

Transformed by maturing together in unity

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Date: 19 June 2022

Preacher: Dylan Marais

[0 : 00] Now when you hear the word church, when you hear the word church, what images and feelings does it stir up for you? I asked one or two people earlier and they said, oh, for them it means family, which is a great answer really.

I think for lots of people, the overarching feeling about church could be potentially a sense of gray, dull boredom. Boredom. I speak to people who aren't in church anymore, but many people my age and a bit older used to go to church as children.

And they just really didn't understand what was going on and it just left them with a sense of being bored really. Didn't really understand what was going on. For some, church brings with it memories of pain and regret.

Maybe some have been emotionally hurt or sadly even physically abused because of belonging to a church. For many, it will feel like a chore. You're on duty again this Sunday.

You can't get off. If you do, you've got to rearrange the roster. Or if you're sick or you're going away for the weekend, especially when it gets colder like this. And we started our services so early in the mornings now. But I think we can feel like this about church being a chore, being something we've got to do.

[1 : 19] We don't really work ourselves up to do this thing. And we feel like this because we don't really know what the goal or purpose of church is. We forget about that. And so we're going to look at that a little bit today.

What is the point of being part of the church and going to church and doing church things? And I think we've missed out to a large degree on the wonder and thrill, really, of being part of the church because we don't have the same vision for the church that God does.

And Ephesians is one of those books that highlights the importance and the magnificence and the beauty of church. And so this week, we're going to look at three important aspects of how being part of the church helps us to change.

And that is an area of unity and maturity and being equipped to make those things happen. But before we get there, I just want to look in a little bit more detail what the church is all about.

I want us to capture this biblical vision, if you will, of what the church is and what God is doing with us. Because I think that will stop us from thinking of church as just an add and extra, as a burden for us to bear.

[2 : 35] I want us to capture this vision, the same vision that God has for his people that Paul spells out in the book of Ephesians. So we're going to spend some time in Ephesians 4, but I just want to highlight a few things in Ephesians 1, 2, and 3 for us to catch on to that will help us understand what we're doing in Ephesians 4.

What we'll see is that the church, rather than being a burden, is actually the highlight of God's plan for history. God's plans for this world. The church is the highlight for God's plans for this world.

So, it'll be good to have your Bibles. Turn with me to Ephesians 1. I'm going to highlight one verse there, verse 10. The first chapter, really, is one long sentence when Paul wrote it.

I think it's the longest sentence in Scripture. The entire chapter, just about, is Paul just going on about how God has blessed us. You know, it starts in verse 3. We read it earlier as those words of comfort.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Now, you've got a full stop there in your Bibles. Paul just keeps going.

[3 : 40] He just goes, he blows right through that stop street. He just keeps running. You know, he chose us in him before the creation of the world. Okay, now, already you've got church stuff there.

He chose us.

There's plural stuff there. This is a communal thing that God has done. In love, he predestined us, etc., to be adopted as his sons. Paul goes on about that. But I want us to notice something in verse 10.

God is doing all these things. He says, I'll have to start in verse 9. So he's given knowledge to people about something that he's doing in Christ.

And this is what it is. To be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment. What is it that God has told Paul that he's doing through Christ?

Well, he's going to do this. To bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, which is Christ. But the force of this verse is that God is now busy doing something.

[4 : 53] Something has happened. Something has changed in the world. God is bringing all things together in Christ, which means at some point they were separate. And we still have that with us today.

It's because of sin. Sin separates us from God. But sin separates people from people. Ethnically, economically, even in families.

Family life is hard. We celebrate Father's Day. There's not a family here. There's not a father here who hasn't had battles with their family. And arguments and divisions and pullings apart.

We all go through that. But God has done something new. He's bringing things together. With the coming of Christ, the healing of the entire cosmos has begun.

God is bringing all things in heaven and on earth. That means, you know, top to bottom. You know how we say from head to toe? So it includes everything. That's what heaven and earth here means.

[5 : 51] The whole of the cosmos is being brought together, together, together, melded together to form a unity so we're not split apart and fighting each other.

