

Covenant Renewal Service

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[0 : 01] Well, do turn up to Ephesians chapter 4 in the Bibles, if you would please. And our subject this evening is Walking Worthily in 2007.

And we're going to look at these verses in Ephesians chapter 4. Now, the turn of the year is often a time for health assessment. And it's probably needed.

Somebody told me that the average weight gain over Christmas in the UK is 6 pounds. Isn't that astonishing? I thought it was astonishing until I weighed myself. And I found out I'd gained not 6, but 4 pounds.

But I thought that was shocking enough. It's interesting, I was in Woolworths just before Christmas. And I happened to notice that they had a rack of all the top chart DVDs.

And almost every one of them was a health and fitness workout video. Isn't that astonishing? What was ironic, of course, was that right beside them was piled high enormous boxes of chocolates and selection boxes and all these sorts of things.

[1 : 07] So I'm not sure whether you were supposed to buy both and then eat one and then use the other or quite what the marketing ploy was. But whatever we think, whatever your weight gain, whether there's been lots or none, it is good to give thought to bodily training.

And Paul says to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4 verse 8, that bodily training is of some value. So those of us who were up the conic hill yesterday at Loch Lomond on the church walk, that was of some value.

And if you're feeling your legs a little bit stiff today, well, fear not. You've done yourself good. But of course Paul goes on, doesn't he, to say that godliness is of value in every way.

Because it holds promise not just for the present life, but for the life to come. And so for Paul, there is another kind of church walking that is his top priority.

And our text tonight is that first verse of Ephesians 4. You might just look at it there. Now it's good to focus our thinking as a church at this time of covenant renewal, when we remind ourselves of the promises we've made to God, the promises we've made to one another, to walk together with God for 2007.

[2 : 34] It's good to remind ourselves of this walk that Paul says must be in the manner that is worthy of our calling. Well, what calling is this that Paul's speaking about?

Well, obviously we need to understand what's going on in this letter. Verse 1 of chapter 4 begins with this word, therefore. And so it's a response to everything that's gone before in chapters 1 to 3.

Now we've only time to skim over that, but if you look back to chapter 1 verse 10, you'll see there what Paul says is the climax of God's electing purpose, God's predestinating purpose that he's talking about here in chapter 1.

What is it? It is, says Paul, to unite all things in heaven and on earth in Jesus Christ. That's God's ultimate purpose.

Because, of course, at the moment, there is rebellion and rupture in both of these realms, isn't there? In the heavenly realms and the earthly realms. That has been the way since the very earliest of times when there was a spiritual rebellion of Satan and his angels against God.

[3 : 48] And that's why in chapter 6 of Ephesians, as you know, Paul tells us that the real enemies of the Christian life are where? In the heavenly realms, aren't they?

The cosmic powers. The dark authorities. But, of course, in chapter 4 and in other places, he equally describes the rebellion that's taken place on the earth, not just in the heavens.

It's a reflection of that heavenly rebellion, isn't it? In chapter 4, verse 18, Paul speaks about people who, he says, are darkened in their minds and alienated from the life of God.

So there's a rupture in the heavens and in the earthly realms. But God's purpose will not be thwarted by these rebellions, neither in heaven nor in earth.

And that's the glory of the gospel. That God has intervened. That his immeasurable power has decisively intervened in Jesus Christ once and for all to conquer all of these dark powers.

[4 : 51] Just look at chapter 1, verse 20. Paul speaks there about the working of the great might of God, you see, that worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come.

Christ has intervened and conquered every power, even the highest heavenly powers. Christ has intervened and conquered every power, even the highest heavenly powers. And he's triumphed. But look at verse 22, isn't it astonishing?

With him and in his triumph, says Paul, is the church of Jesus Christ. Christ's church, says Paul, is his body.

It's the fullness of his glory. That is, Christ's church is to be the showcase of his glory forever and ever. In the earth and in the heavens.

