
Studies in Ephesians – 4

In the last study we examined what Ephesians has to say about *how* a person becomes a member of the “new man”, and *who* may become a member. This week we shall look at the next great theme of Ephesians – how the Lord builds the church. For this we shall be referring mostly to chapter 4.

A new creation

God’s ultimate intention is the regeneration of the whole of creation. Paul says this several times in his letters; for example:

...his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, [is] to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

—Ephesians 1:9,10

Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power....The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” ...When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

—1 Corinthians 15:22-28

*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For... the **creation itself will be set free from its bondage** to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*

—Romans 8:18-23

Peter says:

But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

—2 Peter 3:13

John describes his vision of the fulfilment of this:

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more... [God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for **the former things have passed away.**” And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.”*

—Revelation 21:1-5

Building the bride

In Genesis 2:18-25 we read the story of the creation of the woman. She was not named Eve until later; the only name that she had at this point was *Israhah* – *woman*. Her creation arose out of the fact that it was “not good that the man should be alone”. God first presented all the creatures to Adam, thereby evoking in him the awareness of his need for one who would be “answering to him”. Then he put Adam to sleep and took the rib out of his side (v.21). “And the rib that the Lord God had taken from man He made into a woman” (v.22). The word “made” is literally *built* in the Hebrew.

In the same way, when the Lord Jesus was on the cross there poured out of His side the blood and water (John 19:34) that are the elements of birth. It was as though God the Father was bringing forth, out of the sleep of death and out of the side of Christ, what Charles Wesley referred to as “the second Eve” – the church. There is a very suggestive reference to this in 1 John 5:6-8.

Matthew 16:18 is the famous statement that Jesus made: “Upon this rock I will build my church”. Let us note three things about this statement:

1. The church did not exist when Jesus made the statement. He said, “I *will* build.”
2. He said “my church” – not “churches”. There is *one* church.
3. The church has to be *built*.

I will build

The church was born on the Day of Pentecost. On that day the Lord Jesus began to build His church.

The firstfruits

The church is described in different places as “the firstfruits” of the new creation. See, for example, 2 Thessalonians 2:13; James 1:18; Revelation 14:4.

The idea of “firstfruits” comes from the harvest time. The firstfruits were the first gathering of the harvest, the pledge of the full harvest that was to come. In the Old Testament the firstfruits were offered to God at the Feast of Weeks (Exodus 34:22), also called the Feast of Harvest (Exod. 23:16) or “the day of the firstfruits” (Num. 28:26).

This feast, which was 50 days after the Passover, is called “Pentecost” in the New Testament (*pente* is Greek for five). When God poured out the Holy Spirit on the waiting disciples, He was gathering in the firstfruits of His harvest of new creation. The church is the firstfruits of it.

One church

When God created Eve, He made her so that she was “fit for” (literally “corresponding to”) Adam (Genesis 2:18). She was Adam’s “mirror image” who complemented him. And she was, of course, one.

In the same way the church is the “fulness” or “completion” of Christ (Ephesians 1:23). Paul asks elsewhere: “Is Christ divided?” (1 Corinthians 1:13), and the answer is obviously No. The obvious conclusion is that the true church also cannot be divided. There may be many differences between local expressions of the church, but the church remains fundamentally one body (Ephesians 4:4).

The word “one” recurs throughout Ephesians. See, for example, Ephesians 2:14-16, where it occurs three times: “He has made both one”; “one new man”; “one body through the cross”. We saw in our last study that when God gave the Gentiles the Holy Spirit, Peter said that he had “made no distinction between us [Jews] and them [Gentiles]” (Acts 15:9). Both Jews and Gentiles became members of the one church (see Ephesians 2:13-17).

So in Ephesians 4:1-3 Paul does not ask us to strive for unity. Instead, he says that we are to:

...maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 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.

—Ephesians 4:3-6

He does not command unity because disunity is wrong. Instead, he commands it *because it is congruent with the truth*. We are to maintain it *because the church is one just as Christ is one*. In other words, just as Eve reflected Adam, the new Eve must reflect the new man.

How to maintain unity

To maintain unity means we must live in humility, gentleness, and patience. We must “bear one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2)—the love that is described in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

But within the one church there is diversity; we are not all the same. This is not a defect, but a tremendous source of power. The members differ from one another according to what Christ has distributed to them (Ephesians 4:7). This is exactly the same appeal that Paul makes in Romans:

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them...

