

# The Unity and Maturity of the Church

*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: 22 September 2024

Preacher: Edward Lobb

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, it turns out that we are welcoming the folk from Kelvin Grove and Queen's Park to join us here this morning. Apparently there's a technological hitch at Kelvin Grove. 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 gifts. And 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 also descended into the lower parts of the earth. He who descended is the one who has also ascended far above all the heavens that he might fill all things.

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry.

For building 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.

[ 1 : 17 ] 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 and 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's equipped. When each part is working properly.

Makes the body grow. So that it builds itself in love. Amen. May God bless to us his word.

And as I said, we will return to that a little later. And Edward will be teaching and proclaiming us. Its meaning and its purpose for all of us together. But we're going to.

[ 2 : 18 ] Well, it turns out that we are welcoming the folk from Kelvin Grove and Queens Park to join us here this morning. Apparently there's a technological hitch at Kelvin Grove. But all is well.

Edward Lobb.

Well, good morning, friends. Am I coming through? Am I audible? Visible?

Tangible? Good. Let's turn to Ephesians chapter 4. To the passage that was read a bit earlier. And our passage, our section is the first 16 verses of Ephesians chapter 4.

And my title this morning is the unity and maturity of the church. Now, the moment that we step out of chapter 3 and into chapter 4 is a big turning point in this letter.

Paul suddenly moves his readers in a new direction. And the new direction is clearly indicated in the very first verse. I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you.

[ 3 : 26 ] Urge you. Now, I want us to grasp firmly what this change of direction is. And if we can grasp this firmly and clearly, it will help us to read not only this letter, but all of Paul's letters.

And to understand the way he teaches both the gospel and the Christian life. Let me give you a simple and homely illustration. It's Christmas Day.

Thank you very much. I think a giant is having his tooth filled. Anyway, let's not try to be distracted by that. Anyway, here's my illustration. It's Christmas Day.

You're celebrating Christmas with your family. Today, you've been to church in the morning. And you've come home. And now you're all together at home. And it's sometime in the early afternoon. You're sitting in the sitting room. Sipping a glass of iron brew. And toying with a little bowl of salted peanuts. Suddenly, the door from the kitchen opens.

[ 4 : 25 ] And the chief chef announces, dinner's ready. The turkey's on the table. The potatoes are golden brown. The sprouts have been well cooked, but not reduced to pulp. Therefore, you must come in and sit down and eat.

And you do. You need no second invitation. It's the moment you've been waiting for. Now, what has just happened in those few moments? Here's a simple three-point analysis.

First, somebody has worked hard. Shopping. Preparing vegetables. Making gravy and bread sauce and stuffing. Setting out plates and glasses and cutlery on the table.

Several hours of hard work have gone into the preparation of that meal. It has been costly for the chief chef. But second, once the work is all completed, a joyful announcement is made.

An announcement of good news. Dinner's ready. And third, the announcement of good news is followed by a pressing invitation. Come and get it.

[ 5 : 29 ] Now, in simple terms, that's the way Paul presents the gospel, both here in Ephesians and in all his letters. These three ways. These three points.

First, the hard work, which is God's work, is completed. Second, the good news is announced. And third, there is a pressing command to respond.

In the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul has been describing the hard work carried out and completed by God the Father, by the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

It's the work of providing an eternal salvation for sinners. It's a wonderful work. And it's described in a series of rich statements and ideas in Ephesians 1, 2 and 3.

So, for example, believers have been predestined for adoption through Jesus Christ. Chapter 1, verse 5. We have been redeemed through his blood.

[ 6 : 26 ] Chapter 1, verse 7. We've been raised from death to life. Chapter 2, verse 1 and verse 6. And seated with Christ in the heavenly places. Chapter 2, verse 6.

And because the work of Christ is worldwide in its scope, Gentiles who put their trust in him are included with Jewish Christians on the same basis as members of the one body.

Chapter 3, verse 6. And in the midst of all this, Christ himself has been raised from the dead and seated in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power.

That's chapter 1, verses 20 and 21. So, the good news is that Christ is exalted by God the Father as the Lord of the universe, and all who belong to him are eternally saved and reconciled to God.

Reconciliation is spoken of in chapter 2, verse 16. So, Paul's message in chapters 1, 2, and 3 is Christ has done it.

[ 7 : 31 ] It has cost him his life. But through the cross, reconciliation to God has been achieved.

