

Church United: Relentless Growth to Maturity: Part 1

Ephesians 4:7-16

“...until we all attain to the unity of the faith...to mature manhood...”

Introduction: On our Historical Studies Tour in March, our 8th grade students (and a few 9th graders), along with their parents got to tour the two oldest educational institutions in the U.S: Harvard U, founded in 1636 and William & Mary in 1693. With some original buildings still standing and being used, these educational beasts have produced Presidents, Congressmen, doctors, lawyers, and countless others who have helped shape and influence this country and our world as we know it. That was actually their intended purpose. William & Mary began with a charter and mission statement with the following goals:

1. To furnish ministers to the Church of Virginia
2. That the youth may be educated in letters and manners
3. That the Christian faith may spread among the West Indies

To prepare workers for the harvest, to equip the minds and hearts, and to send young people out to spread the knowledge of Christ to those who do not know Him. Does that sound like a worthy goal? Do you think that type of institution is needed in our country? Does any of this sound familiar? Today, all referenced to the church, Scripture, and Christ have been expunged, replaced with a vision to “change the world – and together we do”, by cultivating “belonging, curiosity, excellence, flourishing, integrity, respect, and service”, which are all fine things, but with no clear goal or understanding how this learning is anchored nor how the goal of change is quantified.

We have an audacious God given goal as a church: to bring glory to God in all things, making disciples of all nations through the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, baptizing and teaching all that Christ commanded. We are to make disciples that will learn, grow, and mature. There is no Biblical distinction between “reaching the lost and training disciples”, though sometimes individuals and churches draw a difference in their philosophy and methodology. As we come to a most important section of **Ephesians 4**, Paul builds off a call to walk worthy through humble, gentle, loving unity in all that we have in common, and now gives aspects of our different gifting that God has created for the church to work together in harmony. But notice the goal. The Body (church) is built up until we all attain to unity and knowledge of the Son of God (v. 13) **to mature manhood**. The idea of “maturity” here is *the reaching of an attained goal or perfection*. In other words, if any church is going to glorify God by making disciples, it must be a growing, maturing, and perfecting church to be healthy and pleasing to the LORD. Growing in Christ gives more motivation to reach new believers, and the goal of a new believer is to mature. Now let me give you a quick framework of “perfection or maturity” before we see *how* God moves us toward this goal.

3 aspects of Perfection:

1. **Positional Perfection** – The first 3 chapters of Ephesians teach us about our POSITIONAL realities in Christ, that we are “made alive together with Christ, raised up and seated with Him” (2:5-6). We are reconciled into one body, created in Him as one new man, and are fellow heirs of inheritance. We have been MADE HOLY in Christ. This is WHO we are.
2. **Eventual/Ultimate Perfection** – We are not only justified in Christ, we are glorified in Him (Rom. 8:30) meaning our future is already secure, where we will see Christ (1 John 3:2) and be like Him.
3. **Transitional/Experiential Perfection** – Because we have both of these aspects of perfection, we now are free to pursue experimental perfection NOW. This growth does not earn, does not make us acceptable, but practically plays out what is already true of us by position and future reality. Are we all messed up because of our own sin and a sinful world? Yes. Do we stay that way? No. Does this mean that we will reach sinless perfection now? No. But it absolutely means that if you are a born-again believer in Jesus Christ, of whom God gave you grace to believe and repent, growth IS NOT OPTIONAL, though it may not always be optimal. Our goal as a church is GROWTH, but not primarily in numbers – God takes care of that – but growth in your maturity in Christ, in your dependence, trust, and contentment in Him. This section is invaluable in giving us the rails to run on to get there.

Grace that Gives Gifts (v.7)

*But **grace** was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift*

Nature of Grace –

Paul’s command to walk worthy in unity moves from what we have in common (one body, Spirit, Lord, etc) in vv. 4-6 to pointing out what differences we have. The church, like a **body, family, or building**, is made up a diverse group of people from a range of ethnicities, socio-economic realities, personalities, and abilities. God brings all of these differences together to move in harmony, to accomplish together what would never be possible individually, and to exercise by faith the gifts God gave to depend on Him, giving Him all the glory for what He accomplishes in and through us.

We have defined “GRACE” throughout our study in Ephesians. It is a gift of God that is undeserved, unmerited favor given to someone. Grace is the foundational word, concept and idea of Christian faith.

“Grace is not something that is dependent upon the receiver. It is dependent only on the giver. It is a self-motivated, self-generated, undeserved, unmerited, unearned, free act of giving, and that is the core of the gospel. The heart of Christianity is a self-donating act of God to dwell within the sinner, to make him righteous.” John MacArthur

We are recipients of grace, whether it is to believe (Eph. 2:8-9) to suffer (Phil. 1:29) or to have gifts given to us. Here Paul references the gifts given to us by the grace of Jesus Christ. Here he does not DEFINE what they are, but we know about these from 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and 1 Peter 4:10-11. It's good to take a few minutes to frame what these gifts are, how they function, and the purpose behind them in dealing with individual believers.

