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Body Building Ephesians 4:13-16

Intro: In his discussion of church unity, Paul has provided a list of specific gifts that have been given by Jesus Christ to His church for the purpose of not just maintaining unity but, as we will see, of attaining to an even greater unity. Paul began by describing the attitudes that reflect a lifestyle (walk) that is worthy (honoring) of the unity that has been given to the church by the Holy Spirit (v3). He then goes on to explain the very basis of Christian unity in v4-6 and then the gifts are listed in v11.

Some try to devise hidden meanings in the order the gifts are listed, as if Paul's ascribing greater importance to the first and less to the last but that's not the case. These gifts have been given to the church by Christ, the head of the church, and as such, they're all important. If there's any pattern to be found in the list at all, it would be sequential. Apostles and prophets were primary for establishing the church, as they formed the foundation of the household of God. Evangelists were then necessary to go out and proclaim the gospel by which people were drawn into God's household. Finally, pastor-teachers minister to these converts to increase growth and maturity within the church.

The biblical sequence of ministry is as follows: those who've been given the gifts of teaching are to use those gifts to equip or "prepare" the saints, so that, as a first objective, believers may do the work of ministry or service, and that, as an ultimate objective, the church may be built up (12), come to the unity of the faith and perfected, attaining even to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (13). This passage gives an immediate purpose to God's giving of the teaching gifts: to equip the saints. But it also gives an ultimate purpose to God's giving of these gifts: to build up the church. The essential intermediate step is still preserved which is an every-member ministry. So, where this intermediate step isn't taken, where the clergy try to do all the work, churches tend to stagnate and divisions occur.

Let's read today's text to get the gist of what Paul's talking about in this passage (11-16). Despite what we just read, what would you say is the primary purpose of God for His church? Some believe it is the missionary

mandate. They point to the Great Commission, a command that is repeated in various ways in each of the 4 Gospels and again in Acts so it's obviously really importance. It is neglected at the church's peril. Yet, is this the church's purpose? Those who believe so think of the church as a mighty army engaged in a great, worldwide invasion. Their favorite image of the people of God is that of the militant church.

Others think of the church in terms of social concerns. They recall Jesus spoke of separating sheep from goats based on whether they fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, looked after the sick, and visited those who were in prison ([Mt 25:31-46](#)). People who emphasize this ministry generally think of the church as an international social service agency. But is this the proper emphasis? Is this God's greatest purpose for His people?

Still others see the church as a retreat from the world and their idea of it is that of a fortress. Believers experience conflict in the world. We're constantly battered by those who don't accept the lordship of Christ and are opposed to concept or appearance of His rule. To these people the church is a place where we can nurse our wounds and be charged up to fight another day. Is this the proper view? Did God establish the church chiefly to be a refuge from earthly conflicts?

In our text, Paul handles the issue of God's purpose for His church quite differently. No doubt Paul would've had little argument with these other emphases. These are things the church is called to do and areas in which it is to function. But "purpose" is a more embracing concept, and as Paul describes it, he shows it as God's developing wholeness or maturity in His people. His image is that of a body, Christ's body, and his concern is that it be built up ([13](#)). It's important for Christians to both understand and pursue God's purpose for the church because much damage has been done in the church by well-meaning believers pursuing the function of the church before the purpose has been achieved. A novice placed in a position of leadership can wreck a ministry if they are not spiritually mature – and they have time and time again. That's why Paul warns against it in [1 Tim 3:6](#).

In fact, in the very next verse, Paul reveals the undesirable alternative to spiritual maturity and the destruction that follows it ([14](#)). In our text Paul's spoken of spiritual maturity once and of building up or growing up 4 times.

Clearly, this means that for Paul God's chief purpose for the church is that it might become full-grown and that each of its members might contribute to that maturity by becoming spiritual adults. Let's take some time to rightly divide God's primary purpose for His church.

13 – Paul's not just referring to God's purpose for the church in a general sense; he's not painting the scene with some broad brush of imagery. He's also being very specific. Yes, the church is to become spiritually mature. We get that, but what does this spiritual maturity consist of, what does it look like in my life and in the life of the church? The 1st answer Paul gives (1st specific goal of his overriding purpose) is unity, the very point he's been making all along. But it's here that we must make a very important distinction.

Up to this point Paul's been referring to unity as a given, as something the church has and must maintain. He recognizes that there's diversity within the church, but far more important than the diversity are the things the people of God hold in common (**4-6**). The church possesses these seven great unities. Since that is so, Paul's exhortation is: endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (**3**). A unity like this can only be maintained. But it's an entirely different unity referred to in v**13**. Here Paul speaks of reaching a unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God. This unity is something to be attained. It doesn't yet exist but is an expression of the full maturity to which the church and all of its members should aspire to. It's a unity that must be worked towards.

