Walking Forward

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

**EPHESIANS 4:11-16**

Gift giving is part of life. On special occasions and holidays we give gifts to one another. Sometimes, they are given in a perfunctory manner with little forethought about the recipient. On other occasions they are enthusiastically received because they meet a great need. The giver of the gift is always glad to hear the other person say, “I have been needing one of these!”

*Name a gift you received that you didn’t appreciate at first but later came to realize how much you needed it.*
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 4:11-16

In his appeal for church unity, Paul previously highlighted God’s gifts to His people (Eph. 4:7-8). This lays the foundation for this week’s Bible passage, which reveals how believers move toward maturity in Christ. A key aspect of this instruction is that gifted leaders are God’s gift to the church for the purpose of spiritual maturity.

There is a need for us to understand this new life given to us in Christ (chaps. 1–3) and how we must display a new walk in light of it (chaps. 4–6). While the Scripture is the primary means by which we come to understand what we are to do in light of the great salvation given to us, God has established a secondary means as well—gifted leaders to equip the church for service.

The overarching theme of the first half of Ephesians 4 is unity through diversity. In other places, the human body is used as the metaphor of how the church functions. (See 1 Cor. 12:12-27.) Our bodies are made up of many different “members” designed to function in an integrated manner. When this happens, we describe it as good health. Health care practitioners understand the individual parts and their functions with a view toward how each part interacts with and contributes to the working of other parts. The role of health care practitioners involves educating patients along these lines and providing medical interventions to restore or maintain good physical health.

In a similar manner, leaders of the church teach members about their individual functions and their roles in the overall ministry of the church. Some of this teaching focuses on the diversity of the body, in which individual members are helped to see how their functions vary from that of others. At other times, instruction seeks to show the unity of the body by highlighting the high degree of cooperation required in the body. At all times, the objective is the nurturing of new life in Jesus as it is lived out among God’s people.

As you read Ephesians 4:11-16, note the progression of development. How does the equipping of believers contribute to the overall health of a church?
And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,

While previously Paul had in view the spiritual gifts themselves (Eph. 4:7), here he focused on the gifted ones. The gifts given to the church are leaders who will facilitate its growth and maturity. Every believer is given a spiritual gift, and this includes the leaders whom God gives to the church. Every leader possesses spiritual giftedness which may vary from leader to leader, just as gifts differ among church members. No human leader has all the gifts, as is true of any and all believers.

It is the work of God to call leaders to serve His church.

Paul described four different types of leaders given to the church by Christ. Part of His grace to us is that He provides us with gifted leaders. To serve a local church in a leadership role is not something one simply chooses for oneself, as if merely selecting a vocation or a career. While there is human participation in the selection and installation of church leaders, fundamentally it is the work of God to call leaders to serve His church.

What are the implications of viewing church leaders as Christ’s gifts to the church?

The first type of gifted leader given to the church is that of apostle. The word *apostles* was used in three ways in the New Testament. First, it was used to describe those who were sent with a message. The Greek word is used this way in Philippians 2:25. This actually applies to every Christian. Second, the word *apostles* often referred to the twelve disciples of Jesus who had
an important role as the first followers of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:5). These apostles were eyewitnesses of Christ and could validate the teachings and ministry of Jesus. In a strict, technical sense, this office no longer exists. A third way that apostle is used in the New Testament refers to those who were in leadership in the early church, providing pastoral leadership in a role similar to a modern-day missionary or church planter. (See Acts 14:14; 1 Thess. 2:6-7.)

Also foundational to the church are prophets. In the strictest sense of the word, a prophet received direct revelation from God to declare to the people (Jer. 23:16-18). The argument can be made that in a strict, technical sense, the office of prophet has passed into cessation with the completion of the Bible. However, the gift of prophecy is still operational—the passionate and pointed declaration of Scripture applied to contemporary issues. (See 1 Cor. 14:1-3,12.) Jesus warned that the messages of prophets are to be carefully weighed because there will always be false prophets. (See Matt. 7:15; 24:11.)

Evangelists can be defined as individuals with a unique gifting and calling to proclaim the gospel. Certainly, all believers are tasked with the mandate to share the gospel. Likewise, a pastor may not have the spiritual gift of evangelism, but he is still called to do that work (2 Tim. 4:5).

While some would separate pastors and teachers into distinct roles and ministries, grammatically it appears that Paul linked them together. Teaching the Word of God is a primary function of a pastor (1 Tim. 3:2). This is probably why there is a clear grammatical connection between the two in the original language.

Every gifted leader serves an important role in the church. No leader possesses all these gifts and callings, which is why Paul repeated the word some in his descriptions. The giftedness of church leaders is varied but all the gifts are needed. They are God’s appointed means to equip His church for ministry and mission.

TO MOVE BELIEVERS FORWARD (EPH 4:12-14)

12 equipping the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, 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. 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.
VERSES 12-13
After stating that Christ gave gifted leaders to the church, Paul clarified the Lord’s dual purpose in doing so. It was for *equipping the saints for the work of ministry* and to *build up the body of Christ*. To equip others is to prepare them for a particular purpose, which in this case is to do ministry and mission. The role of the leader is not to do all the work for the people of God but to train them so that they might do ministry together.

