

“Christian self-defence” Ephesians 4:1-16

“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore, it says, “When he ascended on high, he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Would you like to do something different today? Would you like to learn some tips for self-defence? Some tips for Christian self-defence. To be even more specific - some self-defence tips against the arch-enemy of God’s people.

Let’s do that. Let’s learn about two ways he tries to attack God’s chosen people and what we can do to protect ourselves, our brothers and sisters in Christ and our Christian communities. We all need this more than we know.

But before we do that, let’s rejoice with Paul the apostle in how he so wonderfully describes the Church. **“There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”**

We are one body of Christ, we all are members in this one body of Christ, the Church. It is not a nice metaphor, which you could apply to any other organization. The Church is not like any other human community.

We are in the deepest sense one body. We are united with Christ, with God the Father, with one another, and with all God’s saints by no one else, but by God’s own Spirit. By the Holy Spirit indwelling in you, and creating this eternal bond of love.

We didn’t choose to join the body of Christ; we couldn’t do such a thing. On our own we were dead in our sins; we were enemies of God. You didn’t choose to belong to the Church, you were called. It was the Triune God Himself who chose you before the foundation of the world and who called you by the Gospel of hope.

He is our Lord, for He has redeemed us not with gold or silver, but with His innocent sufferings and death, with His precious blood. Through the Holy Baptism He now brings us into this divine fellowship with the Triune God, with this one true God, who is over all

and through all and in all. This is us. This is you! The body of Christ. And how does the Triune God create this marvellous body of Christ? How does He feed and sustain it? How does He do that? These are very practical questions?

And this is the answer the Spirit gives through Paul. To do all of this, God gave us His gifts. **“He gave [us] the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.”** This is how God creates, feeds and expands His Church. When Jesus was with us, that is what He Himself did.

He was the Apostle of the Father, He was the Prophet like Moses, He brought us the Good News, the Gospel, He was the Good Shepherd of His people, and He was our Teacher. When Jesus ascended to the Father, He gave His Church a gift, somebody to continue His work. Today we call this gift of God simply... pastors.

Or a more sophisticated way to put it would be – Jesus gave the Church the office of public ministry. Jesus gave this gift with a very specific purpose – **“to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. Until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”**

This gift, pastors, is given to us to strive for the unity of the faith and of the complete knowledge of the Son of God, to the full Christian maturity. If we succeed, then we **“may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.”**

And this is the problem. For our enemy. He doesn't want us to attain the unity of faith, he doesn't want us to grow in our knowledge of Christ and in our Christian maturity, and that is why he attacks the body of Christ.

Let's briefly reflect on **two ways the enemy attacks us and how to defend ourselves.**

Pastors are the gift of Christ, through which He builds up His body, the Church, if pastors preach the whole counsel of God, for then those who listen to them receive the Holy Spirit and the true life that never ends.

So, what should the enemy do? For one, he can try **to distort the message**, so that we do not hear the Word of God, but something else. And then we don't receive the Holy Spirit and true life. Or he can **prevent people from hearing the message**, and if they do not hear it, again, they do not receive the Holy Spirit and true life.

Let's briefly look at each of these and what we can do to defend ourselves. **First, distorting the message.** We understand the reason. The Word of God comes together with God's Spirit. God's Spirit creates and sustains the true faith, and builds up and grows the body of Christ, the Church.

If the message is distorted, false, contains something that is not consistent with the Word of God, we do not receive the Holy Spirit, our faith is neither created nor sustained and God's people wither or even lose the saving faith.

This has been happening since the beginning. Every author of the New Testament warns us from false teachings and false teachers. Matthew: **“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”** (Matthew 7:15-16) Similarly, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, Jude.

The most uncomfortable part of these warnings is that they speak about what is happening in the Church. These are teachers in the Church. Not outside. Not some pagan religions. In the Church. In sheep's clothing. This is how the enemy attacks.

What shall we do? How to defend ourselves? It is quite simple. Exactly as Paul wrote – we are to be equipped, to be built up, to strive for the knowledge of Christ and Christian maturity. How do we do that? When we listen to our Lord. When we strive to learn everything that He has commanded to us

When we learn from the sermon, when we read the Scriptures, when we study the Word of God, on our own and in Christian community, when we discuss, share and rejoice in the Gospel, day in and day out. When we allow the Word of God to shape us to be more and more like Jesus Christ, filled with God's Spirit and His wisdom.

