

Perfecting the Saints

Scripture: Ephesians 4:11-16

Code: 49-20

Well, we come today to the fourth chapter of Ephesians, and I confess to you that this is a chapter about which I have thought maybe more than most other chapters in the Bible. And it goes all the way back, in particular, to the beginning years at Grace Church when I was seeking from the Lord to understand what was His desire for a church. And it was in those days, as I was searching the Scripture, that I came to the section that we're going to be looking at this morning: Ephesians 4:11–16. I don't know that I had really a clear understanding of it, even when I went away to seminary. But in my seminary days I was on the hunt, I have to say, to find the best possible plan to shepherd a church, and do it the way God designed it to do and the way Christ wanted His church to go; and I wound up in this passage more than any other passage. And I'm telling you that because you need to know it's very hard for me to go over it lightly this morning. It has occupied much of my life, but I want to give you the overview of these very, very important words. Let's read from verse 11 to 16.

“And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; 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. As a result, we 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; but speaking the truth in love, 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.”

Now, we have been looking at this chapter, and we remember that in verse 1 it says we're to “walk . . . worthy of the calling with which [we] have been called.” We're to walk worthy of the divine summons by God to come out of darkness into light and become a part of His kingdom. And that's a high calling and a holy calling and a heavenly calling. How do you walk worthy of such a high calling? You walk in a lowly way. It's a lowly walk for a high calling. Verse 2, “With all humility and gentleness, and patience . . . [and forbearance, or] tolerance . . . love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Unity is a very important thing to our Lord in His church. Jesus prayed that we would be one; and we are spiritually one in Christ, but He prayed that we would be manifestly one, demonstrably one because of the love that marked our relationships in this world. We are to be “diligent,” verse 3 says, “to preserve . . . unity.” You can see down in verse 13, “Until we all attain to the unity of the faith.” Unity is critical in the life of the church, critical to the church's testimony. And in order to be united, we have to be marked by the virtues that we saw in verses 2 and 3: humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, love, and diligence in preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

The Lord reminds us of our doctrinal unity, our true spiritual unity: “one body,” the church; “one

Spirit,” the Holy Spirit; “one hope of your calling,” the calling to eternal life in heaven; “one Lord,” Jesus Christ; “one faith,” the gospel and divine revelation; “one baptism,” baptism in the name of Christ; “one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.” And we’ve been talking about unity since chapter 2. It is so important for the church to maintain unity, and yet that seems to be such a struggle in the church. It shouldn’t be.

There’s a pathway to this kind of unity, and we saw last time that it involves diversity, verse 7, “To each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” The unity of the church, the unity of the body of Christ, is produced by diversity of gifts. We talked about that last time. Every believer is given a gift by which that believer ministers to the church and that way helps to build the body of Christ. So while unity is our objective and unity is our goal and unity is what we strive for, necessary to that unity is diversity of gifts. So the Lord measures out, proportions out spiritual gifts to everyone in the church by which they can contribute to the growth of the church, which growth produces that ultimate unity.

To each one of us was given a free gift, a spiritual gift. We looked at some of them in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 last time. And we looked at that passage in verse 8 that borrows from Psalm 68, where it pictures the king who triumphs, wins the great victory. God is that King; He wins the victory over Jerusalem and then ascends to His throne with all the spoils that are His for such a triumph. And that’s a picture of what has happened with the Lord. He came down to this earth, He died on the cross, was buried, rose again, and by His work on the cross and through the resurrection, He won souls for His redeemed church; and He ascends back to heaven, as it were, sits down at the throne of God, having purchased the redemption of His people. And then He takes the spoils of that triumph and gives them back to His church in the form of spiritual gifts given to every individual believer; and not only spiritual gifts to every individual, but gifted men, gifted men. That is the second part of this triumphant gift that comes from the Lord of heaven; and that’s where we are in verse 11, “And He [Himself] gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers.”

Why? We know He gives spiritual gifts to individuals, but what are the function of these gifted men given to the church? The answer comes immediately in verse 12, “For the equipping of the saints,” or, “For the perfecting of the saints.” *Katartizō* in the Greek means fully equipped, full-grown, mature, complete, perfect. What is the perfection that this is talking about? Well, that appears—and we’ll see more about it in a moment—but that appears in verse 13. The “mature man” there, the perfect man, is “the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.”

So the objective of our Lord, in the church, is to give everybody in the church spiritual gifts so they can minister to each other and build up the body, and then give the church gifted men whose responsibility it is to aid in their spiritual growth and development by perfecting them, spiritually perfecting them. Anything short of this is to fail to understand what ministry in the church is about.

God is not demanding sinless perfection because it’s clear in 1 John that if you say you haven’t sinned, you lie. It’s clear in Romans 7 that Paul says, “I don’t always do what I want to do, and I often do what I don’t want to do; there’s a certain wretchedness clinging to me.” So we’re not talking about perfection as the kind of perfection that characterizes Christ, not until we get to heaven.

But for now, it’s completeness in the sense of maturity, being a grownup believer. First Corinthians 1:10, Paul says, “Be made complete,” and then he defines it by saying, “[being of] the same mind

and . . . the same judgment.” So part of that maturity is understanding the truth, so that you think alike about the truth and you discern things with the same judgment.

In 2 Corinthians 13:11, the apostle Paul says, “Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete.” And again he’s saying, “Grow up; be full-grown spiritually.” Galatians 6:1 says that if someone is caught in a trespass, those who are spiritual are to—same word—complete, mature, or even “restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.” So we are to be about that in our own lives, and we are to be about that kind of maturing, that kind of completing, in the lives of those around us as well. First Thessalonians 3:10 says, “Praying”—“Praying . . . that we may . . . complete what is lacking in your faith.” So part of this is the responsibility to pray for one another so that we will receive what is lacking in our faith, so that we will grow in our faith and trust. Hebrews 13:20 and 21, “[May] the God of peace . . . equip you”—perfect you—“in every good thing to do His will.” That’s what the equipping does: It enables you in every good thing to do His will, “working in us that which is pleasing in His sight.” So the objective here is to mature believers so that they do the will of the Lord, that they do every good thing that honors Him and everything that’s pleasing in His sight.

It takes some suffering to help us along the way, so Peter adds, “After you have suffered a . . . while, the God of . . . grace . . . will Himself perfect . . . you.” So there’s some suffering that is necessary to develop us spiritually. That’s why James says, “Count it all joy when you fall into various trials,” because they have a perfect work. Second Corinthians 7:1 says that we are to be “perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” So we can say, then, that the objective of the church is to become Christlike, to reach the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ that is a kind of maturity. That’s why the word *mature* is used in verse 13.

And a number of times, here, you see the term *grow* or *growth*. We’re all in the process of growing in sanctification toward Christlikeness. Now the apostle Paul reminds us that we’re not going to achieve it in this life. Listen to Philippians 3:12, “Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.” Christ Jesus laid hold of me to make me like Himself; that’s what He will do, and that’s what I need to pursue here in this life. “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” What’s the prize of the upward call? We’re like Christ. That is the prize; that is the goal. We won’t realize it fully until we get to glory, but in the meantime that is what we pursue in this life.

That’s a great challenge. That’s a great challenge. You have the Holy Spirit, or else it would not be possible at all to move one step forward in sanctification. But we need more help than that, so the Lord has given to the church—look at it in verse 11—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. These are the gifted men who, verse 12 says, equip the saints. First Corinthians 12:28 says, “God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers.” Now what do the gifts of men do? Perfect the saints. That’s pastoral responsibility. That was the responsibility of the prophets; that was even the calling of the apostles.

It struck me interesting—I was reading one of the principles of a church called Elevation Church this week, and this is one of their main principles. Here’s a quote from their document: “We need your seat; we are more concerned with the people we are trying to reach than the people we are trying to keep.” That’s not a church. When you are more concerned about the people that aren’t there than the people that are there, you have missed the entire point because the objective of all ministry is the perfecting of the saints.

Now let's look a little more closely at this—and I'm just going to give you an overview in the brief time that we have. The preachers of perfection, we'll call it, in verse 11. Here he presents the gifted men. And verse 11 says, "He"—literally "Himself"—"gave." These are spoils that our Lord won at the cross. He Himself, as He gave the gifts to all believers (in verse 7), He gives the gifted men. They are His gifts to His church. Some of them are apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers.

What about the apostles? Well, we know who they are. I won't go into this; we've done this many times through the years. The apostles were those whom Jesus chose. The original twelve—Judas disqualified. In Acts 1 he was replaced by Matthias. And then later on, the apostle Paul became the final apostle. And these are identified as apostles of Jesus Christ, specifically apostles of Jesus Christ. And we know that they had some very extraordinary duties and extraordinary power.

They were basically called to do three things: one, to preach. They were the first generation of preachers trained by Christ. Secondly, to attack the kingdom of Satan and cast out demons—you can see that in Mark 3. And in order to validate them as truly the representatives of the true and living God, 2 Corinthians 12:12 says they were given the power to do "signs and wonders and miracles," the apostles. How else would you know that this is a true apostle, when there are teachers everywhere? Believe the one who does the miracles; he demonstrates divine power.

Now these apostles had some very serious responsibility. Go back to chapter 2 and verse 20; it says that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets." And down in chapter 3, verse 5, it says that divine revelation has "been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit." So these first two, these first two were very unique, very unique. They were the foundation, Christ being the cornerstone. They had received divine revelation.

The apostles are identified as apostles of Christ. *Apostle* means messenger. They were sent out to proclaim Christ, to proclaim the kingdom of God, to proclaim the gospel; in the book of Acts, of course, to proclaim the cross, the Resurrection. So they are unique. There was no succession. There were no apostles after them in the sense of an apostle of Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 8, it does mention "apostles of the church"; this would be sort of a lowercase "a." This is a messenger from the church. In fact, the NAS translates it "messenger" because that's what the "apostle" word means in its generic sense.

So there were messengers of the church, 2 Corinthians 8:23, but we're talking here about apostles of Christ, companions of Jesus for three years. They will sit on twelve thrones in the kingdom according to Luke 22, and they will be identified in the glory of heaven by twelve stones in the heavenly city of Jerusalem, and their names will be on them. Now there's a little bit of a debate about whether number 12 is Matthias or Paul; I vote for Paul. But the point is this is a very, very, very small group of people, and no one ever succeeded them in that sense. They were the ones that our Lord talked to in the upper room and said, "Holy Spirit's going to come and bring to your remembrance everything I've said to you." It was through them and their associates that the New Testament was written. That's why the early church in Acts 2:42, when it got together, studied the apostles' doctrine, the apostles' doctrine—divine revelation.

Now what about the prophets? The difference seems to be bound up in the fact that the prophets

don't give doctrine, as such, but they do receive revelation from God on a practical level, like Agabus, who got a word from the Lord about what was going to happen to Paul when he got to Jerusalem, in the book of Acts. The prophets seem to be associated with a local church, with a local church. In fact when for a few years Paul was a pastor at Antioch, he is identified in Acts 13:1 as a prophet. It means a preacher.

They did—as I just showed you—a foundational role, so there was some extraordinary elements of that in the first generation. They were preachers, but they didn't have the New Testament yet. So the Lord not only made available to them the apostles' doctrine but may have given them other revelation. Certainly he did give them revelation on a practical level about life in the church. So they are foundational. The prophets might preach something that was new from the Lord, or they might reiterate something that had been revealed already to an apostle and passed on to the prophets. They seemed to be more involved with practical, pastoral, church ministry, where the apostles were like ambassadors and missionaries traveling with the gospel. So they are the foundation of the church, and it lets you know that at the very foundational level, you have some who take the gospel to the people who haven't heard it, and you have others who preach and shepherd the church, namely the apostles and prophets in that foundational generation.

Go back to verse 11, and you will meet those who replaced them: the evangelists and the pastor-teachers. The evangelist would be like an apostle; he's sent to preach the gospel. That word is not used very often, *evangelist*—only three times here; and with regard to Philip the evangelist; and Timothy, 2 Timothy 4:5, "Do the work of an evangelist." But the verb form, *euaggelizō*, and the noun form, *euaggelia*, which means the gospel or proclaiming the gospel, appears maybe a hundred times in the New Testament. So the responsibility of the evangelist was to preach the gospel; that's what the word means: to preach the good news.

In the early church there needed to be evangelists; they would be church planters. They would have the strength of the building up of the church because they would lead the charge in doing evangelism and proclaiming the gospel. They were the trainers of the congregation to do evangelism. And I've always thought, since way back when I first came to Grace over half a century ago—amazing—that the church needed evangelists. Typically, when churches would build a staff, there would never even be a discussion about an evangelist. They would hire a pastor, an assistant pastor, a youth pastor, and on and on and on they would go through the litany of people.

But where are the evangelists? Where are those who have the passion to proclaim the gospel, those who can train the congregation? So very early on we were committed to that, to having evangelists who developed evangelism training for our church, discipleship evangelism. Thousands of people, including many of you, have gone through that, who would build all kinds of evangelistic outreaches and efforts, whether in the community or beyond our church neighborhood or to the ends of the earth. We would have people whose passion was the proclamation of the gospel to the people who had not heard. And as a pastor, that was the first thing that I wanted to see. I need some evangelists because my job is to preach and teach to the saints. Somebody's got to lead the charge to reach the lost, and that is what evangelists do.

If you're going into ministry, and maybe you see yourself as an evangelist, many churches need you desperately. Or if you see yourself as a teaching pastor, you need to find some people who are basically designed by God to reach lost people. We have those kinds of people; they go door to door in this neighborhood. They go down to abortion clinics. They go down into the middle of the city down

in Hollywood, or wherever they go, and they take people with them to do personal evangelism. They go to the jails and the prisons everywhere. That's the role of evangelists.

And then teaching shepherds. Just to mention it is obvious—this is the one who feeds the flock, feeds the flock. The word *pastor* there is actually *shepherd*. Every other time this word appears in the New Testament, it's translated "shepherd," *poimēn*. It's shepherd. What does a shepherd do? Two things—well, three things: guide, guard, feed; guide, guard, feed. So these are the people who shepherd the flock of God. First Peter, Peter says, "Shepherd the flock of God." That's what teaching shepherds do.

Now I have no problem with this being sort of hyphenated: teaching-shepherd. The little *kai* there in the Greek could mean teachers, that is preachers. Why do I say that? Because in 1 Timothy chapter 5 and verse 17, we read, "The elders who rule well"—so that's a very important element of it—"are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching." So there's really no separation of preaching and teaching for the role of the shepherd, the pastor.

There's a different function: Preaching is proclamation; teaching is more didactic. And it is true that churches have teachers because that's what 1 Corinthians 12:28 says: teachers. A church should have many, many, many teachers. A church should produce teachers of the Word of God. That's what this church has done. We continually draw, attract, train people who teach the Word of God. This church is filled with teachers because that's the priority.

I tell the young men at the seminary, "You will attract the men who want to do what you want to do and what you do." Whatever it is that you do, you'll attract the people to your ministry that want to do that. So be all about preaching and teaching, and you'll raise up a force of people who can handle the Word of God and feed your flock from all different kinds of tables.

Now these evangelists and teaching pastors are really the elders of the church; the elders and the shepherds are the same. And as we read, you also rule well as an elder, so that's the word *episkopos*, or overseer, translated in the old King James "bishop." So pastor, bishop, or overseer, elder—all the same person. Shepherding describes the role of guiding, guarding, feeding; elder describes the maturity, the age; and overseer shows the responsibility to rule.

Again, 1 Timothy 5 says, "Rule well. Rule well." And unless that might seem to you a little bit heavy-handed, I would draw your attention to Hebrews 13 and verse 17; this is instruction to the congregation: "Obey your leaders and submit . . . for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account." You say, "Well, if we're supposed to obey and submit to our leaders, that gives them too much power." No, that gives them immense accountability.

Obey your leaders, submit to them, for they watch over your souls. That's what pastors do: They watch over your souls as those who will give an account. "Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you." A miserable pastor makes a miserable church and a miserable congregation. So it's a very simple structure. Early on it was apostles and prophets, now it's evangelists and pastor-teachers. Those are the preachers of perfection. So the Lord doesn't expect you to become mature, become complete, to grow into Christlikeness all on your own. He gives the church gifts in the form of gifted men for the perfecting of the saints.

So let's look, then, at the progress to perfection. We saw the preachers of perfection; here's the progress, verse 12: "For the equipping of the saints." The gifted men equip the saints. What do they equip you with? With the Word of God, right? "Preach the Word in season and out of season."

The passion of any faithful pastors, evangelists, and teaching shepherds—any of them, their passion is to see their congregation made complete. If you go back a couple pages to Galatians 4:19, Paul says, "My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you"—"I'm in labor until Christ is formed in you." In Colossians 1:28, "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. For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me." This is the pastor's task: the equipping of the saints, the perfecting of the saints. That's the first step in the path of a faithful church. And how do we do that? We do it with the Word of God. It is a serious responsibility.

In 1 Thessalonians 3, listen to the words of Paul in verse 8, "For now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord." That's what satisfied Paul: people standing firm in the Lord, growing up, being mature. And he says, "For what," verse 9, "what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account." So in Hebrews 13, it says if you don't submit to your leaders, they'll do it with grief and not with joy. Here is Paul saying to the Thessalonians, the most faithful church in the New Testament, that he is thankful to God. He doesn't even have words to say to God "in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account. [But still,] night and day, keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and complete what is lacking in your faith." "It's not that you've arrived; and I would love to be with you—you bring me so much joy—and continue to help you grow spiritually."

That's what a pastor's job is: the equipping of the saints. And the pulpit sets the pace for that, clearly. The preaching of the Word of God, the preaching of the cross, it might be foolishness to the world, but not to the church.

Now, the second step in this progression is when the saints have been equipped, they do the work of service, *diakonia*, the word from which you get "deacon." This just means ministry—ministry, all kinds of ministry—and they use their spiritual gifts to do that.

What happens in the church so often is you get lay spectators and sort of professional preachers, and that's far from the Lord's design. The preachers perfect the saints; the saints do the work of the ministry using their spiritual gifts. That's what we've done for over half a century here. And what comes from that—and I'm just going to touch lightly on it—what comes from that: the building up of the body of Christ.

How do you build a strong church? How do you do that? You have gifted men perfecting the saints who do the work of the ministry; and because they're doing the work of the ministry by using their spiritual gifts and applying all the one anothers of the New Testament, they're building each other up; and the whole body of Christ grows. The body is built up; it's built up internally and, no doubt, it's built up externally as well.

So the preachers of this perfection are identified. The progress of it, pretty simple: Perfect the saints, they do the work of the ministry, the body's built up. Then we come to the purpose of perfection.

What is the purpose? 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 that belongs to the fullness of Christ.”

What is the purpose? Christlikeness. The unity of the faith. The unity of the faith, unity around the truth, the knowledge of the Son of God. This is at the very heart of this. I don't think you can perfect the saints unless they're growing in the knowledge of the Son of God.

I think back over all the years of preaching through the gospels; twenty-five years of the fifty years here I was in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. But those aren't the only books that tell about Christ. The epistles describe His atoning work. All the sound doctrines that are around the gospel are laid out and explained in the epistles. Book of Revelation, we've gone through that a couple of times, His coming glory. We spent a few years in the Old Testament looking at all the places Christ appears. And as we grow in our knowledge of the Son of God, we come to a mature man.

The unity of the faith: We all unite around the true and revealed faith in Scripture, and we focus on the Son of God, gazing into His glory, 2 Corinthians 3:18, and are changed into His image from one level of glory to the next by the Holy Spirit, so that the church manifests the fullness of Christ. That's an absolutely magnificent picture. God is not satisfied that you go to church; He's not satisfied that a church has a certain number of people. He demands that we all come to bear His image and that collectively the whole church is Christlike; that's the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. That's what maturity looks like in the church—looks like Christ. We should be, then, showing the world Christ. Sad to say that that's not what the world sees from most churches, but that's what the Lord requires of us.

And by the way, that's a long-term process—in our case, half a century. But in any case, it's a long-term discipling process. And we've had the amazing privilege here at Grace Church of a half a century together, so that we've gone through the entire New Testament, much of the Old Testament, and you've been taught in fellowship groups, in Sunday School classes, in home Bible studies, in all kinds of endless other collections of believing people around the Word of God. And the church begins to look like Christ—it begins to think like Him and to act like Him. And that's where witness becomes powerful.

