

How the church grows

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Preacher: Robin Silson

[0:00] So 1, 1, 1, 7, 5, Ephesians 4 from verse 7 all the way down to 16. But to each one of us, grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

This is why it says, When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people. What does he ascended mean? Except that he also descended to the lower earthly regions.

He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens in order to fill the whole universe. So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers to equip his people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up.

And so we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.

[1:14] Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is Christ. From him, the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work.

This is God's word. Amen. Let me pray. Almighty God, as we come to your word, the Bible, we pray that you would teach our hearts about ourselves, about who you are and about the church.

We pray that you would prune us where we need pruning, that you would encourage us, that you would train us as your servants, that we might be equipped for every good work.

We ask for this in the name of Jesus. Amen. Amen. One of the great privileges of, I suppose, being a parent, but also being a minister, really, and seeing lots of the children grow, is you see them as a parent, you see them from the very first year.

And as a minister now with the kids here, I've watched them from over five years, go from little tiny wee ones to now, you know, getting towards the end of school.

[2:44] And the great thing is, you know, as you see them over many years, they go from, you know, from very little, being able to do practically nothing at all, even the first few years, walking, talking, and then we see school starts, learn to read, solve problems, think critically.

And the real privilege, I think, as a parent, and as being involved, is being involved in that process. You know, teaching them to walk, reading with them, helping them to process the world.

And isn't it, it's striking, isn't it, that that just doesn't happen on its own. They don't just pick up a book and know how to read it.

God uses parents and other adults as the means by which a tiny baby grows to a mature adult who can take care of themselves. Today we're carrying on in our series in Ephesians, in chapter four. And last week, the headline verse for these three chapters, in chapters four to six, was this verse one. It's kind of a, you might call it a hinge verse, as it hinges from the first three to the second three.

[3:58] And it's this, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. That our Christian walk, how we live, is to balance that word, worthy, axis, the axios word, where we get our word axis from, is to balance the calling into God's family, into his one body.

And part of us being one body is that we are meant to do this church life as a family. We're meant to do it together. We're meant to walk together and grow together.

And like a tiny baby that eventually grows to be a mature adult, the church is always to be growing to become mature. God made each one of us different, and as God's people, what that means is that every single person in the church has a unique role.

A unique role. Spiritual maturity in many ways actually looks like having a role. Perhaps you've thought, well, okay, you know, I notice everybody else doing stuff, but what have I got to offer?

What can I offer the church? Even the stuff that I could do, people are already doing it, or, you know, I just don't feel like I've got much to give with the circumstances of my life.

[5:17] What I want us to get from today's passage is this, that everyone in the church, everyone in the church has something to offer.

And not just something, but something unique to offer. Because you're the only version of you. So the fact that you are here is that you're the only one who can bring what you can bring into the church.

Nobody else can bring it into the church, only you. And that's why, it's one of the reasons is that God called you to salvation, but he called you and all the things that you are to be that person in the church. And so here's the thing I want us to consider is what if each of us, what if you have a unique God-given purpose that no one else can do, that no one else can bring, which God actually has decided he's actually going to use that to actively build each of us up.

And that's one of the reasons that he wants to grow you. Spiritual maturity is actually believing that that's true about yourself and living it out. That you come to church, yes, to receive and to be blessed, but also you come with a unique role and purpose and at the same time as being blessed, you get to be a blessing to each other.

here's the principle of our passage then for this morning is that God gives gifts to grow his church into full maturity. God gives gifts to grow his church into full maturity.

[6:55] You see what we say straight from the off, verse 7, that's what we write, but to each one of us, each one of us, grace has been given as Christ has apportioned it, as he's portioned it out.

Every person who follows Jesus has been given grace and it is Jesus himself who decides which gifts each person in the church will receive. He who decides who apportioned it, it does say each of us, doesn't it?

There's no one last start, it doesn't say he'll give grace and apportioned gifts to some of us, but each of us. You have something in who you are to bless God's people and the church is poorer when you're not here.