That's what he goes on to speak about in chapter 2. Just look down to verse 6. He's raised us up with him, says Paul, and seated us with him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus.

[6 : 19] Why? So that in the coming ages he may show the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

Isn't that astonishing? The church is to be the showcase for the glory of Christ. It's truly astonishing.

But, of course, that's what Paul says again later on in chapter 5, verse 27, when he says God's ultimate purpose is that his church should be presented to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or anything else.

And you see, that's why Paul ends his great exposition of the gospel in Ephesians 1 to 3, in his great prayer, in that very last verse of chapter 3, verse 21.

Do you see? To him be glory, where? In the church and in Jesus Christ, through all generations and forever and ever.

[7 : 16] The glory is to be in that marriage of Christ and his church, in time and history, through all generations, and in eternity, forever and ever.

All earth and heaven is to look at the church of Jesus Christ and is to be moved to proclaim the glory and the praise of the church's head, of our Lord Jesus himself, our Savior, our King.

And that's the purpose of the church forever and ever and ever, says Paul. But also, now, in this world, through all generations, not just in the future.

And that's our calling as the church, that's the calling Paul is speaking of. To manifest the fullness of him who fills all in every way. And therefore, says Paul, at the beginning of chapter 4, therefore we are to walk in a manner worthy of that calling.

It's not an option, you see. It's a necessity when you have that mark of the sovereign upon you. I wonder if you read about the poor boxer, Prince, what do you call him, Prince Nazim, who was stripped of his MBE, wasn't he, just recently?

[8 : 30] Because he'd been in prison and, well, he wasn't walking worthily of the honour that had been bestowed on him by the sovereign. And so it was taken away.

But you see, Paul says, not so with the church of Jesus Christ. You are to walk worthy of the calling that you've received. And so in chapters 4 and 5 of Ephesians, he contrasts two ways of walking in very practical terms.

If you just look at chapter 4 there, he speaks about, verse 1, this worthy walk. But if you look down to chapter 4, verse 17, he tells us what that's not to be. No longer walking as the Gentiles do.

But rather, down to chapter 5, verse 2, as imitators of God, as beloved children, walking in love. Verse 8, walking as children of light.

And you see, in chapter 4, verses 1 to 16, and the verses that we read, Paul is applying this metaphor of walking to the whole church. He calls the whole church here the body of Christ.

[9 : 44] I'm sure you were struck by that. It's one of the most vivid images, isn't it? Of just how organically connected together we are as the church of Jesus Christ. We're not just a people.

We're not just a building. We're a living organism. We're a body. We're one body that walks together. And therefore, that means that we either make progress together, or we come a cropper together.

Now, you know that if you've ever walked in a three-legged race. Now, those of you who were at the church outing, not this last year when it was pouring with rain, but the year before, I think we had about a nine-legged race.

Some of you will remember that. And when you're walking with nine legs all tied together, walking in step is very, very important, isn't it? And Paul says we are one, and therefore we must walk as one.

Do you see that great emphasis on oneness in verses two to six there? Bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace.

[10 : 49] There's one body, one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope. Great emphasis there on unity, on oneness. But also, do you see verse seven?

That means that each one of us has been called and given grace to play our part in that. And that's essential for a healthy body that's going to be able to walk properly, that all are playing their part.

And so Paul here in these verses is drawing our attention to what it means to walk together in a way that is worthy of our calling. In verses 11 to 16 that we're going to look at particularly tonight, it emphasizes two things.

First of all, Paul emphasizes the marks of a healthy body that is walking worthily. But also he emphasizes for us the making of a body that can be healthy and so walk together.

And that's what we're going to look at tonight. But I want us again to just remember and keep clear the purpose of that walk. If you don't know why you're walking, if you don't know where you're walking to, then you're liable to get lost.

