

## **BECOMING A GROWN UP CHURCH**

### **Ephesians 4:11-16**

There are two key passages about the church in the New Testament. The first is Matthew 16:13-20 where the Jesus predicts the sovereign construction of the not-yet church. The second is Ephesians 4:11-16 where Paul explains how the church is build up in Christ.

Ephesians 4:1-3 exhort the church to walk in unity: “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 body of peace.” Verses 4-6 state the grounds of Christian unity: “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.” Yet unity does not mean uniformity. Verses 7-10 explain how there is diversity in unity: “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.’ (In saying, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)”

The church is one in Christ. Yet the Lord has given diverse gifts to the church. What are these gifts? How do these gifts function? What is the purpose of these gifts? Ephesians 4:11-16 answers these questions. It is one long, complex sentence in the Greek New Testament. But it makes a simple point: Healthy churches are growing churches. There is no correlation between the size and health of the church. A church can be small and strong or big and week. True church growth is about more than big crowds, large budgets, and huge facilities. It is about growing in Christlikeness. Healthy churches are growing up to maturity in Christ. How do you become a grown up church? What are the characteristics of a grown up church? Verses 11-16 teach the process and purpose of becoming a grown up church.

---

## **I. THE PROCESS OF BECOMING A GROWN UP CHURCH**

The New Testament uses various word pictures to describe what the church is. The primary metaphor for the church is a **body**. Ephesians 4:3 begins, “There is one body.” Christ is the Head of the church. The church is the body of Christ. Every Christian is a member of the body. Every member has been placed in the body to facilitate its growth in Christ. What is the process of becoming a grown up church?

### **A. THE CHURCH GROWS UP THROUGH SPIRITUAL GIFTS.**

Ephesians 4:8 claims Psalm 68:18 is fulfilled in Christ: “Therefore it says, ‘When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.’” In his victory of death, the Lord led a host of captives and gave gifts to men. Ephesians

4:11 comments on this second victorious act: “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.” The gifts Christ has given to his people are gifted people. 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 list spiritual gifts that enable the saints to Christian service. The gifts mentioned in verse 11 equip the saints for Christian service. These five terms refer to four functions gifted people carry out to lead the church to growth in Christ.

The term “apostles” means, “Sent ones.” In the strictest sense, apostles were eyewitnesses of the resurrection of Jesus and personally commissioned by Christ to proclaim the gospel and establish the church. In a broader sense, envoys sent out by churches were also called apostles. The context indicates the word should be understood here in the official sense. Paul is talking about the apostles of Christ, not the church. Prophets are God’s mouthpieces. More than mere preachers, prophets were divine oracles. There were times when they predicted the future. But primarily prophets spoke the word of God to the people of God by supernatural revelation.

The apostles and prophets are mentioned two other places in Ephesians. Ephesians 2:20 says the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.” Ephesians 3:5 says the mystery of Christ “was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.” The apostles and prophets had a foundational ministry. You only lay the foundation of a building once. The apostles and prophets guided and guarded the infant church until the New Testament canon was complete. Now that we have the complete revelation of scripture, we do not need apostles or prophets today. The word of God is sufficient.

“Evangelists” were heralds of the good news of the saving work of Jesus Christ. In Acts 21:8, Luke calls Philip “the evangelist.” In 2 Timothy 4:5, Paul exhorts Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist.” We do not know how these evangelists functioned. But they are listed here as gifts to the church. The evangelists presumably witnessed to the lost. But they were clearly functioned as a part of the body-life of the church. The saints apparently need the gospel just as much as the world.

Finally, Paul mentions “the shepherds and teachers.” The grammar indicates these two terms describe one role. They are “pastor-teachers.” Pastor is the Latin word for shepherd. The primary function of a shepherd is to feed the sheep. The primary role of the pastors is to teach the word of God. 2 Timothy 4:2 charges: “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.” Pastors-teachers are gifts from Christ to nurture the church to maturity in Christ by the faithful teaching of God’s word.

