

The Life of the Church

Scripture: Ephesians 4:11-16

We're taking a little bit of a journey back to talk about some of the things that were critical that the Lord taught me when I first came to Grace Church many years ago. This church is what it is; far from perfect, far from everything we ought to be. But this church is what it is because of certain biblical convictions that the Lord pressed upon my heart very early; and He has sustained those convictions through this half a century that we've been together. They have to do with three things really. One is the character of the pastor, what the Lord expected of me. And we looked at a portion of Scripture last week that was very, very foundational in my understanding of the role that I would play.

A second very important foundational reality was the character of the church, or the life of the church. What should a church be? Why is Grace Church what it is today? And where is the pattern for this? And how did we ever get here? That's so very, very important.

When I, as a kid, grew up, of course, I was in church my whole life, and I had great love and respect for my father who was my pastor for my early childhood years. But I always felt like there was something more that a church should be than what I ever saw. And it wasn't just in the church that I was in, but it was in a lot of other churches. I was exposed to many churches. And as I got a little older, preached in many churches, met many pastors, talked with many. Went to seminary; heard a lot about the church and what the church should be.

But it seemed to me that I'd never really seen a church that follow a clear biblical pattern. So after I graduated from seminary, I spent a few years trying to study the New Testament to figure out what a church should be. And the Lord led me particularly to this passage that I read earlier in Ephesians chapter 4. So if you want, you can go back there in your Bible.

What Grace Church is now is really the product, even with all our failings, of going down the path that's established here. I knew it was important. I knew it was definitive that our church follow this pattern. The first book that I ever had actually published by a bona fide publisher was in 1973, and the first book was called *The Church: The Body of Christ, The Church: The Body of Christ*.

That was a big undertaking for a young guy who'd just been here a few years. But I was convinced that churches needed to understand this concept of the church as the body of Christ. I hadn't seen that really lived out in my experience. Nor was it clearly instructed to me when I was a student. But by the time I got to Grace this was number one in my understanding. We had to follow the pattern of the church as the body of Christ.

There are a number of metaphors, you would say, or word pictures in the New Testament that give us some idea of what the church should be. The church is a family; God is our Father, we are His children. The church is a bride; Christ is our Bridegroom. The church is branches, and we are basically connected to the vine who is Jesus Christ. The church is a kingdom, Christ is our King, and we are His subjects. The church is a group of servants or slaves who acknowledge Jesus as Master.

I understood all of those pictures, word pictures, but I also understood that all of those, while in the New Testament used to refer to the church, are in the Old Testament used to refer to Israel. All of those metaphors are also found as God identifies His people in the Old Testament.

But there was one model for the church, one symbol of the church, one analogy for the church, one pattern for the church that does not appear in the Old Testament, and it is the church as the body of Christ. We don't have that imagery in the Old Testament. But we do have it in Ephesians 4, and it's in verse 12, the end of the verse, "the body of Christ." That was very important to me to begin to understand, "What does that mean that the church is the body of Christ?"

Earlier in Ephesians we are told very clearly that Christ is the head of the church, that He is the one who is head over all things. Back in chapter 1 it says in verse 22 that He who is the head over all things has been given as head to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. The church is to be the body of Christ. This is who we are. This is how we are uniquely identified in the New Testament. And Ephesians has a lot to say about that. As I just noted for you, it talks in chapter 1 about Christ as the head of the church, and the church being the body of Christ. Repeats here in chapter 4 and makes reference to these things in other parts of this same letter.

So I came to understand that in order for us to know what the church should be and define the life of the church, we had to see it as the body of Christ and follow the biblical pattern. And so that was my endeavor from the very, very beginning. I purposed in my heart that as much as was in me, I would endeavor to communicate to the people in this church that we needed to function as the body of Christ under our glorious head the Lord Jesus Christ. We were to be faithful to this model. And whatever this church is today by the mercy and grace of God half a century later, it is because we have followed this pattern. And I think as we think about fifty years, and as I look back over it and try to regrip this foundational truth, it might be an encouragement to you to understand this so you can have the biblical and spiritual explanation for why this church is what it is.

So let's go to Ephesians chapter 4, and we're going to look in particular starting at verse 11. But I want to start at the beginning, because I think it all connects so very well.

We are told in the end of chapter 3 that the church is to give glory to God and Christ. "To Him be the glory in the church." That's how chapter 3 ends, "To Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen." This is a doxology. This is an outburst of praise. God is to be glorified in His church. Christ is to be glorified in His church.