- [12 : 01] We're to walk, says Paul, worthy of our calling. We're to be a showcase for the glory of Christ, not just in eternity, but now through all generations.
- And we're to show God's glory to the heavens and to the earth. It's an astonishing thing if you look at verse 10 of chapter 3, that Paul says that through the church, God's wisdom is going to be displayed to all the heavenly realms.
- Don't you find that quite staggering? But that's what he's doing. And also on the earth. Chapter 5 makes so much of that, shining as light in a dark place.
- That's the walk of the healthy church, displaying God's wisdom and glory to the heavens and to the earth. It's a great calling. And that means, therefore, that if we're to be a healthy church, then our focus can never be just inwardly, never be just on ourselves.
- It must always be upon our calling, our purpose, upward and outward. And a healthy church can't be a church that's always focused on itself and on ourselves as individuals, wanting to be ministered to, wanting things to be focused on me.
- [13 : 17] It must be a church focused on being equipped for our calling. And that's the key that verse 12 is for this whole passage.
- Paul speaks about the work of ministry that belongs to all the saints. Not just a few, but all of the saints. And we're to be a church focused on being prepared for our work of ministry, which is walking worthily, so as to showcase Christ forever.
- That's very, very important for us to remember, for every church to remember, always. According to the New Testament, the church is never thought of as a pampering ground.
- It's a training ground. It's God's school. It's the place where he equips us, where he prepares us for our work of ministry. That's what the church is all about.
- The Bible never thinks of the church as a place to retreat away from the world. It always thinks of the church as a place of rigorous drilling, getting us ready for work and witness in the world.
- [14 : 26] If you like, the image of the New Testament church is far more Sandhurst than Sandringham. It's true, the Bible tells us, yes, we are royal princes in the royal household.
- But now is a time for preparing and training for our service to the crown. And that's why a church that's walking worthily will always be a church determined to be at work in the work of ministry and building up the body of Christ.
- And to do that, it will be a church that, as Paul says here in verse 12, is focused on being prepared and preparing one another for service, for ministry.
- as a honed, single body. With each part being in step with a whole. Because that's how the church grows. That's how the body makes itself grow.
- And we'll come to that in just a moment. But first of all, look at verse 13, verses 13 to 16 in particular. Because Paul here paints for us the marks of a healthy body that's walking worthily of its calling.
- [15 : 36] And we could sum it up really just with three words. Real corporate maturity. Let me just break it down into three parts. First of all, you see, a healthy body that's walking worthily of its calling will show, according to Paul, corporate clarity about Christ and his gospel.
- Look at verse 13. There will be unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God. Now, there's lots of talk today in the church about visible unity in the Christian church.
- And certainly, that is a great concern of Paul here in Ephesians. It's a great emphasis. We've already seen that emphasis on oneness. And clearly, things weren't always quite as they should be.

Otherwise, Paul wouldn't be having to write to urge them to walk together as one. But notice, you see, that for Paul, unity that is real is not something that you can create artificially.

Real unity, according to Paul, is something that comes when there is shared knowledge, that is, personal knowledge, he says in verse 13, of the Son of God himself.

[16 : 48] Those two things are absolutely inseparable. Unity in the church and real shared knowledge personally, of the Lord whose church it is. Unity in the church comes when we're all walking in real and close personal fellowship with the Lord Jesus.

That's obvious, isn't it? When we're all in our personal walk with the Lord, walking in step with the Holy Spirit, then we'll all be walking in step with one another, won't we?

And then there will be quite naturally real clarity about Christ and his gospel. We won't have to spend ages discovering how to be united and discussing it.

Well, we will be united naturally. And that's always true in any church, in any congregation or in any association or denomination of churches.

Real unity never comes from a kind of inward looking, focusing on ourselves, trying to relate to one another and manufacture some sort of unity. Never. Unity comes where everyone is focused on Christ and knowing him and walking with him and loving him and cherishing his gospel.

[18 : 05] That's how unity comes. There's corporate clarity about right relationships with Christ. We're all clear and have a focus on Christ and his gospel and what it means in practice to put Christ and his gospel first in everything in our lives.

