

Church Life

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 September 2023

Preacher: Colin Dow

- [0 : 00] I wonder what normal people think of when they hear about the church. Perhaps some think of high-profile scandals.
- Others, an out-of-date medieval institution. Maybe others, some kind of cult. Still others know so little about the church that they don't know what to think.
- What about us? What do we think when we hear about the church? Among 21st century Christians, the church has become somewhat of an embarrassment.
- Churchless Christianity is now the thing, with its commitment-like approach to church's commonplace. For first-century Christians, it was unthinkable that you could have Christ without his church.
- One of the early church fathers, St. Cyprian, said, If God is our father, the church is our mother.
- [1 : 12] If God is our father, the church is our mother. We cannot claim to be committed to Christ, but at the same time be uncommitted to his church.
- For the apostle Paul, churchless Christianity is no Christianity at all. Throughout his letters, he uses many pictures to describe the church, one of which is that of a body.
- In these verses, Ephesians 4, the apostle explains how the church as a body works, and urges us to do all we can to work for the health of God's new society on earth, the church.
- After all, as we've said, the church is God's plan A for his glory in heaven and on earth, and he has no plan B. The church is the object of God's endless love, the fullness of his Holy Spirit, and the blessed reward of the saving blood of Jesus Christ, shed on the cross for us.
- This passage explains how we can live in such a way as the church to grow both as individual Christians and as a church.
- [2 : 37] Paul speaks of four aspects of our bodies. The heart, verses 1 through 7. The head, verses 8 through 10.
- The stomach, verses 11 through 14. And the tongue, verses 15 and 16. The healthy church needs Christians who are committed to pursuing God's glory in unity and community with each other.
- Not pick and mix, commitment like snowflakes. First of all then, from verse 1 to 7, we have the heart of the body, the heart of the church.
- The apostle Paul begins this chapter by reminding us that he's in prison for his faith in Christ. So he's weighing chains even while he's writing.
- His chains are physical, but the chains that join us together as Christians are spiritual. He talks of the bond of peace at the end of verse 3.
- [3 : 42] And the word he uses for bond is the exact same word as chain. Just as Paul is connected by chains to his prison guard, so we are connected by the chains of peace to each other in the church.

The chain of peace is the unity of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit who lives in every Christian. Like it or not, we're all stuck to one another as Christians, and it's our responsibility to maintain that unity.

Because only in keeping that living unity in the church, shall we walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called.

Verse 1. Only as we commit ourselves to Christ and his church, are we doing what we have been called to do as Christians.

Only as we love God and love his people, are we walking worthy of the Lord. But we say, it's not easy to live as a Christian in the church.

[5 : 06] There are things I find difficult to accept about this church, and there are people in this church God calls me to love, who frankly I don't like very much.

Now this is a serious issue. We must not take this issue lightly at all. It is possible to be damaged by the church. And yet, the genius of God and his church is that it's here in the uncomfortableness of having to keep the unity of the Spirit with other people who are so different from us that we learn humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance.

The church becomes the nursery of our spiritual growth as we learn how to be united to other Christians with whom we find it difficult to get along.

This is the genius of the church, to use technical language. It is the theater of our sanctification. Christians who are forever leaving a church when things get difficult for them learn nothing.

They do not grow in their faith. It is as we live together as Christians rubbing up against each other that we grow in humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance.

[6 : 38] Paul's message for us is this. Persevere with the church and you will grow as a Christian. He proceeds then to describe the church in terms of its unity and its diversity.

Its unity and its diversity. Its unity expressed in the solidity of its faith. Its diversity expressed in the demonstration of the various gifts God has given its members.

So from verse 4 to verse 6 he says there is one body and one spirit. That's unity. Even though there are many churches with small c and many different denominations, there really is only one church.

Capital C. The church saved by the blood of Jesus and filled by the Holy Spirit. What we call in the Apostles' Creed the Holy Catholic or the Holy Universal Church.

