like what was being said matched what was occurring. So again, he walked away.

Later, in 2001, he was a drummer in a band, and they were looking for a bassist. So, he put an ad in the newspaper and got a call, but on the other line wasn’t a bassist. It was a woman who saw the ad, but she was looking for a drummer. She was from Desert Springs Bible Church, looking to hire one for their contemporary music service. Caleb agreed to take the gig and got in the rotation at the church.

Soon, he became friends with one of the musicians. They’d hang out and he would express his rage, and his anger over the stupidity and hypocrisy of the church and religion. But rather than fight with him, the other musician just listened. Then he got his bible and showed him the ways Jesus actually agreed with Caleb.

This happened every week over the course of a year, just about every week, and Caleb found himself drawn to Jesus. He was drawn not by some teaching, some what to do or not to do, but through the hospitality, compassion and kindness of his fellow musician. It was not what they expected of him, but HOW they treated the former skinhead. That’s what drew Caleb in, opening him to repentance and transformation.

He remembers he was struck by the vision of a multinational church, a theme in Ephesians, where all the nations parade their glory before Jesus. He said what struck him was that there was no “othering.” In this vision, to comply with it he would have to interact with different people, with different ideas, different thoughts, and different ethnicities. This flipped his beliefs upside down.

He said that, “Though we are all different,” these differences only magnify “our vision of God. It’s not a threat.”

In what was an even more unconventional journey to becoming a pastor than my own, Caleb is now the lead pastor at Desert Springs Bible Church, and like his predecessors, the now Rev. Campbell emphasizes the need to interact with people who are different from us and show hospitality.

I learned about Caleb, as I said, from an interview on the “Good Faith” podcast. This podcast is intended to help Christians navigate the tense political climate. We don’t want to talk about it, but we all know these are going to be a rough next few months. Host Curtis Chang likes to say they emphasize the “how” in engaging politics, over the “what,” meaning the issues that often divide faithful Christians. I think this is biblical, provided we also add, as Chang does, the who, meaning who Jesus is.

This idea of emphasizing who Jesus is and how we respond is at the heart of what we read from Paul today in writing to the Ephesians. The first half of the letter which we’ve been going through for the last three weeks have been centered on the central theme of the gospel – the core teachings. Now, Paul is getting into the practical application of the gospel.

He talks about how to walk, or ‘live a life worthy of the calling to which we are called.’ He has just said that the good news is that by the grace of Jesus, we are inheritors of God’s life and given the Spirit as a downpayment for the full inheritance of life eternal fully with God. Surely, this is the type of news that could puff us up to say, “I’m chosen.” And we are. It could make us feel like this world is ours to take and worldly power is needed.

But no – by no means. What Paul says here is that we are “God’s accomplishment” and must reflect Christ. Christ was humble, having shared in our mortal humanity despite being one with God. Christ was gentle, choosing not to fight back when sin and death came upon him. He went to the cross, patiently enduring betrayal and the wrath of sin. And on the third day, rose again for us, bearing us with his love.

Yes, the Son descended to us and ascended back to the Father, sending that downpayment of the Spirit. This was not to make us prideful because we are temples of God, but to be his body in the world. When we claim to hold faith in Jesus, then we must respond to our calling. This would be “integrated,” as Caleb Campbell put it.

To reflect Christ in the world, means living into our calling with humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love, endeavoring, as the King James put it, or more literally, being quick, wasting no time, to keep the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace. Unity is not something to say, “Someday it will happen, perhaps in heaven.” No, it’s our job to seek it.

In calling all nations to join the Jewish people, this is about unity, not uniformity. The unity is in the One body of Christ, which is the church, in the One Holy Spirit, just as we have been called into the One hope of our calling. There is the Holy Spirit. Then we see Jesus, because there is One Lord, One faith or trust in him, and One baptism. There is the Son. Then there is the Father of all, over all, through all, in all. Paul shows us the unity of the three persons of the Trinity revealing One God. But what’s more, is that through the Son, who became human, now humanity, which was once divided, is made one new humanity in him.

Now, the grace of God, this unity with God and one another, is the gift of the Messiah, Christ. Then Paul quotes Psalm 58 and makes reference to our Proverbs passage today and all its talk of the one

who ascended, meaning Jesus the Messiah and Son of God, who also descended or came down from his place in the Godhead to bear our humanity and ascending again to fill all things with his Spirit. He sends leaders filled with the Holy Spirit to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers, not for their own power but to build up the church *until* all are brought to unity in faith and knowledge of the Son of God. Our job as church leaders is to put ourselves out of a job, by leading and teaching.

You see, Paul lays out one thing as the job of church leaders. It's not to primarily teach everything that could be known from scripture, but fundamentally it is faith and knowledge of Jesus, as fully one with God and one with us to bring all people to him. Yet still, church leaders, even well meaning, can fall into a practice of deceit, making secondary teachings more important than who Jesus is. Paul says that in the hands of these leaders we can be like infants, tossed about, carried by every wind of teaching. rather than believing in Jesus and who he is and what he has done.

Sometimes leaders may make other things that are peripheral issues a test of faith. This is not to say our teachings about baptism are not important. But religious leaders have said that if you don't believe in infant baptism or exclusively believer's baptism then you are a heretic. Then there's communion and how we perceive Christ as present in the sacrament. God's sovereignty has been used to divide. What is the role of free will? All of these things matter and it's important we have thought on them.

It's important we interpret scripture. It will inform how we view these issues or even one political issue or another. We must seek to have a personal theology of what God wants from us in this world. However, none of these things should come before who Jesus is and what he did for us and none of these teachings should negatively affect how we treat one another.

That is what Paul is saying here – the primary teaching of Christ, who he is, and what Jesus did for us, is a teaching that unifies all people. Other teachings matter, but they can be used to divide people and create an “us” and “them” mindset. If they are used in that manner, then they are used against Christ's mindset. That is the deceit.

We are about to head into a tumultuous and difficult time as a nation. We need to set an example for our children and youth in this difficult time. Yes, every four years, I know, we are told this is the most important election ever. Then people will justify their passionate campaigning and their pleading with others to side with their candidate, or else some catastrophe will happen. We were there four years ago. Four years before as well, and then 12 years ago, and 16, and 20.

Think about it. We've all heard this refrain over and over again. This is because it's easy to make us afraid. It's easy to be scared of uncertainty. Bad things could happen in any number of ways after elections. But how we respond matters.

You will be tempted to emphasize an “us vs. them” mentality and put down or insult people on the other side of the aisle. We may be tempted even to judge family, friends, and neighbors as stupid, or even evil, based only on which party they vote for or what their opinion is on one issue or another. Some will be tempted to think they will earn God's favor with their vote. Still others may desire not just to defeat but destroy the other side, as if total annihilation is the only way to save the country and the world. We have one savior – Christ – and not any candidate.

We will be tempted to use malice and slander, even violence, to protect God. But protecting God is not our job. When we say “Almighty God,” do we really think a being that is almighty needs our protection? God is fine. Trust me. What we're really tempted to do is protect ourselves or the false god we've created. How we choose to act toward others is what reveals the true God to others.

Beloved, God does not need our votes – God is already creator and ruler of all things. To say Jesus is Messiah is to say that he is the anointed King over all people. This means all the nations, not just ours, are under his reign, even if sin remains prevalent at different levels in each one. This is not to say our votes don't matter, because they do. They absolutely do, but beyond our votes, what matters most is how we act toward one another.

If we, or our chosen candidates, choose pride over humility, what does that say? If we choose worldly power and not gentleness, what does that say? If we push urgency and fear of catastrophes we think are inevitable, and not patience or longsuffering, what does that say about our faith? Are we walking with Christ. Are we living a life worthy of the calling to which we are called?

Our challenge and I know it's hard, but it is a challenge from Paul, is to reflect the humility, the gentleness, and the patience of Jesus. Will we bear with one another in love, even those we disagree with? Will we do the good work that God has set before us by being quick to keep unity of the Spirit, and do so in a bond, of peace, confident in God's love for us? We don't need that added affirmation of victory in this world.

My prayer in this season as it starts, is that we all will trust God, with humility, gentleness and patience. My prayer is that we conduct ourselves by bearing with one another in love, just as God bears with us, giving us grace even though we sin. I pray we are quick to keep the unity of the Holy Spirit in the bond of peace and reveal Christ in us. Remember, you are loved, and you are called to love God and others. We all have hope. No matter what's going on around us, we all have hope in Christ.

Beloved, love is the strength of our song. When we speak truth in love – the truth of who the Messiah is and what he has done for us, it is from him that we are joined together and with God. As we go forth, remember the calling to live a life worthy of our call, with humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another in love, and being quick to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Perhaps this will inoculate you and help in this turbulent season. Amen.