That church will naturally be a church walking worthily of its calling. That's a great challenge to every one of us as individuals, isn't it?

Because what it means is that my walk with Jesus personally and yours too, well, it affects everybody. It affects the walk of the whole fellowship. And it means that there is potential, isn't there, for real damage if there's just a bitter root in my heart growing up and damaging my walk with the Lord Jesus.

I'm at risk of causing everybody to stumble. It's like that three-legged race, isn't it? If I stop walking, everybody falls over. But also, of course, there's a great encouragement, isn't it?

That if I'm walking rightly with the Lord or if I haven't been so walking and I repair that right relationship and walk with him, well, that's got a great potential to help the whole church walk so much better with Jesus and be so much more united and powerful.

[19 : 25] So a church that's walking worthily will have this corporate clarity. They'll be united in their walk with Jesus, united in the focus on Jesus and his gospel. But secondly, a healthy church that's walking worthily will have also a corporate character that reflects Christ and his gospel.

Look at verse 13, the second half. Paul speaks about mature manhood to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. That's what every church, he says, is to attain.

Now that word smacks of destiny. It's our calling. The images of a grown-up body that shows the marks of maturity, the marks of adulthood. And there is, isn't there?

There's an atmosphere, there's an ambience of maturity and of stability and of balance and of solidity in the character of a mature Christian fellowship.

That's what Paul's meaning here. It's a fellowship that can cope with the sudden crisis that comes. It doesn't get derailed by that sort of thing.

[20 : 36] It can absorb difficulties. It can absorb difficult people. And it can cope with these things. It's mature. There's quite simply a Christ-like dignity and a gravitas about a mature church that exudes the spirit, the presence of God himself so that people notice it.

Remember, that's what Paul's writing to Corinth about in 1 Corinthians 14. He's writing to an immature church. He's telling them not to be childish, not to be chaotic in their worship when they get together in their meetings, but instead to make the centre of everything a focus on God's word being spoken and heard.

And then, says Paul, if you're mature like that, there'll be something about the whole atmosphere of your meetings that touches people. Paul says, the stranger, the ignorant person will come in and he'll say, surely God is among you.

He'll fall down on his face, he'll worship God. That's the kind of influence that a mature Christ-like character exudes in a church. It affects people. And it's just the same here, that's what Paul's saying to the Ephesians.

A healthy body walking worthily will have Christ-like character and it'll show it to everybody. Look at how he presses home what this means in verses 14 and 15.

[21 : 58] Not, verse 14, being childish, he says, tossed around here and there by every passing fad. Whether it's a wind of new doctrine or it's a fad of new and cunning strategies for this and that in the church.

Or whether it's just being gullible and being taken in by all kinds of deceitful and shallow forms of so-called Christianity. Don't be like that, like children.

Be mature. Well, it's the mark of children, isn't it? That they tend to overreact to everything in all directions. Anybody who's got children can tell you that about the hype of the run-up to Christmas.

It just winds up and up and up and up and up. And then all of a sudden later on there's a great descent, isn't there? There's overtiredness and overexcitement. It all catches up in bursts of hysterics.

Well, you see, churches and Christians can be like that too, can't they? High excitement over all sorts of silly expectations of things.

[23 : 02] Then huge disappointments and disaffections when it doesn't work out like we want or whatever it is doesn't seem to happen. Or when crises are precipitated by something that happens in the life of a fellowship and things can go here, there and everywhere.

People are tossed around. Well, you see, Paul says, no, that's not a mature walk. That's not exhibiting Christ-like character.

And, friends, in 2007, I can guarantee you, just as in every year in the life of a church, we will be presented as a fellowship with all kinds of opportunities that would potentially allow us to show immaturity, wouldn't we?

Childishness. Very likely, we're going to be facing a great upheaval as we have to move out of our church building and go to the halls and the work starts here. That's just one of many, many things that will face us this year.