That's the point. When you're apart, you're bots. But when you're together, you're friends. You're bonded. You're brotherhood. You're family. The process of reunification has begun.

That's what he's saying. When the times have reached their fulfillment, Paul will say that that time has come. It has begun 2,000 years ago when Jesus of Nazareth, when Jesus the Christ came to earth and started his ministry and died and rose again.

The hinge of history has swung. The door to the new age of the spirit and the blessings that Paul talks about here have begun. The blessings of heaven have started to flow to earth.

And the church is integral, vital for that process. It's both a recipient of God's blessings, but it's also the carrier of God's blessings.

[6 : 57] I'll show that to us in a minute. But what that means for us at little old St. Mark's is that we get to be part of that renewal process. I think that should make us realize, perk up, wow, that's church.

Okay, it's coming to church, driving here, it's cold, it's rainy, we're singing songs. We are part of the thing that God is doing in the universe to bring heaven and earth and people and him closer together.

This is a new thing that has been going for 2,000 years, but it's a new thing that God has started. The world has been waiting for this because it's been ripped apart by sin for all these millennia. So God has got this huge renewal project going on.

Okay, how does the church fit into that? We'll have a look at chapter 1, verse 22. Paul is praying a prayer here.

He's bringing the whole world under Christ. Paul is praying that the church will know all about this thing that God is doing. In verse 22 he says, I want you to know, I want you to remember that God has placed all things under his feet, that's Christ, and appointed him to be head over everything for the church.

[8 : 19] Huh. Which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. God has made Jesus the ruler of all things.

That's what the head of everything means. He's the ruler of all things. Including the forces of evil. These are the forces that threaten to rip our world apart for our sake.

For us. Jesus has come down out of heaven to do combat on earth with these things that rip God's world apart. These seriously powerful forces that we can't control.

We've been looking at them recently. Sin. The devil. People who are caught up in that way of thinking. Not honoring God, but thinking that they know how to run the world and they do it so badly.

In fact, what happens is they make people drift further apart. Jesus has come down to do the fighting for our sake. So that we don't have to fight them.

[9 : 15] He's done that. He's done their defeating. All rival and evil powers to God have been subdued by Christ and are under his feet. And because we are in him, they're under our feet.

We, at the Lords and Marks, have the power of the resurrected Christ flowing through our veins. And we can, at our disposal, to fight and to conquer evil forces that threaten to undo God's work of the renewal of all things.

So that if we as a church gather around to get stuff done for God and his kingdom, it is going to happen. And nothing can stop that from happening because we're fighting with Christ as our king, who's done the fighting for us already.

Does that make sense? And then there's an interesting description of the church and what it is in chapter 3. Chapter 3, verse 10.

Paul is writing about how the church has joined Israel, in a sense. Although Israel themselves have to join the church.

[10 : 27] There's this new creation that God has brought about. That's in chapter 2. But this new thing that God has made, here's the intent of it. Here's why he's done this.

Let me read just from verse 6. It'll help you get the context. Paul, again, is talking about a mystery that has been revealed to him. And he says in verse 6, chapter 3, This mystery is that through the gospel, in other words, the stuff that Jesus has done, the Gentiles, that's non-Jews, are heirs together with Israel, and members together of one body, and share his together in the promise, in the promises, or promise in Christ Jesus.

So there's a huge thing that's happened in time and space. And that is that the Jew-Gentile divide has been totally done away with because of Christ, which is one of the biggest divisions in world history. Okay?

Everyone knew in the time before Jesus arrived that you, there's Jews and there's Gentiles. There's Jews and non-Jews. And in Christ, that division has been broken down.

The largest ethnic, sort of cultural division there was. And so the implication of that is that any other cultural division, or ethnic division, must be done away with because of what Christ has done.

[11 : 44] But then into verse 10, that's the mystery that's been revealed. It means this new thing, this church has begun. Verse 10, his intent, this is talking about what God has done.

God's intent was that now, just notice that now is an important verb. What is now? Is it an adverb? Verb?

