

Homiletics Analysis: Ephesians 4:1–32

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Ephesians 4 forms the great hinge of the letter — the transition from the doctrinal foundation of chapters 1–3 to the ethical imperatives of chapters 4–6. Paul opens with a summons to walk worthy of the calling the believers have received (vv. 1–3), grounding that summons in the sevenfold unity of the body of Christ (vv. 4–6). He then introduces the ascended Christ as the giver of gifts to His church (vv. 7–10), with those gifts expressed through specific ministry offices whose purpose is the equipping of every member for works of service and the building up of the body into maturity (vv. 11–16). The chapter's second half pivots to the contrast between the old self and the new self: believers are called to put off the former manner of life — its darkened understanding, hardened heart, and sensual impurity (vv. 17–22) — and to be renewed in the spirit of their minds and put on the new self, created in true righteousness and holiness (vv. 23–24). Paul closes with a series of specific ethical directives flowing from that renewal: truthful speech, anger rightly ordered, honest labor, life-giving words, grief over sin rather than indulgence, and the replacement of bitterness and wrath with forgiveness rooted in God's own forgiveness in Christ (vv. 25–32).

This Text — Intent:

God is calling the church to live from its identity rather than toward it — to walk worthy of a calling already secured, to pursue unity already given, to grow into a maturity already defined by Christ, and to embody a new humanity already created in righteousness and holiness. The intent is not primarily ethical improvement but ontological clarity: the readers must understand what they already are before they can properly hear what they are called to do. Paul's intent is to forge a community whose common life visibly displays the reconciling work of Christ in a fragmented world — so that the church becomes, in its shared practice, an argument for the gospel it preaches.

Subject Sentence: The church is summoned to live from its God-given unity and identity in Christ.

Primary Claim: Because the church has been called into a unity that already exists in the triune God and a new humanity already created in Christ, God is summoning His people to walk in a manner that makes that invisible reality visible — in their shared life, their growth toward maturity, and their concrete daily conduct.

Interpretive Evaluation

The relationship between vv. 1–3 and vv. 4–6 — imperative and indicative: The opening imperative — “walk worthy of your calling” — is sometimes read as a moral summons standing on its own, a call to effort and discipline. This reading, common in moralistic preaching, mistakes the structure of the argument. The sevenfold unity of vv. 4–6 is not a reward to be pursued but the ground on which the imperative stands. There is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father — and it is *because* this unity already exists, given and sealed by the triune God, that the imperative to maintain it has any force. The unity is not achieved by the church’s effort; it is maintained and exhibited by the church’s effort. The Reformed reading, grounded in the indicative-imperative structure that governs all of Paul’s ethics, holds here decisively: the imperative flows from the given reality, not the other way around.

Verses 7–16 — the gifts and the gifted: Pentecostal and charismatic readings of vv. 7–16 frequently import the categories of 1 Corinthians 12 into this passage, reading “gifts” here as primarily the miraculous charismata distributed to individual believers. This conflates two distinct Pauline arguments. In Ephesians 4, the “gifts” Christ gave are not primarily abilities distributed to individuals but persons — apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors-teachers — given to the church as its equipping structure. The purpose clause in v. 12 is decisive: these offices exist “for the equipping of the saints for works of service.” The goal is not the spectacular display of individual gifts but the corporate maturity of the body. The dispensational question — whether “apostles and prophets” here indicates an ongoing or a foundational office — is a genuine intra-Reformed discussion. The Reformation and confessional Reformed tradition (Westminster Standards, Second London Confession) has generally treated apostles and prophets as foundational offices (cf. Eph. 2:20) that have ceased, with evangelists, pastors, and teachers as the continuing equipping offices. This reading is to be preferred: the argument of vv. 11–16 concerns the church’s movement toward maturity measured by “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ,” which is an eschatological horizon, not a description of what continues to be introduced to the church by ongoing apostolic foundation.

