

Growing Up Together, Ephesians 4:7-16

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Introduction

Good morning, my name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. Happy Mother's Day! If you are celebrating today, may we as the body celebrate with you. And if you are grieving today, may we as the body grieve with you.

Over the past three months we have been walking through the letter of Ephesians in a sermon series subtitled, "Into the Fullness of Christ." So I invite you to turn in your Bibles with me to Ephesians 4:7-16. So it's easier to follow along, here's some info about today's sermon: the title is "Growing Up Together," and it goes hand in hand with last week's message. The main idea of the previous message was "In response to the unity Jesus has created, maintain it." The main idea this week, then, is "In response to the diversity Jesus has created, build up the body." Interestingly, I think the structure of today's passage, which lays out so many important things about how God's church functions, answers three significant questions many of us are wrestling with these days:

- I. Who's Our Leader? vv. 7-10
- II. What's Our Purpose? vv. 11-12
- III. Where's Our Future? vv. 13-16

With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. Again, today's passage is Ephesians 4:7-16. Church, hear the word of the Lord:

⁷ But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸ Therefore it says,

*"When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men."*

⁹ (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) ¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith

and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. Ephesians 4:7-16

The Lord has spoken to us. Let's say this together: Thanks be to God! You may be seated.

Exposition

Growing up together is a special thing. It creates a shared experience that can never be taken away, even as life eventually moves us down different paths. What was yours like? For me, my friends and I thought we already had everything figured out by first grade. That's when we were introduced to a man named Michael Jordan. Combine his influence with the centrality of basketball in small-town Kentucky, and what do you think our shared experience became? Like the old Gatorade commercial said, we all just wanted to "be like Mike."¹

This has all come flooding back recently through ESPN's documentary *The Last Dance*, which is all about Michael Jordan's last championship with the Chicago Bulls.² Every episode I watch brings back the old glory and the reminders of how we answered the most significant questions of life:

- Who's our leader? Michael Jordan.
- What's our purpose? Being the best.
- Where's our future? Becoming champions.

In today's passage Paul is going to give us God's vision for his church "growing up together". He has already unpacked a glorious vision in chapters 1-3 of how we become family in Christ—that's our shared experience. Now he's going to show us where we're

¹ "Be Like Mike," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Be_Like_Mike

² "'The Last Dance' Updates: The Untold Story of Michael Jordan's Chicago Bulls,"

https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/28973557/the-last-dance-updates-untold-story-michael-jordan-chicago-bulls; photo credit:

https://s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/media.tcm.ie/media/images/imported/active/bac5ca34-8c36-4d41-8e3e-14a8c7b4d76a_5b77a9f8-1922-4da7-a390-3b896d71200e.jpg

headed together, how we walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called.³

The first step last week was to maintain the unity that Jesus has created. The second step this week is utilize the diversity that Jesus has created. These two steps go together in the same way that your legs work together and allow you to walk. Let me show you what I'm talking about. In verse 6 of last week's passage Paul's climactic words were

⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. Ephesians 4:6

This is the great unifying reality for all who are in Christ—despite all the differences between us, we have one God and Father over us and in us. But if you stop there you might think that the church is where everyone loses their individual identity. Like taking Louisville famous Hot Brown sandwich with all it's glorious individual layers and putting it in a blender to drink like a smoothie.⁴ That's not right! And so that's what Paul clarifies in the very next verse. God is over all of us,

⁷ But grace was given to each one of us, Ephesians 4:7

It's from "all of us" to "each of us".⁵ The wonder of this unity isn't that we all become the same, but that we're all so different and yet use our differences for the good of the body. So there are the two steps to our growth: unity-diversity. But how does this work?

I. Who's Our Leader? vv. 7-10

Well that brings us to our first and most important question, who's our leader? We continue reading in verse 7,

⁷ But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Ephesians 4:7

The "grace" that's being referred to here, this undeserved, unearned favor from God, it's not referring to the forgiveness we receive when we enter into Christ. It flows from that,

³ Ephesians 4:1

⁴ Bradley Bell, "Speaking the Truth in Love, Ephesians 4:7-16,"

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59cc06ebf43b559869616d7a/t/5c7fd4b6971a184cd11953c8/1551881399567/Manuscript-4.pdf>, 3-4

⁵ John R.W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 155

but it's more than that. It's the grace that Paul referred to back in chapter 3 when he said, "Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace".⁶ It's not just Jesus' grace that allows us to enter the Christian life, it's his grace that enables us to grow up. Here's how Paul explains it, beginning in verse 8:

