

Ephesians 4:11-16

### The Maturing Church (Part 1): Increasing in Loving Service

Perpetual childhood—this is what some social analysts have warned is the ambition of an alarming number of teens and young adults. A popular label for this phenomenon is “the Peter Pan Syndrome.” This description images a young man who wants the privileges and freedoms of adulthood without all of the “annoying” responsibilities. A similar appraisal is being sounded by some in China; and they have given a moniker to this group of young people, “Strawberry Generation”—like strawberries that are raised in a protected environment, cost more than other fruits and bruise easily, these young adults seem to demand more from society while refusing to make reasonable contributions, complaining that earning a living is just too hard. Of course, the finger-wagging is not all in the direction of the youth. Much blame is laid at the feet of the parents who coddled their children, even to the point of always protecting them from the natural consequences of their folly. For those who have discovered the joy of growing up and becoming a meaningful member of society, being known as dependable and useful, there is a feeling of pity for those who have thrown this away for a life of seeming ease, but void of purpose. Peter Pan does not look heroic at age thirty; he looks sad, and, in a sad way, quite ridiculous. If this could be said of some young adults today, might it not be an apt description of much of the church as well?

In the last decade of the twentieth century David F. Wells wrote three devastating critiques of modern American evangelicalism that chronicled and analyzed a church that was a sad, and, in a sad way, quite ridiculous church. He documented a church, the American Evangelical Church, which grew fatter and fatter, but refused to grow up. In his first book, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to the Evangelical Mind* Wells compared this generation of Christians to American Christians of an earlier era. This was painful! If everyone acts like Peter Pan, then no one realizes that something is drastically wrong. When a church only has like churches on its landscape to observe, its own spiritual immaturity is not all that apparent. So, when Wells holds the modern American church up against eighteenth and nineteenth century American evangelicals and traces the decline that led to the infantile church of today, it is quite revealing and embarrassing. It reminded me of how I felt as a teenager hearing my grandmother talk of all that she remembered learning in primary school. She would relate historical and literary knowledge like a scholar and attribute her learning to her grade-school and high school education. This is when, as a public school student, I began to wonder how much I was missing. When all I had for comparison was my peers, I didn't think I was very ignorant. But when I had an earlier generation expounding on a subject of which I had only a vague impression, it occurred to me that my education had been greatly watered down.

“Watered down” is a good summary of what Wells described in this first book. Just one example: Wells compared the theological education of ministers from the twentieth century to that of the two previous centuries and concluded that what was considered a Masters of Divinity in most schools today did not even measure up to a Bachelors of Divinity in the “old days.” When I graduated from seminary my degree said “Master of Divinity with Languages.” “With Languages” referred to the fact that I had studied Greek and Hebrew. Now, there was a day when saying “with languages” would have been

redundant. Of course he had Greek and Hebrew. After all, that's what you do in seminary, is it not? Well apparently for the forty-five years prior to my arrival at the school Greek and Hebrew were electives, not requirements. The administration of the seminary while I was there changed that. However, I have heard that the languages are, once again, not required for an M Div. This is unthinkable! Well it's not all that surprising really, since the seminary is simply tailoring its course of study to the demands of the church. The PCA is one of only a few Churches that requires proficiency in Greek and Hebrew for ordination as a Teaching Elder. So, Wells revealed a church grossly immature due to an ignorance of the Bible. Even those who could quote its verses did not love God with all of their minds so that they understood its message.

Wells' second book in this trilogy is entitled *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*. In this book, he shows the corrosive effects of abandoning the biblical vision of a great and glorious God. Like a true physician, Wells gets beneath all the symptoms of the weakened American church and exposes the malady, namely, belief in a domesticated god who is not angry, and therefore requires no reconciliation, who is not holy, and thus requires no atonement for sinners, and who is not other-worldly and thus requires no moral transformation of the individual or of the cosmos. In fact, the god he discerns across much of the "theological" landscape of America is not interested in fitting souls for heaven, but in making men and women well-adjusted for their "best life now"—"best life" of course being defined by modern American values, not by the Bible. With such a god there is no need of the gospel of Jesus Christ. So while much of evangelicalism continues to use the term "gospel" the wineskins have been drained and replenished with modern and post-modern Koolaid.