The church is poorer without you because the gift you bring will not be present. That gift isn't something you bring to the table in your own strength, God is bringing it to the table through you and every member has one.

That's the first thing we want to see in verse 7. Every single Christian has a gift that the church needs. But, he then goes on and wants to kind of specify a particular gift.

[8:10] You'll notice and he goes in on the people themselves. It's a little bit we're going to come back to in verse 8 to 10. I just want to jump down to verse 11. There are kind of gifts that are people in themselves.

Look at me what he says in verse 11. So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers.

He gave. He means that the gifts here are the people themselves given to the church. And why does he give these gifts? This is really key here.

Why does he give these gifts? Verse 12. He tells us why these gifts. To equip his people, to equip the church for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up.

That word for service is also just translated ministry. ministry. So here we have something that is quite often forgotten because you might think that, you know, if somebody said, you know, who does gospel ministry?

[9:13] You'd rightly think, oh, well, that's the minute, that's, you know, Robin's job. He stands at the front, he does this full time. After all, I do preach. I tell people about Jesus, pastor and teach the Bible and so, in one sense, you'd be right.

But Paul writes that the main reason, the main reason that I do my job as a minister is not for me to do gospel ministry. It's to equip all of you, God's people, for works of service, for gospel ministry. You see that? Verse 12. To equip his people for ministry, for works of service. Okay, well, why does it, you think, well, why does he want to do that? Why doesn't he just use, why doesn't he just use me?

Look, we'll look again at the same verse. We've got the reason why. So that, this is why he's going to use people, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God and so that we become mature.

We become mature to the whole measure of the fullness of who Christ is. A mature church is one that looks like Jesus and reflects him.

[10:29] My job, the job of the minister, really, it's really like the job of the parent. Being used by God to speak and to help the church grow so that the church, everybody in the church becomes spiritually mature.

And then, as each of the church becomes mature, they kind of, that kind of whole, it kind of keeps on, the maturity keeps on happening through everyone. The baton's passed on and each of us has the role of helping the next person become spiritually mature using their gifts so that we all can use our God-given purpose in the church.

And I hope you begin to see what this means. It means that when we come to church on a Sunday, it means that when we come in midweek, we don't only come to receive.

It means that if you can't make it, not only do you miss out, but everyone else misses out on the gifts that you bring, that you'd be able to, they miss out on you being able to bless them.

And you might think, sometimes we do think, oh, I come to church because, you know, I need it for me. And that's true, it's right, and, you know, we do receive unlimited blessings from being part of the church, but actually, this kind of flips it on its head because you don't only come for you.

[11:50] You come because you're needed by everyone else. The rest of the church is hindered in some way from actually flourishing in maturity when you're not there because the gifts you have that are unique to you are somewhere else.

And so, if God has designed the church to be this amazing body of mutual growth, of mutual flourishing, where we're all enabled by the gifts that we bring for us all to be built up, the question and maybe the problem that I want to still think about is, what is it that stifles that from happening? What is it that stifles that from happening? And the problem is this, fear and control keep us from maturity. Fear and control keep us from maturity. When we first started following Jesus, we began as, you know, same here, as spiritual infants and spiritually, and it's right this, we needed to be spiritually spoon-fed.

We needed to grow in our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. There's things we didn't understand and that's entirely right and maybe you can remember some godly, older, wiser Christian who not only taught you but modelled really godly character of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus.

And anyone in the early years of that faith, they need to take that time to think, oh, that's what it means to follow Jesus. Didn't really know that. We need that time. But I want to suggest that they can reach, they can reach, kind of, after you've grown for a bit, you can reach a plateau.

[13:27] And I want to suggest two reasons why we might stop growing. The fault can lie with the individual but also, I just want to point out that the fault can lie equally as much with the leadership, with the minister.