Something new has begun. Now, through the church, that's us, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose, which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Whew. Okay, so, church makes known the manifold wisdom of God to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.

Huh. So, we came to church this morning, didn't know what we were going to expect. Did you think that coming to church would mean that we've got something to say to the evil forces that are at work in God's universe?

[13 : 00] In fact, we don't have to say anything. This word is display. By simply being together, we're showing something of the wisdom of God. The church displays God's amazingly rich and diverse wisdom to the evil and defeated powers of the world.

We are the display of the multifaceted wisdom of God. Wisdom here, in part, means to show how clever God is. The manifold wisdom refers to intricately embroidered patterns of cloth.

You know, we're doing knitting with people we're training in knitting. Now, that's not easy, just by the way. After a whole lesson, I still couldn't put the...

So, to get a cloth or tapestry that's intricately woven is something amazing. You need to have a seriously good mind to be able to do that.

Well, that's what God is... That's what the church is. That's what God is doing with us. He's... We're an intricately woven pattern. Or another image is a beautifully or expertly arranged bouquet of flowers.

[14 : 11] Sort of beautiful and varied, different colors, but achieving an overall effect of unity and beauty. Another image is singing. When we sing and there's harmonies, it creates this beautiful unity, but it creates richness and diversity as well.

When the world sees us, they're meant to go, Wow, that is amazing. That is beautiful. Look how the whole plan of God fits together.

How did God think of such an amazing thing to bring little old us together, little old St. Mark's, people from very different backgrounds, economically, socially, and otherwise.

How do we get on? We, at little old St. Mark's, have been called together by God to dazzle the powers of hell with the power and wisdom of God.

That's just a glimpse, I think, of what God is doing through the church. And we need the same vision that God has for His church. In our minds, when we think of ourselves and of what we're doing here at St. Mark's, I think it elevates our thinking to beyond our immediate reality and our immediate problems.

[15:26] It reminds us that we're part of something far bigger and far more important and rich and immense.

and that God has overcome obstacles far larger than we face. I think that should help put into perspective the problems we face as well as the goals that we work for or towards as a church.

All right, so, knowing that that's the kind of vision that God has got for His church, it's not something we do until we die and go into heaven. the church is the vehicle for God to show off who He is to the world and to challenge evil and to push back division and to unite all things under Christ.

We are the thing that makes that happen. Yes, it's God who makes it happen to us, but then we get to run with that ball, so to speak. He passes the ball to us. not leaving us without any help, but we play a role.

We're responsible for taking God's kingdom and God's work and God's name into the world.

Knowing that this is God's vision for the church helps us understand why Paul is so adamant that we should be eager to maintain unity.

[16:42] God is bringing things together and for them to work together, there has to be a shared foundation. So, now we're in chapter 4 and verse 3. Paul is telling the church now, okay, I've told you who you are, you've this amazing new creation that God is using to bring all things together, to unify things that are disunified.

So, now I want you, verse 3, to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Make every effort.

Be eager. Be urgent. There's an urgency here. There's something we've got to work at, at unity.

And the first thing that Paul wants us to be unified together in is our theology, how we think of God and the Spirit and the things that we do at church.

Notice in verse 4, he says, make every effort to keep unity, to be unified. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

So, the first thing we must be unified in is our theology. What Paul calls the faith, later on he says, in verse 13, he calls it the faith, until we reach unity in the faith. Faith here is not my personal trust in Christ.

[18:10] Faith does have that meaning in the Bible, but here he means the faith. That is the teaching that's been handed down by the apostles and the leaders and the teachers of the church to the church members.

It's a basic doctrine that includes the understanding of the Lordship of Christ in basic liturgical practices like baptism in our understanding of God.

And he wants us to have one singular unified understanding of these things, one teaching of these things, if the church is going to stand firm and shine as example of unity to the world.

Now, we don't often get taught on the importance of having the same theology. In fact, the opposite is often taught, isn't it? The modern world teaches us that we should each have our own private, personal opinion and don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

You've all got to make up your own minds. But that's not really what the Bible teaches. There are very certain, very important doctrines that we all have to ascribe to if we're going to call ourselves Christian, if we're going to be part of his body, his household, the church.