So how does that happen? How do we get to the point where Christ is glorified in His church? I don't need to tell you that there are a lot of churches that are not a glory to Christ, they're not an honor to God. They don't put Christ on display, a lot of churches. In fact, or I suppose the normal population of this country or any other to try to figure out what the church is is an almost impossible task. But the church is to be the place where glory comes to God and glory comes to Christ. How does it get to that point where that is its character, its life? Let's start in verse 1.

"Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord." No matter where Paul might have been in some human jail – and he was in a lot of them – he never saw himself as a prisoner of Rome or any other earthly domain. He was always captive to the Lord. And so, "As the Lord's prisoner, I implore you," – I beg you – "to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called."

You have had a high, high calling. You have been called by God efficaciously into His eternal kingdom, into His eternal family. You have been given eternal life. You have been given all the riches of God poured out in grace, both now and forever. You have become the temple of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God has taken up residence in you. All of this and a lot more is laid out in the first chapter of Ephesians.

So we are not like the rest of the world. It hasn't appeared yet what we really are. They can't see what we are. But we are the children of God. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit. We are regenerated, newborn sons of God in this world. We have light and life in the midst of darkness and death. So Paul says, "I'm going to beg you to walk in a manner worthy of this calling," this actual calling into life in Christ, into salvation.

Now how do you walk worthy? How can you walk worthy of this calling? How can you bring honor to this unparalleled gift that the Lord has given you? It's interesting what he says in verse 2, "with all humility and gentleness," – or better, meekness – "with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

You are so highly called. You have been so elevated. God has lifted you above all other humans. He's exalted you to Himself, to His kingdom, into His family forever. This is a high, high calling.

How are you to walk worthy of a high calling? Walk in a lowly way, "with all humility and meekness, with patience," – toward people – "showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Here is the key. The church needs to manifest the unity of the Spirit. We need to be one. We need to have unity in the Spirit; that unity produced by love. And love is a product of humility, meekness, patience, and tolerance. Only humble people love. Only the meek love. Patience and tolerance or forbearance is what builds strong bonds of love.

How are we to walk? We are to walk in humility so that we live in love. We are to live in love, because love preserves the unity of the Spirit and creates a binding together in peace.

Look, most of us have been in other churches, and looking back we might want to define them as places marked by peace or unity, or even love, or even humility. But this is exactly what our Lord tells the apostle Paul to implore us to be. To walk worthy then is to be humble, to be meek, to be tolerant of others, and consequently to love others; and out of that love will come unity; and in that unity there will be a sweet harmony of peace. This is what a church should be.

And I can just tell you this. This church is in that great pattern. This is a church where there is immense love, because there is humility, there is meekness, there is patience, and there is tolerance. And when you care enough about people to lower yourself and you care enough about people to consider the issues of your own life less than the issues of others, and when you care about people enough to be patient with all of their weaknesses and even their sins, and when you care enough about people to be tolerant, love flourishes; and in that love you have unity in the Spirit; and in that unity you enjoy peace. Nothing is really more painful for a believer than being in a church where pride and conflict and selfishness and division and lovelessness exist. It shouldn't be. It shouldn't be.

So that's the objective. So from the very beginning I'm saying to myself, "How is that going to happen? I've never seen a church that would be the fulfillment of that. How is that going to happen?" It must happen, because it is the will of the Lord of the church. And it is consistent with the church's very nature. Look at verse 4.

We ought to enjoy this unity. Unity is the theme, unity of the Spirit. That is a spiritual unity, a heart unity, a unity of love. That ought to be characteristic, because the very nature of the church is defined as one. Look at verse 4: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all."

Seven times the word “one” appears. Paul is saying, “The unity of the Spirit should be the natural result of all those spiritual unities which already exist.” We’re all one body, the body of Christ. We’re all indwelt by one Spirit, the Holy Spirit. We’ve all been called to one calling, salvation with an eternal hope. We have one Lord, one faith, and one baptism, one God and Father of all, and He is over all and through all and in all. We all have all the same collection of ones.

So in Philippians chapter 1, Paul says something similar, summing it up in verse 27: “So conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you’re standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.” You should be one spirit, one mind, striving together to proclaim the glorious faith, the Christian faith contained in the gospel. So we are to be one.

