

How the Body Grows

Ephesians 4:11-16

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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. – Ephesians 4:11-16, ESV

Introduction: Maturity

“Mature manhood” . . . “no longer . . . children” . . . “grow up in every way”

This passage in Ephesians puts a strong central emphasis on the important goal of maturity within the body of Christ, the church. But we don’t like maturity in our culture, do we? We sing commercial jingles saying, “I don’t wanna grow up, I’m a Toys R Us kid” and we watch movies about Peter Pan, the boy who never grows up. We celebrate childhood and childishness and somehow think that maturity is probably just really boring. Adults who have been forced to grow up and get a job and a real life will sometimes spend time and money trying to connect to their inner child and then will sometimes make very childish decisions in the process.

So, is our culture right? Is maturity just boring? What good is it to grow up and to no longer be children?

Well, as we’ll see in our study together, when Paul speaks of maturity, he does not mean a life devoid of adventure or fun. Paul’s own missionary life was full of adventure. When Paul speaks of maturity, he emphasizes healthy growth and stability. Childhood is full of many good things – wonder, discovery, play, laughter – but it’s also a time of life marked by emotional extremes and instability, of relative weakness and quickly changing moods and opinions.

Some people never outgrow the instability of childhood, remaining emotionally turbulent, subject to mood swings and radical changes of opinion, prone to go to extremes. You can remain this way as an adult and even become a billionaire presidential candidate, but people will see your childishness and you’ll have a hard time keeping commitments, including marriages, and will ultimately be worse off for it.

In the church, how does Christ grow His body to maturity and what does that maturity look like and how does such maturity benefit the church? These are some of the questions we’ll be exploring together in this text.

So, we’ll start with this question: How does Christ grow His body, the church, toward maturity? The answer begins with the gift of gifted persons . . .

I. Christ Gives Gifted Persons to Lead & Teach, v. 11

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers”

We discussed last week how Christ gives every Christian spiritual gifts to serve others within the body of Christ as stewards of God’s grace. Well, with that foundational truth that “Grace has been given to each one,” Paul now speaks about people who have been gifted in certain special ways. But the focus is not so much on what special gifts He gave these people as it is on how He gave these specially gifted people to the church. He names four or five specially gifted groups of people: apostles, prophets, evangelists and shepherds and teachers or perhaps “shepherd-teachers”

When he introduces this list, Paul uses the word “some,” in contrast to the “each one” in verse 7. In other words, each one has received grace, but He gave some to be the apostles, some to be the prophets, etc. The ESV leaves out the word “some” for the sake of making a smoother translation and also to bring out more clearly the idea that Christ gave these people to the church. The New American Standard, I think, does a nice job here: *“And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers.”* Even though the word “some” only occurs once in the original, it is meant to apply to each of these four or five.

One way of understanding Paul’s quotation of Psalm 68 in verse 8 (“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.”) is that the “captives” are actually these gifted men who are given gifts and then given to the church. Whether that’s the right interpretation of Paul’s use of Psalm 68:18 or not, it is clear that these gifted men have been captured by Christ and are His servants, given to the church.

A. Foundational: Apostles and Prophets

The first two groups of gifted people – apostles and prophets – were named by Paul as constituting the foundation of the church in 2:20. The apostles were those commissioned by Christ to lead the first generation of the church and authoritatively ground the church on the Gospel and in Christ.

It’s possible that Paul’s use of this term could include both the Twelve Apostles, who were direct eyewitnesses of the resurrection and were invested with special authority from Jesus Himself, as well as others who were probably referred to as “apostles” in the New Testament, like Barnabas, Timothy and Apollos. In other words, a distinction could be made between Apostle with a capital “A” and other “apostles,” lower-case “a,” which differ greatly in terms of authority.

The word “apostle” means “sent one” and denotes someone specially commissioned to take the Gospel to new areas and start churches in unchurched regions. However Paul uses “apostles” here, it is likely he uses it in the same way in 2:20 and that this is a foundational gift, one given to establish the church in its first generation and not one still in operation today.

Prophets were also foundational and were those gifted with direct revelation from God for the church. They did not carry any personal authority, like an Apostle, but were mouthpieces for God. In the early decades of the church, when the New Testament Scriptures were not yet complete and widely available, prophets served as vessels for receiving God's instructions on how to live out the Christian life in the church. As the Scripture was given and became complete, the need for prophecy diminished and eventually ceased after the apostolic age.