—Romans 12:4-6

Again in 1 Corinthians he says:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good... For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ...As it is, there are many parts, yet one body...Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

—1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 12, 20, 27

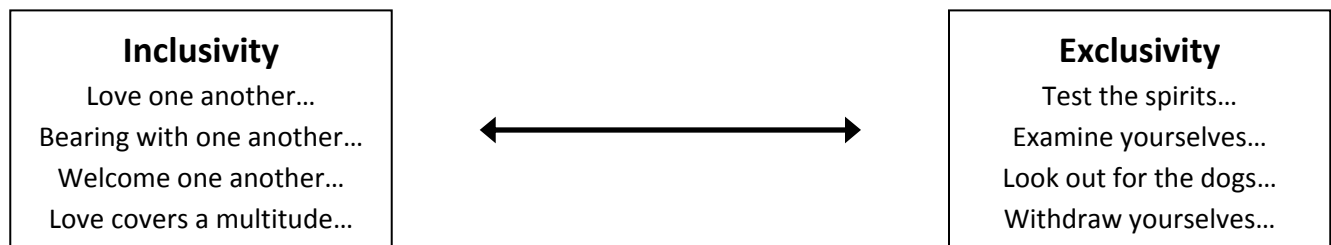
Notice again the emphasis upon the word “one”. We cannot allow our hearts to be alienated from those who are also members of His body. The truth is, if I am joined to Christ, and my brother is joined to Christ, then I am joined to my brother—whether I like it (or him!) or not.

Inclusive and exclusive

Christ’s church is both inclusive and exclusive. It *includes* people from every race and nation, old and young, male and female (Galatians 3:26-28). As members of the church, we have fellowship with “all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible” (Ephesians 6:24). We cannot exclude those who differ from us in race, or age, or on minor points of doctrine. We cannot close our hearts to those who worship Christ in ways that differ from our own. All the members of the church are born of the one Spirit (Ephesians 4:4); all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all made to drink of one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13).

However, the church consists *exclusively* of those who *have* been “made to drink of one Spirit”. Maintaining unity does not mean that we automatically receive anyone who claims to belong to Christ; the test is whether the Spirit is present in a person. Wherever God works, satan sows corruption and deception, and weeds among the wheat (see Matthew 13:24-30). Sometimes it is difficult to tell them apart. Some people use the church for their own ends—social, benevolent, or financial. We cannot assume that a person who can quote the Bible, or sing the songs, is therefore born of the Spirit.

Within the church there must be a balance between exclusivity and inclusivity. The phrases used in the boxes below are all found in the New Testament.



To strike this balance correctly requires wisdom, experience, and good leadership. As members of the church mature and gain experience in the things of the Spirit, they are less likely to be deceived.

We [should] 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. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way...

—Ephesians 4:14

Jesus later commends this Ephesian church: “You cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false” (Revelation 2:2).

Growing up into Him

God is interested in growth. The church is to grow, not only in numbers but also in experience and understanding. There will be no end to this growth until Jesus comes again; it is “growing up into Christ in every way” (4:15). Notice the things that we are to grow up into (Ephesians 4:13):

- The unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.
- Mature manhood.
- The measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

These expressions indicate that the church is to be a reflection of all that Christ is. This growth depends on several factors that Paul sets out in chapter 4:1-16.

Forbearance and love

People who will not live in forbearance and love will not grow spiritually. Instead, they protect themselves from those who differ from them. As a result they are never challenged to grow.

In contrast, we need a robust attitude that welcomes interaction with people who are different from us. We all have odd corners to our personalities, and the church is a great place for getting them rounded off, like stones placed in a bag and shaken up. Since we are all “not the finished article”, we must bear with one another and love one another. Peter says that “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8; see also Proverbs 10:12).

Good leadership

The five “leadership” gifts mentioned in Ephesians 4:11 are only a sample list. They may not exist in each local congregation, but they do exist (still) in the wider church. Paul uses a slightly different list in 1 Corinthians 12:28, and in that verse he lists them in order of importance. And notice that it is *God* who appoints them, not some committee.

Notice how Paul identifies the *person* with the *gift* when referring to these ministries. It is not all about “my gift”. Instead, I am to *be* a gift. According to v.11 the people *themselves* are the gifts of Christ to the world (note: not only to the church). And the world sorely needs them.

