

# The Church: The key to our strength

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 11 May 2014

Preacher: Edward Lobb

[ 0 : 00 ] Amen. Well, let's turn for our reading now to Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and you'll find this on page 977 in our big church Bibles, page 977.

The passage I want to read is Ephesians chapter 4, verses 1 to 16. So Ephesians 4, verse 1. There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. 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 parts of the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens that he might fill all things.

[ 1 : 37 ] And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors 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.

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 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.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and may it be a blessing to us today. Well, do let's turn to our passage in Ephesians chapter 4, verses 1 to 16, on page 977.

This sermon I've prepared for this morning is not part of any series. I am working my way gradually through Judges, and we hope to return to Judges.

I hope to towards the end of June when I've got a little run of sermons. But today is really a one-off. And I've chosen a passage about the church. And you may see I've given this sermon the title, The Church as the Key to Our Strength.

[ 3 : 33 ] In other words, it's the church that brings purpose and shape and focus to our lives. Now, let me begin in a rather blunt fashion by asking you a direct personal question.

You haven't got to answer it, except in your own mind. So here's my direct personal question. The question is, how important is the church in your life?

And when I say the church, I mean both the worldwide church and also our local congregation. How important is it? Do you know how sometimes we're asked to fill in those questionnaires where we have to score things from 1 to 10 or 1 to 5?

Where 10 is very important and 1 is not important at all. You get asked questions such as, how important to you is the question of climate change? Or how important to you is the question of Scottish independence?

That kind of thing. And my question is, how important to you is the Christian church? How would you rank it on a scale of 1 to 10 in your own mind and value system?

[ 4 : 35 ] Here's another related question. Where would you rank the church in relation to other societies or groups that you might be involved in? You might belong, for example, to a dramatic or operatic society.

You might belong to a golf club. I belong to the Beef Farmers Association, in brackets, poultry section. Where do our allegiances lie?

Does the Lord's Church bulk big in our lives or does it occupy just a small corner of our energies and our interests? My own experience, for what it's worth, is that I became a Christian when I was perhaps about 16.

And I'd been a Christian for some years before I really began to think at all seriously about the church. My Christian life had begun at a scripture union summer camp for boys.

And so the early nourishment I had as a Christian was really at the school Christian union and at the university Christian union. So my early growth as a young Christian in my late teens and early 20s happened without any serious involvement in a local church congregation.

[ 5 : 45 ] Now, I did begin to go to church quite regularly on a Sunday. But although I was very interested in the Lord and the Bible, the church, I think, didn't score more than about three points out of ten in my scale of values at that stage.

I was interested in being a Christian. But my view of the church was not at all developed. However, studying the Bible over the years has changed my view a great deal.

I've come to see that creating and building the church is the great aim of the Lord Jesus and the great aim of God the Father. Jesus said, I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

And you might say the whole story of the Bible is about God creating and gathering a people for himself whose final destiny is the heavenly Zion to enjoy his company in heaven forever.

So the existence, the growth, the life and the work of the Lord's church is really what the Bible is all about. Now, I know that the church on earth is sometimes flaky, sometimes downright disobedient, sometimes we have to feel ashamed of things that happen.

[ 6 : 55 ] But that fact should never keep us from seeing that the church of the Lord Jesus is a glorious society. To belong to it is not only a great privilege, but it brings great joys.

And the church becomes the key to the purpose and shape and the strength of our lives. So let's look at the teaching of Paul the Apostle. The Apostles, do you remember, are the mouthpiece of Christ himself.

In other words, what they say, he says. So to listen to the loving instruction of the Apostle Paul is to hear the loving instruction of our Lord Jesus. Now, the church at Ephesus was one of the largest and most important churches that Paul had dealings with.

He doesn't seem to have founded it or planted it. But we get the impression from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 19, that when Paul first went to Ephesus, which was probably in about 53 AD, the church there was small and largely untaught.