And through Christ's resurrection and exaltation to heaven, the heavenly destiny of all Christians is secured.

So, there's the first step. The costly work has been completed. Step 2, the good news of salvation is announced.

And now, step 3, therefore, I urge you. A response is required. Now, let me go over this same ground again, but in a slightly different way.

You could put it like this, that exposition is followed by exhortation. Exposition first. Paul expounds the gospel.

In other words, describes it, unfolds it, presents it, explains it. It's all about what God has achieved in sending Christ into the world. It is good news. He has done it all.

[ 8 : 33 ] Through the death and resurrection and exhortation of Christ, our sins are forgiven, our own future resurrection is secured, our place in heaven is promised. But the exposition is then followed by exhortation.

Therefore, says Paul, I urge you to believe in a certain way, to behave in a certain way. And that word, therefore, opens up the relationship between the exposition and the exhortation.

And it's very simple. Exposition. God has done all this. Exhortation. Therefore, we must respond appropriately. Now, this is the fundamental pattern that lies behind the way Paul teaches Christian behavior, Christian ethics.

God has acted like this. Therefore, we must respond by behaving in line with what God has done for us. Here's yet another way of describing it, and it's to do with the verbs.

The gospel indicatives shape the ethical imperatives. Indicative verbs describe what has happened. God has done this.

[ 9 : 46 ] He has acted in Christ. This is what he has achieved. Therefore, because of all that God has done, ethical imperatives follow. Act appropriately.

Act in a way that pleases God. Now, once we've got that simple pattern in mind, it helps us to understand that big therefore at the beginning of chapter four.

But it helps us to understand the whole big picture of the Christian life. And it makes us joyful and grateful because we learn how to live, how to conduct ourselves.

And we know that God's teaching about how to live is thoroughly good. It's for our benefit, for our happiness, and for his glory. If our friends and neighbors and colleagues and relatives who are not Christians could only understand how believing the gospel leads to happy and purposeful living, the world would be simply transformed.

Because not living by God's principles leads only to confusion and unhappiness. The world's big problem is not knowing how to live, not knowing how to work, how to use money, how to conduct relationships, how to develop friendships, how to enjoy life without resorting to drugs and promiscuity.

[11:03] The Bible's ethical teaching leads to happiness and security and to purposeful and joyful living. So as we turn now to this ethical section in Ephesians, let's do it gladly, knowing that what he teaches us is the pattern of life blessed by God and directed towards human happiness.

Ephesians 1, 2, and 3 give us the indicatives. Ephesians 4, 5, and 6 give us the imperatives. So look at the way that he prefaces this section in the delightful first verse of chapter four.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called. So the Christian life is to be lived in line with the wonderful calling to which we've been called.

That wonderful calling is to belong to Christ and to imitate the ethical example of Jesus. And that means that God has called us not to disordered or unprincipled living, but to something much better.

Just glance forward for a moment to chapter five, verse one, where Paul neatly sums up the essence of Christian ethical living. Chapter five, verse one. Therefore, he says, be imitators of God as beloved children.

[12:26] In this whole section on Christian behavior, Christian ethics, which is all of chapters four, five, and six, Paul is teaching us to follow the example of God and of the Lord Jesus to imitate God.

Now, in our passage for today, chapter four, verses one to 16, Paul majors on two big ideas. First, be united. Second, grow up.

This passage is about the unity and maturity of the church. On the church is unity. Paul uses two strong verbs.

First, in verse three, notice the verb maintain. We are to be eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. And there's a second verb that comes in verse 13.

And that's the verb attain. Paul says until we all attain to the unity of the faith. So at one level, verse three, unity already exists, which is why it needs to be maintained.

[13:32] But at another level, our unity falls short of what it might be, which is why greater unity needs to be. Verse 13 attained. We have unity.

Therefore, let us eagerly maintain it. But we fall short of full unity. Therefore, let us seek to attain it. But you'll see from verse 13 that unity is very closely connected with maturity.

Because Paul writes there, 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.

So the unity of the church and the maturity of the church are two great goals which cannot be separated. If the church grows in unity, it will inevitably grow in maturity.

Now, we'll get into the details in just a moment. But let's first pause to think about this joining together of unity and maturity. It is a wonderful double treasure. If you belong to a church that is growing in its unity and maturity, you very much want to be part of that church.

[14:47] You wake up on a Sunday morning and you think, it's Sunday. So you devour your coffee, your yogurt, and your banana in three minutes flat because you want to get to church.