The higher purpose of training God’s people for service is the building up of the church as a whole. The Greek word translated *build up* was frequently used in ancient writings to describe constructing a building. Construction sites are always messy. One must often tear up one thing in order to replace it with something else. Sometimes things may appear to be getting worse, not better. Yet, with a carefully developed blueprint and the commitment to make progress without taking shortcuts, a building that will last is built. It is an apt metaphor for a healthy church. In spite of difficulties and obstacles, a skilled leader builds up the church by equipping its members to do ministry.

**Division among believers can be traced back to stunted spiritual growth.**

As the church is built up, it is unified. Division among believers can be traced back to stunted spiritual growth. As a church grows spiritually through sound instruction and leadership, its unity deepens. There are two particular aspects in which this is true. First, there is a *unity in the faith*. Paul had previously indicated that everyone in the church shares one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Eph. 4:5). Though *faith* has several usages in the New Testament, here it seems to refer to the body of doctrine that people believe about the gospel. Second, there is a unity *in the knowledge of God’s Son*. This knowledge may begin with intellectual understanding but it proceeds to relational intimacy with Christ. It involves both the head and the heart. Those who possess a deeply personal acquaintance with Jesus have zero desire to see His church divided.

Building up the body of Christ (v. 12) means *growing into maturity*, a progressive development out of the condition of being spiritual children (v. 14). Children are delightful and lovable but at times cause their parents frustration through their selfishness.
and shortsightedness. A mature congregation is made of believers with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness. They live generously, always willing to make the sacrifices necessary to advance the kingdom of God.

**How does each action identified by Paul in verses 12-14 pave the way for the next action or result identified?**

**Part of maturity is the ability to evaluate different truth claims, to reject those that are unworthy of the gospel, and to embrace those that are from God.**

**VERSE 14**

Part of maturity is the ability to evaluate different truth claims, to reject those that are unworthy of the gospel, and to embrace those that are from God. Children have to be protected because of their lack of discernment. Part of the maturity that comes through leaders’ equipping and building up the church is a deeper understanding of the gospel. In this way, members are not tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching.

The deceit of false teaching that believers encounter is subtle. It isn’t always where we think it might be found. We might expect it on television or on the Internet. We might be prepared for it when neatly dressed strangers appear at our front door with religious literature. But what about when a friend or family member says something like, “Well, that’s true for you but not true for me”? How about when a coworker excitedly says, “You should read this book because it has changed my life”?

In those moments, your pastor or small group Bible study leader is not going to be present to tell you the right thing to think or say or do. However, the encouraging truth is that he or she doesn’t need to be. You can be equipped to recognize error and to gently and graciously offer a counterpoint to an erroneous belief. This type of readiness comes through the building up process described by Paul.
**AS A BODY** (EPH. 4:15-16)

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

**VERSE 15**

Much of our growth and maturity as believers comes not from sitting in a classroom but from experiences where we see mature believers speaking the truth in love. Doing this requires a robust and confident faith. Let us grow in every way was the counsel given by Paul to the Ephesians. Ephesus was a very diverse and idolatrous city, with numerous challenges to the Christian faith. Paul realized that such growth and training had to be connected to and flow out of Christ, who is the head and source of His body. Christlikeness is the key to the growth and maturity of the church.

Why might a person’s ability to express God’s love increase with spiritual maturity?

“Tour bus Christianity” is completely opposite of God’s plan for His church.

**VERSE 16**

In our physical health, we understand the cruciality of wholeness. Problems in one part of the body affect other parts. Likewise, it is the whole body, fitted and knit together that is called to fulfill...
the purposes of God in the world. Paul’s vision for the church—indeed, Christ’s vision—was never like that of a bus, where the leader drives and the rest of the church sits passively, going along for the ride and taking the occasional nap. Such “tour bus Christianity” is completely opposite of God’s plan for His church. Instead, He seeks the proper working of each individual part as part of His body.

What should the motive for ministry be? Paul used a recurring phrase in his Letter to the Ephesians to highlight the right motive for ministry: in love. (See 1:4; 3:17; 4:2; 5:2.) Love for others is both an indicator of Christlikeness and the incentive for taking one’s proper place in the body of Christ. The attitude that says, “That’s someone else’s job, not mine” is not only irresponsible; it indicates a fundamental lack of awareness of Christ and the gospel.

What are some other ways of illustrating Paul’s point other than a human body?

**BIBLE SKILL:** Read passages using the same imagery.

Compare Ephesians 4 with other passages where the church is compared to a body: Romans 7:4; 12:5; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 12:12,27; Ephesians 3:6; and Colossians 3:15. Why do you think Jesus compared the church to a body? How does this imagery alluded to also in Genesis 15:1-5 enhance the idea of God being in covenant with His people?
IN MY CONTEXT

- Christ gives leaders to equip His church for ministry.
- With the help of godly leaders, believers can grow in their belief in and understanding of the gospel and participate more fully in the church’s mission.
- All believers are to grow in Christlikeness and strengthen the church by doing their part.

What could your small group do to support the equipping ministry of your pastor and other church leaders?

As a means to ongoing spiritual maturity in your walk with Christ, list one ministry in which you could participate more fully. What steps do you need to take to become more involved in that ministry?

What is your strategy to grow in Christlikeness? What particular attributes do you need to target? Ask God to move you closer to Him.

Prayer Needs