And Paul says, well, are you going to walk like adults or like children? Not like children, says Paul. No, rather, look at verse 15. We're to be grown up, he says.

[24 : 08] We're to keep on growing up. How do we grow up? Well, he says, verse 15, by speaking the truth in love or even better, perhaps cherishing, loving the truth.

Not just sharing God's truth with others to help them grow, that is very important, but also, just as important, welcoming God's truth into ourselves so that we also can grow.

Remember, that's what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians, writing to them, when the Word of God came to you, you welcomed it as a friend, not as an enemy, not as the Word of man, but as the Word of God, as it really is.

It's not always easy, though, is it, to welcome the Word of God as a friend, to welcome his truth into our lives. I don't always find it easy. I'm sure you don't. Because the Word of God, though he is my friend, brings challenge, brings demands, as well as bringing comfort and hope to me.

But you see, that's the mark of maturity. It's the mark of Christ-like character. It's the mark of a mature Christian fellowship that we welcome and cherish the truth of God in our lives and we rejoice to share it with one another and apply it to their lives, too.

[25 : 28] And where a church is walking like that, cherishing the truth, it's walking worthily. And where it's walking like that, there will inevitably be the third characteristic that Paul draws our attention to here.

There will be, naturally, a corporate communication and commending of Christ and his gospel. You see, verse 16, the body will be growing and building itself up.

And that work of growth will be natural. That's the picture here, isn't it? Natural growth. Effortless, in a sense. In the sense that it's the inevitable thing for a healthy body to grow.

If it's walking worthily, says Paul, it will grow. That's what healthy bodies do when they're walking properly. I find my body seems to start growing by itself these days, not necessarily in the right dimensions.

I'm not thinking, that's the kind of growth Paul's speaking about here. He's talking about healthy growth. You see, verse 16, it's so natural, isn't it? It's natural growth, it's proper growth in strength and in stature and in maturity.

[26 : 36] And strong and steady growth like that is always the mark of a healthy body. It's the mark of a healthy church. I want you to notice something interesting here.

You see, in verse 11, Paul mentions, doesn't he, evangelists. But nowhere through this passage does he actually speak about evangelism as such. Certainly not as a separate thing, as a discreet thing.

Now, Paul says that the body grows, the church grows, and that includes growth in numbers, as the whole church is prepared and equipped to walk worthily of its calling.

Do you see that? He's speaking, you see, about the drawing power of a healthy body in the world. It's just what we mentioned from 1 Corinthians 14.

When the outsider sees this, when the outsider comes into contact with that, with a real church, with a real fellowship, with a real family of God, a real body, then Christ is naturally commended to people and communicated to people in word and in deed.

[27 : 49] And that's always the case where the truth is really being cherished among God's people, where it's being spoken to one another, where it's being lived out to one another. That's what William Still used to call primary evangelism.

It's the drawing power of living faith. Just think about our Lord Jesus. He drew all kinds of people to himself, didn't he? As he embodied grace and truth.

And it's just so with Christ's church. Evangelism is not frantic efforts and campaigns and special events. We must get right out of that way of thinking.

We don't find that sort of thing in the New Testament. What we do find predominantly in the New Testament is a focus on the church being the church, being the showcase of the glory of Christ through a people who are united in clarity on Christ and his gospel.

A people who exhibit the character of Christ in his gospel. And that kind of church will inevitably commend and communicate Christ. Now don't misunderstand me.

[28 : 59] I'm not saying, of course, that all events are wrong. Of course not. But by far the very best kind of events that any church can put on are things that help to bring people within the orbit of the experience of the church, the family of God.

Because that's where God's presence is. And that's why I think that the special events that we put on from time to time in the church should all be focused on that, bringing people within the orbit of seeing and experiencing the church family.