There is one hope possessed by every Christian the hope of final salvation. There is one Lord one faith one baptism one God and Father of all.

[8 : 02] The heart of the church of whatever denomination or cultural expression is one. It refuses to be sectarian believing that only our particular denomination is the full expression of God's church on earth and denouncing every other Christian denomination as sinful and substandard.

I'm not saying we shouldn't be discerning but rather than criticizing the wrong in others perhaps we should be more reflective of the wrong in us for after all there is only one body and it's far bigger than us.

but then in verse 7 Paul describes the church's diversity in verses 4 and 6 it's unity in 7 it's diversity.

He writes but grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. He introduces the theme of how Christ gives each one of us gifts from his grace.

He goes on to describe in the following verses what these gifts are but the point is this even though we all believe in the same things in our church we are not clones of each other.

[9 : 29] God respects our individuality our personality and in his grace he gives each of us work to do.

the gifts he's given me are different from the gifts he's given you and the gifts he's given you are different from the gifts he's given me.

This is the genius of the church that within the one church there are millions of individuals who he gives he furnishes with their own gifts.

Here is the wisdom of God in the heart of the church it's unity and diversity. You know we might wish that in the church everyone was just like us but they're not thanks be to God.

The path to maintaining the bond of peace in the church is the full expression of the unity in diversity principle. We can apply this in many ways but let me do so in this way it's okay for you to be you and not me in the church and it's okay for me to be me and not you in the church.

[10 : 54] We believe the same things we have the same Lord the same faith but it's uber important for us to be the individuals God has made us and gifted us to be whoever we are we all belong in this church equally for without us the church would be a far less exciting and interesting place.

It's okay for me to be me and not you and vice versa. This is the heart of the genius of God in the church. This is the nursery of Christian growth.

God so we have the heart of the body. Well then in verses 8 through 10 we have the head of the body the head of the body having described for us the heart of the church the unity and diversity principle which brings life to the church Paul now lifts our eyes away from ourselves to our Lord the Jesus who is described in verse 15 as the head because ultimately is it not our common faith and worship of Christ that unites us as one in this church if only those on the outside of the church could see Jesus the way we see him they'd want to be here also he's our saviour and Lord he's our master and our friend and it's he who is the head of the church directing every function and operation of the body quoting from

Psalms 68 Paul explains how Christ has empowered and equipped his church to be his body on earth he refers to Christ's salvation story of how having descended to the lowest parts of the earth to win our forgiveness and our salvation that's a reference to the cross Jesus has now ascended in victory into the heavens from where he distributes to the church everything it needs in order to grow in love in maturity and to reflect God's glory and wisdom here why did Jesus die on the cross rise from the grave and descend into heaven it was to create the church this church which is the earthly expression of his body we need to get away from the individualistic mentality of the west and see ourselves as the one body of

Christ he loves and for which he gave himself that's why we need to up our game every single one of us when it comes to our commitment to the church for if we're apathetic concerning the church Christ's body it shows that we have not really understood the reason for Christ's salvation work in all its fullness Paul wants us to understand from these verses that as our heavenly Lord Christ has won the right to empower and equip his church with all the various gifts it requires in a hostile world to grow it is Christ who gives gifts to his church each according to the wisdom as a function of his cross and resurrection my gifts and your gifts they're an outpouring of the heavenly Christ's grace if we deny their use if we hide their use we dishonor the

[14 : 59] Christ who died and rose to give them to us let me apply this truth by suggesting that for our church to be truly healthy and we all want it to be don't we every single one of us needs to commit to using the unique gifts the heavenly Christ has given us some of us are gifted communicators make no mistake although we might be naturally talented the gift Christ has given us is spiritual and from heaven itself and is to be used in the church others of us are gifted welcomers and by that what I mean is that we're very good at making strangers feel at home in our church others of us are very gifted at hospitality don't we realize that that ability to welcome people into our homes is a gift from the heavenly

