

Jason Upchurch - Ephesians 4:11-16 - The Maturity of the Church

This morning we're at a very crucial spot in Ephesians because what Paul does here is lay out the mission of the church. The mission of the church is critical.

If we miss the mission of the church we're not going to know what our purpose here in life is these 70 or 80 years.

You look at businesses and they have a mission. And everything bends to the mission. Or should.

Toyota; "To attract and attain customers with high-valued products and services and the most satisfying ownership experience in America."

Cost is isn't in the mission. Specific cars aren't in the mission. Satisfying ownership experience is. And Toyota usually hits that.

Walmart: We save people money so they can live better.

Cost is everything. Experience means almost nothing. And in fairness that's what we experience when we go to WalMart.

All that to say that the mission is going to guide how we do what we do.

So what's the mission of the Church? To make fully mature disciples of Jesus.

I want you to notice Paul's emphasis on maturity in this section. Remember the context here is that Jesus is the ascended King. He ascended to the throne after defeating his enemies and securing our salvation. And as our reigning king he is giving gifts to his church. The gifts are specifically apostles, prophets evangelists, shepherds, pastors.

But why? Why is he giving these gifts? So the church can minister to itself and reach maturity. **Read 12-13, 15-16**

So there's this pattern that God leaders to equip the saints so that the saints can help one another to maturity.

What happens if we don't understand the mission? What if the mission gets messed up?

Things go wrong.

1 - We emphasize evangelism, but not maturity. This is the classic church that's always looking for spiritual revival, always making altar calls, always looking for converts. But their knowledge of the Word is a mile wide and an inch deep. It's pretty shallow. There's no depth.

Some people will say "But the Great Commission is to go make disciples." It is! But disciple - matheteis - means a learner. Someone who continually learns what the Lord wants. And Jesus clarifies that when he says "teaching them to obey all that I've commanded you."

2 - If we miss the mission our view of leadership is skewed. Many Christians have an outsized view of the role of leaders and pastors in the church. It's pastor who does all the ministry. And most people just sit back. If there's a ministry to be done it must be done by the pastor.

But here Paul says the leaders equip the saints for the work of what? The ministry.

Pastors and leaders are like coaches on a baseball team. We're giving tips at batting practice. We're running drills, but we're not playing the game. The saints are playing the game. The saints are doing the work of the ministry. We're just equipping the saints.

3 - The goal of teaching isn't just information, but it's to actually give you the biblical foundation and practical tools to go encourage one another on in maturity.

This is the job of every elder, every teacher: that you would walk away knowing the Word better so that not only are you more like Jesus in maturity, but you can call others to maturity as well.

So that's our goal. That's the goal is that everyone in the Kingdom is striving for: maturity and encouraging one another on to maturity as well.

So the mission, the goal of the church, is to make fully mature disciples of Jesus.

1) The Leaders God Gives. Read 11-12a

So God primarily uses leaders to equip us to go do the work of the church. Most of us can look back over the time we've been a believer and point to leaders, beloved pastors or teachers, that used to equip us.

That's on purpose. In fact, Paul says that leaders in the church are the gifts that he gives to his Kingdom. Yes, there's a sense in which all Christians have spiritual gifts to use but it's often leaders that God uses in particularly powerful ways to encourage his people on to maturity. That's God's design.

And there are 5 mentioned and all 5 are used by God in specific ways to equip the saints for ministry. Every leader in all of Christendom should understand this is our goal.

A - Apostles. The word apostle just means someone sent on a specific mission. Jesus initially appointed 12 apostles. Not 10, not 20 but 12. Why 12? It seems clear what Jesus was doing was showing that he's making a new people of God and just like there were 12 tribes of Israel, there were 12 apostles as the foundation of the church. Even in revelation the gates on the New Jerusalem have the names of the 12 tribes, the walls have the 12 apostles. It's an obvious connection.

Now, when you add them up in the Bible there were actually at least 16 apostles named. The original 12, then Matthias, Paul, Barnabas, and later James the half brother of Jesus is called an apostle. And there were likely several more.