How can that happen? How can that be a reality? So many diverse people, so many wills, so many desires, so many ambitions, so much selfishness, so much sin; how do we ever get there? Well, we have to start with the fact that that’s the goal, and that that goal is connect to our nature, because we are all one.

But this unity is effective only because – listen carefully – it is a unity of diverse parts, verse 7. Four times in verse 6 we see the word “all.” The unity, the oneness, the spiritual ones are all of ours. We all have all of them. But we go now from all of us and what we all possess to each one of us. And now we’ve moved into a different understanding. “But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift.”

Each one of us has been given a gift from Christ, not salvation, but a spiritual gift. The word is *dōrea*, the word for “gift,” and it’s the Greek word for “a free gift.” We’ve been given a free gift. We call – it’s a spiritual gift. They are listed in Romans 12, there’s a listing of spiritual gifts. They are listed in 1 Corinthians 12. They’re even mentioned in 1 Peter 4:10 and 11. Some of them are speaking gifts, some of them are serving gift.

Everybody has a gift. Everybody has a function. In fact, down in verse 16 you can see that, “The whole body is fit and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, which causes the growth of the body, building up itself in love.” So it’s just like a body. A body is one. A body functions as a unit, but it only functions as a unit when all the diverse parts do what they’re supposed to do. It’s not like we’re all rubber ducks pumped out the same way; every one of us is unique and individual. We all have a function.

In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul says there are visible gifts and invisible gifts. There are those things you can see in a body like the external part of the body, you can see those. But he says the more important ones are the ugly ones that are hidden, fortunately, the organs on the inside. They’re uglier, but they’re more vital. But everybody is part of the body. Don’t complain about the fact that you’re not this part or that part. Recognize the part that you are and be faithful to function so the body can express itself in unity.

So verse 7 simply introduces us to the fact that we all have a gift from Christ. I have a gift, it’s a complex of various things. And you have a gift; it might be a complex of various things. You can read the list in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12. Those are just categories of gifts. They’re like colors on a palette, and the Lord comes up with His brush and He dips a little in this and a little of that and a little of that, and He paints you.

You may have a gift of teaching. There may be hundreds of people in this church who have a gift of teaching. No two teachers will be alike. A gift of teaching might be mixed with a gift of mercy, or a gift of wisdom, or a gift of giving, or a give of prayer, or a gift of leadership. So you are you. Like your fingerprints, you are you. You have a spiritual fingerprint which is unique to you. You are identified in the kingdom of God as having a particular specific role to play. Now your gift is for the sake of the body. This is every body part is for the sake of the body. In other words, you have been gifted by God to serve the church.

I have a gift. My gift you all know. I teach the Bible, I preach the Word of God, and I have responsibility for leadership, and I have some other little parts of the gift categories that the Lord has painted into my life that maybe you don't know as well as you know the more public gifts. But I'm a complex of those categories like we all are. And my role is to serve the church with those gifts. And that's how the body grows, to serve with humility and meekness and patience and tolerance and love. And as I do that, the body grows into unity. So your gift is for the church.

So the obvious question: "What are you doing?" You don't need a hard and fast label for your gift. What is it that your heart wants you to do? What is it that you can do well to minister to someone else? And I'm not talking about human skills, I'm talking about, "What is it that you can do to build up other people in the faith?" That's your gift.

Then Paul goes on to say, "Look, you've got to understand something: these gifts are really unique, because these are given from Christ." You received your gift from Christ. That ought to raise the stakes a little bit on your sense of responsibility, right? I mean, if you're doing nothing, that's a shame. In fact, it's shameful, because of what Christ did to provide that gift for you, and this is what he's going to say in verse 8: "Therefor it says," – it being the Old Testament; in particular, Psalm 68 – "When He ascended on high, he led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men."

David is using a very common picture to speak of God. The picture is that whenever a king conquered a city or a country, nation, he would come back, ascend onto his throne, and he would bring back a host of captives and spoils. And when the king came back and ascended to the throne and had the enemies that he had conquered and the spoils that he had brought back, he would then give those spoils to the people who were part of his kingdom.

That's exactly what Jesus did. Verse 9 sort of applies that to Him. But, first of all, the psalm itself is applied to God, and God conquering the Jebusite capital city of Jerusalem. When God conquered Jerusalem, the conquering king, God, comes back with the spoils to distribute to His covenant people.