In the final book in this trilogy entitled *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* Wells warns that because we've become theological pigmies, the Church is no longer challenging the world, but is being shaped by it. The Church is rapidly adopting the values of society because it has created a values vacuum by abandoning Scripture and the God of the Bible. He calls us to recover our moral vision before we, not only the Church, but also our country, wind up, like the Roman Empire, overrun by Barbarians. In short, the Church must grow up. We must mature. This is what God calls us to in Ephesians 4.11-16. This is why He gave the Church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastor-teachers. Just as parents are responsible in large part for the perpetual childhood of the rising generation, so pastors and teachers are largely to blame for the immaturity of the churches today. This is not to excuse the churches, any more than we would excuse the thirty year old who refuses to grow up. It is simply to say that if pastors continue to manufacture their goods around the worldly demands of the market rather than our calling to be saints, then the church will flounder and we will answer to God for it. The Church bears the responsibility to grow up into Christ, who is our head, as the Lord has gifted His people for this process of maturing.

When Paul was speaking to the immature church in Corinth and rebuking them for their childish displays and calling them to love he said, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways" (1 Cor 13.11). It is high time for the evangelical Church in America to put away childish ways and walk worthy of the calling to which we have been called. By God's grace, and only by God's grace, Cross Creek will be a maturing church. I don't say a mature church, but a maturing church. I fear that if we thought of ourselves as mature, we

might feel that we've arrived at our destination and settle where we are. Instead, let us be a maturing church, keeping our eyes on Jesus and so always pressing on toward the upward call of God in Christ. So what is a maturing church? What does a maturing church look like? Our text tells us that maturity is demonstrated through the increase of loving service, through the increase of unity in the truth, and through the increase of complete submission to Christ. We are going to spend the next few weeks studying these verses and these characteristics. As we do, let's be diligent to pray for the increase of these in our church.

The first characteristic of the maturing Church is the increase of loving service. When Paul wrote to the church in Rome he knew that there were many in the church that did not know him personally. They had heard of Paul and heard stories about Paul, no doubt from the many in the church that had met him along the way, but they did not know him personally. How would you introduce yourself to a group of people that didn't know you personally? What would you want to stand out in their minds when they thought of you? Listen to Paul's opening words: "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus." Paul defines himself as a servant or slave of Christ. Well, what does that mean in practical terms? It means that his life did not belong to him, but to Christ. It means that he concerned himself first and foremost with what his Master wanted. In fact, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9.19 "For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them." In other words, in order to win more people for Christ Paul willingly set aside his own self-interests and determined to serve others for Jesus' sake. This is evidence of a maturing believer. And this servant mindset is evidence of a maturing church. So let's consider a few signs of an increase in loving service.

**First is equipping for the work of the ministry (v. 12).** The term ministry in the Greek, like our English word "ministry," has the ring of sacred service. This helps us to understand that no matter what form the service takes, it is ultimately service rendered to God. It is worship. Now it certainly helps to be well equipped with knowledge and tools for any job. Brother Boyd Sprague framed some maps for me the other day and came by the house to mount them to the wall. It was clear that he was well prepared for the job. He had knowledge of how to find the studs right away. He needed to find three studs in which to fasten the mount for the frame. He showed me how paneling is made to line up with the studs. He had a tape measure to make everything centered. He had a level to make sure everything was straight. He had the cordless drill with a light that illuminated the surface he was drilling. He had everything right down to a pencil to mark the wall. Because he was equipped with the knowledge and the tools for the job it went smoothly and we were able to sit back and enjoy a cup of coffee and some pie together.

We need to be equipped for ministry if we are going to be increasing in loving service as a maturing church. So how are we equipped? First and foremost, we are equipped by the gift of the Holy Spirit given to each of us by the Lord Jesus Christ. We saw this last week in verse seven, "But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift." The reason we speak of "Spiritual" gifts is not because they are immaterial, rather than physical, but because they are workings of the Holy Spirit rather than mere workings of human skill and craft. Without the Holy Spirit from Christ we have no power for service. So it starts there. But Paul also goes on to speak of the pastor-teachers who "equip the saints for the work of ministry." Since the emphasis of verse 11 was on word-gifts, it seems that the

equipping in view has largely to do with sound teaching. We need right thinking to be effective servants for Christ.