⁸ *Therefore it says,*

*"When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men."*

⁹ *(In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)*

1) Jesus Descended

There are three movements in what Paul describes here. The first is that Jesus descended. There is some debate as to whether this refers specifically to Jesus descending from heaven to earth as a man, or descending from earth into hell between his death and resurrection. Either way, what we want to keep in focus is the victory he achieved for us by living and dying and rising in our place, paying the price for our sins and breaking their power over us. It all was made possible because the Son of God "took on flesh and dwelt among us"—he descended.⁷

2) Jesus Ascended

The second movement is that Jesus ascended. This is what Paul described in chapter 1 when he said that God "raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places".⁸ The significance of this for us is huge, but the specific application Paul wants to make here is that Jesus ascended so "that he might fill all things." It's almost like all that God created, the heavens and the earth, are a big container that he wants to fill up completely with his glory. It's not enough to fill Jesus' resurrected body with the fullness of God's glory—instead he ascends to heaven and pours out his Spirit so that all believers in all times and places can be filled up too.⁹

⁶ Ephesians 3:7; F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984)

⁷ John 1:14; Bruce; Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), Loc 6728

⁸ Ephesians 1:20; Bruce

⁹ Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: IVP, 1989), 123

3) Jesus Gave Gifts

Which leads us to the third movement: that Jesus gave gifts. That means, along with giving the same Spirit to all who are in Christ, which supplies our unity, Jesus also gives supernatural gifts that are unique to each believer, which supplies our diversity. This is not just so that all the believers in all the world can grow, but also to show all rebel powers that they are defeated and will soon be brought entirely under Christ's lordship.

¹⁰

That means Travis and Gregory McMichael, the men who were seen by the world on video this week killing a young black man named Aumaud Arbery in an act of so-called "citizens' arrest," they *will* one day answer for their crimes, whether or not the U.S. justice system can get it right. How do we know? Well, because Jesus gave gifts. What—how does that relate at all? Here's how Paul explains it.

He quotes from Psalm 68, which describes God as a divine warrior who goes out to battle against the enemies of God's people, and then rides victoriously back into Jerusalem with a procession of enemies he has taken captive—it's the spoils of war. And he ascends to the temple mount where he then distributes the spoils to his people to show he has conquered. This is Jesus, Paul says, descended, ascended, and giving gifts to his people as a sign that he is Lord over all and his people share in it. As Psalm 68 concludes,

³⁵ Awesome is God from his sanctuary; the God of Israel—he is the one who gives power and strength to his people. Psalm 68:35

No doubt this would've been huge for the Ephesians who needed to know the new power given them was far greater than the old power. But it should also be huge for you.¹¹ I don't know if you've ever looked at your spiritual gifts in this "end times" sort of way. Maybe you've been more like, "I guess I've got the gift of mercy or administration or hospitality or something...no big deal." Come on church! You have been gifted with supernatural power from a divine warrior. Don't downplay it. It's a sign that our King has conquered and is using us to bring everything under his lordship. It's a reminder that our leader is Jesus.

¹⁰ Arnold, Loc 6750

¹¹ Arnold, Loc 6550-6567; Bruce; Foulkes, 121-122

II. What's Our Purpose? vv. 11-12

This brings us to the second question the passage addresses: what's our purpose? You may not know this about me, but I used to be deeply involved in Army JROTC. In fact, my senior year of high school I served as Battalion Commander. This is where I really began to learn about organizational structure and how everyone fits into a unit. Here's the thing, if anyone in the chain of command didn't understand their purpose and do it, there was gonna be dysfunction. In the actual military, to not fulfill your purpose puts the person on your right and left at risk.

1) Jesus Gives Leaders

In the church, though, to not fulfill your purpose puts *everyone* at risk. Why? Because God has structured his church in such a way that we are all necessary to one another in order to grow up. Paul lays out this amazing structure in three parts. The first is that Jesus gives leaders. We read in verse 11,

11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, Ephesians 4:11

If you were wondering earlier what it practically looked like for Jesus to give gifts to his people, here are five examples. One thing I want to emphasize here is, church leaders are a gift, and evidence that Jesus loves his bride. Maybe not if church leaders are just those who are the most talented or ambitious or influential. But if they are truly gifted by Jesus and truly called by Jesus, then they are from-Jesus-to-us, so let's thank him for giving such important gifts.¹²

Another thing that's important to know, this is not a complete list of all church leaders, nor is it a list of church offices. Instead, it's the particular leaders who are critical to *establishing* churches. Perhaps another day we can unpack these five roles in depth, but for the sake of time let's just say that they all lead by proclaiming and applying the word of God in different ways.¹³ And yes, I would argue that Jesus *does* continue to pour out these gifts today (though not capital A Apostles, or prophets who provide new revelation).