Apostles were men who specifically set apart by God (**Gal. 1**), they had seen the resurrected Christ so could witness personally about his resurrection (**Acts 1**) and they could perform various miracles (**2 Cor. 12**). These men had a powerful ministry early on in the church bringing many people to faith in Jesus and growing the church in maturity. And almost all of them died martyrs.

There are no more apostles today. Some cults want to say there are apostles. But they are no more.

B - Prophets - You'll see prophets throughout the Bible as men who usually speak for God. God speaks to them in some sort of supernatural way and they then communicate that to the church.

The old saying is a prophet has his back to God and faces the people, whereas a priest has his back to the people and his face to God. Prophets spoke the word on behalf of God.

Now, there's some discussion as to whether or not prophets are still an office God uses today. This gets complicated because the term prophecy is used for all kinds of things in the Bible. People who can play music are called prophets, people who can sing are called prophets, people who encourage each other and console each other are called prophets, along with people who have a message from God.

But the question usually comes down to: does God still speak through men outside of the Bible? And my answer is no, he does not do it in the same way as we see in the OT or the early church where prophet is a God-ordained office where God speaks authoritatively without question through a man.

Can God speak to people? I'm open to that. The Westminster confession and the 1689 LBC leave some room for that. But does he do it on a normal basis as someone who leads the church? No I don't think so. He did,

and it was wonderful because it equipped the church for the work of the ministry in a supernatural way that was impossible to ignore.

But I believe that era has passed.

3 - Evangelists. We don't know a whole lot about the office or position of evangelist. It could be that this is simply someone who has a gift of preaching the gospel and compels people to come into the Kingdom. I think they also have a desire to teach other Christians how to effectively preach the gospel as well.

But there's also some evidence from the book of Acts that these guys were more than just gospel preachers. You remember the 7 who were appointed to feed widows? Well, they don't just make sure ladies are fed. At least 2 of the 7 are able to do not only amazing miracles and signs and wonders, but their preaching seems to be Spirit-blessed.

Acts 6:10: The people at the synagogue "could not withstand the wisdom and Spirit with which he was speaking."

The Spirit enabled him to do powerful signs and miracles and preach in a way that unbelievers just had nothing to say. If you remember, they just killed him because they had no argument.

Well, Stephen and Phillip are sort of lumped together with these 7 and Phillip is later called an evangelist in **Acts 21** and his daughters are all prophetesses. So God seemed to use this office in a particular way to not only preach the gospel but to encourage the early church.

So we've got apostles, prophets, evangelists. Who else does God use to equip the church?

4 - Shepherds - Shepherds are what we usually call "pastors." A shepherd or a pastor is someone who is entrusted to take care of a flock of sheep or goats.

It's kind of funny, we usually call the men who lead the church pastors. But that word is actually only used 1 time in the NT - that's right here.

Usually the NT uses other words for the church leader that we usually call pastor.

Elder - which sort of gets to the idea of someone who is older, mature, respected, and has authority.

Bishop - I know most people think of the Catholic Church, but bishop comes from the word episkopos - or overseer. The idea is that elders, pastors are entrusted to oversee local church. They have authority and leadership.

Ruler - In Hebrews the leaders are called rulers because they have authority.

These aren't different positions, they are different words for the same position. The NT uses them interchangeably.

Elders are to rule well. Rulers are to shepherd the flock. Shepherds are to build up the body of Christ. Elders are to oversee the body. Round and round it goes.

The point that Paul is making is that Shepherds are part of the gifts that God has given the church to equip the body of Christ.

5 - The same is true with teachers. There's some discussion about whether teachers is a separate category or if teachers and shepherds are the same. I tend to think they're different. Every elder needs to be able to teach, but not every teacher is an elder.

But the goal of both teachers and shepherds is to equip the body.

So these are the gifts that God has given the church. These are the leaders. I think the first 3 are not used anymore, Apostles are gone. Prophets in an authoritative office are gone. And miracle working evangelists like Phillip and Stephen are gone.

Today, we have shepherds and teachers. Those are the leaders God gives.

2 - The Goal of leaders Is to Equip. Read 12

Alright, this is huge. When someone asks you "What does a pastor do?" this is where you should take them. The primary job of a pastor is not to do ministry.

We often call pastors "ministers" and even say they've been called into the "ministry." But biblically pastors don't do ministry.

