

Christian Alchemy and the Growth of the Body of Christ – *Ephesians 4:11-16*

Introduction – Alchemy, Definition: 1. a medieval chemical science and speculative philosophy aiming to achieve the transmutation of the base metals into gold... 2. a power or process of transforming something common into something special.

Overview – Paul lists four particular gifts given to the church (v11). These gifts were given to equip the saints for the work of ministry, not for their own show (v12). These gifts are exercised until we reach another unity – a unity of the faith, and a unity of the knowledge of the Son of God which will be displayed in a mature body fitted for its Head (v13). This will protect us from gullibility towards the latest false teachers (v14). Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow up into Christ in all ways of society (v15). Here is the purpose of the church on earth over time: the growth of the kingdom/church/body in all ways in the power and context of gospel-love (v16).

The Gifts to the Church – While there are other passages that also talk about a variety of gifts of the Spirit that are given to the church, primarily Paul has in mind these gifts that the Ascended Christ gave to the church. The first two, the apostles and prophets, have already been mentioned as the foundation-layers (2:20), and therefore, in this context, these particular gifts were only given at the foundation and transition of the new covenant church. Continuing with that “building” metaphor, the evangelists could be likened to the lumberjacks who bring in the building material, and the pastor-teachers as the builders on site.

The Church Gifted So That... - These are not given to do the work of ministry but to equip the saints so that the saints could do the work of ministry. And all of this occurred to build up the body of Christ (v12). “The ministry” should not be primarily thought in the sense of “official ministries of the church” in the way that we might be tempted to think. “The ministry” is primarily the work of everyday service that we as Christians are to render to one another and to the world in all of the relationships we are given and with all of the resources entrusted to us.

From Unity to Unity – We already have a unity of the Spirit because of our oneness in Christ (vv1-3). This is the kind of unity that we enjoy even with our differences and it includes “the bond of peace.” This is the glorious fellowship we enjoy with one another as we walk in the light (1 John 1:7). But there is another unity that we are still growing up into which the teaching and ministry of the body is to bring us all towards. It is a unity of the faith, and a unity of the knowledge of the Son of God (v13). Paul puts it another way: “*to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*” We are to grow up into a doctrinal and covenantal/relational perfection as a body, together, that is fitting to the fullness of Christ.

Sophomore Christianity – There is a reason we call sophomores “sophomores.” They often think they have attained to something which more seasoned people can see they do not have. It is fine that they have not attained it yet; it is only a problem when they think they have and act (or misbehave) accordingly. Similarly, it is fine that the church has not yet grown up into her full maturity; it is only a problem when she acts like she has or treats the process of growth and maturation as an automatic sin-issue. This lack of unity is not a sin issue or a problem; it is how God is governing human history. This means that some aspects of ecumenical unity are not something we have because God has not grown us up into them yet.

The Glorious Work of Spiritual Alchemy – On the one hand, we serve a God Who declares things that are not as though they were, a God Who has already declared that all things are new. On the other hand, we are being served by a God Who is remaking us by His grace through His appointed means. This affects each one of us individually, yes, but the trajectory is something far more corporate. The one body is being “*joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share...*” (v16). Like David in the psalms (Psalm 139:13-14), the language is of a body being knit. Like Ezra/Nehemiah, the language is of a temple rebuilt.

The “Materials” of Spiritual Alchemy – “*Speaking the truth in love...*” The truth of the doctrines of our faith must be clearly proclaimed, taught, explained, and applied. They must be done out of the love of Christ, His love for His beloved, and the Father’s love for His children. Truth without love is like a dry skeleton; love without truth is like a flabby jellyfish. Truth in love is like a mature man, backbone and flesh. The church must mature in her ability to speak the truth in love.

The Messiness of Growing to Maturity - Like watching a building go up or watching a child grow, sometimes you can see the progress, other times it is more hidden. It often looks bad, wrong, and messy in the process as well. Learn to embrace the messiness. However, sometimes the mess is due to sin. When the church has forsaken the teachings of the apostles and prophets, when she has refused to do the work of ministry, when she is not looking to Christ alone, she has stumbled like a naïve child or sophomore, for these were given to her to avoid just that (v14).

What works of ministry exist in your life, in your home, in your family, in your workplace, in your school, that God has, through the church, equipped you to do? The rest of Ephesians will be addressing much of this.