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GROWING INTO A MATURE CHURCH

Ephesians 4:11-13

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Ephesians Lesson 28

Growing into a Mature Church Ephesians 4:11-13

Pastor Stuart Briscoe once told about an incident that happened the first week that he was the pastor of Elmbrook Church. A woman came up after the service and asked him if he would find the answer to a technical question that she had about a particular Bible text. Briscoe replied, "No, I will not."

The woman got a shocked look on her face, as if she didn't hear him correctly. "What?" she exclaimed. "No," Briscoe repeated, "I will not find the answer to your question." She looked at him as if to say, "Well what are we paying you for?" He continued, "But here's what I will do. I'll show you how to find the answer for yourself." And, he proceeded to do that for her.

In that exchange, Pastor Briscoe was following a sound biblical philosophy of ministry, based on our text. Rather than doing the ministry for that woman, he was equipping her to do the ministry herself, so that she would grow to maturity in Christ.

One of the most crippling ideas to pervade the church over the centuries is that there is a special class of Christians, called "clergy," who do the ministry, while the rest of the church sits back and lets them do it. John Stott (*One People* [Falcon], p. 30, cited by James Boice, *Ephesians* [Baker], p. 142, italics in Boice) quotes a remark of Sir John Lawrence to this effect: "What does the layman really want? He wants a building which looks like a church; clergy dressed in the way he approves; services of the kind he's been used to, *and to be left alone.*"

Many pastors, perhaps out of a lack of trust in the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the flock, or perhaps out of a wrongful need to control everything, have perpetuated this crippling distinction. They do almost everything in the local church, while many just attend the services and do nothing else.

As a result, many local churches look like the description of a football game that Bud Wilkinson once gave. He was the coach of the Oklahoma Sooners when they were a football powerhouse. A

young reporter asked, "Coach, how has the game of football contributed to the health and fitness of America?"

To the reporter's shock, Wilkinson responded, "It has not contributed at all!"

"What do you mean?" stammered the reporter. Wilkinson said, "I define football as 22 men on the field, desperately needing rest, and 22,000 fans in the stadium, desperately needing exercise!"

In our text, the apostle Paul gives us a sound biblical philosophy of ministry for the local church. He is saying,

Those with leadership gifts are to equip the saints for the work of service, so that the body will grow to unity, maturity, and Christ-likeness.

To get Paul's flow of thought, we must go back to his citation of Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8. In 4:9-10, Paul expounded upon the phrase, "He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives." Now, he expounds on the phrase, "He gave gifts to men." He is showing how the ascended, victorious Christ gives gifts to His church so that the church will grow to maturity. All of this is "so that He might fill all things" (4:10). Peter O'Brien explains (*The Letter to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 297), "Having achieved dominion over all the powers through his victorious ascent, he sovereignly distributes gifts to the members of his body. The building of the body is inextricably linked with his intention of filling the universe with his rule, since the church is his instrument in carrying out his purposes for the cosmos." Paul makes three main points:

1. The Lord gives leadership gifts to some (4:11).

Although some think that there are five gifts here, most count four, with "pastor-teacher" referring to a single gift. While the lists in Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 focus on the gifts, here Paul's emphasis is on the gifted men. He is not listing all possible gifts, but rather concentrating on leadership gifts. Also, each of these leadership gifts centers on the Word of God, showing that the Word is foundational to a mature church. When the Word is diminished or compromised, the church will be anemic. T. H. L. Parker's fine book, *Calvin's Preaching* ([Westminster/John Knox Press], 1992), shows that Calvin's main emphasis in reforming the

church was his amazing expository preaching ministry. The same could be said of Luther and of the Puritans a century later. This is why I devote myself to the work of expository preaching of the Word. Let's look at these various gifted men:

A. The Lord gave some as apostles.

Apostle means, *sent-out one*. It is used in two senses in the New Testament. First, it is used of the twelve apostles appointed by Christ, along with the apostle Paul (some would add, James, the brother of the Lord; Gal. 1:19). These men had seen the risen Christ (Acts 1:21-22; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:7-9) and were commissioned directly by Him (Mark 3:13-14; Gal. 2:7-8). The Lord gave them the ability to perform miracles as an authentication of their apostleship (2 Cor. 12:12). He gave them authority to found the church and build it up (Eph. 2:20; 2 Cor. 10:8). Their inspired and authoritative writings constitute the bulk of the New Testament epistles (2 Pet. 3:15-16). Because their role and qualifications were unique, when they died, there were no legitimate successors.