And because Paul could see that Ephesus was an important and strategic city, he was prepared to invest a lot of time and effort in building this church up.

[ 8 : 04 ] In fact, he spent about two years in Ephesus, which was a long time in Paul's life. It was a big chunk of his working time. Now, by the time that he wrote this letter, which was a few years later, he was in prison.

You can see that from chapter 4, verse 1, where he calls himself a prisoner for the Lord. And you can see it also in chapter 6, verse 20, where he calls himself an ambassador in chains.

And in this letter, which is crafted to instruct and encourage his Ephesian friends, Paul is opening up to them a broad and comprehensive view of what the church is.

In the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul emphasizes the astonishing truth. It really was a revolutionary truth in the first century AD that the church of Christ consists of, here's the shock, Jews and Gentiles who have come to Christ.

And Paul explains how the Berlin Wall that separated Jews and Gentiles has been broken down through the death of Christ on the cross. And that has led to Jews and Gentiles who come to Christ being reconciled not only to God, but to each other.

[ 9 : 17 ] And thus the church, Paul explains, is a new humanity, almost a new human race, in which the marks of unity now replace the old sense of division.

Humanity without Christ is deeply and painfully divided. Not only that division of Jew and Gentile that was so strong in those early years, but think of the kind of conflicts that traumatize the human race across the face of the globe today.

We know, we're coming to understand that this division between Shia and Sunni Muslim is the problem that really underlies not only the tragedy of Syria today, but so much of the conflict in the Middle East.

But bring it closer to home and think of our British tribalisms that go back many centuries. Working class and middle class, for example.

North of England, where we're tough and hard, and the soft, sappy south of England. Think of Yorkshire and Lancashire, very close to each other, but a bit of fists there. Think of Glasgow and Edinburgh.

[10:22] You know more about that than I do. 300 years ago, it was the Jacobites and the Hanoverians, wasn't it? Unredeemed humanity is intractably fragmented.

But Paul is teaching the Ephesians throughout this letter that the cross of Christ has broken down all these divisions for those who put their trust in him. Now, in the first three chapters of the letter, Paul is teaching the Ephesians the principles.

He's saying this is what has happened. And Christ, by his death, has opened the way for the emergence of a new united humanity, the people of God, the church.

And then in chapters 4, 5, and 6, Paul is showing the Ephesians how they can play their part in developing and fleshing out this new reality. This is what verse 1 is saying in chapter 4.

I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to flesh out this new reality, to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called. The calling to which they've been called is what Paul has been describing in chapters 1, 2, and 3.

[11:30] It's the calling to belong to this new, redeemed, Christ-centered humanity. So as Paul launches into chapter 4, he is saying, let me describe to you how this new humanity, this new body of people behaves.

And let me urge you to shape your lives accordingly. So let's look at our passage now under three sections. I'm not going to attempt to look at every phrase or every verse.

That would take far too long. It would be 3 p.m. by the time we'd finished and you'd be in a coma. So we'll try at least to feel the thrust and understand the main thrust of what Paul is saying to his Ephesian friends and to us.

So here's the first thing. Christian unity is commanded in verses 1 to 6. Now just run your eye over verses 1 to 6 again. The weight of these six verses, I think, rests in verse 3.

Eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. Now let me explain why the weight is in verse 3. Verses 4, 5, and 6 are famous verses and they contain the seven great ones.

[12:43] One body, that's the church. One spirit, one hope. One Lord, that's Jesus. One faith, one baptism, one God and Father. But the function of verses 4, 5, and 6 is to add weight to the command of verse 3.

Paul is saying that because there is one body and one body only, because there is one Holy Spirit and only one, because there is one hope and no other, because there is one Lord Jesus who is the one and only Son of the Father, because there is only one true faith, faith in Christ as Savior, because there is only one baptism, baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and because supremely there is only one God and Father, it is of the utmost importance, brothers and sisters in Ephesus, that you maintain the unity of the spirit.

