

Moving People toward Christ, Part 3 -- Equip

Ephesians 4:1-16

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Please turn with me to Ephesians 4. We've been doing a mini-series this summer called "Moving People toward Christ." Everyone is moving in some direction. Hopefully this series has helped prepare you to be more involved in moving people toward Christ. People aren't blank slates, but are chock full of ideas and goals. Our desire is to point them to the realities of God of which they may not be aware. This is the calling of the church. We are God's instrument to fulfill His eternal purpose of drawing people to Himself. So let's hear God's Word together as we read Ephesians 4:1-16:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. ⁷ But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

⁸ Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." ⁹ (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)

¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held

together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Thank You, God, for Your Word that You've written through men You chose and appointed. Holy Spirit, we ask for Your help to open our eyes to see glorious things about our Father in heaven and the Lord Jesus Christ and about Your work in the church. May our hearts be moved closer to Your commissioning. In Christ's name. Amen.

When we start to speak about growing the church, some people may think we're referring to Marketing 101, assuming church is like a business. And yes, some churches do operate that way, even watering down Scripture to appeal to more potential members. But that's not what we mean when we talk about growth. Growth is healthy and glorifies God. The Bible often speaks about growth. When God first created Adam and Eve, He told them to multiply and fill the earth. He wants His Kingdom to grow—both in numbers and in spiritual growth toward godliness.

God notices numbers. The book of Acts often records the number of people who came to believe in Christ. Jesus gave parables about growth, saying the Word of God is like seed that produces fruit—30, 60, 100-fold. The Word of God is meant to grow us and change us. Our church attendance isn't a box to be checked, but a place to hear God's Word taught. God's purpose is to mature us and to spread His glory.

So let's consider how the church grows. As we see in Ephesians 4, the church grows when it is unified around the gospel and when everyone is involved in each other's lives. People start in many different places, so growth looks different in different people. Some people start at negative ten and are only beginning to think about following Christ. So part of our mission is to take them from unbelief to belief. Next, these people need to be established in their faith, learning about the truths of God's Word. After that, growth comes through becoming more mature leaders, equipped to build up people both in the church and in the world.

So God is always moving us toward Christ, which glorifies God and is exciting for us. As Paul explains in Ephesians 4, church growth happens as the church is unified and as we learn to help each other mature. You could say that in this chapter Paul is seeking to mobilize us to be involved in each other's lives, deliberately seeking to ease any relational tensions that may exist. Notice in verse 14 and following that there is definite opposition to this growth: human cunning and winds of doctrine. The church is in a hostile environment. How can we thrive here?

Ephesians 4 marks a clear shift in Paul's letter. We see in verse one the word "therefore," which ties what Paul will be writing to what he's already written. In the first chapters he describes the wonder of what Christ has done for us. So in Ephesians 4-6, Paul discusses how we

should live in light of what Christ did. We are to do that, but not this. Because we've been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, because we've been united with Christ—we've died and been raised and are seated with Him—we are now to walk in a manner worthy of these truths.

Had Paul begun his letter with these instructions, we might have been disillusioned. We would have to ask, "Where's the power to live this way?" But he explains the gospel clearly in chapter three, so then chapters four through six show us how to apply the gospel. Gospel doctrine leads to gospel practice. It's meant to do something powerful in our lives that results in a different way of life. We are a new kind of humanity. Being identified with Christ means we look different than we used to look. As a people whom Christ has gathered around Himself—whom He purchased and redeemed and adopted—we are now governed by Him as Lord. As His church, He has given us an eternal purpose.

What does He expect of us? To put it briefly, He calls us to love each other and become involved in His work. We are called to unity among ourselves and partnership with Jesus. But many of us have experienced a gap between what we know we are called to and what we actually do. Maybe you've just finished reading Ephesians 1-3 and are rejoicing in what God has done for you. Your mind may even have been blown by the height and depth of what Christ accomplished. That part of Ephesians is incredibly encouraging. But then maybe in your personal life you find yourself grumpy, unloving, without humility, not caring for others. There seems to be a huge gap between what should be and what is.

Paul seeks to close this gap for us, moving our convictions into realities. He wants to ground us in our new identity and new security that's available in Christ, and then he hopes to fuel us into living that out. He's describing what it looks like to reflect Jesus in our world.

