

# **The Growing Church: A Bible Study in Ephesians 4**

**Ephesians 4:1-16**

**PFR Breakfast, PCUSA General Assembly  
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## Preface

First of all, I want to thank you for coming out this morning . . . and so early! Of course General Assembly is pretty much a vacation anyway, so I guess it's not that much of a sacrifice to miss a little sleep. Now you know why the PFR folk invite speakers from Texas. For you it's 7:30 in the morning, and some of you are just waking up. For me it's 9:30, and I'm ready to roll, y'all.

I bring greetings from Laity Lodge, my new ministry in the Hill Country of Texas outside of San Antonio. I know some of you are familiar with this wonderful ministry. Many of you are not, but I hope you'll get more acquainted with us in the future. We share a common vision of multi-layered renewal, and a passion for helping the people of God live as ministers of Jesus Christ.

I want to offer thanks to God for Presbyterians for Renewal. Throughout the past twenty years, PFR has been an outstanding source of wisdom and encouragement for me and thousands of others like me. I am grateful for this ministry and for all that PFR is doing to bring renewal to our churches and to our denomination.

Next, I want to thank PFR's leaders for the extraordinary privilege of speaking at this renowned breakfast. When I consider some of those you have had address you in recent years, Tom Gillespie, Richard Mouw, and my mentor, Lloyd Ogilvie, I am

humbled by the opportunity you have given me. I hope to live up to your trust in asking me to speak this morning.

This is a bit of a tricky assignment, actually. It reminds me of when my children were young and I'd take them to the park. It wasn't easy to keep my eye on two busy kids when they were four and two and loved going in opposite directions at the same time. But I learned that if I kept moving, always with one child in immediate proximity, I could keep both kids in view. So, today, I have two purposes in view. On the one hand, I want to offer a close-up word of encouragement relative to this General Assembly, especially for those who are delegates. My hope and prayer is that you'll leave this breakfast with new vision, courage, and conviction as you seek to serve the Lord in the Assembly. On the other hand, I want to speak to the larger issues of our life and mission as a church. No matter what happens in these next few days, all of the basics of our life in Christ will be unchanged. Though the actions of this Assembly might make our work easier, or might make it harder, our calling to the mission of Jesus Christ will remain the same. So I hope also to offer some words of encouragement as we go out into the world as the people of God, sent to make disciples of all nations.

## Introduction to Ephesians 4

In our short time this morning, I want to do a Bible study. I plan to focus our attention on the first half of Ephesians 4, pointing to some of the highlights in this watershed passage. This text, I believe, speaks with clarity and power to our situation as leaders in the PCUSA. It calls us to the kind of leadership that's desperately needed in our denomination, in our churches, and in our world.

Before I get to Ephesians 4, however, let me give a brief overview of its context in this letter. Ephesians begins with a mind-expanding revelation of God's plan for the cosmos and our role within it. God's strategy for the fullness of time is "to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (1:10). By bringing everything together under the headship of Christ, God will mend this broken world. Moreover, according to Ephesians 1, we were chosen before the foundation of the world to be part of God's renewing mission. Out of his great love for us, God has lavished his grace upon us, adopting us as his children, so that we might "live for the praise of his glory" (1:12). Our whole life becomes a means to glorify the Lord as we participate in his mission through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 2 begins with the bad news of our condition outside of Christ: we're dead. But God, who is rich in mercy, love,

and grace, has made us alive in Christ. Because of Christ's death and resurrection, we have been saved by grace through faith. We do not earn our salvation with good works. But, when we are saved by grace, we are also newly created in Christ for a life of good works. We join God's mission of cosmic renewal, in which we play a crucial role.

The second half of Ephesians 2 reveals that the saving work of Christ touches more than individuals. It also brings reconciliation among people, represented in the breaking down of the wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles. Human divisions will be mended as God brings all things together in Christ.

Ephesians 3 reveals the pivotal role of the church in God's plan. Through the church, God makes known his renewal strategy. The church is the means by which God announces his mission to the cosmos and demonstrates the ultimate success of this mission. Our wholeness and unity as formerly broken and scattered people will tell the world that the Gospel is true. This is what we Presbyterians mean when we say that one of the Great Ends of the church is "the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world" (*PCUSA Book of Order*, G-1.0200). If you want to know if the Gospel is true, Ephesians tells us, just look at the church. (That, my friends, can be a scary thought!)

