

Church United: *Relentless Growth to Maturity*: Part 3
Ephesians 4:7-16

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

Introduction: If you are a parent, grandparent, coach, teacher, or have worked with kids at all in your life, there are common goals we all have in that interaction: we hope to see those kids **grow up and mature**. That maturity looks similar in almost every situation. We want them to learn to make good choices and understand the consequences of actions. We want them to learn to take responsibility rather than blame shift, to work hard, never taking the path of least resistance, to serve, and to care for others more than they care about themselves. We want them to grow in independence but understand the right kind of dependence, prioritizing life through the lens of convictional values. We never want them to settle for less than their best, seeing all of life through a lens of worship, maximizing all of their God given abilities to the ultimate goal of glorifying God. For those that see God as ultimate and Christ as satisfying, we want our kids to love God more than anything else, to savor Jesus Christ, and to be led by the Holy Spirit.

Now the big question that faces every parent, etc., is: *How do we do this? How do we get our kids to grow up and mature? What is the process?* There are a few truths that apply to everyone in this maturing situation. 1) **There is no formula but rather principles of growing up and maturing** – Maturity takes time, must learn through experience, modeling, and failure. When we look for rigid rules or structures thinking that will be the answer, we will depend on those rather than the Lord, and will view any type of failure as negative rather than part of the process. Principles and convictions must drive, not structures, when we desire maturity. 2) **We remember kids are BUILT to GROW** – Why is this so important? Our job is not to CAUSE growth, but create helpful rails and environments FOR growth. Part of me wishes I could slow down time with my girls, keeping them little, dependent, and at HOME. But the reality is, as they grow, they develop new understanding, ask deeper questions, and experience life more and more as an adult. My job is to help them think, to guide them in the truth, to come alongside, more and more, to help them make their own decisions and choices, since they will be out of my personal care soon enough. 3) **The end goal matters** – If our goal was to keep our kids dependent on us, to keep them home, to keep them kids, it would shape how we teach, coach, and model for them. That is why the end goal of maturity matters, both in the home and church.

The last few weeks we’ve been looking at a passage dealing with the maturity of the church, a maturity that not only breeds growth in **individuals** but helps the church **corporate** grow in unity and fruitfulness. Every believer in God’s church has a God-given goal to become more like Christ, to move from infancy, to childhood, to full maturity. When we understand this as a goal OF the church, we have explicit clarity as to the MAKEUP and ACTION IN the church. We know there is no strict formula, that we are absolutely built to grow, and the end goal is maturity in Christ. This sets our **pathway** for everything that we do here. Let’s review this section and how Paul lays out this process of unity through maturity.

Grace that Gives Gifts (v.7)

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

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.)

Corporate Benefit of Gifts Given (v. 11)

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

Pathway for the Gifts to Operate (12)

"To equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ..."

Goal of Gifts Functioning (13)

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,

Time it takes to reach the goal:

If the goal is to grow, how long does this process take? The answer is simple: as long as we are alive, or until we become fully like Jesus. In other words, this is a lifetime process, a pursuit that we never stop until God brings us home. Notice two powerful words to start this verse: **UNTIL & ALL**. This sets the scope of time and participation, since this is not reserved for certain believers, or just young believers, or those in vocational ministry. For the church to truly be unified in means that EVERY believer is growing, using their gifts, is working in ministry, and is participating fully. This means that everyone here has things they need to learn, areas of life that need to change, or new habits to form. Ministry may change over the years, but involvement IN ministry should not. Remember, what is the Biblical model of ministry given to every church throughout the world for all time. The older teach the younger, through modeling and faithfulness, engagement and conversation (Titus 2:1-9), not by washing your hands of it and saying, "We've done our time" and moving on. The beauty of this Biblical model is that you can be **MORE** effective in ministry the older you get, retirement gives you **MORE opportunities**, and your ministry as you grow is to help those younger than you grow as well. Young people without older people in their life can multiply their ignorance (2 Cor. 10:12, and see Rehoboam folly in 1 Kings 12). How long are you in ministry? **UNTIL WE ALL ATTAIN...**then you can stop.