Nature of Gifts:

- **Scope** – In verse 7, notice that grace was given “*to each one of us*”. That means that every believer has been given a gift (s) by the grace of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. That means that the expectation is that EVERY believer is to be active in the process of building up the church and moving everyone toward maturity. We are sufficient and confident in Christ (2 Cor. 3:4-6) and His gifting is for engagement. Far too often the evaluation of a local church centers around “what can that church do for me” or “what does that church offer” or “what do I like about it”, rather than how can I best be used for the glory of God and the building up of the Body. Or we think that only a small percentage of people are gifted, and those are the ones we hire or are the core who truly belong. The reality is that God has distributed gifts to everyone, meaning we all have the ability and responsibility to be active in ministry. The 80/20 principle may be true but it is not a Biblical virtue.
- **Prerequisite** – We are all born with abilities and gifts. I admire those that have voices that can reach into the soprano or tenor 1 notes, or altos that can harmonize by ear (while some of us are better at giving “more video and less audio” sometimes). Some have the innate ability to draw freehand with detail and depth, while others never graduated from stick figures. We have those God given gifts at birth, but we also have **gifts given when we were born again**, unique to salvation and the grace of God in our lives. God uses both gifts for His glory, but only one of these is unique to believers in the church.
- **Proportion** – Because our giftedness comes from the grace of Christ alone, He is the One who doles out the measure to each individual. That means that two people may have the same category of gifting in the church (like leadership or teaching), but that measure may be different, with one teaching primarily and the other in secondary ways. Because it is given by Christ and grace, it's not a result of having enough faith or being better/worse, it's simply what Christ decided. God has gifted certain teachers that have the ability to reach millions of people, while others reach hundreds or tens. WE tend to judge the effectiveness of gifting wrongly, rather than seeing opportunities to be faithful with whatever gifts God has given us.
- **Category** – There are a couple of passages (1 Cor. 12 and Rom. 12) that give lists of gifts, and though these lists are helpful to see categories of how God has gifted His church, I do not believe these are exhaustive lists, or that one list rules them all. In fact, in 1 Pet. 4:10-11 gives **2 main categories** of serving and speaking, each done to serve each other

by the strength God provides so that God would be glorified through Jesus Christ. How do you know if you're gifted to serve, lead, give mercy, contribute financially, or teach? First, start with engaging with all that God has commanded you to do in the church, including discipleship, giving, serving, loving, forgiving, bearing with and helping one another. Second, evaluate what you enjoy doing and are effective in. Third, pray that God will give you opportunities to use your desires and gifts to serve and build up the Body. Remember, gifts are not designed to separate us out (teachers over there, givers in this corner, etc), but to unite us. AND, we are all called to do things we are not necessarily gifted to do (I'm not an evangelist, so...no sharing the gospel for me!), since we all trust the grace of God for all obedience.

- **Purpose** – The goal and purpose, again, of having individual gifts proportionately given to the church is so that we would all function together, playing our roles and serving in the ways God's geared us, so that we would be built up into health. This happens when engaged with different gifts, service, and activities (1 Cor. 12:4-6) by the same strength provided for the glory of God.

This is so important for every church in every time to understand, but particularly for us at Grace right now. We have had a large amount of transition and turnover, with many people leaving and almost an equal amount coming in. The result has been new groups meeting, new ministries started, and new opportunities created, but all of this makes us uncomfortable with where we may fit, unsure where our place may be. This is not unique to us. But the answer to this is to move forward and toward each other, to trust that God has put us together in a way that only He knows, remembering that He makes no mistakes, that we lack no gift (1 Cor. 1:7), and that we can push past our discomfort because love compels us. The excitement for us moving forward is that when this church is growing in grace and in Christ, we will be mobilized and effective in making disciples, in sending out workers to the harvest, all to the glory of God alone.

But how does Christ have the ability to give these gifts? Paul gives an exposition from the Psalms to answer that question.

Victory behind Giving Gifts (vv. 8-10)

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.)

An Understanding of Psalm 68

Paul quotes from Psalm 68:18, a Psalm about seeing God as a conquering king. Verse 18 paints a picture of an ancient King in the East returning from a battle campaign as a conqueror, ascending onto Mt. Zion. Often a king would ride a stallion at the forefront of a victory parade and would be followed by those who had been conquered, who would have been put in shackles and chains. As the king approached the final destination of the kingdom, he would

receive gifts from his people as they would throw them down or place them before. This was a Psalm of David, and Paul interpreted it Messianically, which means it pointed to the work of Jesus to come. There are two main things to point out before unpacking the whole:

- 1) The point Paul was making was that since Jesus, like a conquering King, rose from the dead and was seated at the right hand of God in His resurrection, He had the authority to give gifts to His people (Eph. 1:20-21).
- 2) There is one main difference between the Psalm and re-quoting in Ephesians, which is somewhat problematic but solvable. In Psalm 68:18, the king RECEIVED gifts from people, where Ephesians changes the term to GAVE gifts. Why the change? Sometimes a king would redistribute the bounty He received from the people in a magnanimous show of care. But the greater point is that OUR Messiah, our King, is not one that only receives all praise and glory, He is also the One who lavishes graciously, who dispenses grace in salvation and in resourcing out His church.