Verses 17–24 — the “old self” and the “new self”: The Wesleyan/holiness tradition has sometimes read “put off the old self” and “put on the new self” (vv. 22–24) as describing a second definitive work of grace — a post-conversion sanctifying crisis that eradicates the old nature. This reading imports more into the Greek than is present. The aorist infinitives in vv. 22 and 24 (*apothesthai*, “to put off”; *endusasthai*, “to put on”) are best read as describing a definitive action that has already occurred at conversion — Paul is reminding them of what the gospel has already done to them, not calling them to an additional crisis experience. The present imperative in v. 23 (“be renewed in the spirit of your minds”) describes the ongoing, continuous process of transformation that flows from that definitive event. The Reformed reading — that the “old self” refers to what the believer was in Adam, definitively dealt with at union with Christ, while the “new self” is the regenerate

identity already given — accounts for the grammar, the argument, and the Pauline theology of union with Christ (cf. Romans 6) without positing a second crisis.

Verses 25–32 — ethical specifics: Some Lutheran readings emphasize the indicative of forgiveness so strongly in v. 32 (“forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you”) that the imperatives of the preceding verses are softened into gospel proclamation rather than genuine ethical demand. The text will not sustain this softening: Paul is issuing real commands with real content, expecting real behavioral change. The Reformed reading holds both together: the imperatives are genuine and binding, and they are grounded in and enabled by the gospel indicative. The Wesleyan tradition rightly notes that Paul is describing transformation that is expected to be visible and concrete — not merely positional. This is a contribution worth retaining, provided it is grounded in the indicative rather than disconnected from it.

Key Canonical Support

- **Romans 6:1–14** — The “put off / put on” structure of Ephesians 4:22–24 is grounded in the death-and-resurrection logic of Romans 6: the old self was crucified with Christ, and the believer is to reckon this true and live accordingly. The indicative of definitive change enables the imperative of ongoing renewal.
- **Ephesians 2:14–22** — The unity Paul calls the church to maintain in 4:1–6 has already been secured by Christ’s death, which broke down the dividing wall and created one new humanity. The “one body” of 4:4 is the same “one new man” of 2:15 — the imperative of chapter 4 is grounded in the accomplishment of chapter 2.
- **1 Corinthians 12:12–27** — The body-of-Christ metaphor for the church, each member contributing to the whole, grounds the equipping logic of Ephesians 4:11–16 in a different register: the Spirit distributes gifts for the common good, and every member’s contribution is necessary for the body’s health.
- **Colossians 3:8–17** — A near-parallel passage using the same “put off / put on” structure, with overlapping lists of vices to abandon and virtues to embody, grounding the ethical imperatives in the readers’ resurrection with Christ and their new identity in the new self. Provides a canonical check on interpretation and confirms the Reformed reading of the indicative-imperative structure.
- **Psalms 68:18 / Ephesians 4:8** — Paul’s citation and adaptation of Psalm 68:18 in vv. 8–10 is exegetically significant: where the Psalm describes God ascending with captives in train, Paul reads the ascended Christ as the one who has *given* gifts. This reflects a developed reading of the Psalm in which Christ’s descent into the lower parts (the incarnation and/or death) and His ascension are the basis for the church’s endowment with gifted persons. The canonical movement from Psalm to

apostolic application is itself an argument for Christ as the fulfillment of YHWH's ascent.

Aim: To demonstrate that the ethical summons of Ephesians 4 is not a moral upgrade program but a call to live from the new identity and given unity that Christ has already secured — so that the church becomes, in its common life, a visible argument for the gospel.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
4:1	Paul, the prisoner, urges walking worthy of the calling received	The self-identification “prisoner” is not incidental — Paul embodies the cost of the calling he urges
4:2	Worthy walk described: humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love	These are relational virtues, not individual spiritual disciplines — the context is communal life
4:3	Eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace	“Maintain” (<i>tērein</i>) — the unity is already given; the task is preservation, not creation
4:4–6	The sevenfold unity: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father	Trinitarian structure: Spirit (v. 4), Lord/Son (v. 5), God/Father (v. 6). Unity's ground is the being of God
4:7	Grace given to each one according to the measure of Christ's gift	Shifts from corporate unity (vv. 4–6) to individual gifting — both are necessary and non-competing
4:8	Psalm 68:18 cited: the ascended Christ gives gifts	Paul's use of the Psalm applies it to Christ's ascension; the gifts are its fruit
4:9–10	Christ's descent (incarnation / death) and ascent explained — He fills all things	The scope of Christ's work is cosmic; the gift-giving flows from His universal lordship

