

Joined at the heart: Ephesians 4:1-16

by [Paul Stroble](#) in the [July 26, 2003](#) issue

A newspaper cartoon depicts two men tied to a post and surrounded by enemies. One says to the other, "Someday we'll look back on this and laugh." While the apostle Paul doesn't strike me as the kind of person who'd crack a joke or offer a sarcastic quip in a tight situation, he does share this ability to look positively at a crisis situation.

In the middle portion of Ephesians, Paul refers to himself as a prisoner for the Lord (chapters 3, 4 and 6). Some scholars believe Ephesians is a pseudonymous letter, but whether or not Paul actually wrote Ephesians, he did suffer in prison during his ministry, and he wrote Philemon and Philippians while in prison. In these letters we see Paul taking himself, his readers and his congregations from despair to hope, from sorrow to joy, and from suffering to gratitude.

Buddhists have an explanation for the suffering that Paul endured. They would say that he was burdened with something he hated (prison confinement, hunger, pain, fatigue), that he desired freedom from that thing, and thus he suffered. Most of us can understand this: we can think of situations from which we couldn't immediately extricate ourselves. Some of these were relatively minor: a traffic jam, a long line, a full waiting room. Others fell under "big stuff": an illness, an unsatisfactory job (or joblessness), an overseas tour of duty, perhaps even incarceration.

One of my mother's favorite westerns features the hero and "damsel" tied to a bundle of dynamite, with the long fuse burning ominously. Figuratively speaking, we all understand the predicament. But here's where Paul leaves many of us behind, and makes that turn from despair to joy. Paul's prison experience, even with the deprivation and pain involved, does not create in him self-pity or complaint. Instead, with Christ's help, Paul makes of his situation a positive metaphor. He is an "ambassador [for the gospel] in chains" (Eph. 6:20). He stresses that, as he is bound in prison, so should his congregation be "bound in peace" by its faith in Christ, who has freed us from the captivity of sin and death in order to be "joined" as a common body.

Paul's is a remarkable vision. When Christians are joined together they find strength rather than distress. They will be stronger together because they are together in Christ. It's when they split up that they get into trouble.

Verse 12, "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ," is well known in contemporary studies of parish ministry. A bewildering number of texts and "paradigms" have appeared over the years on the interrelated topics of parish leadership, church volunteerism and the "equipping" and "liberation" of the laity. Laity should be given permission to lead and minister; they shouldn't have to butt against parish bureaucracy and entrenched, change-resistant thinking. In the spirit of Ephesians 4:12, parish ministers are to equip the laity rather than performing and controlling ministry themselves. They are to help the laity become empowered by the Spirit.

Parish leadership texts vary widely from the technical to the readable. My favorite is *The Equipping Pastor: A Systems Approach to Congregational Leadership*, by R. Paul Stevens and Phil Collins (Alban Institute), because it clearly recognizes the complexity and uniqueness of individual parishes. Other books take God's own work for granted and consider primarily our human efforts. I once browsed through a church growth text and noticed that the author didn't get around to discussing prayer as a factor in congregational ministry until chapter nine. "Should have recognized it at the start!" someone had written in the margin.

Our lesson from Ephesians corrects that unintentional Pelagianism. In the context of the church, what are leadership abilities other than gifts of the Spirit? To treat them as anything else is to miss the whole point. Furthermore, a congregation and its leaders cannot "equip the saints" without also (as Paul puts it) "building up the body of Christ" and encouraging "the unity of faith," "maturity" and "the measure of the full stature of Christ."

Paul's words are good to remember in serving congregations. What is the point of all our committees? Does "ministry of the laity" mean getting a bunch of jobs done (because someone has said they need doing) or, as Paul puts it, does lay ministry mean the "knitting together" of Christ's body "by every ligament"? How well do the various aspects of the congregation contribute not only to ministry but also (and perhaps especially) to unity, faith and Christian maturity?

As Christians, we are joined together, responsible for one another's Christian walk and well-being. Paul talks about "one body and one spirit, one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all." So when someone we know is in trouble—some metaphorical fuse is burning in his or her life—we're there for that person, praying, talking, listening and helping. We "bear with one another in love," with "humility, gentleness and patience."

Of course, it's easier to describe that kind of fellowship with good religious words than actually to pull it off. In a *New Yorker* cartoon 15 or 20 years ago, the Three Musketeers were crossing their swords together. But instead of saying, "All for one and one for all," they declared, "Every man for himself!" Too often we say "one body" and don't mean it at all. What makes Paul's prison reflections so remarkable is that he isn't thinking primarily of his own drastic situation, or of how he's going to get himself out of his tight spot. Instead he is thinking of invisible bonds of peace, bonds that are far stronger than any of his chains.