Imagine the world as being like a hijacked airplane. You're on that plane and you know you have a responsibility to do something. Paul is saying, "Okay, this is not a time to sit back and let someone else hijack the plane." The world needs Christ and we're saying, "Let's roll. Let's get involved. Let's live so people will know Who He is."

Consider the tone of the letter and Paul's personal circumstances. He's in prison, but he writes with urgency. Those who read his letter realized he was suffering for the cause of Christ. He knew how serious these things were, but he also was firmly convinced of the truth of the gospel. He was literally begging the Ephesians to walk worthy of their calling. He was pleading with them to consider the significance of their relationship with Jesus. He could have commanded them, or he might have chosen to act gruff and upset. He could have mocked or shamed them into action. But instead he chose to entreat them to walk in a manner worthy of

their calling. He was very open about the cost of following Christ. He was clear: this walk could end with imprisonment; it could involve real suffering. Yet even in the face of these realities, Paul urged people to be obedient to live out their faith.

I've been reading some of the background stories regarding the recent "white supremacist" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. I wondered how the local pastors were responding. After all, the rally had been publicized in advance and they knew it was coming. I learned that a group of pastors actually formed a coalition, although I don't know all the details. One man, a Rev. Edwards, pastors a church called Mt. Zion First African Baptist Church, right down the street from the University of Virginia. He gathered with some other pastors from near the university to pray. Rev. Edwards is about 65 years old and has worked in that area for 37 years. The last thing he probably wanted to do was get involved in a scuffle with a bunch of neo-Nazis. He was hoping they could simply hold a prayer meeting.

As they contemplated the message that was to be communicated at the rally, they realized they couldn't just stand back. So they decided to form a coalition to do their own non-violent protesting. They wrote an open letter to state how they viewed the white supremacy message—that it was against creation and was anti-gospel. They also wanted to communicate by their actions what the gospel does to unite people as one. They hoped in this way to model the power of the gospel.

Listen to what they put in their letter, in bold and italics: "There's an extremely high potential for physical violence and brutality directed at our community." But they urged people to join them in the face of these risks. I think Paul is saying something similar. He's saying, "There's high potential that you'll be imprisoned and hated. There will probably be a cost if you follow Christ. But still, get involved. Come and follow Jesus."

So let me re-emphasize this. For the church to grow, it requires both an emphasis on unity in the gospel and active involvement in each other's lives. What are the characteristics of unity? Paul directly addresses the reality of relational conflict. As he moves from the glories of the gospel to the subject of active ministry, the first thing he notices is that there will be tension in the room. The people have a hard time getting along.

So the first requirements for dealing with this are humility, gentleness and patience (verse two). They needed to bear with each other, that is, to allow for the faults of each other. They needed to accept failures without rejection. They should realize that change is hard and would take time. Think about the diversity of people God has brought together in His body, the church. We come from many nations, many racial backgrounds, family backgrounds, religious backgrounds. We're men and women. But God has brought us together to be one in Christ.

The first thing we're told to do is be humble. The church is a work in progress and isn't built overnight. C.S. Lewis said this about humility: "It's not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less." Gentleness implies loving strength, a governed self-control. Patience is knowing our limits; we are limited in what we know. We don't need to win every argument or conversation. These are the qualities that allow us to bear with one another.

How then does Paul tell us to handle conflicts, in that we are so diverse in every way? We should consider how the gospel actually defines us. For this reason, a Moroccan Christian will feel closer to an American Christian than he will to a Moroccan Muslim because of the identity we all receive in Christ. This is what unites us and it transcends all the different backgrounds, eliminating the natural tensions that exist. Because we're also humble, we are able to learn from each other. Americans learn from the African church and the Asian church and even different churches in our neighborhoods. We pay attention to how each group has come to understand Christ. We are a diverse community and God has gifted each one of us.

Notice however that Paul is emphasizing unity, not uniformity. When you become a Christian, it's not like becoming a UPS driver, where everyone has to wear the same brown uniform, drive the same brown truck and deliver packages the same way. God is glorified by our variety. (No offense to those of you who work at UPS.) God delights in our variety and our differences. So we certainly don't need to become divided over these differences, nor should we feel superior to those who aren't like us. On the other hand, we can be united around the truth of the gospel. That's where the big things are in place. You're a child of God. He's your Father and it's all about Him. Plus we need to keep reminding ourselves about our own growth.