That is the unity, the unitedness that the Holy Spirit brings into being as he brings people to Christ. Did you see how those few verses work? The central exhortation there in these six verses comes in verse 3, and verses 4, 5, and 6 are showing why the instruction of verse 3 is so important.

It is because there is unity in God that there needs to be unity in the church that bears his name and reflects his nature. Now let's look at verse 2, because verse 2 shows us the kind of qualities that Christians need to develop if our unity is to grow.

Verse 2, with all humility. 95% isn't enough. It's got to be all, 100% humility. And gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.

[14:29] Now don't you think there's a lifetime of Christian experience and understanding in verse 2? Paul himself must have possessed these characteristics in very great measure to be able to write like that.

Wouldn't you have loved to have had a cup of tea with Paul? Wouldn't you have given your eye teeth to have had half an hour with him, listening to him talk? He must have been quite delightful. Humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another, bearing with one another's foibles and frailties and awkwardnesses, gladly putting up to the nth degree with the potentially annoying characteristics of one's brothers and sisters.

For example, contrast these two ways of speaking to a fellow Christian. Just imagine you've got two Christians, they're both young men, and they're spending a morning together in May planning the program for a teenager's summer camp that they are going to be jointly leading two or three months in the future.

And imagine that one of these two young men is a much more capable organizer than the other one. Now imagine that the other one, the less capable one, comes up with a draft program for the summer holiday party, and the other one, the more capable one, reads the program, and he immediately can see that this program is poorly thought through in about 17 different ways. Now how does he speak to his colleague at this point? Does he say to him, John, this is a shoddy piece of work. I mean, it's hopeless. Hopeless to have this event on Monday and this event on Thursday.

[16:07] And how can you expect unchurched teenagers to grapple with a series of talks on the book of Ezekiel? That's beyond me. Look, I'm going to tear this useless program up and I'm going to start again.

Go off and make a cup of coffee. Let me start from square one. Oh, dear. Humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love.

Think of poor John. He creeps off into the kitchen to make the coffee feeling crushed and useless, doesn't he? How about this instead? John, thank you so much for working on this first draft.

I think a lot of it is just right. I've got a little query about the Monday and Thursday events. Maybe it might be better to swap those around because we'll have two minibuses by the Thursday and we've only got one on the Monday.

As for Ezekiel, Ezekiel's a terrific writer, terrific prophet. I just love those chapters. I just wonder, though, if something a little simpler, maybe from Mark's gospel, could be better for the youngsters.

[17:08] Look, I'll just go off and make a cup of coffee while you think about that. Do you take one sugar or two? Now, friends, let's bring this home to ourselves.

Think of somebody, if you can, in our own church who has upset you or annoyed you or left you feeling frustrated recently. It may be some trivial matter.

It may be something more important, but somebody's words or actions or failure to act have ruffled you up in some way and have made you unhappy. Now, verse two is for you in relation to the person who has upset you.

Bear with that person in love. That's what Paul is saying. Bear with his or her frailties and shortcomings. Be endlessly forgiving and gentle.

It's as we practice the lifestyle of verse two that we will then be able to follow the agenda of verse three. It's the qualities described in verse two that make the unity of verse three possible.

[18:15] So what is this unity? Does it mean that we become clones of each other? Identical? Everybody having to like Stilton cheese and everybody having to hate Gorgonzola, for example.

No, of course not. You think of some of the men in the Bible. Think of Peter and Paul and Barnabas and Timothy and Luke and Titus. Very different in personal characteristics. But united in this way. United in their love for the Lord, their understanding of the gospel and their belief in the power of the gospel. Verses four, five and six describe the heart of their shared commitment.

Father, Son and Spirit. One faith, one hope, one baptism. Christian unity involves shared convictions on the content of the gospel, on the authority of the Bible and its truth, on the urgency of evangelism, on the centrality of proclaiming and living the truth to the glory of God.