If the church is to exhibit the truth of the Gospel, then we will have to live out this truth in our daily life in the world. The

final three chapters of Ephesians focus on the practical implications of the theological vision found in the first three chapters. Thus Ephesians 4 begins: "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (4:1). Paul, writing from a prison, urges us to walk the talk, to take our calling, spelled out in Ephesians 1-3, and embody it. It's not enough to believe it. It's not enough to proclaim it. We must also live it, each and every day.

### **Where Should We Begin?**

So where should we begin in our effort to lead a life worthy of the calling to live for the praise of God's glory?

The answer of Ephesians 4 begins in a most surprising way. It says we're to live "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:3). The verb translated here as "making every effort" conveys a sense of urgency, of eagerness. We're to desire unity and work to preserve it.

If you're sitting in this room today, if you're still working and praying for the renewal of the PCUSA even after so many years of fighting and frustration, may I suggest that you have indeed been "making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the

bond of peace." Oh, I'm sure many of us haven't done this with much eagerness. Exhaustion has a way of depleting our zeal. Perhaps we've sought unity more out of duty than passion. But, even so, I believe our efforts to keep the fractured PCUSA together are consistent with the call of Ephesians 4:3.

Now I realize that some would say we have no more unity to preserve, that our theological divisions run so deep as to destroy our denominational unity. This may be true today, though I don't think so. And it may be true tomorrow, though I pray it won't be so. Scripture makes it clear elsewhere, in 1 Corinthians 5 or 2 John, for example, that unity isn't an absolute value. There are times when persistent sin or theological error can break our spiritual connectionalism and lead to necessary separation. But, even in such sad situations, may we still yearn for restoration, for genuine unity that reflects the Gospel.

### **Pastors as Teachers**

My limited time this morning requires me to skip some marvelous material in verses 4-10 of Ephesians 4. I'll jump down to verse 11, where it reads:

The gifts [Christ] gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up

the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

Notice that, in this passage, gifts are not abilities for ministry, but the people who provide leadership in the church, including pastor-teachers. The Greek original links these two roles essentially, by the way. Here is a reminder for those of us who are pastors that teaching is essential to our leadership. We are not just community organizers, counselors, dialogue-starters, and program directors. We have been given the responsibility of teaching God's truth to God's people. Too often in our day, churches expect pastors to do a myriad of other things besides teaching, thus diluting pastoral effectiveness and, ultimately, impoverishing churches. Even preachers can sometimes minimize the importance of teaching. Pastors, may we recommit ourselves today to shepherding our people by being faithful teachers of God's truth. Lay leaders, be sure your pastors are your "*pastor-teachers*." Give them the time and support they need to fulfill this crucial biblical calling.

### **Equipping God's People for Ministry**

Notice the task Christ has given the pastor-teachers and other leaders. They are "to equip the saints for the work of



ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (4:12). I expect you know that in the New Testament, the word "saint" doesn't mean "extra special spiritual person," but "ordinary person set apart by God for God's purposes." Every Christian is a saint. And according to Ephesians 4:12, every Christian is called to do the work of ministry. Scripture is abundantly clear, in this passage most of all, that every single Christian is a minister of Christ. Every one. Pastors are not the only ministers. Rather, they are given the special task of training ministers, the people of God, for their ministry.

I'm aware that this isn't new information for most of us here today, though I can still remember the time I first learned I was a minister of Christ. It was in February of 1972, the first Sunday when Lloyd Ogilvie came as the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood, my home church. During that worship service, Dr. Ogilvie began in his sonorous voice: "Today, I want introduce you to the ministers of this church." Now as a critical fourteen-year-old, I thought this was a silly statement. After all, we knew the ministers of the church. They weren't new. Only Dr. Ogilvie was new. The ministers were those men who sat up front in the black robes. But then Dr. Ogilvie continued, "So I want you to turn to the people sitting next to you and say to them, 'You are a minister of Jesus Christ in this church.'" I couldn't believe my ears. We were ministers of Jesus Christ! How was this possible? I

did as Dr. Ogilvie said, even though it was pretty awkward to tell my dad that he was a minister of Jesus Christ. Fourteen-year-old boys don't talk to their fathers that way. But I will never, ever forget the surprise of that moment, the first time I ever thought that I, a *mere lay person*, was a minister.