So Christ conquered death and hell and the grave. He ascended – explaining this a little bit in verse 9 – because He had descended. He came down in order to win the battle at the cross, and He descended in order that He might ascend. And then verse 10, "He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens," – all the created heavens – "so that He might fill all things." He came down, He conquered, He took back captives, the souls He won at the cross, and all the spoils, to distribute to His people. He is the conquering hero who gives gifts to His people. Christ ascended back into heaven, sent the Holy Spirit, and with the Holy Spirit all the gifts to the church. Magnificent picture.

Now He having accomplished His victory, fills all things, which is another way of saying He's sovereign over everything. He's the head over all things. He is the one of whom Paul says to the Philippians, "God gave Him a name above every name, the name Lord, that at His name every knee would bow."

He is enthroned. Now as the exalted, triumphant, enthroned Lord, who won the great victory over sin and death and hell, He has gone back to heaven and He is going to give gifts to His church, so that His church can become His body on the earth and manifest His life before the world. He gives gifts so that we can serve each other, and so that in serving one another we become manifestly Christlike in the world.

All the gifts, all the gifts that are given to the church are perfectly expressed in Jesus Christ. He was the greatest teacher. He was the greatest preacher. He had the most wisdom, the most mercy, the most grace. He gave the most. He was the greatest leader. You can take all the categories of gifts; they are perfectly fulfilled in Christ now in a way that fills the whole universe with His sovereign glory. But He's given us stewardship of those kinds of gifts that are perfectly expressed in Him.

Now, because we have those gifts, as we minister them to each other, Christ is on display. That's leading up to the passage I want you to focus on, verse 11. He not only gave gifts, but in order to see those gifts fully realized He had to do something else. He had to give men, "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastor-teachers," – hyphenated – "for the perfecting of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.

Even with those spiritual gifts, which we all receive at our salvation, the body of Christ is not going to be what it should be, demonstrating Christ in the world, unless there are some preachers who perfect the saints for the work of ministry for the building up of the body of Christ. That word "perfecting" – it may in your translation say "equipping" – is the role of those men mentioned in verse 11, the perfecting of the saints, the equipping of the saints, *katartizō* is the Greek verb. It basically means to be restored, to be complete, to be full, to be mature, full-grown, perfect. Not sinless perfection, but a kind of maturity, a kind of grown-up spiritual character.

This is a word used a lot, *katartizō*, in the New Testament. In 2 Corinthians 13:11 we are told, "Be made perfect," same word. Hebrews 13:21, "May the Lord equip you" – same word – "in every good work." Or 1 Peter 5:10, "After you've suffered a while, the Lord will make you perfect," same word. So this is a very common word.

Galatians 6:1, "If someone's overtaken in a fault, you who are spiritual, restore such a one." "Restore" is the same word. Build them up, equip them, bring him to maturity. Second Corinthians 7:1 says that we are to be perfecting holiness in the fear of God. So this is the goal of the men given to the church. He not only gave gifts to believers, but in the language of 1 Corinthians 12:28, *etheto*, He appointed men, He appointed men.

The perfection of the saints is the goal. It is the goal of trials. James 1 says, "After you've been through trials, God will do a perfect work." It's the goal of suffering, 1 Peter 5:10, "After you have suffered a while, the Lord make you perfect." It's the goal of Scripture: "Keep desiring the milk of the word, that you may grow thereby in respect to salvation." So whether it's trials or suffering, persecution or the Word of God in particular, God gears it all to bring us to this kind of spiritual perfection where in Christlikeness we're using our gifts to put Him on display in the church.

Now let's talk about the gifted men just briefly. Apostles and prophets were foundational men. Back in chapter 2, verse 20, we read that, "God's household, the church, was built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit."

Another way to look at the church is as a temple. But the temple, the living temple of God indwelt by the Holy Spirit, the church, is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. They are foundation stones, Jesus being the corner stone. The apostles then were foundational men. They were the ones who were with Jesus, they were chosen by Him particularly. There are twelve of them, and then Judas drops out and Matthias replaces Judas in the beginning of the book of Acts. And later on, the apostle Paul is the last of the apostles. So there's a total of thirteen of them. According to Matthew and Mark and Luke, they had a unique ability and calling. They were to preach the word, They were to cast out demons, and they were to heal the sick. They were given divine power to authenticate their connection to the true and living God.

