

Growing Up into Christ

Ephesians 4:1-16

NOTES

The fact that we are two like-minded congregations living in close community is not an exception to the great commission but a direct result of it. Many epistles in the New Testament are written to multiple congregations, as Ephesians probably was. We grow up into Christ not just as individuals or single churches, but as multiple congregations in the same city.

Overview of the Text

Paul is in Rome, a prisoner of the Lord, beseeching the Ephesians to walk worthy of their calling (v1). This requires humility and gentleness with patience, bearing with another in love in an effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (vv2-3). There are many Christians and multiples churches, but only one body and one Spirit, everyone called in one hope: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (vv5-6). The unity is everywhere because of the Lord’s presence. And yet each one of us—churches and individuals—is blessed differently by Christ who ascended into heaven and gave gifts to men (vv7-10). He gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, until we grow in the unity of our faith and the knowledge of Jesus, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (vv11-13). The result of this maturity is stability in doctrine, resistance to trickery and deceit, and the ability to speak the truth in love in order to grow up into our head (vv14-15). The whole body is connected to Christ and knit together by what every joint supplies, so that when every part does its part, the whole body grows by love (v16). Jesus loves each part (church and individual) such that each part then loves the other parts and edifies the whole church.

Two Unities

The first unity Paul mentions is not created by us, but we do maintain it in the bond of peace. This is done through humility and patience, bearing with one another in love (vv2-3). You are united to every Christian because you have the same Father. We are not unified because we have one budget, one building, or one bishop, but because we have one Lord, one faith, and one baptism (v5). See how objective this unity is. You can fail to enjoy it, but you can’t undo it anymore than you can eliminate someone from a family. Your job is to maintain the unity. Act like good brothers and sisters, happy to be together, staying in fellowship so far as it depends on you. The second kind of unity is progressive. It increases while the first kind is maintained. We grow into the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God as Jesus loves His bride, the church (v13; Eph. 5:25-28).

Speaking the Truth in Love

The way we grow up into Christ is by speaking the truth in love (v15). Since Jesus is the truth, this means bringing Him—His character, law, word and gospel—to bear on everything. It’s not that the only thing we do talk, talk, talk, spending our time in endless conversations (cf. Acts 17:21). Rather, words direct, shape, and inform our character, plans and actions. If we are going speak the truth in love between churches, we have to know what to address. Love covers a multitude of sins, so you don’t complain about your neighbor’s drapes (1 Pet. 4:8; 1 Cor. 13:5). But what do you challenge? The truth ought to be spoken in love when we think God will be honored and the other party blessed to hear and deal with it. The issue has to be significant enough that love can’t cover

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it, and our motivation has to be their blessing (Gal. 6:1-2). Paul demonstrates this when he opposes Peter to his face for ditching the Gentiles when men from James came to Antioch (Gal. 2:11-13). This was not in step with the gospel and contradicted justification by faith alone (Gal. 2:14-16). No one made a big deal out of this but Paul, and he surely appeared to lack all proportion to the lunch crowd. But he was right and Peter was wrong. See the principle and have courage to take appropriate action. Addressing the factions, drunkenness, and selfishness during the Lord's Supper in Corinth, Paul says they're worse off for coming together, and he asks bitinglly: "Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you" (1 Cor. 11:22; cf. v17). He's happy to judge their immorality via letter (1 Cor. 5:3). These conflicts are over gospel-compromising, soul-threatening issues (to the discerning mind), but we see lesser ones as well. Paul and Barnabas butt heads over taking John Mark on their second missionary journey. John Mark bailed part way through the first journey as they came into the Gentile region of Pamphylia (Acts 13:13), so Paul didn't want him to come the second time. They didn't flip a coin but instead parted ways (Acts 15:36-41). Paul's issue may have been the reason John Mark bailed, but we're not explicitly told, which is also helpful. We're not even told who was right. Did Luke even know? This happened right after the Jerusalem Council, the church's unified statement that Gentiles don't have to become Jews in order to be Christians, and yet two close friends and leaders part ways. We know this conflict didn't ruin subsequent fellowship because Paul asks Timothy to bring John Mark to him, "for he is useful to me for ministry" (2 Tim. 4:11). If John Mark had a problem with Gentiles before, he apparently repented and Paul was happy to work with him (cf. Col. 4:10; Phile. 24). This is how godly men ought to have conflict. And we must not look down upon those who like Paul are engaged in controversies all the time. Elders must not be brawlers; they can't like to fight for the sake of fighting (1 Tim. 3:3). But they must love the truth, which means fighting for it. Churches, denominations, ministries, and schools are buckling left and right to unbelief—sexuality, social justice, abortion, on and on. We need more sunny warriors and not less, more Christians willing to speak the truth in love. Support them.

Keep Your First Love

How do you know if someone speaks the truth in love, or is just a crank? One easy test is to look at not just what he is against, but what he is for. Look at his family and how he lives in community. Look at her hospitality. Does the church love the outsider and welcome the stranger? Do we pray for churches outside our tradition and denomination? Do we have personal relationships where we serve and give? Paul warned the Ephesian churches that savage wolves would rise up from among them to try to gain a following (Acts 20:29-30). We know from Revelation that they fended these off, but "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love" (Rev. 2:4). If you love God as God, the joy of the Lord your strength (Neh. 8:10). You can work with the sword in one hand and the trowel in the other. We have enormous opportunities together as churches—more wisdom, imagination, experience, resources, and creativity than we need—to see "growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (v16). Keep Christ at the center, and take risks. May He bless us with new churches, buildings, businesses, families, schools and people.