Years later, as a pastor, one of my greatest joys was watching people I had equipped do their ministry, whether in the church or the world. What a delight it was to hear of how a manager began to treat her employees differently because of Christ, or how a father started to teach the Bible to his children, rather than delegating their discipleship to the Sunday School. I loved it when people who were once caught in conspicuous consumption chose to invest dozens of hours helping to build a Habitat for Humanity house, or when government officials learned to seek God's guidance for their decisions.

### **Building Up the Body of Christ**

According to Ephesians 4, pastors and other church leaders equip God's people "for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (4:12). In fact, we're to grow up both in maturity and in size. When the church is functioning in a healthy way, it will become more and more like Christ, and it will become bigger and bigger.

While there's little debate these days about the church needing to mature, I realize that such a blunt statement of numerical church growth is bound to raise a few hackles. This is especially true in a denomination that saw a 2.6% decline in membership last year alone, and in which most of our churches are losing members. For years I've heard all the rhetoric about quality over quantity, and the criticisms of church growth strategies. But one cannot read Ephesians with an open mind and not conclude that the church of Jesus Christ is supposed to be growing in size as well as strength. Yes, yes, there are sometimes good reasons why churches don't grow for a season. Pruning, after all, is a necessary part of healthy growth. But if our denomination and our churches don't grow year after year after year, and if, in fact, they continue to shrink year after year after year, when are we going to be honest enough with ourselves and with our Lord to admit that something must be terribly wrong?

Minimally, we must not be doing a very good job as a church when it comes to equipping people to do the ministry of Christ. Church growth, from the perspective of Ephesians 4, isn't a matter of clever programming or technological innovation. It doesn't require an ad budget or a snappy new image. Rather, it's the result of God's people being trained for and doing their ministry, which involves building up the body of Christ.

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## Evidence of Maturity

"But," we might respond when confronted by the reality of our numerical decline, "at least we're growing in maturity." I expect this is true in the case of many churches. But how can we know if this is more than just wishful thinking? Ephesians 4 gives us some guidance here. Though our English translations usually put a period at the end of verse 13, in fact the Greek original continues the thought into verse 14. A more accurate translation would say that the church is to grow up in size and maturity, "*so that we may* no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming" (4:14; italics my translation of *hina meketi omen*). You can measure the maturity of the church, according to Ephesians 4, by the church's response to the spirit of the age as it blows through the halls of academia, and stirs up the waves of the media, and inflates the sails of pop culture.

A grown up church interacts responsibly with the world in which it lives, yet without buying into that world's latest fads and fancies. It responds to the community in which it has been sent by God, but without merely echoing that community's values. A mature church takes seriously the cultural trends of its milieu, but always weighs these trends in the scales of God's truth. Such a

church is relevant, but not pandering as it responds to its neighbors.

On the contrary, a church of spiritual infants rides the wave of the moment, celebrating its apparent relevance while rushing toward the rocks of its destruction. It abandons God's timeless truth in favor of timeliness. It chases after whatever is hot, whatever is fashionable, whatever promises not to offend. It models itself after social institutions, arguing that the church should imitate the ways of business, or government, or the media. The immature church is rudderless, moving all over the place, yet never getting anywhere.

My friends, the winds of doctrine are blowing at gale force these days, and we can easily be blown far off course as a church. Did you see the *San Jose Mercury News* on Monday morning? There, on the front page, was an article entitled "Survey: Americans see salvation in many religions." This story reported on the results of a survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. One of survey's findings was that 70% of Americans with a religious affiliation agreed that "many religions can lead to eternal life." This is no surprise, really, in a cultural in which relativism rules the day. So how did members of the PCUSA answer this question, given our longstanding conviction as a denomination that salvation comes through Jesus Christ, who is "the only Savior and Lord" (PCUSA *Book of Order*, G-3.0300)? Did 70% of our

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members abandon the biblical doctrine of salvation through Christ alone in favor of the culturally-acceptable "many religions can lead to eternal life" view? No, not 70%, but 80% (Pew Report, p. 134). Talk about being blown about by winds of doctrine! We Presbyterians are windsurfing these days, I think. Maybe our denomination isn't growing because the vast majority of our members believe that their non-Christian friends and neighbors are in fine shape without Jesus Christ. I'm afraid that when it comes to biblical standards for maturity, we Presbyterians have a long way to grow.