Christ for our church to be truly healthy every single one of us needs to commit to using the gifts the heavenly Christ has given us now perhaps there are some of us sitting here who don't know what our gifts are we're saying I don't have any gifts or I'm too old to use my gifts or whatever let's ask other Christians a Christian friend perhaps could you tell me what you think I'm good at could you tell me what you think God has given me a gift for and then approach the leadership of this church to offer your services let's commit ourselves to the head of the church Jesus Christ let's get out of our comfort zones and serve him by serving his church with the unique gifts he from heaven in his wisdom has given each of us as individuals so we have the head of the church verses 8 through 10 then we have the stomach of the church in verses 11 through 14 the stomach of the church in these verses

Paul enters into the meat of the church's life and operation he talks about some of the gifts the heavenly Christ has given to the church he's talking mainly about gifts of what we might call leadership apostles and prophets evangelists shepherds teachers these are God's gifts to the church without being self serving this evening when Nate comes to preach the word at six o'clock be here he is God's gift to the church in order that our church may grow into maturity and the full knowledge of Christ before we become over critical of our leadership let's reflect on what Christ has called them to be and to do for theirs is a very heavy responsibility notice notice from verse 12 their role Christ has given the leadership of the church to us to equip the saints for the work of ministry for building up the body of

Christ to equip many years ago a ministerial friend and I were interviewed by a large church in the north in its after church fellowship we were asked by someone what will you as young ministers do to fill our church now my friend who is an awful lot quicker on the uptake than I am instantly responded it's not our responsibility to fill the church it's your responsibility to fill the church our responsibility is to equip you to do it it's not our responsibility to fill the church it's yours our responsibility is to equip you to do it now the person who asked that question was clearly not happy with the answer because he went off in a huff he was of the old school who expected the minister to do everything and there may still be

Christians in our congregations who still think wrong it's not the minister's responsibility to fill the church it's the minister's responsibility to equip the church's members to engage in evangelism by himself preaching Christ to them I know many churches with ministers who are declining because the members expect the minister to do everything I know many churches who don't have a minister which are growing because each member of the church takes responsibility for the evangelism and health of the church that's the ideal every church has a minister who is focused on equipping the saints for works of ministry for living as a Christian in a hostile society by being the light of the world and the salt of the earth this is the daily weekly nutrition of the church the constant equipping of

[20 : 39] God's people in the church through the equipping work of the word of God preached by the church's shepherds and ministers it's commitment to this scheme which will ensure that our church grows in maturity and in the knowledge of Christ it's commitment to God's genius in the church which will keep us from being cut along by the latest fad of false teaching or from the deceitful and cunning schemes of false teachers it's also commitment to God's plan for the church in this which will keep the leaders of the church from becoming bullies control freaks personality cults who treat the church as their own personal kingdoms the ministers they exist for the church not the other way around they're not the masters of the church they're its servants the healthy church must focus on developing effective leadership structures which do not dominate but liberate

God's people which do not coerce God's people into being clones of each other but which encourages them to be who God made them to be in the fullness of their individuality the healthy church must invest in leadership which empowers and equips us for works of service for engaging with others in the church for loving our families for commitment to our friends and to our work for deep friendship and for evangelism and mission that's the leadership to which we're called not as masters but as servants even as Christ came not to be served but to serve this is true leadership when those Christ has called to minister serve with the express intention of equipping and empowering ordinary Christians to be everything

God has made them to be to encourage the weak to give hope to despairing to challenge the apathetic and to channel the gifts of God's people let me apply this by challenging those of us who think that the pursuit of leadership in the church is the pathway to status in the church it is not it is the pathway to service it is the pathway to the lowest place of washing the disciples feet there have been far too many high and mighty ministers in our church treating those they've been called to serve as not as important as they are or as pawns in their power games ministry is the path to deep commitment and to the spiritual well-being of those