That sounds shocking. That sounds counter intuitive. What do pastors and teachers do according to **Vs. 12?**

Equip the saints for the work of the ministry. That's what we do.

We're like the armory in the military. We don't actually shoot the guns, we hand out the guns for the soldiers to go shoot. We hand out the grenades and launchers for others to go use.

You guys are the saints. You guys are on the front lines of ministry. You guys are the ones who interact with friends and family and neighbors and coworkers. You guys are the ones who counsel each other. You guys are in the trenches and our job is to equip you to do the work.

That doesn't mean pastors don't ever talk to unbelievers. It means that our primary job is to make sure you've got what you need to go do your ministry.

This happens all the time when I'm talking with you guys. "How do I talk to so and so?" "How should I engage my family?"

By the way, this should be the heart of every pastor: how do we equip the body of Christ? What do we need to grow? If you ever have questions about books to read, ways to grow, how to do a ministry, whatever - this is our heart toward you.

We equip the saints. Paul also says we build up the body of Christ. **Read 12**

I think this is saying basically the same thing. Our goal is to build up the entire body of Christ.

If you think of a strength coach: they want to build up the body. What exercises are most effective? What muscles need the most attention? Do we need to lose weight? Eat more protein? Do we need to change diet? Do we need to do different exercises?

I want you to be jacked spiritually and I want you to have every bit of equipment you need to go do the work of the ministry,

That's the goal of the leaders that God has given to the church.

3 - How long do we do this? Til Jesus comes back. Read 11-13

Here's the deal: the equipping never ends and the ministry never ends until Jesus returns.

The pastors are equipping and the saints are ministering until we all attain the unity of the faith. When does that happen? When you're dead. Or when Jesus comes back - whichever is first. But this cycle never ever stops.

Or put a different way: we can stop when we all attain to the unity of the faith.

We can stop when we attain the complete knowledge of the Son of God and to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

But that won't happen until we're dead or Jesus comes back So I equip you, you minister to others until we're in glory.

And I think the things he mentions here are critical. When you're thinking about ministering to people, what's your goal? What guides what you do?

Well, I think your goal should be unity of the faith. **Read 13**

Part of your ministry in this age is to compel people to be unified. The unity of the faith. Unity around the Christian faith.

Not koombaya, not "can't we all just get along." Unity around the core doctrines of the Christian faith. "Only when you find agreement on sound doctrine will you find meaningful fellowship."
(ESV Bible intro 2 John). So we compel people to unity in the faith.

Also your ministry is to the knowledge of the Son of God. That is, your job is to know Jesus more and to get other believers to know Jesus more. And oftentimes, you guys, this is as simple as asking people "Hey, what are you reading in the Bible right now?"

If you're a Christian you should love it when people ask you that question. You should love it because you know you should be reading the Word. You should love it because if you're not, it's a reminder to do what you know to be doing. If you are, it's a way to encourage others. "Yeah, I'm reading Psalms right now and realizing that God really wants me to rejoice in his provision."

And if you love it when others ask you, what should you do to others? Ask them. I was at a bbq last week and talking to some guys and there's this lull in the conversation and so I asked them. Changed the whole feel of the conversation in a really good way.

We need unity, we need knowledge. We also need maturity. **Read 13**

So our goal is that every person is mature. We're not just cramming information into peoples' heads. We're not just trying to get people to deal with each other and not cause waves.

We're after maturity. Have you matured in the faith over the last year? Two years? What ways in your life do you need to grow? If you don't know, you should ask someone you know and trust: Hey, how do you think I need to grow in the Lord? How do you think I need to mature?

You know when we raise kids the goal isn't to raise 10 year olds or 14 year olds. Our goal is to form these little ones into responsible, God-fearing adults who contribute to family, church and society. Our goal is maturity.

Sober minded, Spirit filled, gentle, patient, kind, wise, loving, men and women of God.

So God uses leaders to equip the saints. The saints do this until Jesus comes back.

4 - Warning if we don't grow. **Read 13-14**

What happens if we don't grow? Paul says we're children if we don't grow. Nepios - Literally, infants - the NIV hits the nail on the head. Little babies.