### **Speaking the Truth . . .**

Ephesians 4 shows us the way forward in our growth as a church. It comes in verses 15 and 16:

But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Notice the imperative "we must grow up in every way." Growth is not an option we can take or leave. It's God's command for us. And, once again, growth isn't limited to one dimension, either quality or quantity. We're to grow up *in every way*.

How? What's the key to healthy church growth? *Speaking the truth in love*. In contrast to being blown about by every wind of doctrine, we are to be people who know and speak the truth. One of our Great Ends as a denomination is "the preservation of the truth" (PCUSA *Book of Order*, G-1.0200). Moreover, we affirm that "truth is in order to goodness," that true belief is the essential foundation of right action (PCUSA *Book of Order*, G-1.0304).

And where do we find this truth that leads to goodness? For centuries, we Presbyterians have affirmed that the truth once came to us in the Word of God made flesh, in Jesus the Christ. And now it comes to us in the Word of God written, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. The written Word, like the incarnate Word, has both human and divine characteristics. But in the mystery of biblical inspiration, God has spoken authoritatively in Scripture, which is therefore worthy of our study, our belief, and our obedience. Thus in the first chapter of the *Book of Order* we read that "[i]nsofar as Christ's will for the Church is set forth in Scripture, it is to be obeyed" (G-1.0100c). The same is true for our personal lives as Christians.

Of course I'm saying nothing new here. The authority of Scripture is the bedrock of the Reformation, upon which Presbyterians have built a house that has stood for centuries. But in recent times, other authorities have vied to replace the Bible as

our chief authority. Some folks have argued that we ought to put our trust more in reason than in Scripture. Science will reveal the truth to us, we're promised. Others have sought to reduce biblical teachings to a few simple, plastic truths, such as the call to love. We assume the freedom to mold love into anything we want it to be in any given situation. Thus Scripture ends up calling us to do whatever we want to do. But the most pervasive competitor to biblical authority today isn't reason or reductionism. It's emotion. Today's credo, "I feel, therefore I am," offers the ultimate source of truth. I can't tell you how many times in the last twenty years I've heard faithful Presbyterians say, "Yes, I know that's what the Bible teaches. But that just doesn't feel right to me." Personal emotion and subjective experience trump God's Word. Of course if it turns out that your feelings and my feelings don't line up, then we have no external arbiter. So truth becomes a matter of power. The one with the most power defines the truth.

I believe the greatest need in our church today isn't a new *Book of Order*, or a new missional consciousness, or a new outreach to younger people, or whatever else is on the agenda. *The greatest need in our denomination is a reaffirmation of the truth of God as revealed in Scripture.* Only then will we be people who can speak the truth. Only then will we be able to turn the tide of denominational decline so that we might begin once again to grow up in all ways into Christ.



I know full well that what I've just said is offensive to the majority of Americans. According to the recent Pew survey, it may well be offensive to most Presbyterians. But, while I freely admit my own limitations in discerning the truth, and while I'm quite sure that I sometimes get the truth wrong, I nevertheless believe that God makes his truth known in Scripture, and that the church will never be healthy until we speak this truth among ourselves and to our world.

### **. . . in Love**

*But*, that's not the end of it, is it? We are not just to speak the truth, but to do so *in love*. Whenever truth-speaking is mixed with haughtiness, whenever it's combined with arrogance, whenever the truth is delivered so as to hurt people, this falls short of Ephesians 4. The church will grow as we speak the truth in love. Truth needs love to be communicated rightly. Love needs the truth to be expressed rightly. In the church of Jesus Christ, truth and love can never be separated, because both reflect the God who is both truth and love.