It is very important that we are thankful for these foundational gifts and that we receive the fruit of them in the form of the New Testament Scriptures. But it's also important that we realize their foundational, and thus temporary, nature, because no one should stand up and claim the authority of an apostle or the revelation of a prophet today. To do so is to abuse spiritual power, usually for the purpose of exalting oneself and controlling others. We have the complete Scriptures of the New Testament and so God has been faithful to give us the gift of the apostles and prophets, too.

B. Ongoing: Evangelists, Shepherds & Teachers

To the church throughout all ages, Christ has given evangelists, shepherds and teachers. These gifted men continue to serve the church today. Evangelists are those uniquely gifted by God with the ability to share the Gospel with unbelievers and see them come to faith in Jesus Christ.

All Christians should be looking for ways to share the Gospel and every pastor/shepherd should heed Paul's advice to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4 and "do the word of an evangelist." But God has undoubtedly gifted some men in a unique way to bring the Gospels into an area, be used by God to bring people to Jesus and to start forming these people into small churches.

In the PCA, we use the office of evangelist to describe a pastor/teaching elder who is especially called to ground-breaking church planting work. But I think here Paul is talking more about the gift than the office, so someone could be gifted to serve the church as an evangelist and not necessarily serve in that formal office.

The last two words either describe two different sets of gifted men – "shepherds" and "teachers" – or one set of men who have two gifts, as "shepherd-teachers" or as "pastor-teachers." I lean toward this interpretation – one set of men with two gifts – because of the placement of the definite article, "the." The ESV does a great job of showing us where Paul has placed the definite article. "*And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers*"

So, the last two terms are joined together by a single "the" – "the shepherds and teachers." So, it could even be translated, "the shepherd-teachers" or "the pastor-teachers." These gifted men are the elders of the local congregation, I think. As Peter said in 1 Peter 5:1-2, "*So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly.*"

The elders are the ones called to shepherd the flock of God, to make decisions for the leading of the flock together. Some among the elders are especially devoted to preaching and teaching. Paul makes this distinction in I Timothy 5:17: **“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”** This verse is why we make a distinction in the PCA between “teaching elders” and “ruling elders” and why “teaching elders” – or pastors or ministers – must complete a seminary-level education and be subject to additional examination, because we are **“those who labor in preaching and teaching.”**

If Paul intends two different sets of people by these last two words, then we could make a distinction here between elders who shepherd and others who teach in other capacities. But I don’t think that’s what he had in mind. Instead, I think regular, non-ordained teachers come into view later.

II. What These Gifted Persons Do, v. 12

So, if Christ gives these kinds of specially gifted men to the church, what is their purpose or function within the church? How does the gift of these men to the church help bring the church to maturity? Well, Paul says these men are given *“to equip the saints for the work of ministry.”*

A. Equip the Saints

What does it mean “to equip the saints”? Well, the Greek word Paul uses here means to completely furnish or outfit, and this is the only place it is used in the whole New Testament. But it seems to basically mean to fully furnish with what is necessary for the task to be done. And what is the task to be done . . .

B. For the Work of Ministry

. . . is the work of ministry. Now some translations will put a comma between “equip the saints” and “for the work of ministry,” as if it is the job of elders to equip the saints and to do the work of ministry, but I think that the best way to read the flow of this sentence is the way the ESV, the NASB and the NIV all have it – “to equip the saints for work of ministry.”

In other words, ministry work is the work of every saint, every believer, every member of the church, the body of Christ. This is why grace was given to each one, for the work of ministry. But how do we know how to do the work of ministry and how can we be prepared and equipped to do it well and faithfully? That’s why Christ gave the church gifted men – apostles and prophets who gave us the Scriptures, evangelists who bring the Gospel to the lost, and shepherd-teachers, or elders, who teach, equip and lead within the local church.

All of these gifted men are given to the church in order to equip the saints for the work of ministry. As we’ll see even more clearly at the end of this passage, the church thrives when every member is

actively contributing what God has gifted them to contribute, and the way the members get prepared to do the ministry God has gifted them to do is through these gifted men teaching His will and leading His people faithfully.