---

## **B. THE CHURCH GROWS UP BY MUTUAL SERVICE.**

Why has the Lord given these gifted people as gifts to the church? Verse 12 answers: “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” This verse issues two big responsibilities that facilitate one great purpose.

The first responsibility belongs to pastor-teachers: “to equip the saints.” Pastors are not given to do the work of ministry. They equip the saints for the work of ministry. Pastors are not above serving. But the primary service the church needs from pastors is to equip the saints by sound teaching. The word “equip” means to make fit, ready, or prepared. When the pastors take too much personal responsibility for the work of ministry, they stunt the growth of the church. The members of the church need to exercise their faith in service to one another for the body to grow up. For this reason, pastors are given to equip the saints for the work of ministry.

This passage affirms THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS. The dichotomy between clergy and laity is not biblical. We call the pastors-teachers ministers. But every member of the body is a minister of Christ. The church is to practice every-member ministry. On the ship of the church there are no passengers. All are members of the crew who share “the work of ministry.” This phrase refers to practical Christian service. You may not have the qualifications to lead or the gifting to teach or the talent to sing. But there is still work for you to do. Galatians 6:10 says: “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” This is the job description for the work of ministry in two words: “do good.”

The pastors-teachers equip the saints for the work of ministry. Why? “For the building up of the body of Christ.” “Building up” is an architectural term used for erecting a house. Mixing metaphors, Paul says pastor-teachers equip the saints for the work of ministry to build up the body of Christ. The goal is edification. Romans 14:19 says: “So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.” 1 Corinthians 14:26 exhorts: “What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.” Spiritual gifts are to be used to build up others, not yourself. They are tools to work with, not toys to play with. Corporate worship is not about your gifts or tastes or needs. Everything that happens when we come together should be to build one another up.

---

### **C. THE CHURCH GROWS UP FOR ETERNAL GLORY.**

Verse 13 says: “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.” These goals will ultimately be fulfilled in the Second Coming of Christ. But Ephesians 4:1 urges us to walk worthy of the calling to which we have been called. We have been called to eternal glory. But that eternal call should govern how we walk here and now. Verse 13 contains three Christ-exalting goals we should constantly strive to attend.

A CALL TO SPIRITUAL UNITY: “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God.” Ephesians 4:3 exhorts us to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” There is a unity we are to maintain. But there is also a unity we must attain. It is the unity of the faith. Jude 3 reads: “Beloved,

although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints." The faith is the body of Christian truth. This is not merely affirming a creed. It is doctrinal conviction rooted in personal devotion. Paul connects "the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God." Devotion is essential to unity. The closer we get to Jesus the closer we will get to one another.

A CALL TO SPIRITUAL MATURITY: "to mature manhood." Revival breaks out when lost people are being born again by the gospel of Jesus Christ. But the fires of revival cool off when the born again do not grow up to mature manhood. What is mature manhood? Paul explains it best in 1 Corinthians 13:11: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways." The Lord wants his church to become a man and give up childish ways. Colossians 1:28 says: "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ."

A CALL TO SPIRITUAL CONFORMITY: to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." The Lord Jesus Christ is the head of the church. The body derives its life from him. The body is governed by him. The body grows to maturity in him. Romans 8:29 says: "For whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might become the firstborn among many brothers." It is the will of God to have the Spirit of God use the word of God so that the children of God may look like the Son of God.

---

## **II. THE PURPOSE OF BECOMING A GROWN UP CHURCH**

Verses 11-13 teach how the church grows up. Verses 14-16 teach us what the church looks like when it grows up. A grown up church is doctrinally sound, spiritually mature, and mutually equipped.

### **A. A DOCTRINALLY SOUND CHURCH**

The first result of becoming a grown up church is negatively stated in verse 14: "so that we many 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." When the church is not attaining the measure of the statue of the fullness of Christ, the members of the church are like "children." Christians are to be childlike. We are not to be childish. The church is not to cater to self-centered babies. We are to strive to no longer be children.