My most embarrassing trait, I'll admit, is that I'm so very slow to change. I need this church to help me grow. I need people to hold me accountable, to give me wisdom, to teach me things I don't know, to walk with me and be patient with me. There's no chance I'll change on my own if I'm on an island.

Listen to what Paul is doing in Ephesians 4:4-6. He says there's one body, that is, one church, and one Spirit. Notice the Trinitarian reference here: "*There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*" There are seven "ones" here, but they are arranged around the Trinity: the Spirit, the Lord and God the Father. This is backward from our traditional creeds, which would list Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Paul probably is indicating here how our unity is rooted in God's unity. He is both diverse and unified, and we as a church reflect that. To the extent that we love each other, we reflect the

love in the Trinity. The church is a community that reflects its Creator. This pushes us to realize that the foundation of our unity is centered on Who God is. The Spirit indwells the body; therefore we as the church are God's dwelling place on earth. The one hope refers to the fact that the Spirit guarantees our inheritance. The one faith is the body of knowledge about Who Christ is and the story of our salvation. You might think Paul wouldn't have mentioned the one baptism, because that particular area can be divisive. but he's talking about our common identity in Christ even in the face of our differences. Finally, his mention of one God reminds us that it's all about Him. He's over all, through all and in all. It's not about us. It's not about our church. It's really about Him—we're His body reflecting Him on earth, and He wants us to reflect Him well through our unity in diversity. God's purpose and glory is to grow the church, so that people might be saved.

Verse three says we're to be eager for this. We need to be intentional about this, praying for it and paying attention to the growth He desires. Maybe there's a person in the building you haven't met. Don't be shy. Rather, be eager for unity. Be eager to know their names, their kids' names. Sometimes kids are hard to get hold of, but we should pursue them and get to know them. We're one body. There is a special togetherness the Holy Spirit can create here, where we are one in the bond of peace. This is a powerful testimony of what God can do in a church, where people are so different and yet are in unity.

In 4:1-6, Paul talks about growing in unity and diversity, centering on Who God is. Then in verse seven, we see another shift. Now we see that Christ also involves us. He's seated on His throne in heaven, but He has a strategy for the church that's laid out in verses 4:7-16. First, through His generosity He has given grace to the church. Verse seven, "*But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.*" In the previous verses, the word "one" referred to the universal church. Now Paul is talking about you and me as individuals. The grace he's speaking of isn't saving grace, but rather the gifts that He gives by grace which are measured out individually based on what is needed to accomplish what he calls each of us to do. It's not about us; it's about the work He wants to do through us. Verse eight says, "*He gave gifts to men...*" and verse 11 says, "*He gave the apostles, the prophets the evangelists, the pastors and teachers...*" The gifts Christ has given us from heaven are actually these people—you and me and others.

The series of people listed in verse 11 are actually different kinds of Bible teachers. Earlier in Ephesians 2:19-20, Paul describes the church as the "*the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.*" Then in Ephesians 3:5 he says that the mystery of the gospel "*has now been revealed to his holy apostles*

and prophets by the Spirit.” If you’re wondering why he mentions apostles first, I think what he’s implying is that Christ is the hinge between the Old and New Testaments, and the apostles were introducing Christ.

The people in this series have teaching gifts that are for the benefit of the church. So it follows that one of the ways God is building His church is through the teaching of the Word. Let’s say you’re telling your neighbor about something you’ve read in the Bible. That’s God’s way of reaching people and advancing His Kingdom—through the gospel and the Word of God. We emphasize the Word here at NCBC so you’ll have every opportunity to grow, learn and be equipped. You are equally ministers in the body. Our meetings on Sunday mornings are designed to help you live out your faith in this world.

Then in verse 12 we see that all of this is designed to equip the people to equip others. You know you’re a disciple if you’ve made a disciple who makes a disciple. To be equipped means to be furnished or prepared, so a person is able to fulfill their assignments. This is the goal of every Bible study and small group—to help people grow personally and to equip them for outreach.

This the strategy Christ designed and it will be His strategy for the church until the end of history. As it says in verse 13, the church is to be built up *“until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”* We’re going to be active in this work until the Lord returns. And Christ is accomplishing this all through the Holy Spirit, through the Word of God, and through His people who are praying. The ongoing work of the church is God’s instrument on earth. By the Spirit, we are to draw people to follow Him, make disciples and then help them grow.