God. This is not, surely, about Christian denominations, Methodists and Baptists and so on. I don't say that there isn't a further application of this teaching to the question of denominations, but there were no denominations in Paul's day.

[19:30] This is written in 50-something A.D. Paul was writing here about relationships within the local fellowships that he knew and loved. His powerful desire was to see the Christians at Ephesus caring deeply for each other in love and building up the oneness which they already had in Christ in principle, but which needs to be painstakingly worked at in every Christian congregation.

It is a lovely aim. Let's allow nothing to cause any of us to turn away from a fellow Christian in the congregation because of some difficulty.

So there's the first thing. Unity is commanded. Now secondly, Christian service is enabled or if you like made possible.

Christian service is enabled. And here I want us to look at verses 7 to 12. We won't look very closely at verses 7, 8, 9, and 10, but just to sum up those verses, what Paul is saying there is that Christ, having ascended to heaven, has given the church many gifts.

He's showered the church with gifts. In verse 8, Paul is quoting from Psalm 68. He gave gifts to men. And what were these gifts that he's given to the church?

[ 20 : 49 ] Well, he tells us in verse 11, he gave the apostles. Now the apostles are the foundation teachers of the church, Peter and Paul and John and the others, and their teaching, recorded in the New Testament, defines for all time the content of Christian belief and the character of Christian lifestyle, what we believe and how we behave.

Without the gift of the apostles and their writing, we would be adrift and clueless. Next, Christ gave the prophets. And Paul is probably thinking there of Moses and the others who set down the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures.

Next, he gave the evangelists. Now he may be thinking there of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, but he may well be thinking also of Christians throughout the ages who are gifted at telling the good news about Jesus to others.

People, for example, like John Wesley and George Whitefield in the 18th century or Billy Graham in the 20th century or other people who are not well known but folk in the local churches who are skillful at explaining the gospel clearly and persuasively to other people.

Now let's look at Christ's fourth gift, the pastors and teachers. Now Paul's Greek at this point strongly suggests that these are not two different categories, pastors and teachers.

[ 22 : 11 ] They're one category. You might call them pastor-teachers. Now I've got a question here and I want somebody in the congregation up here in the Great Hall to raise a hand and give me an answer to this question.

Okay? Perhaps somebody under 25. So here's my question. Look at verse 12. Look at verse 12. My question is according to verse 12, who does the work of ministry in the Lord's Church?

Who does the work of ministry in the Lord's Church? Any hands?

Any hands? Silence is golden. No, it's not. Come on. Who's going to tell me? Who does the work of ministry in the Church?

Somebody down here. Yes, you. No. All right, somebody over 25. Duncan. The saints. Thank you very much.

[ 23 : 13 ] Duncan, would you like to define the saints for us? Christians. Thank you very much. The saints means all Christians, doesn't it? Every Christian. Now, in about half a dozen words, Paul is telling us about both the role of the pastor teachers and the role of the church members.

Do you see that in verse 12? The pastor teachers equip the church members, the saints, for the work of ministry and the saints then roll up their sleeves and they do the work of ministry.

Ministry means service. It's very simple and very clear when you see it. But over long periods of time, the churches have not seen this clearly at all. Let me give you an example.

Some years ago, I was talking to an elderly member of a well-known church and I was very interested in her church and I said to her, tell me about the ministry of your church over recent years and she said, well, back in the 1980s, we had so-and-so as our minister.

He was a wonderful preacher. And after him, we had Mr. So-and-so for a while. He was a wonderful preacher. Now we've got Mr. So-and-so. We've had him for some years. He's a wonderful preacher.

[ 24 : 27 ] Now that conversation left me very thoughtful because I realized that the old lady was not answering the question which I had asked. When I asked her to tell me about the ministry of the church, she obviously thought I meant the ministry of the minister or the pastor.

But that's not what I meant at all. I meant the ministry of the saints, the congregation. What I was interested to know about was the way in which the congregation had been broadcasting the good news of Jesus.