I'm going to start with the individual. In every area of life, especially as we get older, we become, we've, you know, we've got experience in life and so we become more competent, don't we? You think in your career, your line of work. No doubt if you've worked hard in a career for many years, by now you'll be good at it. You'll have matured into that role.

And so what happens in churches, you become a believer and all of a sudden you're a beginner again. And that is something, if in one part of your life you're competent and you can do lots, but then this only spiritual life has started, you're a beginner again, it's kind of out of your comfort zone, isn't it?

We don't want to give something a go and make mistakes. So it can be much easier to just, oh, you know, hang back, let somebody else, in many ways, you keep on the illustration, to stay in the spiritual nursery, to stay spoon fed because it's a place of safety.

[14:46] Perhaps we don't want to give something a go because we feel we're not qualified enough. We feel perhaps that's the pastor's job or someone else will do a better job than me and we don't like admitting that and so we might say things like, oh, we just don't have time.

I need to protect my peace or maybe even add spiritual language. God just doesn't have me in that season right now. Staying like a spiritual infant is easier.

For me, you know, spoon feeding Caris is a lot easier than letting her use her own cutlery. She makes a huge mess but if I don't let her try, she will never mature to feed herself.

When you take a step of faith to use your gifts in the church, for the first time, it's not going to be polished like someone's been doing it for years. with experience.

You might make a mistake. That's okay. That's how we grow. That's how we learn. That's how we mature is by having the culture in the church where actually making mistakes is totally okay and so give something a go.

[16 : 06] If I'm still spoon feeding Caris when she's 30, that's not just a problem. It's tragic. giving things a go, being willing to grow, trying things out and not being perfect is actually a sign of maturity.

So, I said the problem can be with the person, the individual, but the problem can equally be with the leadership because the question, whose fault is it if Caris is still being spoon fed at 30?

Might be Caris just refusing to use her cutlery but it's also mine. It'd be mine to keep, even now, you know, to keep the table, the floor and her clothes from being covered in tomato sauce, from being a mess.

It is easier if I control that and do it for her but she will never grow. You see, the anxiety of the leadership can be to blame.

Giving people with less experience and opportunity means that things will get messy, might even look a bit chaotic, the church at times won't look polished and neat and together and sometimes it might be easier for leaders to think, do it themselves or micromanage because, you know, then we keep a little bit of control for ourselves.

[17 : 34] Leaders can be fearful of the mess that comes when people try out ministry but that is just as tragic. What does maturity need?

It needs a church to have mutual courage. It needs leaders who let go of control and members step into that beautiful mess of serving together and if we don't, verse 40 shows us what the danger is. See what it says? It says, if we do this, we're not going to long be infants but if we stay infants, it says, we are tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.

when a child learns to process the world, when they're learning something for the first time they're more susceptible to believing things that are wrong.

If I taught a class of six-year-olds that three plus two equal ten, some of them would believe me because they've never done maths before. There is an innocence and an immaturity to their knowledge that makes them ready to take on board whatever they're told.

[18 : 55] They would believe me because I'm an adult. The same applies spiritually. It's why you need to spend time just learning what it means to follow Jesus. When someone starts following him, you could hear teaching here, there, and everywhere, but the solution is not just bad maths.

It's actually the intention is attractive deceit aiming to hoodwink the innocent and pull you off the wrong spiritual path. Paul says the spiritual infant will be blown off course.

If you stay spoon-fed and never learn, if you don't become healthy, if you don't mature, you won't be able to distinguish the spiritual food that's healthy from the junk food.

Why does that keep a church immature? Because if everyone's blown around by a different teaching here and there, what ends up happening, everyone's sailing in the opposite direction. And it leads what to, we talked about last week, disunity.

If you're sailing in that direction, one over here, one back there, none of you are sailing together, but in the opposite direction and unity is threatened, which is peace is at stake.

[20 : 11] Maintaining peace is threatened. Okay, so the principle, the problem, we'll go to the gospel.

Jesus descended to pay for all the ways we resist maturity. All is not lost, it's not too late. We've jumped over verses 8 to 10.