An Understanding of Christ's Victory

Now, as to the rest of the aside in vv. 9-10, what is meant by ascending, descending, lower regions, and being far above the heavens. There are two main interpretations, and they both have merit and could be helpful:

- 1) Jesus descended to the the depths of Sheol and Hades, and the captives He brought with Him were OT saints from Sheol awaiting release – In 1 Pet. 3:18-20, Peter gives insight into where Jesus went after His death and before His resurrection. He had died in the flesh and was immediately made alive in spirit, and went to Hades and proclaimed (kerusso, not euangellion) to the spirits in prisoner His victory on the cross. There were demonic spirits from the time of Noah (Genesis 6) who tried to thwart God's redemptive plan by breeding out humanity who God uniquely locked up from then until now. Jesus went to pronounce what they tried to thwart was accomplished in full. The captives then, would have been those He took out of Sheol, or the OT holding place of the righteous dead, and took them to heaven with Him. This interpretation has much merit with early scholars, and absolutely could be right. However, there is another option as well.
- 2) Jesus descended to the earth in His humanity, taking on flesh as a servant (Phil. 2:9-11), and the captives were Satan and his hosts who were put into subjection under His feet when He ascended to heaven (Eph. 1:21-22). This also focuses on His **victory on the cross, His authority in His ascension, and His ability to give every blessing in the heavenlies** (Eph. 1:3). This seems to fit the context the best, but either way, the point that Paul is making is clear: Jesus was victorious on the cross, over His enemies, and because HE FULFILLED THE LAW and was our PERFECT SUBSTITUTE, He is able to graciously give gifts to His people, not only in salvation, but in gifting for use in the church.

Corporate Benefit of Gifts Given (v. 11)

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

Gifts Given to the Church as a whole

Now Paul moves from individual gifts possessed by every believer to the fact that God gave some gifts to the church as a whole, and in particular, there are **4 gifts of people or roles that have helped the church from the beginning**, the first two having to do with the start of the church and the last two with the continuing of the church.

The Apostle and Prophets – We are indebted to these groups. When Jesus ascended and left His disciples to proliferate the church the apostles played a role of having authority and setting the ground of teaching (Acts 2:42), and the prophets would continue on that teaching role until the canon of the NT was completed. **Ephesians 2:20 singles these out as foundation layers of the church:** *“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone.”* God used this group to reveal the mystery of the gospel that had not been revealed to generations (Eph. 3:5). Along with these roles, they had the gifts of healing, miracles, tongues, and prophecy (1 Cor. 12:27-29) to aid in this foundation laying, validating the message and messenger. Today, there is no apostolic succession and there is no authoritative gift like these where men speak a new Word from the Lord.

The Evangelists and Pastor-Teachers – We have very little description of the role of evangelist, with Philip being identified as one (Acts 21:8) and that Timothy was to engage in the work of the evangelist (2 Tim. 4:2). This would be an outward focusing gift, this who would bring the message of the gospel to new areas, much like modern day missionaries. Evangelism is not something most do easily though all believers are called to, but there are some that God gives the unique gift to reach the lost to build up the Body.

The last category is the main functional role in our modern church. Though it looks like 2 separate categories in English, the Greek construction dictates that this is one grouping of pastor-teacher. “Pastor” is not a widely used NT word, but is used as a verb in Acts 20:28, where elders/overseers are to CARE for or SHEPHERD God’s church, the flock of God. The picture of a pastor/shepherd/bishop/elder is one that cares, protects, and feeds the people God has entrusted to them. A pastor is to lead by example (1 Pet. 5:3) through solidified character (1 Tim. 3:1-7), teaching in public and from house to house with a message of faith and repentance (Acts 20:20-21), willing to admonish with tears (Acts 20:31; 1 Thess. 5:14). But the main way that a pastor helps the congregation grow is through teaching the Word.

Basis which the Gifts operate

How do we change and grow to become more like Christ? 1) We are perfected but the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, as He brings clarity, conviction, and changes our desires (Galatians 3:3). 2) We change through the trials God presents us with uniquely, knowing that the testing of our faith produces steadfastness and perfection (James 1:2-3). These first two are connected in the sense that this is what God does in and through us to mature us. How does He use pastor-teachers? 3) Presenting the banquet of God’s Word. “Like newborn infants, long for (crave) the pure spiritual milk that by it you may grow up into salvation” (1 Pet. 2:2). God

changes us from the inside out through the Spirit, brings trials and suffering to cause us to trust Him, but He gifts the church to help us grow in our understanding, desire, and love for God's Word, so that we will grow in our love and understanding of God in Christ.

The picture of a healthy, effective church given here is not complicated, but those who experience the fruit of this health seems limited. How do we walk worthy to the glory of God? We are unified through His work on our behalf, by the grace given to us individually and corporately, so that we would all grow in maturity, regardless of our differences. This happens when we all embrace the reality that we need each other, that we all have a role to play, a gift to exercise, and people to serve. We want to grow as a church, and that cannot be mere sentiment or wishful thinking, but the deep desire for each of us to glorify God with our lives. Jesus has secured victory, now we can live out that victory fully.