You want to be with the people that you are learning to love and trust. You find their company so appealing. It is so stimulating and humbling and encouraging and instructive to sing to the Lord, to pray, to listen to the Bible teaching, and to spend time talking to your fellow Christians, sharing your joys and your sorrows, perhaps sharing a meal together after the service is over.

But if you belong to a church that is disunited and immature, you wake up on a Sunday morning and you think, oh no, it's Sunday. I must go to church because I must show my support.

But what if I were to meet Mrs. Ochter-Machty and she glares at me as she did last week? And what if Mr. McMorrin comes to me at the end of the service and says, I've got a bone to pick with you, as he did two weeks ago?

Some churches, I'm afraid, are like that. And the painful thing is that any one of us could turn into a glaring Mrs. Ochter-Machty or a crabby Mr.

[16:01] McMorrin if we don't pay attention to the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4. He's teaching us here how to maintain and develop our unity and how to grow up into maturity.

And we need to leave childish behavior behind. We need to grow up. If your friends have just had a baby, you go to them and you visit them and you admire the baby.

Beautiful baby, all that sort of stuff. Now the baby, of course, is wearing nappies and a baby grow onesie. It's what you expect. But if you visit your friends 20 years later and you find that their child is still in nappies and still sucking a dummy, you know that something has gone badly wrong.

We need to grow up as individuals and as congregations. So let's allow Paul to teach us how this growth into unity and maturity happens.

I want us to notice two things. First, how unity grows. And secondly, how maturity develops. First, then, how unity grows. Paul urges Christians to learn to live humbly with each other.

[17:13] This is how he starts. Look back to verse one. Walk in a manner worthy of your calling. So what does that look like? Well, he tells us in verse two.

With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love. Now that verse two looks so lovely, so sweet, so obviously right.

We might even think that the qualities it commends are so self-evidently true that Paul need hardly have trouble to write them down. I mean, don't we all know that humility and gentleness and the rest are the obvious recipe for a united body of people?

Now we do recognize the self-evident rightness of these qualities. But Paul is a seasoned old pastor. And Paul has spent time with many different churches over the years.

And he knows that Christian people are well capable of not behaving in a verse two fashion. He has sometimes seen in churches behavior that is the complete opposite of verse two behavior.

[18:18] Let me reword verse two with its opposite qualities. With all pride and fierceness, with impatience and an unwillingness to make allowances for other people's weaknesses.

That's the kind of behavior that Paul has observed in churches often. And it's that kind of behavior that divides people from each other and destroys unity. One of my commentaries dealing here with verse two includes this short sentence, which so struck me as I read it that I had to stop and think about it for about two minutes before I could read on.

Here's the sentence. Pride lurks behind all discord. Now that's an observation full of insight. When two Christians really get on well together, they always respect each other.

But when one Christian is not getting the respect that he thinks he deserves, that's when he gets cross and unhappy. He thinks, but I'm not being noticed.

I am after all a person of certain abilities. I've got competence. But somebody else is doing what I could do better than he does. I'm being marginalized. Now, if that's me thinking like that, and I can assure you it could be, my problem then would be pride.

[19:40] My vanity is being touched on a raw spot. And so I get cross and I mumble and I grumble. And other people hear my grumbings and a little spot of discord appears in the church like a spot of rot in an apple.

But if I can learn to rejoice in the abilities of others and give them my respect by recognizing their God-given worth, I shall promote harmony in the church.

Pride puts oneself onto a pedestal. Look at me, I say. And my motive is then to promote myself and to attract admiration.

But if I learn to value others, I shall support them and encourage them to throw themselves into the life of the church and take responsibility. I shan't praise them too much.

They might get big-headed. But they will know that they're respected and supported and loved. Me first. That's the problem. If I can put it bluntly, we are all of us, by nature, proud blighters.

[20:49] Self-centeredness is written into our DNA. Let me ask you to turn over about three pages to Philipians chapter 2, if you will. Philipians chapter 2, verse 3.

Where Paul is expressing very similar thinking, but he brings in a phrase here which is very instructive. Philipians 2, 3. He says, Our problem is that by nature, each of us thinks of himself or

herself as the most significant person around.

By nature, we are each the center of our own little universe. So if somebody says to us, Tell me about yourself. We think, Oh, this is nice.