But that old lady's view was a view commonly held a generation or two ago. And I guess there are still bits of it that remain in many people's minds.

The view was that the work of ministry, the work of the church, was done by the minister, by the pastor. Yes, he might be helped by a few keenies. There'd be a few elders who would visit people. There'd perhaps be a small group of people who were able to run the Sunday school and the youth group. One or two who might produce a church magazine and arrange flowers for Sunday. But basically, the work of the church was the work of the minister.

[ 25 : 31 ] So he would arrange and lead the Sunday services. He would choose the hymns. He would prepare the sermons. He would preach the sermons. He would visit the sick, visit the dying, take baptisms and weddings and funerals.

And in many cases, he would be the one to mow the church lawns, to wind the church clock, to ring the church bell, to dust the hymn books, and to set the mousetraps in the church basement. Most old-fashioned churches, I know from experience, need mousetraps.

And as for the congregation, they would turn up on a Sunday morning looking very happy. They would warble their way through a few hymns. They would listen to the sermon with a nice smile on their face, shake the minister by the door and say, thank you, nice sermon, and don't you think it might be raining by four o'clock this afternoon?

And then go home and that was it. That was really church life. Now, I'm exaggerating a little bit, but not very much.

Paul's vision here is entirely different. The pastor teachers of verse 11 have a significant role, certainly, but in a sense, they are the backroom boys.

[ 26 : 38 ] If you think of this in terms of a football team, the pastor teachers are like the coach and the physiotherapist. It's the saints who go out onto the field of play and do the business. The team are the saints.

The pastor teachers provide them with the equipment and the equipment that the saints need for their work is the knowledge of God through the knowledge of the Bible, the knowledge of the gospel through the knowledge of the Bible.

So the pastor teacher's main work is to press the Bible into the saints, like somebody pressing polyfiller into the cracks in the wall. That's the pastor teacher's job.

That's what I'm trying to do at this very moment, so that the saints are then full of the Bible and are then equipped to go out and share the gospel with other people. Not that the work of ministry is all about evangelism.

Evangelism will always be the central thing, but it will include many other things, caring for others, looking after the needy, looking after the young and teaching them, looking after the old and bringing them comfort and friendship, supporting overseas missions, getting involved in prayer meetings, catering teams, all sorts of practical work, and even setting mousetraps is part of it.

[ 27 : 53 ] Now notice the final phrase of verse 12, for building up the body of Christ. So the pastor teachers are body builders. As they teach the Bible to the church, and as they train others in the Bible, the church develops muscles and sinews and strength, which it didn't have before.

A congregation that is well fed on nourishing Bible teaching becomes a force to be reckoned with in the community. Its members raise the profile of the gospel, and they live the Christian life with confidence.

And those in the community who are not Christians begin to sit up and take notice. They say, the members of that church have an interesting and attractive quality about their lives.

I must find out more. Well, what have we seen so far in this passage about the church? First, Christian unity is commanded. Second, Christian service is enabled.

And then thirdly and last, Christian maturity is enjoyed. We're looking here at verses 13 to 16. Christian maturity. Verse 13, of course, is not beginning a new thought or a new sentence.

[ 29 : 08 ] It's all running on from verses 11 and 12. And the idea is that as the pastor teachers teach the truth and equip the saints for ministry and build up the body of Christ, inevitably, a process of growth follows and the church becomes increasingly mature.

Look at verse 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.

Mature manhood there, of course, doesn't mean mature maleness. It means mature humanity. Now, the process of maturing is a good thing and a necessary thing.

We all love babies to be babies while they're babies. But if somebody who is age 20 is still eating mush and wearing nappies, you know that something has gone wrong.

The necessary maturing has not taken place. So maturing is a good and necessary process. Let's notice how Paul defines maturity here in verse 13.