In the second sense, *apostle* is also used of others sent out under the authority of the church or of the twelve for some task (Acts 14:4; 1 Thess. 2:6; Rom. 16:7; 2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25). The men in the first group are designated as "apostles of Christ Jesus" (Gal. 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1; etc.), whereas the other men are called "messengers [apostles] of the churches" (2 Cor. 8:23). In a very loose sense, the term might apply to modern missionaries (which comes from the Latin word for "apostle"), although they probably fit better under the heading of "evangelists." But to avoid possible confusion, it is best not to use the term *apostle* at all. After the apostle John died, no one legitimately has apostolic authority.

B. The Lord gave some as prophets.

Along with the apostles, the New Testament prophets laid the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20). This term is a bit more difficult to define, resulting in more disagreement among scholars. Some (*e.g.*, Wayne Grudem, Sam Storms) argue that there is a legitimate use of the term today. But most conservative scholars insist that (as with the apostles) the gift passed off the scene after the completion of the New Testament canon.

The New Testament prophets received direct revelation from God, which they imparted to the church. Sometimes they predicted the future, but at other times they expounded on revelation already given (Acts 11:27-28; 13:1; 15:32; 1 Cor. 14:3, 24-25, 29-32). Although I have heard supposed examples of prophecy, I am skeptical that there is a legitimate sense of this office or gift today. All evangelical scholars would agree that there is no current revelation on a par with that of the New Testament.

C. The Lord gave some as evangelists.

The apostles and prophets gave us the Word of God by direct revelation. The evangelists proclaim the Word at it relates to people's need for salvation. This noun is only used in two other New Testament texts (Acts 21:8; 2 Tim. 4:5), but the verb ("to proclaim the gospel") is used 54 times and the noun ("good news," or "gospel") 76 times (John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Ephesians* [Moody Press], p. 142). Although some (Calvin, Martyn Lloyd-Jones) limit this office to men like Titus and Timothy, and thus argue that it has passed off the scene, I am not convinced by their arguments.

Although all believers must proclaim the gospel, evangelists are those with a special gift to do so. They may do so as missionaries in foreign cultures or in their own culture (George Whitefield, John Wesley, Billy Graham). They may travel around or function mainly in one church (2 Tim. 4:5). As verse 12 implies, evangelists should not only preach the gospel, but also help equip the rest of us to do it better. Sadly, in recent times those who are noted evangelists are not so well noted as being sound theologians. But with so many winds of doctrine blowing that purport to be the gospel, it is essential that evangelists be well grounded in sound doctrine.

D. The Lord gave some as pastors and teachers.

The two words are linked by a single definite article, which leads most scholars to view them as a single gift. But some scholars argue on grammatical grounds that there are two different gifts with overlapping functions (O'Brien, p. 300, who cites D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*; Calvin held this view). According to this view, all pastors must be teachers, but not all teachers are pastors. Thus teachers could function in a seminary or in the local church

without having the duty of shepherding the flock. But wherever it is exercised, teaching should not be only academic, but also must aim at godly living (Col. 1:28).

The word *pastor* means *shepherd*. This is the only place in the New Testament where the noun is used to refer to a ministry in the church, but the verb appears several times in this sense (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2; see, John 21:16). The words *pastor*, *elder*, and *overseer* (= *bishop*) are used interchangeably (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Tim. 3:1; Titus 1:5, 7; 1 Pet. 5:1-3). *Elder* points to the fact that church leaders must be mature men of God. *Overseer* looks at the main task, that of managing, leading (Heb. 13:7, 17), or overseeing the church. *Pastor* looks at the task from the analogy of a shepherd and his flock. In that sense, he must feed (teach) the flock with God's Word, guard the flock from wolves, and gently care for the flock.