How lovely. This has given me an opportunity to shine. I'll draw out of my personal history a few observations about my glowing abilities and achievements. I'll say nothing, of course, about my personal disasters and failures because I want this person I'm talking to to see how significant I am. Paul says to us, Stop that. You need to learn in humility to count others as more significant than yourselves.

[ 22 : 05 ] And as we learn to do this, our attention will be focused on them, on their needs, their opportunities, their abilities, the difficulties they may be facing in life.

And we will then want to support them and encourage them. Now, returning to Ephesians 4, verse 2, you'll see that humility is the first quality that Paul mentions because the other qualities in verse 2 really all flow from humility.

If we exercise humility towards others in the church, we will inevitably treat them with gentleness and patience. And if they display unattractive or challenging behavior towards us, we will bear with them in love we won't turn away from them, expressing frustration and disgust.

We won't in effect say, I don't want to have anything more to do with you. Now, you might ask, but what if somebody in the church that we know is clearly in the wrong about something?

Does bearing one another in love mean that I shouldn't talk with my fellow Christian about his wrong attitude or behavior? Well, no, Paul cannot mean that.

[ 23 : 18 ] Paul himself always addressed problems of behavior with people who were stepping out of line. He never swept problem behavior under the carpet, pretending that all was well when all was not well.

And why was he like that? Because he loved, loved those who were misbehaving, and he wanted them to turn away from their misbehavior. Because sinful misbehavior always undermines the unity and the joy of a congregation.

Now, look onto the first word of verse three. Eager. It's a lovely word. It speaks of heart and mind being strongly engaged. It's a word that expresses a strong desire.

Eager, says Paul, to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Let me just unpack that verse briefly. The Holy Spirit dwells in every Christian.

Every Christian has been born again by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God himself, the life breath of God, who inhabits and increasingly transforms every Christian.

[ 24 : 28 ] And one of the things that he does for us is to unite us. Now, he doesn't clone us to make us all exactly like each other. That would be ghastly, wouldn't it?

But he unites us by being the great common factor that we all share. He teaches us to think the same thoughts, right thoughts, about God the Father, about the Lord Jesus, about the Church, about the Gospel.

He teaches us a consistent body of truth from the Bible. And because we all share him and are all taught by him these same truths, he unites us.

How? Paul tells us in the bond of peace. Bond means binding. So we are bound together. We are roped together. We're strapped together.

And the effect of that binding is to produce peace between brothers and sisters. So within the Lord's family, we are at peace with each other.

[ 25 : 28 ] That is the real unity that we enjoy. It's given to us by the Holy Spirit. But maintaining that unity is clearly our responsibility.

The Lord gives our unity to us, but now it's up to us to keep it in good repair. And Paul says to the Church and to every one of us, be eager to maintain that unity.

So if a shadow falls across my relationship with another Christian, if we begin to find each other irritable or insufferable or a pain in the neck, we've got some work to do.

We've each got to recover the mindset of verse 2. Humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love. Now if I were then to have an imaginary conversation with Paul, if I were to say to Paul, but Paul, I cannot love that brother.

He makes me unboundedly irritable. Paul would say to me, stop that. You must love him and you must bear with him in love. The important thing at stake here is not your hurt feelings, but the unity of the Church.

[ 26 : 41 ] I remember an incident from many years ago that still gives me a stab of pain when I think about it. I was in my 30s and I was the vicar of a parish church in England.

One Sunday evening, we'd finished our evening service in the parish church. Evening services were always at 6.30. It must have been about 8 o'clock in the evening and I was talking with somebody at the back of the building and saying goodbye to people when suddenly I heard raised, angry, male voices at the other end of the building.

So because I was the minister, I thought, I've got to take some responsibility here. So I walked up the central aisle of the building where I found two senior men, both well into middle age, having a blazing row.

They both held positions of responsibility in the church and quite a few other people were still there in the building and they witnessed this scene. So I said to these two men, brothers, this must stop right now.

And it did. They both hung their heads like schoolboys caught smoking behind the bike sheds. And I said, we must sort this out. We must find reconciliation.

[ 27 : 50 ] And I met with them a day or two later and I'm glad to say they climbed down off their high horses and peace and friendship were restored. So having done the wrong thing in public, they then did the right thing in private.

I can't remember what the disagreement was about. The problem was not what they were disagreeing about, but the fact that they allowed themselves to get angry with each other and to hurt other Christians by shouting at each other in public.

Now we can be sure that Paul witnessed quite often scenes like that. I say that because look on to verse 31 in this chapter. He's writing to Christians.

31. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor. Clamor is loud voices, isn't it? Let all that and slander be put away from you along with all malice.

But instead, be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you. Now Paul would not have written like that unless he knew that Christian people were still tempted to behave like that.

[ 28 : 56 ] Now back to the early part of chapter 4. Paul goes straight on in verses 4, 5, and 6 to show the Ephesians why it is so necessary to maintain the unity of the church.

It's because of the unity of the gospel and of the Lord God himself. So verse 4, 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. Paul's point there is that if God is one and is undivided and if the faith of the church is one and undivided, there'd be something deeply inappropriate if the church were to be divided by discord. So verses 4 to 6 give the powerful motivation behind verses 2 and 3. Because God is one, because the faith is one, the church must be one.

So brothers and sisters, if we ever feel anger or discord arising like a volcano in our hearts against somebody else in the church, let's remember Paul's words here in verses 2 and 3.

[ 30 : 10 ] These are not suggestions, they are commands. Pride lurks behind all discord. So we're under orders from our apostle to bear with one another in love, exercising, and just look again at verse 2, not just humility but all humility with gentleness and patience.

If any one of us undermines the unity of the church, we are seriously out of order. If we have at some point sown discord in the church, it's not that we can't be forgiven, of course we can be, but we need to repent of our pride and to seek with all humility to bear with one another in love, sowing peace and not disharmony.

Well now, Paul is about to move from the subject of unity to the subject of maturity in the church. So let's see how he does this and how unity and maturity are closely linked.

Indeed, the maturity of the church is based on the unity of the church and grows out of the unity of the church. You'll notice that word, but, at the beginning of verse 7.

Always a key word because it indicates a change of direction. In verses 4, 5, and 6, Paul has emphasized the solid oneness, the unbreakable unity of God himself and of the gospel faith.

[ 31 : 35 ] But, verse 7, within that oneness, there is a diversity of gifts given to people, gifts given to build up and promote the unity and maturity of the church.

Now, Paul explains here that Christ is the giver of these gifts that benefit the church. Verse 7, grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

And you'll see verse 11 begins with, he gave, that is Christ. Christ is the giver. Verses 8, 9, and 10 do look a bit complicated, but I don't think they really are.

In verse 8, Paul quotes a verse from the Psalms. It's Psalm 68, verse 18. And Paul is saying this verse from Psalm 68 shows us a pattern which Christ fulfilled, a pattern of ascending into heaven from where he distributed gifts to human beings.

That's what Christ has done. That's what Paul is saying. And in verses 9 and 10, Paul is simply tracing the two great journeys, one down, and the other up that Christ made in order to win our salvation.

[ 32 : 52 ] So let me paraphrase verses 9 and 10. He ascended. Yes, he did. Because previously he had descended. He had come down, down as far as he could go to this lowest of all places, the earth.

That phrase, the lower parts of the earth in verse 9, doesn't mean Australia or Antarctica. It just means planet earth, which is a deep, dark, low down place to come to if you are used to the shining courts of heaven.

So he who descended, verse 10, subsequently ascended to a place higher than anywhere else. He now fills everywhere with his presence and authority.

So in verses 8, 9, and 10, Paul is simply reminding the Ephesians of the fundamental shape of the gospel. Christ came down, so far down, humbling himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross, and then he ascended to the glory of heaven from where he showered gifts on the church because he loves the church and he wants it to grow strong and increasingly mature.

So what are these gifts? You'll see there's a short list of them in verse 11. But we mustn't muddle this list of gifts up with Paul's other lists of gifts.

[ 34 : 16 ] There are two other places in Paul's letters where he lists gifts given by the Lord to the church. One is in Romans 12 where Paul lists a number of gifts enabling people to serve, gifts of generosity and leadership, acts of mercy and so on.

The other one comes in 1 Corinthians chapter 12 listing various gifts of the Holy Spirit. Now this list in Ephesians 4.11 is a much shorter list and it's focused in one particular direction.

These are gifts of speaking and teaching. Paul has no interest just here in extending his list to include wide varieties of Christian service because he's wanting his readers to focus on the gifts that promote and build up the unity and maturity of the church.

Other gifts, of course, have an important place in the life of the church but they're not Paul's concern here. He wants the readers of this passage to know how the church grows in unity and maturity and the answer is by listening to the word of God and obeying it.