It is not clear whether “shepherds and teachers” (v.11) refers to one ministry or two. There is no warrant for combining them with a hyphen as some do (“pastor-teachers”), since the original text clearly contains the word *and*. Neither is there any warrant for elevating the role of the pastor or the teacher above any other role, or for thinking that “pastor” can only refer to some full-time employee of the church. The elevation of the pastoral role is not biblical.

The purpose of these ministries is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (v.12). It is not “to use the saints as a platform for my ministry”. In other words, these gifts are to be self-reproducing, not self-serving or self-aggrandizing. They are not an end in themselves. Paul himself is a good example of the kind of leadership that God wants for the church:

For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive... we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others...For you remember, brothers, our labour and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you.

—1 Thessalonians 2:3-12

This is not boasting; it is written as an example for them to follow. Compare 1 Corinthians 9:14-19.

Speaking the truth

The church must be full of “the truth spoken in love” (v.15). The “truth” includes the truth of the gospel (that is, consistent teaching). But we also have a responsibility to speak the truth one to another—the positive truth and the negative truth. We must be willing to rebuke as well as to encourage—and to receive rebuke and encouragement also. We are not to go about looking for something to criticize (we all know people who like to do that!). Whether encouraging or rebuking, both must be done in love.

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbour.

—Galatians 6:1-4

Body ministry

One of the major factors in the growth of the church is a genuine understanding that *all* the members must contribute (v.16). If one part is not functioning, the whole body is affected. For a similar passage, see 1 Corinthians 12:14-27, and note that this chapter is *not* primarily about spiritual gifts but about the proper working of the body of Christ.

Again, it is not about one person taking all the responsibility or becoming predominant. And it is certainly not about one person “lording it” over everyone else. See Mark 10:42, 43. Though we are to honour those who minister to us (1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:7), we also have a responsibility to provide balance for them, by faithfully giving what God has given us. If we do this, we not only grow ourselves but we also protect the church from imbalance.

There are other lists of gifts and ministries, apart from Ephesians 4:11. See Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28-30; 1 Peter 4:10, 11.

A New Testament example

Do you know a church that is growing up in this way? Not just individuals growing up, but the whole church growing up? The church in Jerusalem evidently was one. It faced several crises, one of which is recorded in Acts 6:1-7. Notice how the apostles dealt with this crisis:

- They did not go and do the work themselves. They kept their priorities and remained in their calling.
- They were confident that the church itself was capable of sorting out the problem.
- They knew that there were people available who were “of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom”.

- They did not look for people with natural administrative ability; they looked for spiritual qualifications.

As a result, not only was the problem solved, but others were empowered to minister, and the word of God increased (v.7). See Acts 6:8 and Acts 8 for the later ministries of Stephen and Philip.

The aim: the fulness of God

The growth of the church is not primarily numeric, although God certainly is interested in numerical growth (see the early chapters of Acts for some accounts of numerical growth). The primary growth is in character, purity, unity, and love. It is to be *the alternative society*.

...that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God.

—Ephesians 3:17-19

This is the apostle's prayer. He uses the analogy of a building: "the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Ephesians 2:21); or of a body: "...holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God" (Colossians 2:19). Peter says we are to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18).

Building on the foundation

There is only one foundation for the church, and that is Jesus Christ Himself (1 Corinthians 3:11). He must be present in the hearts of the people, and present when the church gathers (otherwise it is not a church).

At this very moment every one of us, whether conscious of it or not, is building on that foundation.

You are...God's building...I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it...If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

—1 Corinthians 3:9-17

Note that Paul is not talking about what I build in my *own* life, but what I build in the lives of *others*.

Conclusion

If the church is God's precious possession, for which He gave His life, we ought to cherish it in the same way as He does. This is the point of Paul's command to husbands in Ephesians 5:29. It is no wonder that Satan tries to destroy what God loves, and we must be careful not to do the enemy's work for him. Nevertheless, we must not be deceived into thinking that the church is open to just anyone. Membership of Christ's church is contingent upon repentance, faith, and the receiving of the Holy Spirit. Contributing to the growth of the church is *the* most important thing in life. God wants a glorious church, "without spot or wrinkle...holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:27), and all that we do must be directed toward this.