The reason for this work is in verse 14: God wants us to *“no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.”* We’re in a hostile environment and part of our work is to rescue people who are caught up in these deceptions. We are to free them from the domain of darkness, so they also might experience the new life in Christ. Likewise, we ourselves have rough terrain in our lives. We have issues such as anger that represent places God wants us to grow. We need the body to help us mature in the faith as well.

Notice that the metaphor of children is usually a positive metaphor in Scripture. We are to enter the Kingdom of God like a child. But here the implication is negative. It’s like an adult wearing diapers. It’s not a pretty scene. This person is still being bottle fed when he should be acting like an adult. The image of being easily tossed to and fro by waves refers to a person who has no anchor. Think of someone being buffeted by the wind and waves. Their hair is frazzled,

and you're a beautician. You need to calm that hair down. You need to help ground them, giving them an anchor in Christ.

We're on a rescue mission. This is like a Katrina issue. We should be "all hands on deck." We're rescuing each other and others. There's no way a small groups of elders is going to care for the whole church. Everyone needs to get involved in order to follow up with all the struggles among us. We need to be praying for one another and sharing with each other. This is what God has called us to do.

I think it's interesting that it is Jesus Who's calling us. Let's go back to verses 4:8-10. Verse eight is a quote from Psalm 68 that says, "*When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.*" Originally Psalm 68 was speaking about Yahweh rescuing Israel out of their Egyptian captivity. Now it's being applied to Jesus Christ—Yahweh clothed in flesh—and He's rescuing a people who also had been captive. He's leading a victory train and He's bringing them up into the heavenlies.

Then it says, "And he gave gifts to men..." I really think what he's talking about here—and in verse 11 when he says He gave the apostles—is giving the ones He's rescued back to the church. In a sense He sends them back to earth so they themselves are the gift to this world.

There's a parenthesis in verses 9-10 that says, "*(In saying, 'He ascended,' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)*"

So for Him to ascend means He first had to descend. He's God. He left His original home and came to earth in the Incarnation, lived a perfect life, died a death for our salvation, rose from the dead in victory, and then all who trust in Him are the captives He's rescued. He's now in the heavens where He fills all things. Jesus' Kingdom is over all the earth.

And what is His Kingdom agenda? We must look at the church to see what His Kingdom looks like. We're to reflect His Kingdom values. It's an upside down Kingdom. We're not here to rule in power, but rather to serve in humility. We are to be gracious and loving, which are different qualities than exist in other kingdoms. We get along with each other and minister to each other. We build each other up, not tearing them down to build ourselves up. So in that sense it's a reverse kingdom. We're gifted by God's grace and we're the gift He's given to each other and to the world. So we're united under His Kingdom authority. It's important for you to realize that if you're not interested in this call, you're refusing to follow your Lord and Savior. He's calling you to be part of the central purpose of the church, which is the task of drawing all nations to worship Him until that great Day.

So what are some of the implications of this? Ask yourself, “How am I to get involved? What’s my role in this?” There is no one here who is not a gift of God. You’re gold—for us, for each other. You’re valuable to the body. Every joint and ligament needs to be in working order. You’re to build up the body so no one is missing. I need your gifts. Who else is going to share wisdom with you or encourage you or give you direction? Who else is going to be patient with you or hold you accountable or teach you? This is where the body of Christ functions best. You have a role to play in someone’s life.

That’s why you want to learn. That’s why you want to read your Bible. It’s not just for you, but for others as well. You need things to share. You need to be equipped to help others. Don’t just look forward toward Jesus; look around you as well. How are other people moving toward Christ? And look behind you to those who haven’t even found Him yet. In other words, become aware. Your gift is to be used for the Lord Jesus Himself.

You can read about the gifts in Romans, 1 Corinthians and 1 Peter. There are something like 20 different gifts mentioned in these texts. But I think they’re just illustrative of the variety of what God has given us in the body of Christ. And this reminds us that no one is better than anyone else. We’re all just gifted differently. Christ has measured out the gifts. He’s decided who gets what and in what measure. So there’s no superiority in the room. It’s all a shared ministry around the lordship of Christ.

The Reformation emphasized the priesthood of all believers, so we don’t need a priest to go to God for us. We can go directly to Jesus. He’s the one Mediator between God and man. That’s a really important theme the Reformation recognized. But also I think we might need a new reformation that acknowledges “every member ministry.” We’re not just priests; we’re also all ministers. You have a gift for works of ministry. That should grip your heart—you’re a minister in God’s world to do His work.