God has called us to serve by equipping them and empowering them it's a vocation which is entirely focused on the other where one's greatest joy is found in the spiritual growth of those one serves so we have the stomach we have the heart and the head and the stomach of the body and lastly in verses 15 and 16 we have the body's mouth rather speaking the truth in love so on the healthy church is a growing church Knightswood Baptist Church is situated at the crossroads between Great Western Road and Knightswood Road it has a sign outside saying welcome to a loving growing church now the sign's been there for the 20 years I've lived here

Knightswood Baptist Church has quite a small building so every time I go past the sign which is most days I wonder to myself whether after all these years it is still growing because if it was by this time it should have far outstripped its current building but then I check myself and I realize that I'm judging as so many Christian leaders do by the worldly standards of numerical size size like David did when he counted his army and assumed that because he had a large army it was also strong and God judged him for it the numerical expansion of a church is only one measure and most often the least important element of its growth to my knowledge and as you know

[26 : 01] I'm always open to your correction there is not one mention of the numerical size of the Ephesian church given anywhere in this letter or in any other part of scripture and yet Paul still talks in verses 15 through 16 about growth it's not the physical size of the Ephesian church Paul is interested in it's its spiritual depth and according to our text the key to spiritual growth and depth in the church is that we engage in speaking the truth in love to each other there's the key by speaking the truth in love now the truth to which we refer is not criticism of one's behavior and speech that is a grotesque distortion of this text someone comes to you and says

I'm just speaking the truth to you in love but I want to tell you how much I hate your hairstyle or I'm just speaking the truth in love to you but I just want to tell you that really you've got to sort your sense of humor out that is a grotesque distortion of this text the truth to which Paul refers here is the truth of the gospel all the great truths detailed in Ephesians chapters proclaimed from the pulpit and as we talk about these great truths in our one-to-one or small group settings we learn how to apply them in our day-to-day lives and we grow as Christians and as the church Martin Luther the great German reformer he used to say that he preached the gospel to himself every day perhaps we should make it our aim to do the same and more even maybe we should aim that in our conversations with other

Christians we remind each other of the great truths of salvation the eternal love of God the infinite grace of Christ the unchangeable empowering presence of the Holy Spirit with us rather than just talk about the weather the football and our jobs we become more intentional about speaking the truth in love with one another in doing so we will grow closer to Christ we will grow up into our head as we know him better as we're engaging in love with him and with each other every part of the church will work as it should and the whole church will build itself up in love that's the definition of a healthy church that in which every single member is working properly according to the gifts

God has given them the gospel of Jesus Christ at the very center speaking the truth in love our spiritual depth is growing even firmer no far from dismissing Knightswood Baptist Church's claim that it's a loving growing church we commend them for recognizing and we want to imitate them that it's only through love that the church grows and the main criterion by which a church's health should be measured is not physical size but spiritual depth let me apply this by reminding us all of the centrality of our mouths in this process what we say to one another it is good to speak about the church with each other but it's better to speak about Christ it is good to catch up on what's going on in each other's lives but it's better to speak the gospel to each other to help each other figure out how to apply the life-giving truth of Jesus

Christ into our real-life situations at home at work in the church at the gym wherever we are perhaps our prayer needs to be Lord direct my words that I may speak the truth in love well as we close perhaps we're thinking to ourselves I don't really want to be part of this body the church after all I've heard this morning there's too much involved it's too time consuming and it requires more commitment than I'm prepared to give remember what St Cyprian said if we have God as our father the church is our mother for the writers of the Bible the church is the nursery of growth in the Christian life and it's through the church the wonders of the glory of God are best seen in the world let's ponder this the New

[31 : 34] Testament never recognizes us Christians those who are not part of the church the New Testament never recognizes those as Christians who are not part of the church rather the New Testament consistently praises those Christians who express their gratitude for Christ's salvation to the church his body this time to ask ourselves what does this mean for me to ask if anything to ask how can help anything me the the

Republic which is the are always who has done what the best