This unity has 2 parts: of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God. Faith usually means a person's subjective response to the Word of God and the gospel, and knowledge usually refers to the content of what a Christian believes. But in this verse it's actually the other way around. The faith refers to the theological content of Christianity; it's the faith that was once for all delivered (entrusted) to the saints (**Jude 3**). Knowledge of the Son of God refers to experiential knowledge of Jesus attained through day-by-day discipleship; it's what Paul refers to in **Phil 3:10** where he writes of his desire to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Paul means knowledge that goes beyond what can be packed into the head, knowledge that also trickles down into the heart and flows out into the life in obedient and loving service to the Lord. This unity is to be both grounded in truth and in a personal

experience of Christ as a result of that truth.

This twofold knowledge (of head and heart) is what Paul says the mature church should attain to, work towards. Where possible we should have an outward, visible unity. Jesus even prayed that His church might experience and example a unity by which unbelievers might be stimulated to faith ([John 17:23](#)). But far more important than any outward show of unity is that deep, inward, motivational unity that comes from believers growing in the knowledge of the truth, as we find it in the Bible, and living that truth out experientially in day-by-day fellowship with Jesus Christ. This reality provides the capacity to transcend all barriers in the church, denominational or otherwise.

The 2nd specific goal of spiritual maturity is what we would call today Christlikeness. It's what Paul's speaking of in the phrase to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. This means we're not only to have an experiential knowledge of Jesus and His ways but we're also to become increasingly like Him **through** that fellowship.

This goal does have a personal side: those individuals might become Christlike. Ironically the temptation that came to Adam and Eve in the garden was exactly on this point. The serpent succeeded in getting Adam and Eve to doubt God's goodness and then question His word. But the clinching argument was when he said to them, God knows that in the day you eat of it [the forbidden tree] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil ([Gen 3:5](#)). Of course, this was a lie, although like all good lies it had a measure of truth mixed with it. It was true that if they ate of the tree, they would come to know good and evil. Before this they had only known the good but not the evil. The lie was in the fact that they did not become "like God," knowing good and evil. Instead, they became like Satan, who not only knows what evil is, as God knows, but also practices it.

Here's the irony. Before the Fall Adam and Eve actually were like God. That's the meaning of the thrice repeated phrase "in our [God's] image" from the creation account in [ch1](#). In their unfallen state our first parents actually were like God, and this is precisely what they lost by succumbing to Satan's temptation. The wonder of the gospel is that this original image, once lost through the Fall, is now progressively restored as believers are made like

Christ within the environment of fellowship that exists in the church.

Would you like to know what the performance standards are for achieving this goal? They're provided for us in the Book of Galatians, where Christlike character, termed fruit of the Spirit, is unfolded: The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control ([Gal 5:22-23a](#)). These attributes perfectly describe Jesus Christ. They also describe the direction believers are to grow by the power of Christ's Spirit.

There is another aspect of this that is also worth considering. We've been looking at Christlikeness on the personal level as it involves each individual member of the church, and this is important. It's actually how the church matures. Yet it's also true that in this great passage dealing with maturity, Paul's thinking not so much of individual believers as he is the church as a whole. He's saying that just as there's a growth in maturity for the individual, so also there's a growth in maturity for the church corporately. This means that as the church goes about its business in this world, God works in it to develop one aspect of the character of Jesus in a particular way here and another aspect of the character of Christ in a special way there, so that the entire church in every place is necessary to manifest the full character of the Lord to the world.

When the Body of Christ attains to, or becomes a mature, unified Body, as Paul instructs and as God intends, then it will fulfill its mandate to manifest the tangible, recognizable presence of Christ on the earth. To whatever degree the church fails to be unified, it fails to provide the full expression to the fullness of Christ. This means that the unified maturity of the Body of Christ is of the utmost importance for making Christ known in the world. As long as divisions and fractures exist, the witness of the church is not all it could be. Are we aware of this? Do we pray for it? Clearly, it's what the Lord wants to see in those who make up His body.

14-15 – The 3rd specific goal of maturity for the church is truth; without truth there is no real maturity. The contrast here is with the nature and conduct of infants described in [v14](#). Children are delightful little creatures to have around, but they do have their limitations. 2 are instability and naïveté. Children are notoriously fickle. They will be interested in one thing for five minutes; then they change their minds and focus on something else entirely,

and five minutes later they move on to a third concern.

Also, children can be easily fooled. It's easy to deceive them. That's why parents have a special responsibility for the sound education and careful guidance of children; its part of what it means to be a child. However, it's an unfortunate thing when those same characteristics hang on into adult life, weakening a person's character and limiting their usefulness. It's particularly unfortunate when the same marks of immaturity mar a Christian's spiritual development. Neither individual Christians nor the church as a whole are to be so weakened. If the church is not to be weakened, it must grow in the truth of God.