How do you know who the true teachers are? How do you know who the true apostles are? How do you know really represents God? Those that have power over disease, those that have power over demons; they're preaching the true message from God. They had those duties: preach, cast out demons, and heal the sick. They were companions of Jesus, they are very unique, so unique that Jesus said in Luke 22:28 to 30, they will have twelve thrones in His kingdom when He returns. He will have twelve thrones.

Now I know you're saying, "Well, is it Matthias or Paul? Who gets the twelfth throne?" I have no idea, I don't have a special revelation on that; but there will be twelve thrones. We know that in Revelation 21:14 it says in the new Jerusalem, the capital city of eternal heaven, there will be twelve foundation stones representing the twelve apostles.

So they have a remarkable, unique – not only the foundation of the church in this world, but foundation stones for the new Jerusalem, the capital city of the eternal state. Unique. And they were used by God, along with their associates, to write the New Testament.

There are no apostles today, they were chosen by Jesus, given miraculous powers. The signs of an apostle: signs, wonders, mighty deeds – 2 Corinthians 12:12. Hebrews 2, "How should we escape if we neglect so great a salvation at first spoken to us by those who were with the Lord, and then confirmed by signs and wonders." They were foundational.

After them came the second group of preachers: the prophets. The prophets were not chosen by Christ, but they were rather identified by the church; and their responsibility was to preach the gospel. They aren't miracle workers as such, but they are preachers of the truth. They are pre-Scripture preachers. The New Testament hasn't come together yet, so they're preaching what the Apostles' Doctrine was. They're preaching what the apostles received from the Lord; and occasionally the Lord even gives them some revelation. But most of the time they're preaching what had already been revealed to the apostles. The early church was engaged in studying the Apostles' Doctrine. They were preaching the Apostles' Doctrine.

The goal of the apostles and the goal of the prophets, what is it? It says to perfect the saints, to perfect the saints. That was their goal. That's always the goal, always the goal, to bring the saints to maturity and to Christlikeness.

Now historically they are replaced by evangelists and pastor-teachers. Evangelists would be kind of the subsequent of apostle-like people who were sent. "Apostle" comes from verb; means to be sent. They are sent out with the gospel. They go to the mission field. They plant churches.

Look at Grace Community Church. Through the fifty years that we've been here, how many men have come through this church and gone to the ends of the earth, gone to the far corners of the planet to carry the gospel there, not only to preach to those that are lost, but to train the pastors and churches all over the globe to do the same. They have the heart of an evangelist. They are the ones who are sent to preach the gospel and to train others to preach the gospel. And every church should be marked by them. How amazing is it that after this half a century there are people who've come through this church and felt the call of God to be an evangelist, and they're somewhere on this planet scattered to every corner. And then they're scattered across this country, planting churches and preaching the gospel and every kind of place where Christ is not named and people need to hear.

And then along with those come the teaching shepherds, and they are the ones who shepherd the flock. It's as if the evangelists go out to gather the sheep; and once they're gathered, the evangelist goes back out to gather more sheep, and the shepherd teaches them.

It's translated "pastors" here, kind of interesting. It's the word *poimēn*. It's always translated "shepherd" in the New Testament except here. For some reason they used a Latin term here. But it's a word that means a teaching shepherd. That's an elder, that's a bishop.

And I knew coming into the church that I was a teaching shepherd, that I've been called to the role of a teaching shepherd. It doesn't mean I don't have a responsibility of evangelism. Paul said to Timothy, 1 Timothy 4, "Do the work of an evangelist. Do the work of an evangelist." So we do that.

But primarily the role is to feed the flock of God, 1 Peter 5. Acts 20, "Feed and lead the church which God has purchased with His own blood." We are the feeders and the leaders. Jesus says to Peter three times, "Feed My sheep. Feed My lambs. Feed My sheep." This is pastoral ministry, to feed the flock of God. That is why we meet, so that you can be fed, so that you can become mature, so that you can be perfected. That's the point of this whole passage. Let's go back to it.

So those are the preachers of perfection, look at the progress to perfection, verse 12. The gifted men equip the saints. The pastor-teacher, evangelist is for the equipping of the saints; that's what we're for.

Certainly I want to reach the lost with the gospel, but the lost are going to be reached by you if you are mature in Christ. The goal of the shepherd is to feed and lead the flock, to protect them what is destructive, to make sure they get to green pastures and still waters. The gifted men equip the saints. For fifty years that is what I have tried to do; and that's basically all I have really tried to do. I am in labor, like Paul in Galatians 4:19, until Christ is fully formed in you.

