

A Clear Path of Opportunity for the New Year

A Broad Look at Ephesians

“Until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God...”

Introduction: “Where do you see the church going in the coming years?” This is a great question, and one that gets posed to me often, from new people to this church and those that have been here for decades, and one I hope people keep asking often. It implies that you are **thinking** about the future, are somewhat **invested** IN that future, and you **CARE** about that future. Sometimes we get caught into OVER-thinking the future of the church, thinking that we need some sort of **new or fresh vision** to reach the world and to be effective in the time and place God has planted us. But I’d pose to you that we do not need a **NEW vision**, which often means one we make in our own image or create on our own, putting us outside of God’s will and plan, but rather looking **freshly at a Biblical vision** for the future of the church. If God created, loved, died and bled for the church, and if Christ rules over the church as Her Head, it would communicate that He is vested in what we do, why we do, and ultimately the results of what goes on. In the end, it is all done to His glory by His strength and power, so our goal is to make sure we are operating and measuring success based on His commands, not our dreams alone.

Now we can all recognize the unique days and time we live in. Never in our experience have we been closer to radical changes in governmental operation, moral degradation, and social separation. The future seems fuzzy in terms of continued freedoms we’ve enjoyed in the past. We have seen droves of people leave California due to rising prices and liberal policies, seeing the overall population of California to be a net loss for the first time in our lifetime. This church alone has averaged around 15 families leaving the State over the last few years, and that pace is not slowing down. The face of Simi Valley will continue to change as new people keep coming in. Even in this church we have seen many visitors come, some to check out and some to become members, both from established churches and some for the very first time. In all of this change, much that feels so rapid, the one outstanding word that keeps standing out is NOT FEAR, but rather **OPPORTUNITY**.

This opportunity is to be faithful where God has planted us, to shine brightly, to stand immovable as the world shifts around us, as God continues to **build HIS CHURCH, to bring in those He’s called, and to glorify Himself among the nations**. Folks, the nations have come to Southern California, and though we will continue to send people overseas to reach the unreached, we know that there is immense need right in our own backyard for more and more healthy churches to operate the way God has called us to, not to get cutesy with the gospel or His Word, and to faithfully live and teach His Word. So, this morning, we want to look at our mission as a church that comes out of the book we’ve been studying, as we pan out to see the big picture before diving more specifically over the next months. This church will be healthy and effective when the highest percentage of us possible are **unified in our participation, equipped in preparation, and bold in our proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ**. This is the goal for each of us to understand and embrace, so that we can seize the clear path of opportunity in front of us.

Unified in Participation (Eph. 4:1-3)

*“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.**”*

Coming off of the Christmas season where we spend much time with family, we know that unity among loved ones is highly desired and difficult to attain. In fact, we often get along better in short times

together, but if we had to spend extended time, tension would inevitably rise. The reason is even within family, differences are vast: from personalities, to preferences, practices, and viewpoints about parenting, life, politics, etc. But we also know that the church, like the family, is most effective when we are the most unified.

- **Unity is an outflow of the gospel itself** (Eph. 2:11-22) –

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (Eph. 2:13)

How does a seemingly random, multi-generational, multi-ethnic group of people from all socio-economic classes get together and not simply exist but accomplish an audacious mission of making disciples??! The answer is resounding: **the gospel of Jesus Christ!** We will look in the next couple of weeks at how God brought together the two most unlikely groups of people, His chosen, covenant people Israel with those OUTSIDE of the covenant and kingdom called *Gentiles* (most of us). The answer to all issues of unity in the midst of any diversity is the same, where *dividing walls that cause hostility*, be it the color of skin or part of the world where you come from, fall down in Jesus Christ. **“For He Himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility.”** (Eph. 2:14). The gospel levels all of us, takes all of our differences, and brings us all to the foot of the cross where we find ourselves in the same spot, needing forgiveness for our sin and reconciliation with God. Jesus’ blood scrubs us clean so that what is left is His righteousness, not ours, and though we maintain glorious differences, we have unity IN something far greater than the world can piece together. Unity is found NOT in breaking down systems but rather dividing walls of sin, and transfers us to the same **country** (2:19), **family** (2:19), and **temple** (2:21). Any attempt to unify outside of the gospel is temporary, artificial, and cannot weather the differences we all bring to the table. **True Biblical unity is supernatural!**

- **Unity is produced by the Holy Spirit, maintained by us** (Eph. 4:3)

...” eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

How do we get unity? We cannot produce it; we can only maintain it! When the gospel takes hold in our life and our eyes are opened and hearts softened, we receive the Holy Spirit. In walking with the Spirit, we have a new life given to us, so that we now walk in **humility, gentleness, patience, and love with one another**. Each of these is produced BY the Spirit. It means that we should make every effort, by grace, to maintain what the Spirit has produced. So, the source of unity is that we actually proactively live out the realities of the gospel that God has called us to. What does that look like?