Because that's where God is, of course. But that means, doesn't it, that when people do come within the orbit of experiencing the body of Christ, it does need to be a healthy body that they experience, doesn't it?

If it wasn't that, then, well, it would be counter-evangelistic. When I was looking at all these fitness and weight loss DVDs, I did happen to notice that the pictures of all of those who were presenting them on the front were specimens of supreme health and fitness.

Well, you're not really going to buy a Get Fit DVD with Ralph Albertine Nisbet or somebody on the front, are you? It's just not going to work. And that's the challenge for us as a church, isn't it?

[30 : 17] I'll never forget seeing, really desperately sad it was. Television news program about a town where there'd been a great public split in the church and it had caused so much damage to the witness in the community and they went into the local pub and spoke to one of the people who were sitting there and he said, well, I take refuge in the pub because in the church there's nothing but rancor and fighting and the pub in the village is the only place that I can find peace and harmony.

You see, the church must be healthy because we are the message and we're what people see and body language matters, doesn't it?

And the body language of Christ's church must commend Christ not betray him. So that's a good question for us to keep in mind in 2007, isn't it?

As we think about the year. Are we showing the marks of healthy walking? Are we walking worthily together of our calling? It's vitally important, isn't it?

We are the showcase for the glory of Christ. But that brings us then to the making of a healthy body that's walking worthily. And if the first thing can be summed up by real corporate maturity, this is certainly summed up by real corporate ministry.

[31 : 43] And you see, the first thing that we must notice that we must rejoice in, in fact, is that it's God and God alone who makes a healthy body. Only he can.

You see, verse 15 there says that Christ is the head of his church. And so it's from him, verse 16 says, that the whole body derives its nourishment and can grow.

There's no other way to grow than by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and thank God for his grace. or we'd all be stunted, wouldn't we? But that is not to say that growth is a passive thing.

God's work in us never is passive, is it, in the New Testament? It never bypasses us and our responsibility and our involvement. No. Christ does it through a whole body ministry, through real corporate ministry.

Look at verse 16 very carefully. From Christ, says Paul, the whole body, joined and held together by every joint, when each part is working properly, the whole body makes the body grow.

[32 : 53] Do you see that? The growth of the whole church comes through the ministry of the whole church. What ministry is that?

Well, verse 15 tells us, doesn't it? Speaking the truth, cherishing the truth in love. Not just speaking the truth to one another, but ministering it through every part of the fabric of our fellowship.

That means being committed to the truth in our lives. Encouraging one another to love the truth and to live the truth. And Paul says, that's a ministry for the whole church, for the body.

The body builds the body. Look at verse 12. It's a ministry, he says, for all the saints. That's why the saints need to be equipped.

The only way to make a body that can be healthy and walk worthy is by equipping the saints for the work of ministry. That's why he says the first priority of the church there in verse 12 is equipping one another for service, for serving and for ministering to one another.

[34 : 04] In other words, in a healthy church, Paul says, we are all to be the ministers. Not just one, not just a few in a team, but all of them. That's Paul's point.

Remember once going to preach in a church and it had a leaflet rather like ours and it listed the different people to get in touch with for different things. You know, the organist, the treasurer and so on. And at the bottom of the list it had ministers.

Beside it said everyone. I thought that was terrific. That's exactly what Paul's saying here. See, if our calling is to work together so that we walk worthily and we're marked out by the character that verses 13 to 16 have spoken of, then our priority must be verse 12, mustn't it?

To be equipped for that calling, for the real corporate ministry of the truth. Whatever the manifestations are, whether it's public or private, whether it's from the pulpit here, or whether it's in the coffee shop with a friend, whether it's in a large group or a small group, maybe something going on in the church halls or something in your home group or somewhere else, whether it's seen or whether it's unseen, whether it's just meeting up with somebody privately, maybe around the lunch table on a Sunday, maybe privately in the kitchen over the dishes afterwards, cherishing the truth in love, ministering the word of life to one another.