III. The Goal: Mature Unity, vv. 13

Verse 13 is really telling us how long these gifted men are given to the church to equip the saints for the work of ministry. *How long? 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*

That won't be perfectly realized until Jesus returns and we are with Him face-to-face, and so the work of evangelizing, shepherding and teaching continues until Christ returns. But beyond telling us of the duration of the usefulness of these men for the church, verse 13 also tells us what we're working toward.

A. Unity of the Faith and the Knowledge of Christ

The first thing we are working toward is unity, but a specific kind of unity: the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God. "The faith" with the definite article "the" in front of it, refers not to the subjective experience of faith but to the content of our confession, to what we believe about Jesus. And "the knowledge" is what we know of Jesus. It has more of the notion of discerning, recognizing, understanding. So, the kind of unity we're working for in the church is Christ-centered; it is all about the Son of God. Specifically, this unity comes from what we believe about Him and how well we understand and discern His will and character, which are revealed in His word.

B. Mature Manhood: Christ-likeness

Along with unity comes maturity, but just as our unity is measured in Christ-centered terms, so also is our maturity. The measure of "mature manhood" for the church is "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." This maturity can be distinguished from unity in that unity is more centered on what we believe and what we know – what we confess, understand and discern – and maturity is more concerned with how we live, how we act out what we believe and what we know.

So, as a church, our focus should be on growing in our understanding of our faith, in our knowledge of Christ and in our conduct as believers. This is what we mean by being "rooted" in our mission statement as a church: **"Forest Hill Presbyterian Church is committed to being deeply rooted in God's Word and to reaching our neighbors and the nations with the Gospel**

of Jesus Christ.” We emphasize being rooted in God’s Word because that’s where we learn who Jesus is, what we should believe, how to understand His will and how to live in obedience to Him.

In a sense, we can use verse 13 as a way of understanding the whole structure and purpose of Ephesians, too: The first half is focused on our unity in the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, while the second half is focused on our attaining mature manhood in our Christian conduct.

IV. The Outcome: Stable Growth in Christ, vv. 14-16

So, what would be the outcome of this kind of unity and maturity described in v. 13? That’s what Paul shows us in the rest of this passage, vv. 14-16:

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.

A. Stability

Sadly, the world and even many parts of the church are a never-ceasing stream of human cunning and deceitfulness. As just one example, do you know how much money has been made off of books claiming to be first-hand accounts of visits to heaven?

Now hear what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4:

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

Here is a man who went to heaven, probably Paul referring to himself in a humble, third-person way. But no best-seller came from this first-person account because these are things “that cannot be told, which man may not utter.” So, if you see a book written by someone who spent *90 Minutes in Heaven* or who wants to show you that *Heaven is for Real*, beware! Please know that biblically, there are only two conclusions: either they’re lying or they’re telling things which God has forbidden to be spoken.

Now some of you might be offended by what I just said, but we will not grow in maturity and stability unless we know what God’s word says and are committed to evaluating everything in the light of the Scriptures. I don’t want you to take my word for it, which is why I always reference Scripture, building on the foundation of the Apostles and prophets.

B. Mature Growth in Christ

Not only will we find stability in our unity and maturity, but we will grow spiritually as a body as well. But this kind of growth only comes when rich, meaningful contributions to body life are being made by every member:

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.

If some part of your body stopped working, you would immediately recognize it as a serious medical issue and would seek help. Your life could not just continue as normal with a dead, non-functioning part of your body. So it is with the body life of the church. Healthy growth comes when each part is working properly. Only then will the body build itself up in love.

And notice the last word is love. A healthy, growing church should be a loving church.

Conclusion: What Kind of Church?

So, what kind of church do we want to be?

We could be an entertaining church, where you come and get a good show every week and leave feeling good about yourself.

We could be a church that tells you exactly what you want to hear, confirming you in your own biases and misunderstandings and never challenging you to think or change.

We could be a controlling, legalistic church, telling you what we think and demanding that you live according to our standards.

We could be an academic church, filling your heads with knowledge.

Or we could be a growing, maturing, united Christ-centered church, where God's word is opened and is proclaimed and taught, and where all the saints are being equipped by the ministry of the word to do their own work of ministry in the body, each part functioning properly, fully engaged, and together being built up in love by Christ.

Only God's grace, working through His Word and His Holy Spirit, can make us what we need to be, what God wants us to be.