There is no other way, no silver bullet that will scare the enemy away, no some trick that will make the enemy leave us be. This is it. And what a joyful self-defense it is. Feasting on the Word of God, being filled with His Spirit of joy and hope. May our good Lord Jesus Christ help us all to master this self-defense to perfection!

But there is another way the enemy attacks us. He works to prevent us from hearing the message. How does he do that? It is very simple. With gossip. Yes, yes, with gossip. That's it. How would that work? This is how.

As Christians we usually behave reasonably well. How often have you heard about Christians leaving their congregations because there was a lot of fist-fighting, or a lot of adultery going on, or lots of stealing happening? Not too often, I guess.

But what about gossip? What about hurting others with words? What about slandering others behind their backs? What about spreading rumors? And, of course, sooner or later some of that comes out. What happens?

You feel betrayed. Your good reputation is often irreversibly damaged. You don't want to see those people anymore. You don't want to be with them. You don't want to worship with them and to share the Lord's table with them. You know they have sinned against you and they haven't repented and asked for forgiveness. Like nothing happened. You may want to leave such a congregation. There are too many such stories. And then we may struggle to hear the life-giving Gospel. The enemy wins.

But then there is a master-strike that the enemy performs. One punch that can take out many at once. What was the gift that Jesus gave to His Church to equip it and build it up? Remember? Yes, pastors! They are called to bring us the life-giving Gospel.

What if the enemy could prevent people from listening to their pastors? But how? For one, he may tempt them to sin in a way, that completely ruined their reputation. That does happen. But there is also a much easier way. Gossip, yes, gossip!

It can be about something about our weaknesses, about our imperfections, about our failures, about something that pastors haven't done or haven't done enough. We are sinners, o, yes! We are easily tempted, we regularly fail, others and ourselves, our families and our members, all the time. In reality we can do so little, even if we wished to do more. How easy it is to put together a list of things that someone hasn't done.

Or, haven't done more. How easy it is to say: "Yes, but they haven't done this or that. Not enough!" The enemy will succeed every time he says it, because for every human being there are more things that we haven't done, than those that we have. And pastors are human beings. What happens if the enemy makes this master-strike?

If he succeeds painting such a picture, the congregation is robbed. They will struggle to hear the message. Instead, they may be sitting and thinking: "Yes, they preach to us, but look at them, what about them, why haven't they done more?!"

The message may still be preached, the Spirit sent forth, but not much happens, for the congregation can't hear the message anymore, they can't receive the Spirit anymore. The enemy wins and wins big. So, how can we defend ourselves?

The good Lord has given us wonderful means for self-defense. For one, the 8th Commandment helps us to identify when this is happening, and then teaches us how to respond: "We should fear and love God that we may not deceitfully belie, betray, slander, or defame our neighbor, but defend him, [think and] speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything." Easy to say, but...

We all fail in this one. Therefore, we have been given the gift of reconciliation, the gift of confession and forgiveness. It is so simple. This is how it works. When we have sinned against our fellow saints, we say this: "Brother, Sister, I have sinned against you, please, forgive me! Please, forgive me!" To which we immediately and with great joy reply: "Brother, Sister, I forgive you!" So simple. So powerful defense against the enemy.

But there are a few things that are more difficult to master than this; for to ask for forgiveness means to admit that, yes, I have sinned, I haven't been perfect. And by the way, I think this simple act of asking for forgiveness is what separates Christians and Pharisees, the true Church and the false Church.

Pharisees were almost perfect in their behavior, and they hated to admit they had sinned and needed God's grace. They gossiped about Jesus. They slandered Him. They rejected the Son of God. They didn't repent. They rejected the Spirit.

It is impossible to master this art of Christian self-defense on our own. Luckily for us, we are not on our own, we are members of the body of Christ and we have the best Helper, God's Spirit in us. The Triune God with us. He enables us to do what we couldn't.

Why would we hide our sins and not ask for forgiveness, if Jesus already has taken the guilt of those sins upon Himself, how can we not confess: "Yes, I have sinned! Forgive me!" And why would we not grant our forgiveness, if Jesus already has suffering for those sins: "Yes, I forgive you!" This is how our God helps us with our self-defense. And the enemy who wants to steal our joy, peace and unity is rendered powerless.

That's how it works. I pray that we all would become masters in this Christian self-defense, so that cherishing God's gift of unity in one body, we can live as Paul invites us: **"Walking in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called – children of God - with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."**

And the Triune God will help us to succeed.

Amen.