Three steps of a singular goal: ATTAIN

But what are the specific areas or ways we are to grow or attain. Paul does NOT give three different goals, but three steps to the same goal, each building up to the other, like steps up to the stage. Look how each one builds:

- **Reaching Unity and Knowledge** – “unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God” We already looked at Eph. 4:3, which says unity is produced by the Holy Spirit and 4:4-6 which gave the foundational basis for unity (i.e., one body, Spirit, call, hope, Lord, faith, baptism and God), but now his point is an experiential, or practical unity in the faith. Remember, this is born out of us all walking in a manner worthy of our calling, in **humility, gentleness, patience, and love**. In unity we know that we have more in common in Christ than anything that divides us. In humble unity we consider others as having surpassing value greater than ourselves. The “unity of the faith” is playing out every aspect of the gospel of Jesus Christ together, knowing that unity itself is supernatural. The easiest thing is to divide, complain, and leave. Unity takes the right kind of work. That is why it’s linked with our progressive, growing, and experiential knowledge of Christ.

Some have said doctrine only divides, so they stay away from reading, thinking, and studying God’s Word, but the opposite is true. We grow in our love, understanding, and passion for Jesus as we have a full-blown knowledge of Him. That is why there is such an emphasis in all of chapter 4 with the mind, doctrine, and truth. The more we understand Scripture SO THAT we know and understand Christ, the more we will mature, thus the more we will be united. Our pursuit of Christ in His Word is a lifelong venture, an adventure of unfolding revelation, of reading a love letter over and over, knowing that each time we’ll glean something new. We read Scripture to understand Christ, and if He is our goal, we walk together.

- **Reaching Maturity** – So as unity and knowledge grow, they will lead to greater maturation, with the idea of “perfection, fullness, and completion” embedded in the word. But notice here the emphasis is NOT on individual maturity, though that is definitely a part of it. Here the emphasis is on BODY GROWTH, that the church as a whole is growing toward maturity, completeness, and fullness. Maturity is a group project, which not only means I have a role to play in the whole, but it also means that I cannot grow into true maturity without the rest of the Body. The idea that we can love Jesus and grow in Him OUTSIDE of the church is unbiblical and misunderstand the nature of growth. **But what does this corporate growth look like?**
- **Reaching Christ-likeness** – The goal of our church is Christ likeness, to set as our purpose to know Christ and become like Him in His life and death. Not only can maturity NOT happen outside of the church, but it cannot happen outside of Christ. Christ becomes both the **source and the goal**, the means by which and measure to get there. Eph. 1:23 told us that the church, which is His body, is the FULLNESS OF HIM who fills all in all. Eph. 3:19 says that we pray to know the love of Christ, that surpasses knowledge, so that we may be filled with all the fullness of God. This transcends simply studying and reading Scripture, but means it is played out together as we share our individual spiritual growth and gifts together, encouraging each other, challenging each other, helping each other. That is why we are called to BUILD UP, not tear down. A dis-united church is immature by nature and has not grown up in Christ, not understanding

the vast nature of His love. This goal leads to the final understanding of **the results of unity through maturity.**

Result of Gifts Working Together (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. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 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”.

Avoiding the Enemy of Maturity (14)

Sometimes we need to understand what something looks like by looking at its opposite. That is what Paul does with the picture of maturity. He gives a negative picture of what maturity IS NOT, and then looks at a positive result of how maturity is cultivated. Maturity is **settled, grounded, not easily shaken, content, and set on a firm foundation.** These are the opposite characteristics of children.

- **Tossed about like children** – Paul gives a picture that children first and foremost are like a boat that is tossed about by the whims of the wind and waves it is placed on. If you’ve ever been on a ship in the middle of the ocean you know that regardless of how big it is, it will roll, sway, and toss about since it cannot propel itself away. Children are by nature trusting, and will easily believe what they are told since they have not developed discernment. A child will believe that candy at all meals is good for them, that their brother/sister IS ALWAYS in the wrong, and that there are places where fairy tales are real. But children can be easily swayed to believe a lie. We see today the battle going on for our kids minds and hearts, that from even pre-school age they are being bombarded with teaching that rebels against God’s designs for marriage, purity, manhood/womanhood, gender, identity, etc. **WHY?** Win the child’s mind and heart and you have upped the percentage that they will follow that course. We remember that someone is going to train and teach our children, and it’s our responsibility to be the ones to equip them so they are NOT TOSSED about by every wind of doctrine. But here the illustration is that IMMATURITY in the church is childlike ignorance. Maturity means we are grounded in the truth, that we are stable IN THE TRUTH so that we no longer chase after other things that are clearly false. **How do we know what a counterfeit \$100 bill looks like?** You study the original and true bill so that you know what is false. Maturity is grounded in truth. Why is this so important? Because the field is not neutral that we are playing on.
- **Carried about by insidious schemes** – Notice the description of “cunning, craftiness, and deceitful schemes”. These are not neutral words. They are proactive, intentional, and purposeful ways that our enemy is trying to bring down the church. This comes in the form of **cultural teaching**, like what happens in our schools and institutions, to even organized religion. We got to talk with a dear brother in Pennsylvania who lived as an Amish man in an Amish culture. He believed in Jesus alone for salvation, saw through

