



THE CALL TO MATURITY

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 Ephesians 4:12-16
 Fourth Message
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We are living in an age in which people seem bent on trying to turn back the aging process. Every generation resists change. We fight growing up and growing old. We don't want to take on responsibility and commitments. The apostle's call to Christians in Ephesians, however, is that we "we are to *grow up* in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ" (4:15b).

As we have seen in earlier studies, Paul exhorts Christians to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling by which you have been called" (4:1). We have learned that the worthy walk is, first, a call to community, a call for believers to relate to each other with character. Second, the worthy walk is a call to unity. We are called to maintain the central truths of our faith in Jesus. And third, the worthy walk is a call to diversity. Even though we are unified around Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, every believer is gifted in different ways, and each one has a unique contribution to make to the body of Christ.

Finally, as we will see today, the call to walk worthy is a call to maturity. Listen to the words of the apostle:

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. (Eph 4:11-16, NASB)

Apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers possess the equipping or support gifts; the role of the pastor-teacher is to equip the saints unto the work of service; and the saints are called to build up the body of Christ. The reason these diverse gifts are given, and the goal for the proper functioning of the body, is that it might grow and be built up. In other words, the goal of diversity is maturity. Here Paul uses the metaphors of

building and growing to make his point.

What does it mean for a Christian to be mature? Three phrases define Christian maturity: "the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God"; "a mature man"; "the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ." These phrases all point to the same thing: we grow up to the fullness of Christ, to the adult representation of Jesus, to be his body.

Notice that this call to maturity is not made to just individual believers. Paul uses the words "we all." All of us together, corporately, are growing to maturity. This is the goal for the Church. It is not how much is given in the offering, nor is it the number of people coming on Sunday morning. The goal is not to elect Christian politicians, either.

The goal is not even evangelism *per se*. We must be evangelistic in our outlook, of course, but that is not our ultimate goal. The goal is to present every man and woman complete in Christ. We enter the Church as babes in Christ. We are joined to one another by the Spirit. We feed together on the Word. We develop and use our spiritual gifts. And we grow together into the fullness of Christ.

Earlier in chapter 4, Paul said that as Christians we should maintain the unity of the spirit. Here we see that we are to attain the unity of faith. Maturity is the goal of the body of Christ. Spiritual gifts are given in great diversity to build the new temple in which God dwells.

The apostle says that we need to grow into maturity so that we might no longer be children: "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" (4:14).

Children are vulnerable, unsettled, gullible, easily distracted and restless. If we remain spiritual children, then, like a tiny boat adrift on the ocean, we will be tossed about and carried away by every new teaching that comes along. "Trickery" means "dice-playing"; "craftiness" means "a trickery involving evil cunning." If we remain children we will be easy prey to those who are scheming to turn us aside. If we do not go on to maturity, our spiritual walk will be anchor-less, unsettled and lacking direction. We will be at the mercy of a roll of the dice.

In every generation some new cult or new teaching comes along seeking to attract the gullible. These high-control people are easy to recognize: Jesus is not the center of their teaching, and their focus is not the Word of God. Christians need to be mature so that they can spot these smooth-talking salesmen.

How then do we go on to maturity? Paul gives us instruction in verses 15 and 16: "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" (Eph 4:15-16).

Notice the main clause in these verses, "the whole body...causes the growth of the body." Again we are reminded that we are all in this together. We are either growing as a body or stagnating as a body.

Let me offer some thoughts of how Christians grow to maturity.

1. Our focus must remain on the Head.

We are growing up into Christ, to be like him. Therefore we must focus on him and encourage others to do likewise. Christ is the key to eternal life.

2. We must maintain a balance of truth and love.

We need these two things: truth and love. And we need to keep a healthy balance between them, never sacrificing one for the other. This is hard to do, but it's necessary for our growth. It's tempting to remain children, to hold onto childish dependencies. Because we are blind to the obstacles to our spiritual growth we need brothers and sisters to come alongside to help keep us on track. Speaking the truth in love does not mean judging people or being critical of them. It means that we care enough to be honest with them. When we don't speak the truth in love the results are disastrous for the body of Christ.

3. We all make our individual contributions for the good of the whole.

"...being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part" (4:16a). The growth of the body requires that all of us do our part. The body is made up of arms, legs, feet, eyes and ears. Every Christian makes an important contribution to the whole.

4. We undergird everything we do in love.

These two little words "in love" keep appearing in this letter. Paul uses them throughout, and three times in the first sixteen verses of chapter 4: "in love He predestined us to adoption as sons" (1:4); "being rooted and grounded in love" (3:17); "to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge" (3:19); "showing tolerance for one another in love" (4:2); "speaking the truth in love" (4:15); "the building up of itself in love" (4:16); "walk in love" (5:2).

Love is the motivation for community, for unity, for diversity and for maturity. The love of God is what got us here in the first place, and it is love that will get us through to the end, to that "eternal weight of glory" that lies ahead.

Are we committed to growing and maturing, both individually and corporately? Growing can be painful and risky. We may have to let God break us and expose us, and that can be a scary thing. But God wants to bring us to maturity. We should desire nothing less.

If we accept this vision, and commit ourselves to community, the Lord will do the rest. He is committed to us and to our growth in Christ. As we begin to use the gifts that he has given us through the Holy Spirit, as we become an active part of the Christian community, placing ourselves under the Word of God, then we are sure to grow. God will see to that.

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