They are, these verses, when you first read them, they're kind of confusing, but what they tell us, two things, they tell us what Jesus has done for us, and they tell us how these gifts come to the church.

I'm going to unpack it quite slowly, because it is quite technical. We read this from verse 9, we'll go from verse 9. What does he ascended mean, except that he also descended to the lower earthly regions?

He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens in order to fill the whole universe. Really what's happening is you've got two words here, descended and ascended,

the two words descended and ascended explain Jesus' journey from start to finish.

[21:20] Descended is the first half of Jesus' journey. He begins in heaven, but then he descends down to earth, coming into the world as a baby, but then his journey doesn't finish there.

His journey continues to descend. He is persecuted all his life, and then he ends up going down again as he dies on the cross. The end of the first half of his journey, the bottom of his descent, is his death.

That is the place, the means by which he pays for our resistance to become mature, where he pays for our sin, the things that we fear, our fear of failure, which is really pride, and where he pays for all the leaders who have feared what might happen if they don't let go of control, where he pays for maybe sometimes my micromanaging out of anxiety.

It is because Jesus descended all the way to the cross, dying as a slave, dying for all our fear of stepping up, trying things out, all of that, it's because he descended that we can be forgiven for all the times we've chosen to stay in that immature place.

It's because he descended that there is now no guilt and no condemnation and no shame for the times that we've done that. Because Jesus has paid, because he's descended, because he's swapped places, it's because of his descent that we receive his life and live out of that place.

[22:58] We live out of the place of being no guilt, no condemnation, no shame, completely forgiven. That is the gospel. And it leads us to how we respond.

The response, we get to be the means by which God grows us to full maturity. We get to be the means by which God grows us to full maturity. This is the second half of the journey.

He's called about the descent, descended. The second half of the journey after his death is, you might say, the ascended half. He ascends from death, he's raised, and then he ascends, goes up again to be with the Father at his right hand side in heaven.

And the gifts arrive when Jesus has ascended. That's what it means. It says, when he ascended on high, he took many captives, and he gave gifts to his people.

He gives the gifts from his ascended place when he's gone into heaven after being on earth. This is the new way. And the way that we're called to respond as he gives gifts is to build up the body of Christ.

[24:03] gifts. And specifically we have here, there's lots of gifts that we all have, but one gift I think that Paul is wanting his people here and the church to use, to exercise, is something that we actually all do.

It is the gift of speaking. Look how verse 15 explains what maturity looks like as it's lived out. He says in verse 15, instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is Christ.

From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work. The people gifts given earlier that we looked at, you'll notice they're all speaking gifts.

And so maturity here in the church, it involves everyone growing in what it means to speak truth in love. Love has to be the motivation whenever we speak the truth to one another.

It has to be the motivation. And I kind of, when you hear that, what I don't want you to hear is, oh man, not another thing to do as a Christian.

[25:28] Because this call to action is really to be the voice of Jesus in each other's lives. Because we're connected to him, we then get to be the voice of Jesus into each other's lives.

Sometimes people have used this verse when they want to be confrontational. You know, I'm just speaking the truth in love, meaning I just want to tell you something that I really dislike about you, but I'm just speaking the truth in love.

And it's hard, isn't it, if we want to do that because our motivations might be we disagree or because we've been hurt. If that is your motivation for speaking the truth, it's not really done in love, and we should probably refrain from speaking until we're doing it with the right intention.

It goes without saying that when we talk, when we speak, when we're growing in the gift of speaking, this is what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean that everyone in the church is called to preach from the front or become like those gifts in verse 11, but rather that none of us are to stay silent.

And so I just want to give you five ways of how you might do that, some practical, kind of what speaking the truth might look like. The first one is encouraging.

[26:52] We want to be a church that speaks words of encouragement. That might be telling someone I can really see how God is at work in your life. You model to me patience like I've never known before, encouraging people with the character, the godly character that they have, how they're living like Jesus and how you can see that.