Colossians 1 says it this way, end of chapter 1, "We proclaim Him," – that is Christ – "admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ." That's a pastoral role. That's a definition.

Paul says, "For this purpose also I labor, striving" – a word that means working to the point of sweat and exhaustion – "according to His power, which mightily works within me." God works within me, and I work to see every man and woman complete in Christ, equipping the saints.

It wasn't just the work of an apostle. At the end of the book of Colossians, we are introduced to a man named Epaphras, chapter 4, verse 12. "Epaphras who is a member of the Colossian church, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God. For I testify for him that he has a deep concern for you," – and what is his concern? – "that you be fully completed in Christ, that you grow up to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

Gifted men are not given to the church for unbelievers, they're given to the church for believers. They're not given to the church to make the believers feel good about themselves, they're given to the church to make the believers grow to become more like Christ.

So if we're going to perfect the saints, what instrument must we use? Well, prayer. That's what Epaphras did. But the key instrument, listen to what Scripture says; and there's no question about this, 2 Timothy 3:16 and 17, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be perfect, equipped for every good work." Whether it's the man of God or anybody else, it is the Scripture that is inspired by God and profitable for teaching reproof, correction, training, and righteousness, that makes one equipped for every good work.

So how do you equip the saints? You equip the saints with the word. That's why Paul says to Timothy over and over, "Preach the word. Preach the word. Give yourself to the word." Says it to Titus, "Preach the word. Preach it with all authority." That's what the shepherd does. It's a serious responsibility; you'll have to give an account for it to God, Hebrews says. It's a serious responsibility. James says, "Whoever doesn't offend with his mouth is a perfect man." So don't be so many teachers, for theirs is a greater condemnation. But it's a high calling and a glorious calling at the same time.

So using the word of God to perfect the saints is the call of the shepherd. That's what I've done for fifty years. I am not the explanation for the results, I've just been one instrument for the process.

Then the second step – back in Ephesians – the second step is this: "For the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry." What happens is when the saints grow up to maturity, they do the work of the ministry, then their gifts begin to be used, then their gifts flourish, then they begin to function in the church with the one another, then they do the work of service, diakonia. That's a word that had to do with waiting on tables. But it was a general word for serving.

The gifted men perfect the saints, the saints do the work of the ministry. Remember in Acts 4 the apostle said, "Look, we give ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. You're going to have to do the work, you're going to have to take care of these widows." That's how it works.

And so, what has happened over the years here is the preaching of the Word of God, has matured the saints, and the saints have done the work of the ministry. That started very early actually. We were still meeting in the chapel decades and decades ago in the early days, and a man from Chicago came out and wanted to write an article on our church because we were growing so fast, and he wrote the article in a national magazine. Some of you have heard this.

But the title he gave to the article is "The Church with 900 Ministers." At the time we had about 900 people coming here, and what struck him after interviewing all the people around here was that he couldn't find somebody who wasn't involved. Already in those early years when we were still in the chapel, the original building, the people had caught the vision to do the work of the ministry. They were being perfected by the word and doing the work of the ministry.

People would come to me and say things like, "Hey, we need this kind of ministry," and I would say, "Hey, go do that. Great, go do it." Somebody else would come and say, "You know, I've got a friend and we would like to start this ministry at the jail." "Great, go do that, wonderful," and the Lord began to move on the hearts of people, and they began to do the ministry. And that is the way the church is to this day, people doing the work of the ministry, people who are grown up in Christ, who've been matured by the Word.

And then there's another step; this, obvious. As they begin to do the work of ministry, the body of Christ is built up. As they minister to one another they're ministering their gifts, and they're ministering those gifts in the power of the Holy Spirit, and they produce spiritual growth and spiritual development.

I minister a gift here, but this church is full of people who minister their gifts to me. And the strength that I bring to you through the gift that God has given me here is in part brought to me by the ministry of so many people around me, so many, many people. That's how the body is built up.

Whatever Grace Church is now, it is because gifted men have for all these years taken the Word of God to perfect the saints, to do the work of the ministry, to build up the body of Christ. I am not the explanation for this church; no human being is. The elders, as wonderful as they are, are not the explanation. The explanation is the Spirit of God through the Word of God building up the saints. The saints gifted by Christ Himself do the work of the ministry. Consequently they build up one another. And what comes out of that is maturity. And what comes out of that is love. And what comes out of that is unity and peace; and that's the testimony that the Lord wants.