These gifts of verse 11 are gifts of speaking and teaching and you'll see he lists four types of people who speak and teach. apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor teachers.

[ 35 : 37 ] Pastors and teachers are best understood as the same person, not two separate gifts. After all, the pastor's chief responsibility is to teach the Bible to the church.

You can't have a non-teaching pastor. It would be rather like having a hen that lays no eggs. When I have a hen that lays no eggs, it has a short future.

It soon disappears down my throat. The pastor's job is to teach the church, to teach the Bible. Now back to the top of the list, the apostles, numbering 12 plus Paul plus Barnabas plus James, the Lord's brother.

Those apostles are the foundation teachers of the church. They are all dead. They are irreplaceable. But they speak to us still with all authority because they are the mouthpiece of Jesus himself.

In fact, Paul is teaching us at this very moment because we are subjecting our minds and our hearts to his words. As for the prophets and evangelists, it's unwise, I think, to be too dogmatic about exactly who Paul is talking about, almost certainly the Old Testament prophets who delivered the scriptures to the Jews and to the Christian church.

[ 36 : 54 ] The evangelists, well, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, almost certainly, but almost certainly also a whole army of others, both ancient and modern, who have a marked ability to teach the gospel persuasively, to call people to repentance and faith.

It's not helpful for us to get bogged in discussions about who exactly Paul was talking about when he mentions prophets and evangelists. The key thing for us is to follow Paul's main emphasis, and that is that Christ has given to the church, both way back then and today, people who are able

speakers and teachers because it is the speaking and teaching of the words of God that gives a church muscle, backbone, and the strength to endure.

Without the strong teaching of the Bible, a church has no staying power and it will decline and die. Now this is an exhilarating passage. Time is short, but I want us to notice what the work of teaching the church achieves.

The short answer is it builds up the unity and the maturity of the church, but I want us to look at the details because they are full of interest. The teaching work of the church is to expound the Bible words of the apostles and the prophets.

Now they are dead, but they speak to us powerfully today as we listen to the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. And the work of the evangelists and pastor teachers today is again to take the words of the Old and New Testaments and to apply them as forcefully as possible to the contemporary church, which is us.

[ 38 : 34 ] So what does this Bible teaching achieve? Just put on your seatbelts seven things in quick succession. Here we go. First, from verse 12, it equips the saints, that is all Christians, that's what saints means, all Christians, for the work of ministry.

Now this is perhaps a surprising revelation because not long ago, even as recently as 30 or 40 years ago, the work of ministry was thought to be done only by accredited or ordained ministers. So you would have the Reverend Thaddeus Smith and his congregation. He was the minister and the congregation were the recipients of his ministry.

He was the one who did the work. The congregation just pulled up on a Sunday, listened to him and went away with their priorities largely unchanged. Now that is not what Paul is teaching here.

Paul's view of the situation is quite different. The pastor teacher's role, verse 12, is not to do all the ministry himself but to equip the congregation, the saints, so that they are able to do the work of ministry.

[ 39 : 46 ] So what is the work of ministry? At heart, it is the challenging job of getting the gospel out into the world. And Paul is showing us that every Christian has a part to play in that glorious enterprise.

Now, not every Christian, obviously, can be an able speaker or evangelist, but we can all play our part in helping the great cause to go forward.

So for example, we can man the creche, clean the church building on a Saturday, welcome people into church, help with the IT, play a musical instrument, visit elderly Christians, do admin work, catering work, painting, building maintenance, emptying bins, et cetera, et cetera.

All these essential works support and make possible the getting out of the gospel into the world. And the Bible teachers in the church are equipping the saints for all these activities which center upon the gospel.

Secondly, from verse 12 still, the Bible's teaching builds up the body of Christ, strengthens it. And if you extend Paul's metaphor a little bit, the Bible teaching puts muscle, sinew, and bone into the congregation.

[ 40 : 59 ] What we all long for and what Paul is teaching us to long for is a congregation growing in strength. Increase of numbers is certainly part of that, but the big idea is that we develop a faith which is deeply understood where the saints grasp with growing joy the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ for us.

To go back to chapter 3, verse 18. A strong church is a church with a developed understanding of the gospel and of the Bible. The pastor teacher's work is so to teach the Bible that the congregation grows stronger in understanding and joy and willingness to serve.

Third, from verse 13, the Bible teaching develops the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Lord Jesus, the Son of God. Just look at Paul's words.

until we all, all, not some of us, but all of us, attain to the unity of the faith. And this means that over time, each one of us is making our way step by step towards a growing understanding of the Christian faith which we then share.