[19:15] We can't just make up our own minds about who God is or how he operates in the world. So if our theology is at odds with what the Bible says, then we must be humble enough to change our theology.

We've got to learn to change our theology, our thinking about God in line with what God has revealed about himself. And that really only comes through the Scriptures. Which is, for example, why we say the Creed fairly regularly at St. Mark's.

Today we didn't say it, we sung it. Which is a cool way of saying the Creed. We want to express our unity with historic Christianity. It's an important part of our witness that we belong to something far more ancient, far more larger than just our own private, personal connection with God, as important as that is.

We need to have this unified understanding of who God is so that builds our foundation, that builds our unity. So there's this emphasis on unity.

I want you to be unified together in your understanding of God. When Christian leaders talk like that, people tend to start getting very nervous for a variety of reasons.

[20 : 30] It sounds like we say you must believe exactly what you've been taught because, of course, you can read the Bible, but we all know that the Bible gets given to us through teachers. In other words, me and Nick and the books that we read.

And so when we say you've got to believe one and the same thing, it sounds very much like you've got to believe exactly what we are saying to you. And that gets people a little bit nervous.

But Paul himself is not calling for total uniformity as if we're all robots cut out of the same cast. He's not calling us to be robots. So in verse 7 to 12, he talks about how we have all individually been given different gifts so we can be effective in different ministries, which really is for the building up, the unification of the church, but we'll have a look at that.

So I'm going to sort of summarize from verse 7 to 12, but just notice verse 7. To each one of us, grace has been given as Christ has appointed it. So Paul goes from being one God, one faith, one Lord, one baptism, but to each one of us, and now he's talking individual, grace, that's a gift, has been given as Christ has appointed it.

So each individual person at church has been given a different gift, a different grace from Christ depending on what their needs are, depending on what they're asked for. Okay, then at verse sort of 8 onwards, it talks about Christ ascending and descending.

[21 : 58] I'll pick that up in a minute. Verse 11, Christ has, it was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers to prepare God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up.

Okay, and then we'll go on until we reach the maturity of faith, which we'll talk about just now. So grace is given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift, and then he also gives the church leaders to equip the saints for works of service.

So different equipplings, different works, different things that we get to do as part of the church for the building up of the unity of the church. In the middle of that, there's a very strange bit about Christ ascending and descending, and that often trips people up.

How does that fit in with the whole thing of receiving gifts from him? It's actually quite simple.

Remember that Christ was sent at a certain point in time to fix a creation that had been torn apart by evil.

To do that, he had to descend from where he was at God's right hand from before the creation of the world, and he had come down to earth to fix the problems that were created on earth, the problems that we get to create, that we've made, the mess that we've made.

[23 : 14] So he descends to earth to do battle with the evil forces, to break their power, and then once he's defeated them, and he does that through his death and through his resurrection, once he's defeated them, he ascends back to heaven, and all their possessions become his by right of conquest.

So this is conquest language. Everyone in the ancient world would have known exactly what was going on here. They would have had it, every time a king goes into a foreign land and defeats them, he takes all their possessions, becomes his booty, and then he takes it to the capital and they have this huge procession.

And then as he's going down the street, the whole city comes out to welcome him back and he throws out all the stuff that he's taken from the people that he's defeated. The gold, the silver, slaves, clothes, food, things like that.

Jesus goes back to heaven to show the powers that he is now undefeatable. He's defeated them once by being in heaven. It means he's unreachable now. He's the, did I say it?

I think I said this once. He's the undefeated, so heavyweight champion of the universe and he can't be defeated. And like all conquering kings, he showers his people with good things so that they can enjoy the new life and blessing and freedom that comes from being rescued, but not just that we can enjoy it for ourselves, but that we can get stuff done for each other, with each other, to be equipped for works of service.

[24 : 45] Now the gifts aren't spelled out in any detail here, but they are for works of service or the work of service. And that's, the work of service is easy enough to understand. The gifts Jesus gives us are to be used primarily, but not exclusively, for helping others in the church.