So the preachers of perfection follow the progress of perfection, and the benefits are amazing. Look at the benefits of this progress, the benefits of perfection just briefly. Verse 13, "until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ." That is amazing, isn't it.

That's what a church should look like: the unity of the faith, unity in doctrine, unity in truth, unity in deep knowledge, not superficial knowledge, deep knowledge of the Son of God. And when you know the faith and you're united around sound doctrine, and you have a deep knowledge of the Son of God because you've gone through all the Gospels time and time again, year after year after year, you have a deep knowledge of the Son of God, you come to a mature person, and as you become a mature person you are coming in the direction of the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. You're becoming more like Christ. Now that is a benefit.

I can't imagine being in any other church if there was a church that was like that. As a believer, I want to be like Christ. And to think that it's possible if I am being equipped by the Word of God so that I can grow up to maturity in the work of ministry, building up the body of Christ, come to a unity of sound doctrine, deep knowledge of the Son of God, and become a mature man in some way measuring the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ, why would I go somewhere else? That's the goal of everything, that we gaze on His glory and become transformed into His image.

Now there's a result to this. First, a negative result, and then a positive result, just quickly. When you come to the unity of the faith, that is you're united around sound doctrine, and you have this deep knowledge of the Son of God, and you are mature, and you are being shaped like Christ in His fullness, the first result, "You are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming." Who does all that? Satan and all his emissaries.

So the first result of this kind of maturity of a church is that it is solid in its doctrine, no longer gullible, no longer undiscerning, no longer victimized, tossed by every wind of doctrine, by the kubernia, the trickery of men and their crafty cunning deception. That's a marvelous thing, isn't it? What he's saying is when you're a part of that kind of church you have discernment, you're not susceptible to error, you're safe from being seduced by saying you're a spiritual young man who's overcome the Wicked One, because the Word of God abides in you and you are strong.

And then there's a positive result, verse 15: "You speak the truth in love." You know the truth, so you're not subject to error; and you also speak the truth and you speak it in love. You speak it in love, because Christ spoke it in love, and you're Christlike. That's how a church should be. It should be basically discerning so it is not seduced by false doctrine. And it should be evangelistic, speaking the truth in love. The truth is everything. If you have the truth, you're not susceptible to lies. If you have the truth, you can speak it. And if you're characterized by love, you will speak it in love.

And just to sum it up, verses 15 and 16, Paul pulls it together; so here it is: "We are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love, in love."

Did you notice how important love is? End of verse 2, "in love." End of verse 16, "in love." "By this shall all men know that you're My disciples, that you have" – what? – "love one for another."

A church that follows this divine pattern will be known not only for its sound doctrine, but more characteristically, it'll be known by its love. And I can just you, that is the reputation of this church. There are people who think, well, never having been here, you know, "MacArthur's a strong preacher and is very opinionated and dogmatic, and he's been there for fifty years; that must be a hard place. Those people must be as tough as leather listening to all that doctrine all the time." Strong preaching and sound doctrine doesn't make hard people, it makes soft people, it makes loving people. And I think that is the surprise for people who haven't been here. Every year new people remark not about the doctrine or the teaching, but about how much love they sense in this church. That puts Christ on display.

This church is what it is not because of me, but because the Lord laid a pattern down in His word and said if the pastor-teacher and the evangelists, the faithful men will perfect the saints through the Word, they'll do the work of the ministry, the body will be built up, and the body will be built up to the degree that it becomes like Christ. It will be discerning, safe from false doctrine, and it will be able to speak the truth in love, and it will be characterized by love because Christ Himself is characterized by love, right? So the more you are like Him, the more you are truth and love manifest.

Father, thank You for our morning together. Just wonderful to think back through all these years in how you have brought us all to this hour. Amazing, amazing that You have again vindicated Your word. And You said this is how to do it, and we tried, failing frequently; but we tried to follow the pattern. And here we are half a century later and we can see that this church is marked by love and truth. These folks love You deeply, they love each other, they love the Word. And this brings You glory, and that's the reason for all of it, that You might be glorified in Your church.

Be glorified in our lives, and may the future be far more wonderful for this church than the past. We commit the future to You to follow the same path, to see Christ honored in His church, in His name we pray. Amen.