the trappings of Amish living, and had a heart to reach others in the culture (Amish only) for Christ. But then he told me something that was initially surprising but not shocking: those in the church were **DISCOURAGED from reading and studying the Bible!** Follow the teachings of the church, but do not study it on your own. This is how you control people and keep them away from Jesus. Any religion that keeps the Word from individuals is seeking to lead them astray by craftiness and cunning, letting them hear the Word in German or Latin, but not on their own!

Our enemy is after hearts and minds, and if he can keep us immature, he will keep us dis-unified and imposters. What's the cure?

*“Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, **rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith**, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and **NOT ACCORDING TO CHRIST.**”*

Colossians 2:6-8

Note the words “rooted, built up, and established”, which come out of teaching, so that we are not taken captive by the enemy who IS seeking to captivate. So, we cling to Christ, since He is the antidote to what is false.

Embracing Means of Growth (15-16)

So instead of being tossed, Paul says there is a counter, “Rather...” we are to do something different.

- **Truthing in Love** – I like that Paul makes up words, or perhaps that he allows us to. What is translated “speaking the truth” (which is a fine translation) comes out of the verb form of the Greek word for truth (aletheuontes), and thus has more to do than merely speaking, it is actually “TRUTHING in love”. This is the path to be built up in every way into Christ, the source and goal of maturity and unity. So, far from being counter aspects of maturity, truth and love are intimately tied together for our growth. Truth gives the parameters so that we do not walk in ignorance or falsehood, but love shows the nature of the Truth giver. Truth without love is heavy handed, while love without truth is mere sentiment. **H.B Charles said, “Truth without love is brutality, while love without truth is hypocrisy.”** It’s no wonder that our enemy would love us to separate these out or see them as mutually exclusive. To truly love someone, we **MUST** tell them the truth of God, His purpose, our sin and true problem, the solution of Christ as the source of hope. If we **SAY** we love someone and do not tell them the truth, the reality is we **LOVE** ourselves too much to risk them being mad at US. But love is defined as **seeking the highest good of the one loved**, which is in clear opposition to the false truth we saw in Eph. 4:14.

Truth in love, then, transparent, giving, sacrificial, and consistent. Truthing in love has to do with our words and actions, our conduct but also our motives. Think how marriages would change if we committed to both truth and love. We would no longer

exaggerate, lie, or refuse to communicate at all. When we refuse to deal in reality and hard truths, we avoid, shut-down, and self-preserve, which is the opposite of love. Truthing in love demands that we deal with real issues, ready to admit wrong, ask for forgiveness, and offer it. This is because truthing in love truly points us to Christ and seeks the highest good of the one loved, which IS CHRIST alone.

- **Growing up in love** – Finally, Paul closes this section with how he started, with LOVE being a motivating and essential factor in all that we do. We love as an outflow of God's love for us. We love in selfless and sacrificial ways. We love God first and foremost and seek to love our brother, sister, and neighbor as ourselves. We love with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. We love because that was modeled to us by Christ and His love controls us (2 Cor. 5:14). It is love that drives us to engage in ministry each day, to seek the highest good of everyone in this church, to give up my time, comfort, and resources to see the whole church built up in Christ. Love drives us to encourage those hard for us, to serve those that bug us, and sacrifice for those who are unlike us. Love drives us to personal growth in Christ and showers that growth with others in the church, not hiding it under a veil for us to experience alone.

This is such an important passage for us not only to consider, but to absolutely nail down. Unity comes out of maturity, and unity fuels our ability to be fruitful. A growing and maturing church is passionate about worship and motivated to see more and more experience the joy of forgiveness in Jesus Christ. We will only be as healthy, strong, and effective as we are at helping each one here grow in maturity and fullness of Jesus Christ. This task seems overwhelming, exhausting, and unrelenting, and to that we say, "Amen!" We are equipped by God's grace through Jesus Christ who gifts us individually and corporately, have the Holy Spirit to guide and convict, and calls us to walk together as this beautiful puzzle, a mosaic of people and gifts that fit perfectly, creating a picture of Christ's love and goodness. May we all be maturing and making disciples of Christ helping other disciples become more like our Savior.