- We recognize the different points of growth we each find ourselves – A few weeks ago in 1st step, we met two sweet and different groups of people. One has come here after 40 years at a church and had questions about policy and practice. The other was a young man at church for the first time and he had questions about what baptism even was. I love this mix! This means we approach everyone as someone in progress in the gospel, some in the very beginning of a new life, and others who have lived with Christ for decades. To truly love each other and be unified, rather than separate, we must have humility, gentleness and patience with each other
- **We need to major on PRINCIPLES NOT PREFERENCES** – Here is the difference. We all read Scripture and let it drive our lives, seeking to honor Christ through His grace to obey Him in all things, both in our external conformity and internal submission. A **principle** is that which

we can point directly to Scripture for the basis of an action or belief. A **preference** is how that principle is played out in life. These are both hugely important, since we ALL must think through HOW we live out principles, like loving each other, leading our families, or bringing our kids up in the discipline of the LORD. We will all play these out differently, but we like to think our way is best, and if best, it must be right. This can lead to un-needed divisions (like the type of schooling you choose) or condescension (you don't do family devotions?!, you drink that?!, you watch what?!). The goal is to point each other to Christ, not get everyone to function within the same preferences. In loving Christ, we will love each other and be understanding and appreciative of differences, rather than divisive.

- **Unity is bound together by love** (Col. 3:14)

And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

The gospel frees us to truly love each other. In fact, **1 Thessalonians 4:9** says that we've been GOD TAUGHT to love, meaning in Christ we KNOW how to love each other. Love binds because love by nature is focused NOT on ourselves but on God and others. Love seeks to honor the Lord and the very best for those that we love. So much of disunity is based on self-love, which is simply selfishness and pride played out. 1 Cor. 13 gives us a description of love that is exactly that: love IS patient and kind; Love IS NOT envious or boastful (this is so hard), NOT arrogant or rude, does NOT insist on its own way, NOT irritable or resentful, NOT rejoicing in wrongdoing but rejoicing WITH the truth. It bears, believes, hopes and endures all things.

For 2022: Where does this kind of unity play out here? My encouragement to all who are here this morning is to invest your time and energy in relationships, playing out the one-another's in building up this body, and using your gifts to serve each other. One primary way we do that is through **Shepherding Groups** which meet all through the week. This is a truly worthwhile use of your time and will allow you to get knit together with a smaller group of people who you can love. These are not built around normal affinity (i.e. age, job, marital status), but around our love for Christ and His Word.

Equipped in Preparation (Eph. 4:11-14)

*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.*

This second focus is often misunderstood, but exceedingly important. The church is NOT a place that we come to observe and be entertained. It is a family where we participate together in worship, in fellowship, and mission. Some believe we hire pastors to DO the ministry and we are there simply to invite and give, but the Bible gives a radically different view. The goal of pastors is to actually train and equip each believer, each member of the church FOR the work of ministry. Pastors are paid to free them up to do this more completely, not as a replacement for others. The word **equip** here has several uses: restore, mend like a fishing net, train, and prepare. If you are here, we want to equip you, prepare you, train you for ministry. This happens by faithful engagement, by following examples, and by formal training. It is why we started our ESSENTIALS program a few years ago, to allow for a more thorough study of Scripture individually, to give you the tools to understand your Bible so that you will be ready for all kinds of ministry. But what does this kind of equipping prepare us for?

- **Prepared by building up the Body of Christ** - The Word of God is profitable for teaching, reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Notice that the profit of knowing the Word of God plays out interpersonally. If we are committed to truly loving each other, we must love each other IN THE TRUTH, knowing that the Bible is transformational. As the Body of Christ is strengthened by each member, we will be more and more effective in honoring Christ and ready for His harvest. There is a truism in churches that 20% of the people do 80% of the work. If that is real, or close to real, it means that a large percentage of churches misunderstand their role within the church. We are ALL called to ministry, and ministry starts here. It entails serving and meeting needs, to encouragement, admonishment, and help. When we are invested in relationships, there is no want of ministry. But we must first see ourselves as ministers, then prepare ourselves to do it. Again, we will be most effective when everyone here at Grace engages in gospel ministry both inside and outside of the church.
- **Prepared by Maturing in Christ** – What does growth look like in our life with Christ? There are three overlapping ideas: unity of the faith and knowledge of Christ, maturity, and attaining the fullness of Christ. There is no growth without knowing Christ, and maturity is measured by our understanding of Christ. We cannot love and serve WHOM we do not know. Why do we study Scripture? To know Christ. Why do we sit under preaching of His Word? To know Christ. What is our goal of life? To know Christ. He has made Himself known to us in His Word, which is why we “long for the pure spiritual milk that by it you may grow up into salvation” (1 Pet. 2:2), just as a newborn craves his mother’s milk. This is why we want MORE focus on studying God’s Word, we want each of you to know your Savior through the Word, and that intake will be here and on your own. Again, a maturing church will be a healthy church, and OUT of maturity comes all kinds of service and ministry.
- **Prepared to Stand Firm** – The world is full of false truth, false narrative, and deception. All of this comes from a source that is not neutral and is exceptionally dangerous since it has as a goal to blind and take captive (2 Cor. 4:4; 10:2-5; Col. 2:8). Our enemy cannot take our salvation away, but he can sure toss us about, like a row boat in an open ocean. Maturity in Christ means that we can **identify, understand, and counter** false truth with Biblical truth, knowing where it all comes from. Parents, we must be so clear on the truth that we can help our kids navigate the bombardment of false teaching they receive on a daily basis. It’s like when I used to take my girls to the Ventura cove with its tiny waves, but big enough to knock them down. I would hold their hand as the water would sweep their leg, and instead of doing a face plant, they would grip my hand and stay upright. We need to be mature enough in the truth that we can help them stay upright, and show them we are holding onto Christ in the same waves.