So think what this means. On the one hand, the church is holy and set apart. We are saints who have been cleansed by Christ’s blood and credited with His righteousness. Yet we’re still growing. We’re not perfected yet. We’re the household of God, but we’re still in the renovation phase. Also we’re a ‘catholic’ church, meaning we’re part of the universal church. In one sense our local church is a church. Even a home church is still the body of Christ. But we’re also part of the ‘catholic’ church, the entire universal church. When you meet people who attend a different gospel-believing congregation, you’re part of them as well. We’re part of the same body and have the same identity. In addition, the church is an apostolic church. It was built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets and ultimately it’s a church built on the Word of God.

Another implication of these scriptures is that Christ is the head of the church. That means He has authority and power, giving direction to everyone who is part of His body. We're to reflect Him. Because the church can still be either built up or torn down, we need to ask ourselves, "Am I adding to the church? Is this comment I'm about to make going to build this person up, or am I going to tear them down?" I need to repent of anything that would tear down another Christian. Christ calls me to pray for them and to build them up.

Notice that the book of Ephesians wasn't just written to the leaders. It was written to an entire congregation. The whole book is for every believer. Therefore, when Paul says, "Speaking the truth in love," he's talking to all of us. We're all involved in some level of speaking ministry. Speaking might include correction, but it also needs to be loving. Some of us are strong in the truth category, but people might walk away from us thinking, "That guy doesn't care about me at all." Then others are strong in the loving category, making people feel accepted, but they might think "He gives me no direction as to what to believe." We must hold to the combination of truth and love.

Next, you might ask yourself, "Why am I hesitant to get involved? Why am I not discipling someone or trying to minister to someone?" What are the issues that could be present? It could be a heart issue, a knowledge issue or a method issue.

- By heart issue, it could be that you're just really attached to this world. You're way too concerned about yourself, looking out for yourself and neglecting other people. Maybe you just need to get your heart right before God. "Lord, please orient my heart toward others. Calibrate me to Your purposes. Help me understand why You put me on this planet and how I need to respond?"
- With a knowledge issue, you might just need to be learning more about Who Christ is so you'll be better able to speak. You could even take some training in areas where you need to grow.
- With a method issue, there are ways to grow in our ability to meet and interact with people. We need to grow in our ability to articulate the gospel in such a way as to reach a person wherever they are. We need to grow in our ability to disciple someone. Often these involve specific methods that can be learned.

As a church, we're trying to offer training in all these levels: the heart, knowledge and methods. In the next two months we'll be training on how to read the Bible one on one, which hopefully will help provide you with tools.

Is coming to church simply like going to a Cubs game or a Bears game for you? There are 50,000 spectators who are just watching nine or eleven players and their coaches. That's an "eat, drink and be merry" kind of view. You're not directly involved in the real action. Ephesians 4 blows that out of the water. You're not in the stands—you're on the field. And who's watching?

Who's in the stands? Your neighbors, your relatives, non-Christian co-workers. They're the ones watching you to see what it looks like to follow Christ. What kind of team atmosphere do they see? Is there love on the team? What's the game plan? How do they communicate with each other? What's their vision? Who's their enemy? How do they defeat their enemy?

Get in the game. This is part of our call as a church. We're in the game because God has called us to be here, and it's all for His glory.

We have lots of opportunities listed in the bulletin today to be praying for—zero in on one particular thing and ask God on Saturday night, for example, “Lord, use me on Sunday. Let me encourage someone. Let me get to know someone new.” If we do that, then Sunday mornings could actually be times when you and I can make disciples. We might be here to pray for the Word to be heard. We might have an opportunity to encourage someone. We might be available to listen and draw someone out. We might ask questions. Regular church attendance is a great thing. We're a team and we don't want to miss out on practices. Sundays can be seen both as a time to grow personally and a time to reach out and bless others. There are a lot of people suffering and they'd love to talk with you.

So let's pray for all these things as we close.

God, thank You that what You've called us to do, You will accomplish. Thank You that this is not something we do in our own strength. This is about You and Your work, the work of Your Spirit. I pray for the people as they review this passage, that we would glean even more insights. We want to obey You in all these things, but we need Your help. We all can see gaps in our lives. Help us to be open with each other, that we might see more and more gaps closed and healed, and that we would be more and more equipped to be the people You call us to be. It's all for Your glory and Your praise. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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