The maturing Christian is not tossed about by every religious fad that comes along. There are religious quacks out there waiting to kidnap God's children and get them into their false cults but the mature believer recognizes false doctrine and steers clear of it. These cultists don't try to win lost souls to Christ. They don't set up rescue missions in the poorest neighborhoods in their cities because they have no good news for those downtrodden by sin. Instead, these false teachers look to capture immature Christians. That's why the majority of the membership of false cults comes from local churches, particularly churches that don't feed their members on the Word of God.

This is why Paul began by speaking of teaching gifts: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. It's not that these are the only gifts; they're not. But Paul lists these specifically since they are the ways the church is to grow out of spiritual infancy to maturity. One of the tragedies of our day is that the church is so immature in this area. Consequently, it's always being carried along by the world's fads or being led astray by false theology. The only real cure is teaching the truth followed by teaching the truth and then still more teaching of the truth.

Yet this is **not** truth in isolation, as if we only needed to bombard people with facts. Truth is important! But we also need to speak the truth in love. Love is the 4th and last of the specific expressions of maturity. Paul emphasizes love. This isn't as evident in the English translations, but in the original text the word truth is actually a participle. So a more literal translation would be truthing [it] in love. The combination means both speaking and living the truth in a loving manner. In the combination of these goals, love (the noun)

is emphasized.

We see this more clearly in [John 17](#) where Jesus prays for His church, highlighting 6 spiritual characteristics by which the church is to be recognized: joy, holiness, truth, mission, unity, and love ([13-26](#)). Each one is important. But love is most important. How do we know this? Look at what happens when you remove love from the formula. See what the other characteristics become without love. Subtract love from joy. What do you have? You have the kind of hedonistic reveling found in the secular world, the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake. Joy is distorted.

Take love from sanctification. The result is self-righteousness, the thing that described the scribes and Pharisees of Christ's day that allowed them to be filled with hatred, so that they crucified the Lord Jesus Christ when He came. Sanctification is destroyed. Take love from truth. The result is bitter orthodoxy. Truth remains, but it's proclaimed in such an obnoxious, unpleasant manner it fails to win anybody. Take love from mission and you have colonialism. In colonialism we work to win people for our denomination, organization or worse, our culture but not for Christ. Take love from unity and you have ecclesiastical tyranny, where the church imposes human standards on those within it.

But if instead of subtracting love, you express love—for God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Bible, one another, and the world—what do you have? You have all the other marks of the church, because they naturally follow. Love for God leads to joy; nothing is more joyful than knowing and loving Him. Love for Jesus leads to holiness; as He said, If you love Me, keep My commandments ([Jn 14:15](#)). Love for the Word of God leads to truth; if we love the Bible, we will read it and grow in a knowledge of what the Word contains. Love for the world leads to mission. Love for other believers leads to unity. Love is the circulatory system of the Body of Christ.

The logical result of speaking the truth in love is that the mature believer will grow up in everyway into Christ. As the church works towards and reaches this unity of the faith and of the knowledge of Christ, becoming one complete Body with Christ as its head, we'll experience the broadest possible scope that this growth can occur in. Every element of our faith, our life, our love will move inexplicably in this direction, into Him. We may not recognize it in our day-to-day lives and we certainly won't be able to explain

it but if we commit ourselves individually to pursue this goal of a unity of head and heart, and work at it every day, then one day we will look back and wonder why we were so easily captivated by certain habits or so easily distracted by worldly amusements. As we grow into spiritual maturity, as we grow into Him, our interests and appetites will begin to change for the better, for the holy, for that which is pleasing to our Lord.

When Paul speaks of the church's maturity in these verses, he does so in terms of bodily growth. His point being that growth is a process. Growth takes time. The church doesn't become mature overnight any more than we as individual members become mature overnight. But if God is working to accomplish this in us (and He is), we must trust Him to do it and be patient as He works. Of course, we want everyone to be patient with us. Let us learn to be patient with everyone else, and with the church—as God works in each believer, in all places and at all times to build and perfect Christ's earthly body, of which we are a part.

Today's study may seem like "old hat" to you or it may be a shocking revelation. Either way, each of us standing here today must recognize what God's purpose is for His church and then personally commit our lives to pursuing that purpose until complete spiritual maturity has been attained – a perfect man (13b). Of course, that won't happen until we stand before Jesus in glory but that just means Paul is providing us with the divine marching orders that should direct our steps for the remainder of our lives here on earth. If we truly desire to please our Savior, this is the path we must choose to walk on. It won't be an easy path; both the world and our own flesh will resist it. But Christ has overcome the world and He has granted us His indwelling Spirit to empower and enable us to walk that path.

Will you choose to go God's way? Will you choose to pursue His calling on your life? 😊