And just as the body's growth comes through the ministry of the whole body, Paul says, so the ministry of the truth comes through the ministry of the truth. Do you see that?

[35 : 43] God gives every member some gifts to serve, says verse 7, but in particular he points, doesn't he, to the gifts of word ministry as being given specifically as the means by which Christ equips the whole body for the shared ministry of cherishing the truth in love.

See, the gifts of the ascended Lord in verse 11, they're all gifts of truth, aren't they? Word ministry, truth ministry. And they are essential for their saints to be equipped for their ministry of truth.

See, if the body is to grow in maturity and in numbers and in size, then the whole body, all the saints, must be ministering because the body makes the body grow. And therefore, all the saints are to be enabled to minister.

They must be equipped. Now, Paul's not talking here about technical training. He's not talking about sending people to theological college, all these sorts of things. That's necessary and there's a place for that.

But he's simply talking here about God's word being at work in all of our hearts. That's the key to effective ministry. It's not strategies, it's not specific, clever training.

[36 : 57] It's God's work in us through his word to change us, to mould us, to transform us, to enable us, to equip us. That's what we need more than anything else because it's spiritual service.

It's offering our worship to God. It's ministry. The very word that Paul uses there in verse 12, the word equip, helps us to see that. It's a word that means to put something into its proper condition or to restore it into its former condition.

And isn't that exactly what we need if we're going to be ministering to one another the grace of God? It's what happens at the very start of our Christian life, isn't it? It's God's word that works in us a new beginning by his grace, brings us into our proper condition, our destiny as a servant of his.

In Hebrews 11, verse 3, that same word is used when it speaks of the whole universe being created, put into its proper condition by the word of God.

And when you first believed, God did a work of new creation in your life to bring you into your proper condition. And that's basic to any ministry, any service of God.

[38 : 12] You can't serve him without that. That's a wonderful thing to celebrate, isn't it, when we see that happening in our fellowship, when there's new life, that's the very beginning of equipping for ministry.

And that should be a prayer, shouldn't it, for 2007, that we see more and more of that. But it's a word that also means to restore, to bring back to health from ill health.

It's a word, interestingly, which is used in a medical sense of setting a broken bone or a dislocated joint. And sometimes that's necessary too, isn't it, in a fellowship, in our own lives, because we can get spiritually out of joint, can't we, with ourselves, with God, with one another.

And where that's so, well, it doesn't just mean that we're unequipped for God's service, it means that we have an effect on the whole body too, doesn't it? Our eyes of jointness and our own heart can cause limping in the whole fellowship.

And we need to take that seriously if we've thought about being out of joint spiritually, something that affects the whole body. It doesn't just affect you if you're not playing your part, it does affect you, but it affects everybody.

[39 : 32] But you see, there is grace, isn't there, with our Lord. God is the great physician, or in this case, the great surgeon, I must be fair to the surgeons, to reset the dislocation, to reset the broken bone.

And God does that to us, doesn't he, through his word in our lives. It may be painful, often is, isn't it? But it needs to be done. It may take time, it's not at all easy. That word also, interestingly, is used in the gospels of the fishermen sitting, mending their nets, equipping their nets once again, so that they're being made useful.

Maybe some of us need that mending to make us usable again. But friends, God does that. It's his word, patiently at work in us, as we cherish the truth with one another, in love.

As we help one another, that's ministry. Paul used that same word in Galatians 6, verse 1, where he talks about restoring somebody who's fallen, restoring them gently, knitting them back together like a broken bone, mending the holes and the damage in the net to make them usable.

It's a ministry of God's word to restore his people. And that equipping for gospel ministry comes through the gospel ministry at work in the whole church as together, as a body, we cherish the truth in love.

[40 : 58] We welcome God's word to our hearts from one another and we give it to one another in love. Of course it's true that there are those who are particularly set aside in the special offices of the church, the pastor, teacher, the evangelist and so on.