[ 30 : 14 ] To mature manhood or mature humanity to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. That's the standard. So to grow as a Christian is to become increasingly like Christ.

That's what happens over the decades of the Christian life. Our minds are changed. Our values are changed. Our commitments are changed. We learn increasingly to love the things that Christ loves and to hate the things that Christ hates.

We begin to think more as Christ thinks. And the reason for that is that our minds get filled up with the Bible which is the product of God's mind and therefore, of course, of Christ's mind as well.

So to grow as a Christian is to become more like Jesus. And what does this lead to? Verse 14. 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.

So leaving childhood behind brings stability and strength to our understanding. Let me say something here to encourage younger Christians, either those who are young in years or perhaps older in years but young still in the faith.

[ 31 : 36 ] You may well feel that you would love it if your convictions about the Christian faith were deeper than they are. You may think, for example, I certainly believe in the Lord Jesus as the Son of God.

I certainly believe that he died for my sins and rose again and conquered the power of death. I certainly believe that he will return to judge the world. but I'd like to be more deeply gripped and more deeply convinced.

I feel that the roots of my faith and understanding have not gone very deeply down into the soil yet. Now, my encouragement is this. The depth of conviction will come as long as you remain firmly in the body of the church and as long as you keep drinking in the teaching of the Bible.

If your involvement in the actual church becomes weak and if your Bible input becomes patchy, you'll wobble. You'll become, to some extent, unhappy and confused.

But if you take the medicine of Dr. Paul dispensed in these verses, you will grow strong and you will develop a depth of understanding about so many things, about the gospel, what it is, about the nature of sin, about the power of salvation.

[ 32 : 53 ] You'll develop clear views about other religions, about marriage and sexuality, about life, family life and work and friendships. You'll learn to live with much greater confidence in the midst of this fallen and wicked world.

Here's a simple illustration. Just think of the hand of a very newborn baby. Can you imagine that? A very newborn baby. It's very tiny, isn't it, the hand of a newborn baby.

Think of the little, little finger on the end of the hand of a newborn baby. It's a very, very tiny thing. What does that little tiny finger have to do in order to grow into a big finger?

All it has to do is to remain in the body and it will grow. Paul adds a further thought in verse 15.

How do we grow up into Christ? Well, he says, by speaking the truth in love. That's not a very good translation of Paul's phrase.

[ 33 : 56 ] Paul's actual words don't refer to speech at all. His phrase is literally truthing in love or you might say doing the truth or living the truth in love.

That will, of course, include our speech because our speech is the overflow of our heart and life. But Paul's point is that our maturity grows as we learn to relate to each other truthfully.

Sinful man by nature tends to be devious and deceitful. We all know how to put a spin on our words so as to make ourselves look better or perhaps so as to gain some kind of advantage over other people.

Paul is saying that as we learn to be honest and loving and straightforward with each other, we grow up into the stature of Christ from whom, verse 16, 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.

Isn't that a delightful picture of the healthy church, the church that is growing into maturity? And wouldn't it be madness not to want to belong to a body like that?

[ 35 : 13 ] Growth in unity, growth in service, growth in maturity. That's Paul's message to the churches. The church is the key to our strength.

God's purpose worked out in history but consummated finally in eternity is to gather to himself a great body, a countless multitude who are rescued by Jesus Christ.

And under God's hand, it is the body of the church that gives strength to its members. and it's the members of the church who give strength to the body.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. 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.

Dear God, our Father, we thank you again for this wonderful miracle, this phenomenon of the worldwide Christian church and we thank you so much that those who become part of it and who stay with it and love it and grow are given strength and stability to be no longer knocked about by every blast of doctrine, false teaching, but are able to stand firm and stable and strong and we do pray for every one of us who is here today and ask that you will continue this wonderful process of bringing greater maturity to us so that our convictions deepen and grow and so that we are able to do the work of ministry and service and share the gospel, the good news with our community here in Glasgow.

[ 37 : 17 ] and we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.