The main point to keep in mind with all of these gifts, and especially with pastor-teachers, is that they must be centered on the Word of God. If a pastor does not concentrate on preaching and teaching the Word, he may be a nice man and even a godly man, but he is not doing the main work of a shepherd. I stand firmly against the modern evangelical trend to dumb down or even do away with the systematic, expositional preaching of the Word. J. I. Packer rightly contends "that the well-being of the church today depends in large measure on a revival of preaching in the Puritan vein." He adds, "to the Puritan, faithful preaching was the basic ingredient in faithful pastoring" (*A Quest for Godliness* [Crossway Books], pp. 281, 283).

2. Those with leadership gifts are to equip the saints for the work of service (4:12a).

The King James Version put a comma after the word "saints," making the sentence read as if the pastors had three tasks: to equip the saints, to do the work of the ministry, and to build up the body of Christ. I was surprised to find that some still advocate this view (O'Brien, pp. 302-303, discusses and refutes this view). But the context (4:7, 16) and the Greek syntax (there is a change of prepositions after the first "for") support the view that the task of those with these leadership gifts is to equip the saints so that the saints may do the work of service (or ministry), to the building up of the body of Christ.

Of course, evangelists and pastor-teachers are also engaged in the work of the ministry. But the point is, they don't do it by themselves. Rather, they equip the entire body to work in accordance with their various spiritual gifts. Every Christian is "in the ministry" in the sense that every Christian has a ministry to do for the Lord in building the body of Christ.

The word *equip* has the idea of "making someone adequate or sufficient for something" or some purpose (O'Brien, p. 303). It is used of James and John mending their nets (Matt. 4:21). In classical Greek, it was used to describe restoring a dislocated limb or of setting broken bones in place. It also was used of furnishing a guest room, to get it ready for guests.

So the idea is that pastor-teachers are to teach the Word to help the rest of the body become adequate or prepared so that they may serve the Lord in accordance with their gifts. We do this here at FCF through the preaching of the Word on Sunday mornings, through the various Bible Institute classes, through Sunday evening discussions of the sermons, through various home fellowships or other small groups, and through various men's and women's ministries. Also, we seek to equip the saints through one-on-one contact, whether in counseling or over a cup of coffee or a meal. To the degree that you are equipped, you should also engage in teaching others (2 Tim. 2:2), so that the entire body grows to maturity. That's the final goal:

3. The goal is that the entire body will grow to unity, maturity, and Christ-likeness (4:12b-13).

Note four things in this regard:

- A. The goal is that the body will grow or be built up.

Building up pictures a building under construction, but Paul uses it here with *the body of Christ*, where the analogy would be physical growth. This includes both adding new members to the body through evangelism and seeing all of the members growing spiritually as they come to know God and His Word in deeper ways. In the first sense, we read in the early chapters of Acts how "the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (2:47b), so that the church in Jerusalem came to number in the thousands (see, 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7). I am not

content with the fact that we see very few coming to saving faith here. I realize that there are unusual times of revival, when the Spirit of God brings many to repentance and salvation. But, we should pray for such and we should, even in more normal times, be seeing lost people coming to salvation.

In the second sense of the word, being built up refers to spiritual growth among those who are saved. As Paul wrote (Col. 1:28), "We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ." Or, (Col. 2:6-7), "Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude." In both texts, Paul mentions teaching or instruction as a primary way that these saints were being built up.

- B. The goal is that the body will attain to the unity of the faith by knowing well the Son of God.

Grammatically, there are three phrases in 4:13, each beginning with the word *to*. Thus, "attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God," is one phrase. Attain "to a mature man," is the second phrase. Attain "to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ," is the third phrase. *Attain* is used nine times in the Book of Acts to refer to travelers arriving at their destination. Thus each of these phrases involves a process that results in a goal. While the goal will not be perfectly attained to until Christ returns, it is something that we should aim at.