¹² Foulkes, 123

¹³ Arnold, Loc 6770

2) Leaders Equip Members

The purpose of their proclaiming and applying the word of God is actually the second part of the church's structure that Paul mentions: that leaders equip members. We read in verse 12 that Jesus gave these church leaders—very simply—

12 to equip the saints, Ephesians 4:12

If you remember, in probably the most important part of the Post-Sabbath Year Prayer Guide, we announced that our primary strategy for reaching out to the neighborhood and the nations was actually rooted right here in Ephesians 4:12: it's to equip you, the saints.¹⁴ The word equip carries the idea of training to the point of qualification, of bringing something into shape, order, health.¹⁵

- If we as church leaders fail to equip, we fall short of our purpose.
- If we hoard the ministry instead of sharing it, we hold back the saints.
- If we aim for impressive performance in all that we do, we cease to be a place where the saints can learn and grow by trial and error.
- If we stop being a flint that sparks people and ministries that move beyond our congregation, we can no longer be rightfully named "Antioch".
- That's why I have consistently tried to pull the pastors back from responsibilities instead of pushing them into more.
- That's why we started putting out an Antioch Servant Needs list to help develop a culture of people making their ministry desires known.
- That's why we're walking through identity emphases and the trainings that go with them—in order to *equip the saints!*

3) Members Conduct Ministry

To equip them for what exactly? Well that's the third part of church structure that Paul describes: (1) Jesus gives leaders, (2) leaders equip members, and (3) members conduct ministry. Returning to verse 12,

12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, Ephesians 4:12

¹⁴ Antioch Church, "Post-Sabbath Year Prayer Guide," <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59cc06ebf43b559869616d7a/t/5d49e7b434241100019289b8/1565124562868/Post-Sabbath+Year+Prayer+Guide-2.pdf>, 23-27

¹⁵ Foulkes, 126-127; Swanson, J. (1997). *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)* (electronic ed.). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Take note that it is the saints—not just the leaders—who conduct the ministry and build up the body. You may never have thought of yourself “called to the ministry,” but here it is. Grace was given to you according to the measure of Christ’s gift, and you are supernaturally enabled, in some way that is unique *to you*, to help grow up the church. You may not know exactly what your gifting is, or you may not feel like you have a role in the church to express that gifting. But this is what I want you to walk away with, more than the desire to break out a spiritual gifts inventory and categorize yourself: *you* are the gift. Be who you are in Christ and share that with the body (we need you to do that!), and God will use you to build up his body. *That* is our purpose.

III. Where’s Our Future? vv. 13-16

This brings us to our third question answered by the passage today: where’s our future? Where’s the end goal our leader, King Jesus, is moving us toward as we build up his body?

1) To Attain to the Unity of the Faith

Again I think Paul gives us a three-part answer. The first: our future is to grow in the unity of the faith. We read in verse 13 that we are to build up the body of Christ

¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, Ephesians 4:13

Here Paul uses a word that’s similar to the trek-over-land-and-sea journey of maintaining the unity.¹⁶ Except here it’s not about the journey, but the destination—*attaining* to it.¹⁷ The destination is all of us on our individual journeys, in dependence upon one another, coming to the same unshakeable convictions about Jesus. And not just knowledge in the form of doctrine (though it includes that), but a face-to-face intimate knowledge like Paul describes in Phillipians 3 as his goal in life. He says,

¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the

¹⁶ Bradley Bell, “Walk Worthy, Ephesians 4:1-6,”

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59cc06ebf43b559869616d7a/t/5eaf2e4ebfac930dc1125e34/1588538958715/Walk+Worthy%2C+Ephesians+4%3A1-6.pdf>, 3

¹⁷ Foulkes, 127-128

resurrection from the dead. ¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Philippians 3:10-12, NIV

Which again isn't possible alone in your quiet time, but in the lifelong experience of Christ through all the unique expressions of his body. There are things that Doug Groce and Nicholas Robertson have that we need in order to grow up, in order to be conformed to the image of Christ.¹⁸ And that's the goal in all we do—not just that people would be saved and sent, but that they would grow to “mature manhood,” looking just like the man himself, Jesus Christ.