Speaking the truth in love means that we communicate "with all humility and gentleness," as we read in Ephesians 4:2. It means we don't return anger for anger, attack for attack. When we are maligned, we offer a word of peace. When we are

misrepresented, we clarify without malice. Though the wind of our culture urges us to wage war with words, the call of the Gospel compels us to wage peace through our words.

But speaking the truth in love entails more than just talking in a kind and respectful way. It also has to do with living in loving relationship with one another. Our responsibility as leaders in our churches is to create communities of trust and intimacy so that people can speak truthfully with each other. Our churches need to be places where we can say: "I know this is hard, but I believe Scripture is calling you to stay in your marriage;" or "I'm so attracted to a colleague at work that I'm tempted to leave my wife;" or "God has not abandoned you even though it might feel like he has;" or "I'm just not sure I believe in God anymore;" or "This is the body of Christ, broken for you."

Don't you yearn for the PCUSA to be a church where we speak the truth in love, where we're unashamed of God's revelation in Scripture, and where we communicate that revelation with tenderness and compassion?

Don't you yearn for the PCUSA to be a church that proclaims the good news of God's plan to unite all things in Christ, and that demonstrates this good news by our own unity in Christ?

Don't you yearn for the PCUSA to be a church that profoundly engages the culture around us while preserving the truth delivered to us in Scripture?

Don't you yearn for the PCUSA to be a church that grows up in every way into Christ as we speak the truth of Christ in the way of Christ?

Some of you will have the chance, indeed, the responsibility, to do this very thing in the next few days. The debate in the General Assembly will no doubt be hot and heavy at times. I expect some people will say things you'll find offensive and hurtful. Your deep convictions will surely be criticized, maybe even derided as antique or bigoted. It will be tempting to abandon ship and head for a safe harbor where the winds of doctrine aren't blowing your way. Or you may want to stand up and hit back, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But even in the midst of such understandable temptations, I pray God will give you the grace to speak the truth in love. Speak with humility. Speak with gentleness. Speak with conviction. This is the only way we have any hope of growing back to wholeness as part of the body of Christ.

### **As Each Part is Working Properly**

Even as I say this, you might be secretly thinking that you don't matter. In an Assembly full of pastors, theologians, and learned people, how will your voice make a difference?

May I remind you of how Ephesians 4:15-16 ends. We will grow up as the body of Christ, it says, "as each part is working properly" (4:16). *As each part is working properly!* That's how God has joined and knit together the church. Each part matters, including you. So don't dismiss your importance to the process you're about to enter as a delegate to this General Assembly. Your job isn't to guarantee any particular outcome. It's to be faithful to live out your calling, and this means doing your part of speaking the truth in love.

But whatever happens here in San Jose in the next few days, our churches won't experience the renewal for which we pray until each part begins to work properly. My friends, I know I'm speaking to the choir here, or perhaps I might say these days, to the band. You're the folks who are working properly in your churches, no doubt doing your share and so much more. So I'm not sending you back to your home church with more work to do.

But I am suggesting that you and I need to think and pray about how we can help our churches become bodies in which each part works properly. How can we help our fellow pew sitters realize that they really matter? How can we set our pastors free to be the pastor-teachers they are called to be, so that they might equip every member for ministry? How can we become churches in which all of us embrace our high calling to be ministers of Jesus Christ, both in the church and in the world?

I don't know exactly how to answer these questions, but I'm working on it. Truly. My passion for the ministry of God's people is one of the main things that led me to leave my beloved congregation in Irvine and join the team at Laity Lodge. One of my main responsibilities there is to discover how to help churches equip and empower God's people for ministry. So I'll keep working away on this issue, and I look forward to your partnership. As I discover ways to help the people of God live as the ministers they're called to be, I'll let you know what I find. But what I do know for sure today is that the way forward for us is centered in speaking the truth in love. In this way we will indeed grow up into Christ.

### **Conclusion**

I will conclude with the benediction at the end of Ephesians 3. This is, in fact, the last thing I said to Irvine Presbyterian Church as its pastor. This text is full of hope and power. So, listen to the Word of God. Believe it, and live it!

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (3: 20-21)