So we don't end up each with our own privatized, bespoke version of Christianity. Oh, I think that God is like this, but you think that God is like that. No, we become united in our understanding of the faith and the truth.

[ 42 : 28 ] We remain distinctive individuals. We're not clones, but there is only one faith, one God, and one true understanding of the gospel which is the understanding taught by the Bible itself which does not contain irreconcilable or contradictory elements.

And it's the work of the Bible teachers so to unfold the contents of the whole Bible that we all grow into an increasing unity as we grasp together the whole glorious revelation of truth and the knowledge of the Son of God who is central to the gospel.

This whole section is about growing and developing each of us as individuals and all of us as God's people together. Fourth, still from verse 13, the Bible teaching develops us towards mature manhood.

Women, of course, just as much as men. The point is the teaching of scripture matures us as human beings. The heart of the gospel is the promise of eternal life.

The gospel always fixes our eyes on the world to come, but it also changes us greatly in this life. It makes us more truly human. And how important this is in today's world where so much is going on that is dehumanizing the human race.

[ 43 : 48 ] And in verse 13, Paul shows us the standard of mature humanity, which is the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

Jesus is the human being. Behold the man, said Pontius Pilate, not grasping the full import of what he was saying, but saying it nonetheless. The man.

The teaching of the Bible helps us to grow into the characteristics of Jesus himself, developing in us our capacity for love, for self-discipline, for joy, for resistance to temptation, understanding of other people, and so much more.

Fifth, from verse 14, the teaching of the Bible gives us immense stability in the midst of the world's many conflicting philosophies.

Now just look with me at the way verse 14 is worded. Toddlers can't surf. Can a toddler stand up on a surfboard and ride a six-foot wave?

[ 44 : 53 ] Of course not, because the toddler is not strong. He'll be knocked down. The person whose faith is childish and immature is going to be tossed about by the waves, carried about by every wind of doctrine.

He'll end up by saying, oh, the world is full of so many contradictory ideas, I just don't know what to believe. The teaching of the Bible makes us clear in our thinking and enables us to say no to those whose view of life clashes with the Bible's view.

So the Bible enables us to distinguish truth from error. Then sixth, from verse 15, the Bible's teaching enables us to speak the truth in love.

In this verse, when Paul speaks of the truth, he means the truth of the gospel. He's not talking here about the human tendency to tell lies. He's going to deal with that problem in verse 25, which we should look at next week.

But in verse 15, speaking the truth in love holds together the truth, which is the clear, definite content of the gospel, with the loving heart of the Christian who speaks it.

[ 46 : 01 ] It is, I'm afraid, possible to speak the truth of the gospel in a harsh and fierce manner. But where the truth is spoken with love for those who are listening, we follow the example of Paul and of Jesus himself, who spoke the truth clearly and uncompromisingly, but with hearts brimming with love.

The teaching of the Bible will enable us to follow that example. And then seventh, the power of true Bible teaching, verse 15, enables the whole church to grow up into Christ.

verses 15 and 16 give us a delightful picture. There is a power that works beautifully in two ways here, in two ways.

First, we, the church, grow up into Christ, who is our head. But second, he, our head, so pervades us and transforms us that like a human body in perfect working order, we work together, every part of the body working together.

the old and the young, the introverts and the extroverts, the very able and the not so able. We all have our part to play. So let us, each one of us, play our part.

[ 47 : 14 ] And the consequence, verse 16, is that the body, that is the church, the congregation, grows and builds itself up in love. And let's notice how love, that is love for each other, pervades Paul's whole teaching about unity and maturity.

Look back to verse 2, we are to bear with one another in love. Verse 15, we speak the truth in love. And then verse 16, we are to grow and be built up in love.

So here is Paul's God-given instruction about the unity and maturity of the church. Unity comes, unity grows, as we lay aside our self-centered pride, as we climb down off our high horses and our

self-importance.

And maturity develops, along with unity, as we listen to the teaching of the Bible. So friends, let us all listen, carefully, thoughtfully, willingly.

And for those who teach the Bible, whether in sermons or in leading Bible study groups, teaching young people, let us do it with great care because the health of the church and the unity and maturity of the church hangs upon it.

[ 48 : 36 ] Let us bow our heads and we will pray. Amen. Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life which thou hast given us in our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen.