Walking Forward

Christ gives the church gifted leaders to help believers mature and minister.

About ten years ago, I had the opportunity to participate in the planting of a new church in an area of our city with little ongoing gospel witness. It was exciting to hear the founding pastor’s vision for a new congregation. He had been commissioned by an established church that pledged to pray for and support the new work as it got started. The new church would reach out intentionally and passionately to residents in the targeted area who either had no former involvement with church or had dropped out of any church involvement years earlier.

“Launch Sunday” for the new church start went great! A large group of volunteers from the established church pitched in to serve that day as greeters, ushers, parking attendants, and instrumentalists. People from the community showed up for the meeting, and the worship service was electric. My wife and I went home afterward as excited as we had ever been about being part of a church congregation.

Then came the second weekend’s services. Most of the volunteers from the established church returned to their usual ministry roles there. Meanwhile, activities at the new church start were chaotic and disorganized to say the least! My wife and I quickly realized that if the new congregation was going to endure and grow, those of us who were mature believers and experienced church members—we were few at that time—would need to step up and serve in ways that perhaps we had never served before. Consequently, my wife and I soon found ourselves sitting on the floor and taking care of toddlers during worship times for two Sundays a month. It was a temporary assignment, but we felt called to serve in this new way until others with passion and training for providing childcare could be enlisted.

Step by step, the new congregation got better organized for ministry. Another church member enlisted and trained a group of greeters and ushers.
Volunteer musicians stepped forward to form a praise team, and a musically inclined young medical student volunteered to serve as our worship leader. By the end of the new congregation’s first year, we had moved from chaos to calm and had grown in weekly attendance. After two years, we had baptized a number of new believers and had become financially self-sustaining. We rejoiced to see clear evidence of God’s power at work in the community, particularly as we saw lives beginning to be transformed by the gospel.

Good church organization means having good leaders in place who sense God’s calling in their lives and exhibit the Spirit’s equipping to carry out gospel ministry. This theme is what Paul focused on in Ephesians 4:11-16. In this session, we will explore the truth that Christ gives His church gifted leaders to help believers grow in faith and serve Him in His mission.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 4:11-16

Ephesians 4:11-16 is a single, complex sentence in the Greek text of Ephesians. English Bible translations typically punctuate the passage into several sentences for clarity. But of more importance, this passage is one of only a few in the New Testament that teach directly about spiritual gifts—what spiritual gifts are, what purpose they serve, and who has them.

Here are brief summaries of the primary New Testament passages focused on spiritual gifts:

• 1 Corinthians 12–14—In these three chapters, Paul gave instructions to believers in Corinth who had sorely misunderstood spiritual gifts. He listed a number of examples of spiritual gifts without necessarily defining or describing them (1 Cor. 12:8-10,28). Then Paul gave serious attention to the gifts of prophecy and tongues, which seemed to have been the two most misunderstood or misused gifts among the Corinthians (see 1 Cor. 14). He emphasized that unless all spiritual gifts are energized and guided by Christlike love, they amount to nothing (1 Cor. 12).

• Romans 12:3-8—In Romans, Paul introduced himself and the gospel he proclaimed to a church he hoped to visit soon. In that context, he wrote about seven spiritual gifts, noting that “according to the grace given to us, we have different gifts” (Rom. 12:6). He made a similar emphasis in his introduction to spiritual gifts in Ephesians: “Grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Eph. 4:7).

• Ephesians 4:7-16—Many Bible students have noted that, in this passage, Paul’s emphasis was more on God’s gift to the church of certain types of
leaders rather than the spiritual gifts being given to individual believers. Nevertheless, the types of leaders described clearly possessed and exercised spiritual gifts in their leadership roles.

- 1 Peter 4:10-11—Peter also taught about believers’ receiving spiritual gifts. He called on believers to recognize that they were “stewards of the varied grace of God” (1 Pet. 4:10). He organized spiritual gifts into two broad categories: speaking and serving.

While these four passages represent the broad New Testament context for the understanding of spiritual gifts, this session based on Ephesians 4:11-16 focuses on the theme of gifted church leaders. Let us keep in mind also that the passage falls in the second main section of Ephesians (chaps. 4–6) that emphasizes practical application of the theological truths expounded in Ephesians 1–3. Moreover, 4:11-16 builds on Paul’s teachings regarding church unity and the qualities that promote this unity (4:1-10). Just as there is diversity among believers in general, diversity exists as well among church leaders. However, that which unifies believers in general—the unity of the Spirit—also keeps diversely gifted church leaders working toward the same purposes: glorify Christ, advance the gospel, and equip believers to do the work of Christian ministry.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

EQUIPPERS GIVEN (Eph. 4:11)

Paul identified several types of gifted leaders the risen and exalted Christ gave to His church. Each type of leader plays an important role in the equipping of believers for serving Christ in their daily lives.

VERSE 11

And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,

In Ephesians 4:7, Paul declared that every believer receives grace “according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” In other words, all who are saved by God’s grace through faith in Christ (2:8) are blessed also with at least one spiritual gift by which they can honor and serve Christ. Here in 4:11, Paul returned to the matter of spiritual gifts given by Christ: he himself gave. This declaration is in line with the apostle’s teaching about Christ’s exaltation (ascension). As the victorious King, Christ gave gifts to His subjects.

Rather than speaking of the types of spiritual gifts Christ gave His people, Paul focused instead on the variety of gifted leaders Christ gave the church.
Identified first in the list of church leaders are apostles. The literal meaning of the word *apostle* is “one who is sent out.” It refers to being commissioned, authorized, and sent out by someone to deliver a message or carry out a task. Thus, Jesus used this term in reference to the twelve disciples whom He first sent out to preach, heal, and cast out evil spirits (Mark 3:13-19). One apostle, Judas Iscariot, betrayed Jesus and later hung himself, prompting the others after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension to select a replacement apostle (Acts 1:21-26). The replacement had to be a follower of Christ during Jesus’ earthly ministry and would be an additional witness of the reality of the resurrection.

Of course, Paul testified to his own divine calling as an apostle following his conversion (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 9:1-2; Gal. 1:1; 2:7-8). Thus, the early apostles were authorized and sent out by the risen Lord to preach the gospel and make disciples of all the nations. They established and guided the first churches and had Christ’s authority to speak and to write. In Ephesians 2:20, Paul wrote that the church was being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. The writings of the apostles eventually were recognized as the inspired Scriptures of the New Testament. While a few Christian groups today continue to use the title *apostle* in reference to a primary church leader, many believers acknowledge that Christ’s gift of *apostles* was no longer necessary after the original apostles died and the biblical canon of Scripture was complete.

**Prophets** in the New Testament were those who—like the Old Testament prophets before them—expounded God’s message to His people. Bible scholars have expressed differing views on the gift of prophets. Some hold that prophets in the early church era were foundational leaders who—although not apostles—also taught and led churches with authority. In this sense, both the apostles and the prophets were foundational. Other scholars contend that prophets were more numerous than apostles and functioned in local Christian congregations as proclaimers of the gospel message (forth-tellers) as well as messages regarding future trends and events (foretellers). A man named Agabus is a New Testament example of such prophets (see Acts 11:27-28).

We can be certain that with the completion of the writings in our New Testament, the work of apostles and prophets in the primary sense is complete. Most conservative, evangelical Bible scholars today agree there are no more prophets who speak (or write) new Scripture that is authoritative for all Christians.

The Greek term rendered *evangelists* literally means “those who tell good news (gospel).” These leaders demonstrated giftedness in proclaiming the gospel in compelling ways especially to unbelievers. Philip and Timothy are New Testament examples of this type of gifted leader (Acts 21:8; 2 Tim. 4:5).
While all believers are called to be ready to testify of their salvation in Christ, evangelists are especially effective in this regard and are called to such a ministry. Perhaps these leaders also served by instructing other believers in ways to share their faith. After all, Paul indicated that all of these gifted leaders were responsible for “equipping the saints for the work of ministry” (4:12). While Paul likely had in mind evangelists who served a single congregation, there were also itinerant evangelists who traveled to new places and people groups, preaching the gospel in various settings. In modern times, evangelists such as the late Billy Graham and others have fulfilled and continue to fulfill this type of ministry leadership to the benefit of many churches in an area.

Bible students debate whether Paul had in mind one type or two types of leaders in the phrase some pastors and teachers. The Greek term rendered pastors literally means “shepherds,” those who tend and protect a flock of sheep. Because Christ referred to Himself as “the good shepherd” (John 10:14), the term easily became applied to those who were given the responsibility of leading, caring for, and protecting Christ’s followers in the church (see Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2-3). The English term pastor derives from the ancient Latin word that means “shepherd.” Some scholars conclude that in Ephesians 4:11, Paul was referring to the same kind of congregational leaders he called “overseers” or “elders” in other passages (1 Tim. 3:1-2; Titus 1:6-7). Among Baptists in the modern era, the title pastor continues to be used in reference to the leader (or leaders) entrusted with the care of a local church congregation.

The title teachers referred to church leaders who were responsible for instructing a congregation concerning the Scriptures as well as the gospel message and its related doctrinal truths. (We can imagine that such a church leader in the Ephesian church was responsible for teaching the contents of Paul’s letter to the congregation on a regular basis—much like we today explore the Letter to the Ephesians again and again in sermons and Bible study sessions.) Thus, whether Paul was referring to one type of leader with dual responsibilities (teaching pastors) or to two types of church leaders, his point was that Christ gave churches the types of gifted leaders they need for spiritual growth.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

How are pastors and evangelists alike and different? In what ways are all believers responsible to participate in evangelism? In caring for the church? In studying and teaching God’s Word? What do you consider to be your primary spiritual gift? How are you using it?
TO MOVE BELIEVERS FORWARD (Eph. 4:12-14)

The purpose of gifted leaders is for equipping and building up the church. The goal is for believers to reach maturity in doing the work of ministry.

VERSE 12

equipping the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ,

Why did Christ give gifted leaders to the church? Paul described the intermediate purpose as that of equipping the saints. The Greek term translated equipping suggests being made fit for carrying out an important responsibility. The term saints refers to all believers as being set apart for salvation in Christ and service to Him (see Eph. 1:1).

For what service are believers to be equipped? Paul’s answer was clear: for the work of ministry. The Greek word rendered work is a general term meaning “intentional effort.” The word rendered ministry refers to serving others for their benefit. In the context of the church, ministry involves helping others come to know and believe in Christ and helping others in ways that Christ Himself served—tending to the sick, caring for the destitute and vulnerable (widows and orphans, for example), and pushing back against entrenched evil spirits, to name a few.

Paul had previously referred to himself as a “servant” (3:7). But here he made it clear that all believers have been entrusted with ministry responsibilities. While Christ gave the church gifted leaders to equip the saints, all of God’s people have work they can do in the life of the church. Church members are not spectators in the work of ministry; they are participants.

The ultimate purpose of gifted leaders, Paul concluded, was to build up the body of Christ—that is, the church (see 1:23; 2:16; 4:4). The apostle had previously declared that the one body of Christ, the church, was an established reality. Yet that body can grow and be strengthened as it is built up. Here, Paul began referring to practical ways in which the church develops over time. He used the idea of a child’s growing over time into mature adulthood as an illustration. However, as mentioned previously, the Greek term rendered build up was primarily an architectural term. (See 2:20-22 for Paul’s architectural analogy of the church as an edifice being built stone by stone on a solid foundation.) In 4:12, Paul probably used the term more in the sense of being strengthened or edified. Each congregation—therefore the worldwide body of Christ—develops and grows stronger as individual believers (including church leaders) use their spiritual gifts in service to their fellow believers, their communities, and indeed to the nations of the world. Paul clearly taught an “every member is a minister” approach to the church.
VERSE 13

until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness.

Paul went on to explain the ultimate aims of Christ’s giving the church gifted leaders, of all the saints participating in the church’s ministry, and of the church’s being built up. The first aim is that all believers would reach unity in the faith. In one sense, unity in the faith has been achieved already through the death of Christ. Paul had been at pains to explain that the previous barriers separating people—Jews and Gentiles, for example—from one another had been demolished (2:11-22). In another sense, church unity remains an ongoing work of the Spirit. The goal for all believers is to enjoy consistently the unity or oneness with one another that Paul urged in 4:3. He believed that this goal could and would be achieved. By the term the faith, Paul was referring to the body of truths that Christians affirm (4:3,5).

To make it clear that unity is not achieved merely when people agree to a set of truths, the apostle went on to state a second aim for all believers: the knowledge of God’s Son. Knowledge of a person is deeper than knowledge of facts. The knowledge of Christ requires the help of the Spirit. Paul had prayed in 1:17 that believers might experience “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him.” He spoke here about knowing God’s Son (literally, “the Son of God”). Paul rarely used the phrase Son of God about Christ, so some Bible students have concluded that Paul used the phrase here to emphasize the almost unbelievable privilege believers have of having a personal relationship with God through faith in the Son.

Returning to the analogy of a human body (4:12), Paul phrased the final goal as growing into maturity. The fact of a human being’s growing from childhood to maturity is easily observed. Paul’s words about maturity were in terms of reaching the stature measured by Christ’s fullness. The apostle was speaking of believers’ moving toward Christlikeness, not physical growth. In Paul’s view, believers not only grow in knowing God’s Son personally but also move toward being completely like the Son of God in our character.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Unity” on page 1621 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. What does it mean for believers to keep the unity of the Spirit and to reach unity in the faith? How are you contributing to your church’s keeping the unity of the Spirit?
VERSE 14

Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit.

In contrast to mature adulthood is the immaturity of little children. In this setting, the apostle used childhood in a negative sense to refer to the instability and ignorance of children. There are other New Testament passages in which being childlike is commended as a positive virtue. For example, Jesus said that receiving His kingdom must be done like a child (Luke 18:17). Further, Peter wrote that believers should crave the milk of the word like infants (1 Pet. 2:2). Childlike qualities such as dependence and humility are quite distinct from childishness.

Paul then moved to another analogy—boats being tossed on a stormy sea. He described the experience of being tossed by the waves and blown around. By the time Paul wrote Ephesians, he had personally endured a shipwreck at sea, as described in Acts 27. He knew of what he spoke when he compared that experience with a believer’s being in grave spiritual danger of false teaching.

The phrase every wind of teaching suggests the latest religious fads or popular preachers who are intent on gaining a following. They were around in Paul’s day as well as in our day.

The phrase human cunning with cleverness points to those who intentionally manipulate people, tricking them for dishonest gain. Sadly, television has greatly magnified the opportunities for this.

The phrase techniques of deceit points to the demonic or devilish inspiration of those who go about unsettling immature believers. Paul developed this idea further in 1 Timothy 4:1-2.

EXPLORE FURTHER

How does the illustration of a stormy sea help you understand spiritual immaturity? How can you guard against being manipulated spiritually? Reflect on whether there are others whom you could assist in their spiritual journeys so as to be stable and not blown about in their faith.

AS A BODY (Eph. 4:15-16)

Paul reminded the recipients of his letter that maturity is demonstrated by confident faith in Christ as well as by all believers growing in service.
VERSE 15

But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into him who is the head—Christ.

Having warned believers against being led astray by false teachers, Paul encouraged them to be known for speaking the truth in love. The single Greek word rendered by the phrase speaking the truth literally means “truthing.” The concept refers not only to truth in speech but also to integrity in actions—in other words, “doing the truth” both in words and deeds.

All of the gifted leaders Paul listed in 4:11 carried out their varied ministries by means of speech and actions. Such leaders needed to be committed to the truths of the gospel and were expected to communicate those truths to other believers. The apostle was thinking beyond just expectations for church leaders, however. In this context he was addressing all believers regarding Christ’s expectations that they would speak and live in Christlike integrity.

The phrase in love is a crucial descriptor for believers. It is possible to speak the truth in such a tone or in such a setting so that the truth is used more like a hammer than a healing agent. Paul urged that believers’ unequivocal commitment to the truth be always motivated and guided by Christlike love.

In the church—then and now—truth and love work best when they work together. Sadly, some believers seem to thrive on getting the truth out no matter what collateral damage their crusade might cause. Other believers sometimes confuse genuine love with a mushy, live-and-let-live attitude of permissiveness. Neither of these extremes describes the true nature of Christlike love. Christ boldly called out the hypocrisy of the temple leadership when He overturned the moneychangers’ tables and drove out those who had turned God’s house of prayer into a den of thieves (Matt. 21:12-13). Only days later, however, Christ prayed while on the cross that the Father might forgive those who crucified Him, a group that included some of the same temple officials He had previously confronted. Christlike love stands for the truth; Christ’s truth is motivated and energized by genuine love.

In 4:13, Paul stated that the ultimate aim of gifted teachers who equip the saints to minister and to build up the church is for all to be “growing into maturity.” Here in 4:15 he restated that aim with a slightly different emphasis. Growth, Paul insisted, happens only when the body of Christ (the church) remains in close relationship to the head—Christ. Paul’s words let us grow exhorted all believers to keep on growing toward full Christlikeness. This imagery is a stark contrast to the analogy of a storm-tossed boat on a roiling sea. Rather than instability, true Christian growth brings stability. Rather than immaturity, it aims for spiritual maturity in every way. All aspects of our lives as believers grow and thrive in our ongoing faith-relationship with Christ.
VERSE 16

From him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building up itself in love by the proper working of each individual part.

Paul expanded the application of his physical growth analogy to the spiritual growth of believers individually and churches collectively. Just as a properly functioning and growing physical body depends vitally on the head, even so the body of Christ (the church) can function and grow properly only when believers are vitally connected to Christ. We get our spiritual nourishment and direction from him (Christ).

Then Paul addressed the reality that the body of Christ is fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament. The root of the Greek term rendered fitted is the basis of our English word harmony. The term rendered knit together (“compacted,” KJV; “held together,” ESV; NIV) can refer to the reconciliation of people who were previously quarreling. Both terms point to a situation of harmonious cooperation under the direction of another, who in the church’s case is Christ.

All parts of the human body are important to its proper functioning and growth. Even so, in the church every believer—leaders and followers alike—are important parts of the body of Christ and contribute to its proper functioning and spiritual growth. Christ the Lord provides direction, but the members of His body are expected to respond to His direction and participate in the church’s ministry.

In the same way that every believer plays a role in Christ’s body, even so each church congregation is expected to participate in the church’s God-given mission under Christ’s lordship and with the Spirit’s power. No outside hierarchy or agency is necessary for a local church to grow and be healthy, although supporting organizations can provide additional resources and help. Each congregation is to build itself up in love. Unity and maturity succeed only by the proper working of each individual part. Let us be committed as individual believers and as churches to this ultimate aim!

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Body” on pages 229–230 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. What steps can you take to promote your church’s submission to Christ’s headship? To do your part as an individual believer to strengthen your church’s spiritual maturity?