Two things come out of that, and I guess we could say these are the benefits of this perfection. First is protection. First is protection, verse 14, “As a result, we 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.” There are lots of false teachers—right?—false apostles, false pastors; they're everywhere. But the church that has the deep knowledge of the Son of God—the *epignōsis*, that's a deep knowledge, not a superficial one—and has come to the unity of the faith that is characteristic of a mature man, and comes to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ, that church is mature enough to be protected.

Like John said in 1 John, we have overcome the evil one: “You are strong . . . and you've overcome the evil one.” How did we get strong? He said, “You're a spiritual young man.” In other words, “You started out a spiritual babe, and you got tossed around. You grew and you became a spiritual young man, and you overcome the evil one.” It'd be very difficult for somebody to come in here and seduce us away into false teaching. And there are men trying every possible trick. “Trickery of men” may be contrasted by the “craftiness in deceitful scheming,” referring to Satan, because the New Testament talks about the schemes of the devil.

So how do you protect yourself from the trickery of men and the schemes of the devil? You have to be grown up; you can't be a child. And I would hasten to say that many churches are childlike, hopelessly childlike, and there are many of the leaders in those churches who are equally childlike and childish. You don't put the children in charge of anything. You don't want a church that feels like a seventh-grade event.

So the first benefit is protection. The second is proclamation. Now in our maturity, we speak the truth, verse 15, in love. And when you do that, you have reached the apex of the church's purpose in the world, right? Why are we here? To go into all the world and—do what?—preach the gospel, to live godly lives, lives marked by love that makes the gospel attractive.

We speak the truth in love, and as we do, we “grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ.” Paul kind of goes back, at that point in the middle of verse 15, and picks up sort of a summary: OK, the end of this progress is we're now “speaking the truth in love.” “The goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart.” We are “speaking the truth in love”—that's the reputation. That's what people see. That's what can only be explained supernaturally by the power of Christ.

And so he goes back as if to summarize it: We are then “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”—every individual with every individual gift—“according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.” You can only speak the truth in love if you have been built up in love. You can only be built up in love if you grow in all aspects into Christlikeness, and the body functions as He designed it to function so it grows and it becomes manifestly marked by an inhuman, supernatural love. That's the church. That's how the church is supposed to be in the world.

I just have to say how thankful I am to the Lord to have been placed in such a church. This is that kind of church; not perfect, but we're not expecting perfection. But this is a church that has followed this pattern for half a century, that has had faithful evangelists and teaching pastors, and still does, equipping the saints who continue to do the work of the ministry. The body is built up. We enjoy unity, deep knowledge of the Son of God, spiritual maturity, and all that comes with the fullness of Christ permeating everything in this church. We are not children, we are not easily seduced by false doctrine, and we are committed to speaking the truth in love; and that's because all the parts of this body are functioning, and it's being built up in love.

Even God declared the importance of love in reaching the world. He said this through the apostle John: “For God so”—what?—“loved the world.” Whatever the world needs to see in the church to make the gospel believable, whatever people might think that is, it comes down to love, the supernatural love, and that again is John 13: “By this shall all men know that you're My disciples, that you have love one for another.” We are marked by love when we speak the truth in love. That's a mature church where everybody is doing their part; and being built up, the body of Christ looks a little bit like the Lord Jesus Christ and manifests His love. That's the pattern for the church; that has to be the goal. Any other goal needs to be thrown out.

The only way to grow a church is to stay within the boundaries of Ephesians 4:11–16. That's a faithful endeavor that honors the Lord of the church. Let's bow in prayer.

Father, so much comes to mind in all these wonderful realities. Thank You for what You've done in this church, not that any of us are worthy—we're not—nor are any of us to gain the credit. We have all given so much—everything we have—to this church. But even all of that, if it were just a human effort, would amount to nothing. So we know the Spirit has been alive and working in this church through the Word, through the leadership, through the saints, and we are seeing the fruit of it. We would desire nothing more than that You would look at this church and say, "I see a reflection of Myself, not perfect, but I see at least a faint reflection of Myself in that church." That's our desire. And may the world see it as well and be drawn to You, our Savior.

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