The second one is the hardest one of all five, correcting. It is hard but it's important. It is pointing out where perhaps there's wrong thinking about God, wrong thinking about themselves or maybe even there's kind traits, sinful patterns of life that somebody hasn't seen where repentance is needed and it needs to be pointed out.

If you ever have a call to do that with someone, it is never done out of malice but only with humility, care and relational trust where you desire to see the person become more like Jesus.

Third word is empathising, listening and speaking words of comfort when people are suffering.

Four, we've got gospeling.

Kind of made that word up. It's reminding people of their forgiveness and acceptance with God when they feel, you know, they're repentant, they've got guilt and shame about their sins and they feel sorrow for it but they need to be reminded of the goodness of Jesus, of forgiving their sin, of paying for all their debt in their place.

[28:25] That can be done in the church but also to the people outside. And the last one is praying. Not always waiting to be asked to pray but offering prayer for the circumstances in people's lives.

Five ways that you could speak the truth in love. We are all in this together, this great plan of God to mature us. We're all involved with the joints, the ligaments working together and when you speak, when you do this, a word of comfort, a warning, a grace to someone that's taken from the truths of who Jesus is, truth from the Bible, when you do that, even just quietly, even just one to one, it is the living Jesus continuing his ministry through you.

people. We're connected to the head and his life can flow through your ordinary words and conversations. Christians.

Why would we not want to be involved in that? There is one view of church that you come along, you know, you watch gospel ministry happen, perhaps like going to watch a sports team as a spectator and the professionals, those who do it full time are the ones who take to the field the pitch.

But that's not church. In the church, every believer takes to the field. The stands are not where you belong, the chairs in church are not a spectator's gallery, they're the dugout.

[30:03] And the minister, he's like a player coach. This is where we're equipped to take the field together. And there is as much joy for me when I see each of you playing, speaking the truth in love, in here and out there as if I was playing myself.

Who are the spectators? Then, it's the watching world. Watching what the church does and how it lives. So, as we come in for landing, the body of Christ grows because the spirit of God is at work. He uses people to grow us and one of the main ways that we're called to do that, the unique call on each of our lives as the unique role is through speaking. We start the Christian life as infants but connected in God as we speak to each other, as we encourage, as we correct, as we empathise in gospel and pray, we build one another up as a body that grows together who don't stay spoon-fed but walk in maturity.

Every single person here has something to offer. Each of you has a unique God-given role that only you can fill. Jesus pays for all the times we've resisted.

We're forgiven for all the times we're out of fear, we've sat back, or where maybe me has tried to micromanage and control. So the gospel today, this is the opportunity today, the gospel does, is it frees you, each of us, to be used by God in each of us lives.

[31:41] He provides us with words, with truth that we can speak in love to one another and we get to be the means, we get to be the means in each other's lives to help one another grow into full maturity and look like Jesus.

Let me pray. Almighty God, I just praise you for this big vision, this big picture of what church should be like.

and you know each of us, you know there's times where we resist that, where we fear failure and so we don't even want to give something a go. I know from my own heart there's times when I fear what it might look like if I don't control or if I have micromanaged people in the past, Lord, and been

too intense, Lord, my own heart, I just ask for forgiveness and pray that you'd help me to let people have a go and give people opportunities so that we can all grow.

Lord, I thank you that you speak to us through the Bible and I thank you that as we take truth and take it in our own hearts and it becomes part of who we are, I thank you that you could use any way to build one another up but it's just such a great privilege that you get to use each one of those to build up one another and to speak truth.

Help us to not do it out of when if there is a hard word to say, I pray that we wouldn't do that with the wrong intentions to get our own back but I pray that we do it with love. Fill our church with love and power your spirit.

[33:28] And so we ask for help, Lord, we can't do this alone and we thank you that we ask that through this you enable us to maintain the bond of peace with one another. We ask for this in his name.

Amen.