2) To Avoid Deceitful Teaching

The second part of Paul's answer about where we're headed is to avoid deceitful teaching. We read in verse 14,

¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Ephesians 4:14

There are two images Paul uses here: gullible children and storm-tossed boats. Although we are to have the faith of a child, we are not to reason like a child.¹⁹ Although we are to step out of the boat by faith, we are not to be ruled by the wind and waves.²⁰ The danger Paul has in mind here is false teaching, not just the kind that that's “out there” flowing from the mouths of people like Joyce Meyer and Steven Furtick, but the lies that rise up *in here*. They may have all appearances of being man-made, but they have the fingerprints of hell on them. And they cannot be overcome without the body of Christ protecting one another. How do we do that?

3) To Grow Into the Fullness of Christ

Well that brings us to the third part of Paul's answer: God aims for us to grow into the fullness of Christ. We get there, overcoming wind and waves of false teaching and lies, by doing what Paul says in verse 15:

¹⁸ Romans 8:29

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 3:1-2; 13:11; Hebrews 5:13; 1 Peter 2:2; Bruce

²⁰ Matthew 14:28-32

¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. Ephesians 4:15-16

It's not enough for us to be a loving church in the feel-good sort of way. We have to love each other enough to say the hard things, to confront one another with the truth when we're sliding into lies. And we *all* slide sometimes. So don't be a gullible child who thinks you're not vulnerable; and don't be a solitary storm-tossed boat because no one has the right to speak into your life. Say to your brothers and sisters, "Please! Help me see where I'm believing lies and point me to the truth!" That is real loving relationships, not just the feel-good fluff we often settle for in the church.

This is the end goal King Jesus is moving us toward: growing up in every way into him who is the head. This is a weird phrase, and there's only one way I know how to explain it. In East Africa there was a silly name for when kids were at that stage where their heads are really big in proportion to the rest of their bodies. They called it having a "duba ras," which literally means a "pumpkin head". It wasn't demeaning, it just meant that the child's body needed time to grow into its head.²¹

The vision Paul is describing here is kind of like that. The church's head, Jesus Christ, is fully developed and perfectly formed. But the church's body, well, we've got a long way to go. Therefore, we, the church across all times and places, are to grow up into the head, into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. It takes all of us, gifted by our Leader, serving our purpose, to grow into a perfect body, fit for a King. Where's our future? There's our future, into the fullness of Christ.

Conclusion

In conclusion today, let me ask you, did you and your childhood friends grow up to be what you had planned together? Probably not exactly. For me, when I watch *The Last Dance* and the old clips of Michael Jordan in all his glory, my heart starts to feel the old pull toward worshiping him, and I start to feel like a loser for not growing up into my childhood dreams. But then a shot of Michael in present-day comes on, and he's aged and he's got a dad bod and he's cursing people and living in the glory days, and suddenly it's very clear—thanks be to God that:

²¹ Bell, "Speaking the Truth in Love," 7

- My leader is no longer Air Jordan, but King Jesus.
- My purpose is no longer being the best, but building up the body of Christ.
- My future is no longer in becoming a champion, but becoming all that Jesus made me to be, for my joy, and for the church's good, and for God's glory.

And if you are in Christ, the same is true for you, no matter how far away you are from your childhood dreams. All that's left now is to have a group of people with a shared experience of God's grace, a group with whom you can grow up together, a group who needs you and you need them, a group that doesn't grow old and fat living on the glory days, but keeps each other always looking toward and growing toward the great championship celebration, the marriage feast of Christ and his bride in Revelation 11, and the last dance of the Champion called Faithful and True²², the Middle Eastern rider who sits atop a white horse and destroys all God's enemies forever, who has a name written on this thigh, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Jesus Christ.²³

And for those of you who are not in Christ, and by that I mean you don't look to Jesus as the definitive leader over everything in your life great and small, then honestly I hope that image of him atop his white horse haunts you. As Johnny Cash sings, "There's a man goin' 'round takin' names, and he decides who to free and who to blame"—he's not talking about a census worker, he's talking about Jesus Christ.²⁴ Now is the time to run to him and receive the forgiveness he offers and the family he created. There will be no chance once you meet him face to face. Let's pray.

²² Photo credit: Chris Koelle, "Faithful and True,"

https://biblicalgood.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/43-Faithful-and-True_24x18_1024x1024.jpg

²³ Revelation 11:6-16

²⁴ Johnny Cash, "The Man Comes Around," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9lfHDI-2EA>

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