Paul mixes metaphors to emphasize the instability of children: "tossed to and fro by the waves." This nautical metaphor pictures the church adrift at sea. The storm-tossed waves drive the church from one extreme to another. Our culture is in a storm of divine abandonment. And the church is acting like a ship with a rudder, compass, or anchor. The proof a church is lost at sea is that it is "carried about by every wind of doctrine."

- **The church needs to be mature enough to know what not to say "Amen" to.**

- **The church needs to be mature enough to know what preachers not to listen to.**
- **The church needs to be mature enough to know the stand firm against the changing winds of false doctrine.**

The term “carried about” was used for sick people being carried on the beds (Mark 6:55). This is what happens to a church that is not committed to sound doctrine. It is like little children in an unprotected nursery. It is like a rudderless ship on a stormy sea. It is like an incapacitated man carried somewhere he does not want to go. Note the sinister motives Paul assigns to false teachers: “by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.” Some teach error because they do not know better. They are ignorant of the truth and need to sit down to learn before they stand up to teach. But many twist the scriptures to satisfy people who want junk food rather than a healthy meal. 2 Timothy 4:3-4 says: “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.” A grown up church has hungry hearts, not itching ears.

## **B. A SPIRITUALLY MATURE CHURCH**

Verse 15 shows us how the church can resist false doctrine: “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” Pastor-teachers should speak the truth in love in the public ministry of the word. But this applies to the pew as much as the pulpit. A church is not biblically regulated just because the pulpit preaches sound doctrine. The body-life of the church must be characterized by speaking the truth in love. Christians grow through fellowship with other Christians who speak the truth. Proverbs 27:6 says: “Faithful are the wounds of a friend, profuse are the kisses of an enemy.” TRANSLATION: It is better to be stabbed by a friend than kissed by an enemy. You need people in your life that will tell you the truth. But truth-telling is counterproductive if you do not speak the truth in love. Truth must be inseparably married to love. Truth without love is brutality. Love without truth is hypocrisy. We are to speak the truth in love.

As we speak the truth in love, “we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” There may be times the church is not growing numerically. But there should never be a time when the church is not growing spiritually. We are to grow up “in every way.” No area of the life of the church should be permitted to go undeveloped or under-developed. There should be a total commitment to spiritual growth. We should grow in knowledge of Christ. We should grow in faith in Christ. We should grow in obedience to Christ.

“We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” Christ is the sphere and standard of Christian growth. We grow into him. 2 Peter 3:18 commands: “But grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” And we grow unto him. Comparison is the favorite indoor sport of the church. Some struggle with pride as they compare themselves to those who are less mature. Others struggle with discouragement as they compare themselves to those

who are more mature. But Christ is the standard. In Philippians 3:13-14, Paul says, “Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting that lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

---

### C. A MUTUALLY EQUIPPED CHURCH

Verse 15 presents Christ as the sphere and standard of Christian growth. Verse 16 presents Christ as the source of Christian growth: “from whom the whole body.” The growth of the whole body comes from Christ. We don’t grow the church. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus says: **“I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”** Christ builds up his church through the mutual edification of the saints: “joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped.” The joints and ligaments and muscles of the body hold it together and equip it to grow. So it is in the church. But each part must work properly. Every member of the body has a function. It is a sin against the body of Christ to come to church and only spectate or receive or criticize. You have work to do! When every member is working properly it makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

The passage closes with the third reference to love in this chapter. Ephesians 4:2 exhorts us to be “bearing with one another in love.” Verse 15 exhorts us to be “speaking the truth in love.” Then verse 16 says that “when every part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” Ephesians 4:1-16 is about walking together in Christian unity. Paul begins and ends the passage by telling us that walking in unity is about loving one another. In John 13:34-35, Jesus says, **“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”** What does this look like in practical terms? Ephesians 4:32 says: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you”