We need right thinking about God. If we do not have both reverence and love for God we will be very poor servants for Him. The more we know of the majesty and power of God the heartier our service for Him will be. The more we know of the height and depth and length and breadth of the love of Christ, the more fervent our zeal for Him will be. We need right thinking about others. We need to see people as remarkable creatures made in God's image. Yes, people are fallen. People are totally depraved. We need that insight so that we are not shocked into inaction by their folly. But we also need to understand humanity's unique place in the cosmos and seek to restore men to peace with God. We need right thinking about ourselves. Paul told the Romans not to think too highly of themselves, but to think with sober judgment. A high-minded servant is the embryo of a stubborn rebel. We need a humble estimate of ourselves and a generous and gracious estimate of others. We need a clear understanding of the gospel and training to articulate it so that we are faithful witnesses. We need regular instruction in God's law so that we grow in our knowledge of what pleases Him.

At Cross Creek we try to equip the saints for the work of the ministry in multiple ways. We just had a powerful Family Bible Conference to equip us for our walk with God, focusing on matters of personal piety, such as prayer and patient endurance. In just a couple more weeks we will have a Share Your Faith Workshop to help you be a more competent witness in your daily life. Sunday School, ABF, Covenant Groups, officer training—all of these are meant to equip the saints.

**Secondly, edifying the whole body (vv. 12, 16).** The ultimate goal of our service is the glory of God. One of the intermediate goals or means to that end is the building up of the church. This is what Paul has in view when he says, "for building up the body of Christ." The aim of getting equipped is not so that we can sit back and say, "Look at how smart I've become!" In verse sixteen he says each part working properly, "makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love." Those words "in love" are absolutely necessary. You will recall that just before recording the event of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, John told us "having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end" (John 13.1). Jesus served His disciples because He loved them. In the same way, we must love each other. It is this genuine love that leads to service. Without this love, Paul told the Corinthians, "I am nothing . . . I gain nothing." No matter what I do, without love it's nothing.

We are living in the "me-generation" and this is no more evident anywhere else than it is in the church today. People come to church for what I can get. Now we should come with the expectation of receiving from the Lord. But a mature Christian is not coming to church saying, "What are you going to do for me?" The maturing Christian is learning that "I am receiving much grace from the Lord as He uses me to bless others." How can I serve you? How can I serve the Lord's beloved?

We have a challenge to overcome the consumer mentality of the childish church by the servant mentality of the maturing church. It appears sometimes that people are confused about our union with Christ. Sometimes we act as though we realize more of our union with Christ by having people serve us. "Christ is a king, so in my union with him I'm going to act like royalty and expect people to bow to my

wishes and wants.” But in John 13 Jesus was telling us that to experience our union with Him, to follow Him, we must become loving servants. So, how can you serve the body of Christ? How can you build up the body of Christ? What gift or gifts have you been given by the ascended and enthroned Christ for the edification of the Church?

**Thirdly, exercising gifts according to the measure each has received (v. 16).** We all have a gift. If you are part of the body of Christ, then you have a gift to be used in service to the body. There are no obsolete organs. In verse 16 Paul says “from Christ 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.” “Every joint working properly” reminds me of Paul’s words to the Romans, *“Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness”* (Romans 12:6–8). “Having gifts let us use them!” That seems rather obvious doesn’t it? But how many people have gifts that they’re not using?

We don’t want you to do what is “unnatural,” something you weren’t created to do. It is detrimental to the body of Christ when people are pressed into service in areas where they are not gifted. Not everyone is gifted to teach. So James warns, *“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness”* (James 3:1). Not everyone is gifted with the same measure. Even if someone is gifted to teach, he should have a sober estimate of his abilities and serve accordingly. (Warning about theoblogs and facebook forums).

Now, there are many gifts in the body of Christ. Yours may be exhortation or encouragement. Perhaps you are gifted with money to make generous contributions to needs in the Church as Paul said in Romans 12, or to help others who have made a mess of their finances learn financial discipline. Are you gifted with leadership? Then lead with zeal, Paul wrote. Are you gifted to discern needs and show mercy? Then do your charity with cheerfulness. Are you gifted for administration? The gifts for ministry are as diverse and numerous as the needs for ministry.

“Working properly” means using the gift you’ve been given according to the proportion of your giftedness in the power of the Holy Spirit. Never underestimate the impact of your service. Remember, it is “ministry” or Spiritual service. That means capital “s” Spiritual—energized by the Holy Spirit. And He is accomplishing His will and purpose for His church through the exercise of your gifts.

The increase of loving service is one indication of a church that is maturing. Are we growing up into Him who is our head, into Christ? We don’t want to be the adult spoiled brat. We want to be like Christ, a loving servant-minded church. Our service is always to Christ our king. He died to redeem us; and in His death and resurrection He also purchased gifts for us. These gifts come to us through the one great gift of the Holy Spirit.