But Paul's very plain here, isn't he? Their job is not to be the evangelist and the pastor, teacher. Verse 12 says their job is to equip the saints for the work of ministry.

That all the saints, by cherishing the truth in love, might so minister to one another that the body will grow. It's all one ministry. But the ministry of God's word, the speaking of the truth and cherishing the truth in love, is what equips us for more ministry.

It's self-perpetuating. And of course it's not just equipping in that negative sense of restoring to health. Of course not. Once the body is healthy once again, once you've had the medicine and the operation, what you need is food, strength.

Edifying, building up the body of Christ. And that's what God promises to do for his church, isn't it? Remember what Peter says in 1 Peter 5 and 10? The God of all grace who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ will himself restore and confirm our word again.

[42 : 23] Equip, strengthen, establish you. He'll confirm us in our calling so that we can walk worthily. and he does it through the ministry of the word at work among us.

And he does it as all of us together cherish the truth in love and help equip one another for the building up of the body. Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way, says Paul, into him who is the head into Christ.

That's real corporate ministry. And only that will bring about real corporate maturity. And that's what makes the body grow.

So here's a question for each of us as the new year takes hold. How will I use the grace given to me to help equip and be equipped for our corporate ministry together?

And where can I, by cherishing the truth in love, help myself and others grow up in every way in Christ? Well, for one, I can make sure that I get beyond superficial conversations over coffee and get serious with one or two people.

[43 : 40] I can stop ignoring the friend of mine who's gone missing, who's out of touch with the fellowship. I can get in touch with them and seek to restore them to their proper place.

I can look around when I'm in church and make sure that the person sitting on their own isn't left on their own for long by themselves. I can show them that I cherish the truth in love as I want to share God's word with them.

But most of all, I can just think all of the time, whatever I'm doing, how am I helping this body, this church, how am I helping us all together to walk worthily of the calling that we have?

To be the showcase for the glory of Christ? In short, it's just really thinking about all of my life, isn't it, as a ministry that I need to be equipped for.

Of course, there are specific gifts and offices and these sorts of things, whether it's the Pope or the Home Group or wherever it is. But also, and always, ministry happens as the word of God is at work in our hearts.

[44 : 51] And through the ministry of all the saints, cherishing the truth in love, that's how the body grows. Real corporate ministry is what releases the power of God in our midst so that the church is able to exhibit these marks of health, the glory of Christ.

So that the church is seen to be walking worthily of our calling, clear about Christ and his gospel, full of the character and maturity of Christ and his gospel, and therefore, quite naturally, communicating him, commending him, showing him to others.

So will we walk worthily in 2007 as a body here? Well, it's up to us, says Paul.

Because the whole body makes the body grow. And grace has been given to each one of us. Every one of us has a part to play in cherishing the truth in love with one another.

The whole body makes the body grow. So we're going to pray now and ask God to help us to do that. And at the end of the prayer we'll stand and we're going to say together these words in our sheet that remind us of the covenant that we've made in response, which is really just a way of promising to walk verbally of all that Christ has called us to.

[46 : 16] Let's stand together, shall we, and pray. Heavenly Father, we rejoice that you have called us never to walk alone, but to walk together with all of your people as one body under one head, our Lord Jesus Christ.

And we thank you, Lord, that your grace has been given to every one of us, that each of us has a vital role to play in this body here, in this expression of your church. We thank you that we look to you, our head, and we pray that in doing so and by cherishing the truth together in love, you would help us to walk worthily in this coming year and to proclaim to the heavens and to the earth the glory and the wisdom of our God.

To that end, Lord, we join together our voices now in responding in these words of covenant to you as we repeat them together. I am no longer my own but yours.

Put me to what you will. Place me with whom you will. Put me to doing. Put me to suffering. Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you.

Let me be full. Let me be empty. Let me have all things. Let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

[47 : 55] And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. May it be so and may the covenant which I have made here on earth be confirmed in heaven.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.