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
4:11	Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors-teachers listed as Christ's gifts to the church	Note the article structure in Greek: "pastors-teachers" may be one office or closely linked offices
4:12	Purpose: equipping the saints for works of service, building up the body	Three-part purpose clause — often misread with incorrect punctuation; "equipping" is the primary task of the offices
4:13	Goal: unity of the faith, knowledge of the Son, mature manhood, fullness of Christ	Eschatological horizon — the church's maturity is measured by Christ's own fullness
4:14	Negative goal: no longer children, tossed by waves, deceived by human cunning	Doctrinal instability is the mark of immaturity; the gifted offices guard against it
4:15	Positive goal: speaking truth in love, growing up into Christ the head	Truth and love are not in tension here — both are marks of corporate maturity
4:16	The body, joined and knit together, grows as each part does its work	The growth of the body depends on every member's contribution, not only the offices of v. 11
4:17–18	Imperative: no longer walk as Gentiles — their minds are darkened, understanding futile	The Gentile manner of life is intellectual before it is behavioral — wrong thinking produces wrong living
4:19	Callousness → sensuality → impurity → greediness: the descent of the hardened heart	Sin has a logic and a trajectory; the progression is not incidental
4:20–21	"But that is not the way you learned Christ" — the gospel as counter-formation	"Learning Christ" is the distinctive category — not merely learning <i>about</i> Christ but being formed by Him
4:22	Put off the old self — corrupt according to deceitful desires	Aorist infinitive — a definitive action, grounded in conversion/union with Christ
4:23	Be renewed in the spirit of	Present infinitive — ongoing,

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	your minds	continuous renewal; the ongoing side of what v. 22 declares definitively
4:24	Put on the new self — created after God in true righteousness and holiness	The new self is not self-constructed but <i>created</i> — a new creation category
4:25	Put away falsehood; speak truth to your neighbor — members of one body	Each specific imperative (vv. 25–32) has an embedded theological reason
4:26–27	Be angry without sinning; do not let the sun go down on your anger; give no opportunity to the devil	Anger is not forbidden but must be rightly ordered and resolved
4:28	Stop stealing; labor with honest hands; share with those in need	The goal of honest labor is not self-sufficiency but generosity — a complete reorientation of relationship to work
4:29	Only speech that builds up — giving grace to those who hear	The standard for speech is not neutrality but active benefit to others
4:30	Do not grieve the Holy Spirit, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption	Corporate sin grieves the Spirit; the seal is eschatological — pointing to the final redemption
4:31	Put away: bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, malice	A comprehensive list of relational destructiveness — all rooted in an unforgiving heart
4:32	Be kind, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you	The ground of all interpersonal ethics: God’s prior forgiveness in Christ

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	4:1–3	The Summons: Walk Worthy of Your Calling
2	4:4–6	The Foundation: The Given

Division	Verses	Label
3	4:7–10	Unity of the Triune God The Giver: Christ Ascended, Filling All Things, Bestowing Gifts
4	4:11–16	The Equipment: Gifted Persons, Mature Body, Measured by Christ
5	4:17–24	The Contrast: Old Humanity and New Humanity
6	4:25–32	The Application: Concrete Conduct Flowing from the New Self

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim *(restated)*

Subject Sentence: The church is summoned to live from its God-given unity and identity in Christ.

Primary Claim: Because the church has been called into a unity that already exists in the triune God and a new humanity already created in Christ, God is summoning His people to walk in a manner that makes that invisible reality visible — in their shared life, their growth toward maturity, and their concrete daily conduct.

Applications (Five)

1. Stop striving to create unity and start working to maintain it. *(Mind/Belief)* The most common mistake Christians make about church unity is treating it as an achievement to be constructed through sufficient effort, agreement, or relational chemistry. Ephesians 4:3 corrects this at the root: the unity of the Spirit already exists, given by the triune God whose own being is its ground. The task is not creation but maintenance — guarding and exhibiting what has already been secured. This means that every act of reconciliation in the church is not building something new but uncovering something real. Every conflict that is resolved by bearing with one another in love is not an improvement on the church's condition but a return to the truth about it. Rethink what unity is and where it comes from: it is not yours to manufacture. It is yours to walk in.

2. Let the church's gifted offices do what Christ gave them to do. *(Mind/Belief)* Evangelists, pastors, and teachers are not the church's professional Christians employed to do ministry on behalf of the congregation. Ephesians 4:12 makes their purpose unmistakably clear: they exist to equip the saints so that the saints do works of service.

The pastor who does all the ministry while the congregation watches is not a model of faithfulness — it is a structural inversion of the design Christ gave His church. Equally, the congregation that evaluates its pastors and teachers by entertainment value or emotional satisfaction rather than by whether they are being equipped to serve has misunderstood what they are there for. The measure of a healthy church is not the quality of the Sunday gathering but the maturity and ministry of every member.

3. Let the grief of God’s Spirit over your sin matter more to you than the comfort of staying as you are. (*Affections/Worship*) Ephesians 4:30 names something stunning: the sins listed in this chapter — falsehood, unresolved anger, corrupt speech, bitterness, slander — grieve the Holy Spirit. Not merely violate a standard. Not merely break a rule. They grieve a Person who indwells you and has sealed you for the day of redemption. The Reformers took the emotional life of God seriously — not as divine impassibility’s opposite but as its complement: God is not manipulated by His creation, but God is genuinely affected by the conduct of His people. If that is true, then the question to ask about persistent bitterness or habitual deceptive speech is not merely “what is this doing to my relationships?” but “what is this doing to my relationship with the Spirit who lives in me?” Let that question break the comfortable tolerance of sin that most Christians have learned to maintain.

4. Replace one specific pattern of speech this week with speech that gives grace. (*Will/Behavior*) Ephesians 4:29 does not merely prohibit corrupt speech — it replaces it with a positive standard: “only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” The standard is not neutrality (don’t say harmful things) but active benefit (say the thing that gives grace to this person in this moment). This is a concrete and measurable discipline. Identify one recurring pattern in your speech that fails this test — the reflexive complaint at the dinner table, the cutting remark that has become your way of expressing frustration, the silence that is actually a form of punishment — and replace it this week with something that specifically builds up the person who would hear it. Not a generic kindness but a particular word for a particular person.

5. Ground your forgiveness of others in what God’s forgiveness of you actually cost. (*Affections/Worship*) The command to forgive in Ephesians 4:32 is grounded in the most powerful motivation in the universe: “as God in Christ forgave you.” This is not sentiment — it is a claim about what forgiveness costs and what it is worth. God’s forgiveness of your sin required the death of His Son. It was not a matter of overlooking, excusing, or tolerating — it was an act of substitutionary bearing that absorbed the full weight of what you had done. When you are called to forgive someone who has wronged you, you are being called to act from that ground — not from the relatively modest standard of your own character or willingness, but from the inexhaustible resource of having been forgiven at infinite cost. The person who grasps what Christ’s forgiveness actually required finds that the grudge they have been nursing begins to look different — not immediately easy to release, but deeply inconsistent with who they now are.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Ephesians 4 is theologically foundational for a biblical understanding of the church as the body of Christ — not a voluntary association of like-minded individuals but a new humanity created by God, indwelt by one Spirit, living under one Lord, and moving toward one eschatological goal. The chapter teaches that Christian ethics is never free-standing: every imperative is grounded either in a divine indicative (this is what God has done), a Christological reality (this is who Christ is and what He accomplished), or a pneumatological fact (this is how the Spirit works in and among you). God’s character is displayed here in His deliberate design of a body whose unity reflects the unity of the Trinity, whose growth reflects the fullness of Christ, and whose common life reflects the righteousness and holiness of the new self He creates. The chapter also teaches the goodness of embodied, structured, communal Christian life: maturity is not achieved by isolated individuals but by the whole body, joined and knit together, as each part does its work.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Ephesians 4 is a locus classicus for the Reformed doctrine of the church’s ministry and the relationship between the indicative and imperative in Christian ethics. The indicative-imperative structure that governs all of Pauline ethics is displayed here with unusual clarity: unity is given before it is maintained; the new self is created before it is worn; forgiveness is received before it is extended. This structure is the engine of Reformed sanctification — not “try harder” but “reckon true what God has declared true and walk accordingly.” The passage also grounds the Reformed conviction that the ordinary preaching and teaching ministry of the church — evangelists, pastors, teachers — is the primary instrument by which Christ builds His body to maturity, guarding against the twin dangers of doctrinal immaturity (v. 14) and relational dysfunction (vv. 25–32). The Reformation’s insistence that the Word of God preached is the primary means of grace is not a claim about technology — it is a claim about what Christ designed His church to grow through. Ephesians 4 is one of its clearest textual grounds.

Main Takeaway

The church does not need to become something it is not — it needs to walk in what it already is. The unity is given. The new humanity is created. The gifts are bestowed. The Spirit has sealed you. God’s summons in Ephesians 4 is not “improve yourselves so that you can eventually resemble the church Christ intended” — it is “the church Christ intended is already real; live like it.” That means guarding unity instead of manufacturing it, speaking words that give grace instead of words that take something for yourself, forgiving

because you have been forgiven at a cost you cannot repay, and letting the grief of the indwelling Spirit over your sin mean more to you than the comfort of staying the same.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Separating the ethical imperatives from their indicative ground.** The most common and most damaging mishandling of Ephesians 4 is to preach the commands of vv. 1–3 and vv. 25–32 without grounding them in the theological foundation of vv. 4–16 and the conversion-logic of vv. 17–24. The result is moralism — a series of good behaviors urged without gospel motivation. “Be humble, be patient, stop lying, be kind” may all be true, but without the ground of “because the Spirit has sealed you, because you are a new creation, because God in Christ has forgiven you,” they are simply a Christian version of the self-improvement culture the surrounding world already offers. Every imperative in this chapter has a theological tether. Cut it and the imperative becomes law without grace.
- **Reading v. 12 with wrong punctuation — making the offices the ministers and the congregation the audience.** The older KJV punctuation introduced commas that made the three-part purpose clause of v. 12 read as three parallel purposes of the offices: equipping *and* building up *and* works of service — all done by the pastors. The correct reading (reflected in most modern translations) makes the equipping the work of the offices and the works of service and building up the work of the equipped saints. This is not a minor textual dispute — it is the difference between a clergy-centered church model and an every-member-ministry model. Preach the correct reading with clarity.
- **Flattening the “old self / new self” into a moral makeover.** The “put off / put on” language of vv. 22–24 is consistently misread as a self-improvement program: stop doing bad things, start doing good things. Paul’s language is far more radical — the old self belongs to a different humanity (the humanity of Adam, darkened, hardened, corrupt), and the new self is a new creation, created by God after His own likeness in righteousness and holiness. This is not self-reformation; it is resurrection-logic applied to daily life. Preaching that reduces it to “work on your character” has missed the gospel claim embedded in the ethics.
- **Treating v. 30 as a threat rather than a pastoral reality.** “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit” is frequently preached as a warning that functions like a spiritual traffic violation — cross this line and face consequences. The context makes it pastorally richer: the Spirit is a Person who indwells the community, who has sealed them for a final inheritance, and who is genuinely affected by the relational sin that Paul has been cataloguing. The point is not fear but intimacy: you have been given the Spirit as a resident, not a referee. Bitterness, slander, and malice are incongruent with His presence in a way that should produce grief in the believer, not merely fear of punishment.

- **Treating “speaking truth in love” (v. 15) as a technique for delivering difficult feedback.** This verse has become a cliché in Christian relational ethics — “speak the truth in love” is routinely invoked as a license for any hard conversation preceded by the disclaimer “I say this in love.” Paul’s context is ecclesiological and doctrinal: speaking truth in love is the body’s corporate response to the false teaching and cunning deception of v. 14. It is about the church’s doctrinal integrity maintained in a spirit of love for one another, not primarily a formula for interpersonal confrontation. Recover the ecclesial and doctrinal weight of the phrase before applying it to relational contexts.
- **Neglecting the corporate dimension throughout.** Ephesians 4 is addressed to a community, not to isolated individuals. The virtues of vv. 2–3 are relational virtues. The unity of vv. 4–6 is corporate. The gifts of vv. 7–16 function in a body. The specific ethics of vv. 25–32 — truth-telling to your neighbor, not letting the sun go down on anger, words that build up those who hear — are all inter-personal, not private. Preaching this chapter as a guide to personal spiritual improvement (how to be a more patient and kind Christian) misses that Paul is describing what a community that has put on the new self looks like together. The “you” throughout is plural. Preach it that way.