As we saw in 4:3, there is a unity of the Spirit that already exists by virtue of the new birth. Every born again saint is baptized into the one body of Christ by the Holy Spirit at the moment of conversion (1 Cor. 12:13). But, here Paul refers to *the unity of the faith*, not as already existent, but as a goal to be *attained to*. *The faith* (as in 4:5) refers to the essential truths of the Christian faith, centered on the gospel. So Paul is referring here to *doctrinal unity* that comes about through the teaching of the Word (4:11). The more that you understand of God's Word, the closer will be your experience of unity with others that know the Word well. At the heart of that unity is a common knowledge of and love for Jesus Christ.

Thus Paul links *the unity of the faith* with *the knowledge of the Son of God*. Paul rarely uses the title, *Son of God* (see, Rom. 1:4; Gal. 2:20; 1 Thess. 1:10). It emphasizes the deity of Christ, who was sent to this earth by the Father to secure our salvation. *Knowledge* has the nuance of real or true knowledge (it is an intensive form of the more usual word for knowledge; R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* [Eerdmans], p. 285). Thus he is not just talking about an academic ability to recite various doctrines about Christ, although that is important. Rather, he is talking about knowing the Son of God in an intimate, personal way. As we come to know Christ more deeply, we will experience a closer unity in Christ, which is Paul's point here.

C. The goal is that the body will grow to a mature man.

Paul uses the singular word for a full-grown male. He is probably referring back to the "one new man" of 2:15, which is the church, made up of Jews and Gentiles reconciled to Christ and to one another. It contrasts with the picture in the next verse (4:14) of the church as children, tossed about by every wave and wind of doctrine. So he is not just referring to our individual maturity in Christ, but also to our *corporate maturity* as a church. In our relationships with one another and in the way that we love one another as we work together in the cause of Christ, and in our doctrinal maturity, the world should see beyond us to our Savior. Hence,

D. The goal is that the body will grow to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

Stature may refer either to age or physical stature, but it speaks figuratively of maturity. The measure of spiritual maturity is nothing less than the fullness of Jesus Christ, who is the very fullness of God (Col. 1:19; 2:9)! John MacArthur writes (p. 157), "The church in the world is Jesus Christ in the world, because the church is now the fullness of His incarnate Body in the world (cf. 1:23). We are to radiate and reflect Christ's perfections." Thus the goal is that the church would grow to complete Christ-likeness, so that when the world looks at us, it gets a glimpse of the Savior.

Conclusion

Some of you are relatively new Christians. You should take advantage of the different opportunities for being equipped with

God's Word, both on Sundays and throughout the week. As you grow in the faith and apply the Word to your own life, look for ways to impart God's truth to others.

Others of you are more mature in your faith and you're involved in ministry to others. I would encourage you not to grow weary in the work (and it *is* work!) Helping others grow in Christ is kind of like raising kids. It's a long process, and in church terms, you no sooner get some out of the nest and on their own, but there are more needing to grow in Christ.

But my concern is for those of you who have been Christians for quite a while, but you're not involved at all in ministry to other believers. Perhaps you've become stagnant in your walk with Christ. Start there, by recovering your first love for Him. But, also, look around for new people in the church that need a friend. Older couples should look for younger couples who need mentors. Invite them over to your home and get to know them. Suggest that you study the Bible together, or if you don't feel gifted to lead a study, take them with you to a Bible study and then interact on the truths that you both are learning.

The point is, get out of the stands and onto the playing field. Christianity is not a spectator sport! If you need more equipping, then get equipped. But, use what you've got in the work of service toward other believers. In that way, this church will grow to maturity in Christ. His kingdom rule will be extended through us. And, the world will get a glimpse, however imperfect, of the glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Application Questions

1. Why is the distinction between so-called "clergy" and "laity" harmful? Is there any way in which it is helpful?
2. Where is the balance between feeling "adequate for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17) and feeling inadequate (2 Cor. 2:16; 3:5)?
3. How would this church be different if every member viewed himself/herself as a minister of Christ?
4. It is usually said that "doctrine divides." Yet, the unity of the faith is primarily doctrinal unity. Explain.

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