Remember, as we stand firm in Christ, the world will continue to shift around us, which will make it feel like there is a growing divide between the way we think and live and the way the world does. The impulse may be to pick up our flag and move it toward them, to stay relevant, close the gap. But that is the exact opposite of loving truth. As we stay firmly planted in Christ, the light shines brighter, and salvation becomes clearer. True relevancy comes when we present a transcendent Christ, NOT a life that chases the world. This leads to the last hope for the New Year:

Bold in Proclamation (Eph. 6:18b-20)

*To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, **making supplication** for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in **opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel**, for which I am an ambassador in chains, **that I may declare it boldly**, as I ought to speak.*

- **Bold in prayer and confidence through faith** (Eph. 3:12) – Not much fruitful activity or purposeful effort comes without prayer. Paul knew this. As he waited in prison, he prayed for his loved ones in the church that they would stand firm against the schemes of the devil, that they would know the full love of Christ, and in thankfulness for their salvation. But Paul always had a burning passion to reach the lost. So, he asked that the church would pray to that end. But even Paul knew that making the mystery of the gospel known was difficult. Notice he prayed for **boldness, to speak freely and without restraints**. The reality is that often we would rather let someone else do this part, to have the hired professionals do it, or convince ourselves that we do not know enough. But truly, it takes a supernatural boldness to bring a message that most will reject or even reject us. There is no timidity in proclaiming the gospel, since hesitation leaves us speechless. So, our prayer is not only for those that we hope know the gospel of Christ, but also that we would be marked by boldness in proclaiming Him. No one who is a disciple of Christ should go through this year and NOT proclaim Christ to someone that we love. If this seems unreasonable, it reinforces our need to pray for each other.
- **Bold to proclaim the mystery of the gospel** – How do we do this?
 - **We make sure our house is in order** – Not only are we to be growing in maturity in the fullness of Christ, but *“to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.”* (1 Thess. 4:11-12). In other words, the gospel must take root in our own minds and heart, transforming our lives as we bring it to others. The number one reason we would NOT share the gospel boldly is that we do not truly believe it in our own lives! But a transformed life WILL YIELD A NEW DESIRE FOR OTHERS TO KNOW CHRIST. This is why transformation is always front he inside out, that WHO you are produces WHAT you do, not the other way around.
 - **We keep clear in the difference between the church and the world** – The gospel breeds new desire for obedience for every believer, since His commands are not burdensome (1 John 5:2). We have new or Biblical views of marriage, sexuality, drinking, greed, pleasure, how we use time and money, our views of life, abortion, and how to truly help people trapped in their sin. These are all shaped by the gospel, and should be! But here is the challenge. Paul told the church at Corinth to NOT associate with certain people, sinful people (1 Cor. 5:9-11), to which some may have heard that separation from the world was the key. But then he clarified: *“not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world...since then you would need to go out of the world”* (v. 9-10). His point was to deal with those claiming to know Christ who were simultaneously living in sin, not the world living in sin. **“For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?”** (5:12). This is so foundational. We are NOT trying to conform the world to the moral standards we have in Christ. When the world acts like the world, it makes total sense. When a declared follower of Christ acts like the world, its infinitely confusing. Our goal is to point people to Christ, to call them to repentance from their sin, to believe in Jesus for forgiveness, and to be reconciled to God. When this happens in the gospel, morality and

conformity to Christ happens! When we confuse this, we both see the world as our enemy instead of people to be loved, and flip the script of trying to get people MORAL before they are transformed, instead of the other way around.

So, we have great opportunities ahead of us because of Christ. Christ is the reason why we love each other, discipline ourselves in the word and prayer, and seek to proclaim the mystery of the gospel. It's also why we are desirous and aggressive to send workers into the harvest, for it is plentiful but the workers are few (Luke 10:2). This year we plan on sending three of our families to New Hampshire, to see a healthy church that will be a beacon of light and truth so that they will model unity in Christ and proclaim the mystery of the gospel. This is our next venture, but our goal is that it is not our last. Out of unity in the gospel will come preparation in equipping, which will allow us to be fruitful with all that God has called us to. May these things mark us in the New Year, as we do all things for the sake of Jesus Christ, our greatest value and treasure, "for by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities —all things were created through Him and for Him, and He is before all things and in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the Body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, **so that in everything He might be preeminent!**" (Col. 1:16-18)