It's okay to be an infant in maturity if you're brand new to the faith. But infants grow fast - and believers should grow fast too. If you've got a friend or loved one who is not growing you need to have a conversation with them.

“Hey, I love you, but I’m concerned you’re not growing in the faith. Do you think you’re maturing?” We need to be maturing. It’s weird when 10 year olds are sucking on bottles. It’s awkward. It’s weird when people are 10 years in the faith still sucking on milk. We equip you to go mature them.

We also don’t want to be ships. **Read 14**

You ever been around people who all they talk about is the last weird conspiracy they watched on YouTube or some podcast? It’s all speculation and conjecture? Or people start dabbling in weird theology.

You get people who do weird things with end times stuff - always looking for signs and dates.

You get people who get really into the OT law and that’s all they talk about.

You get people really riled up about Bible version or social justice or whatever.

They’re like a sailing ship in a storm. They have no direction, no control. They’re just blown about.

I’ve seen this happen to many people. They can’t bring themselves to read the Bible or read a theology book but they’ll spend hours chasing down some crazy theory about the Bible that has no basis in reality.

They’re just blown around and useless. And what they’re blown around by isn’t biblical doctrine. Paul says it’s human cunning and craftiness. **Read 14**

We need to be careful that we’re not easily manipulated by people and clever ideas.

So God gives leaders to equip the church. The church matures. We’re not blow around by nonsense.

5 - What does a maturing church look like? **Read 15-16**

This is a great contrast. We’re not babies and we’re not blown around by what other people say. What’s a maturing church look like?

A - Speak truth in love. This is what should be coming out of our mouths: truth. In order to speak truth you have to know truth. You have to be grounded in truth.

John 17:17: sanctify them in the truth, your Word is truth.

Then you have to speak it in love. This doesn’t mean we don’t offend people. When you speak, the truth will offend.

I was talking to a good friend this week and I think he believes Christians should never offend people with sharp language. We should never be jarring, never be edgy. It’s almost like we should live in Victorian England and sip tea and only ever say nice things.

Jesus: called unbelievers snakes, hell bound fools.

Paul: emasculate themselves, whitewashed tombs.

James: Adulteress, and said their tongues were a world of iniquity.

John the Baptist: fiery preacher, you’re’ getting chopped down and burned like tree in the fire of hell.

Prophets: every offensive thing you can imagine.

So whatever speaking the truth in love is, it can’t be politeness.

Serrated Edge - Doug Wilson - is a good little book thinking about using spicy language as believers.

The idea is speaking the truth from love. That's the idea. Is the motivation for what you're about to say love?

Paul says aim of our charge is love **1 Tim 1:5**

B - So we have to speak the truth, and motivation needs to be love. What does that produce? It produces growth in Christ. **Read 15**

If you really are speaking the truth in love to others, it will produce growth in others to be like Jesus. To look to Jesus.

Not look to the law, not look to rules, not look to theologians and theories. But Look to Jesus who is the head of the church. He's the true authority in the Church.

You want to know any easy way to tell if someone is maturing? Just ask them if they love Jesus more now than they did a few months ago.

"Are you growing in your love for Jesus?" Everyone knows what the answer should be, don't we? The real question is: is it true. Are you actually growing in Jesus, loving Jesus more?

More thankful, more holy, more humble, more obedient, more joyful, more at peace?

So maturing church speaks the truth in love, is growing in Christ.

C - Is growing together in love. **Read 15-16**

So this is the beautiful thing. The more we mature, the more we contribute to the body, the more other parts of the body contribute and grow and are useful.

It's like a child, the older he or she gets, the more she can contribute to the household. They're big, stronger, more capable, and more is accomplished.

That's how the body of Christ is. The more it grows, the more equipped it is. The more equipped it is, the more it equips others. And on and on it goes - every part working as it should.

And the ultimate result is self perpetuation of building in love.

How do you know a church is mature? It's filled with love.

How do you know it's maturing? It's more loving now, than it was last year. And it's more loving next year than it is now.

That's what our goal here is at RBC. The elders and teachers equip you, you minister to each other. Everyone is growing in love, grounded in truth, maturing in Christ.

To the glory of God.

Pray

Romans 15:13: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. (Romans 15:13, ESV)