The word service here is the same word used as a servant. It's the *doulos* word, if you remember that, *doulos*-ship. It's serving. It's a servant.

It's helping. And Paul maybe is sort of intentionally vague here because he doesn't want us to tick boxes, but just to be open to doing anything at any time for anyone of our fellow Christians.

for that, indeed, is the work of being a servant. Okay, that means that being a Christian or rather being part of the church is not a spectator sport. All too often we can think of the leaders of the church as the ones getting things done and the members in the pews are the spectators.

But that's not how the church works. Think of it like a rugby team. The Stormers have just won the championship. You've got the coaches and you've got the players and then you've got the spectators.

[26 : 05] And the coaches don't coach the spectators, they coach the players so that the players get the job done well. They become skilled in rugby playing.

That's how that works. And the spectators are watching going, yes, that is amazing. I didn't know that you could do that and all the skills and the tricks that they've got. So the leaders of the church that God gives as gifts, by the way, he gives gifts to us as church members but then part of that gifting is the church leaders, these people who do the teaching.

So it's in verse 11, apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. And just so you know, we don't have apostles anymore. Prophets, depending on how you define that, is someone who speaks the word of God.

Evangelists, certainly. But essentially what you've got as pastors and teachers now, our job is to help train the church to work more effectively and better, to be champions at service, to be service champions.

You're the players. The world is the spectator watching what we do. Something for us to think about. Equipping equates to training, equipped for works of service.

[27 : 26] My NIV says, to prepare God's people for works of service. Equipping, being prepared, being trained, it's the same thing. Interestingly, the equipping word here comes from restoring.

That restoring word we saw, was it last week? We restore each other gently. It's being able to get people to function properly. And I don't know about you, but it's way more fun to be part of a game than just watching it from the sidelines.

To be part of the rugby team. That's, it's much more fun to get stuck in and be part of the team that wins. And that's exciting because the cool thing about being on the side of the church is that you are the side of Team Jesus, which means we're on the winning team.

We're automatically on the winning team if we work with Jesus to build up his church. So that any work, any service that we do is going to go towards helping the church win even more.

You know, sometimes we don't get involved because we don't know if we'll make any difference.

We're asking for singers. Oh, I don't know if I can sing. We ask for people to help maybe at the soup kitchen or to go take someone somewhere.

[28 : 47] oh, I don't know how to get there. I don't know if I can do that. But we, it does make a difference. The small things, which are seemingly small and insignificant to us, becoming like a slave and serving others and helping them no matter what they need, that's a thing that God uses to change the world.

Remember, that's exactly what Jesus did. He didn't come to be served but to serve. it's the same word. God saves us and then empowers us to do the work of helping others and through our acts of service, he builds the kingdom.

Do you get, you get what we're saying about the church here? It's not a spectator sport. We get to be involved in what God is doing to change the world and it comes down to sometimes very sacrificial works of service.

And then lastly, we need to aim for unity, which we do through acts of service and by making the time to be equipped to do them better.

And all of this is so that the church can become more mature. Just a word on being equipped better. It does take time. So the rugby players go to practice to get better at playing, at winning.

[30 : 04] And so, we've got to be prepared as God's people to be better equipped, to be better trained, which requires time and energy and sacrifice.

But that's worth making if you know you're on the winning team. Because then it's a joy, then it's a pleasure. Yeah, sure. If I need to be trained in how to do things better for the church, if I need to learn how to be more merciful, be more gentle as I restore, be more loving, all these things. Yeah, that's worth doing. Because it's going to help build the body better. It's going to help. You're going to be part of the team that actually is winning. Then the other part of that is to become more mature.

The goal of this equipping is so the church becomes mature. We're part of the process of growing to maturity. We don't want to be like little children. We want to be grown adults.

So that's in verse 13. Christ has given gifts to his church. Some of those gifts are to the teachers of the church, the leaders.

[31 : 06] They're there to equip the saints for works of service, verse 12, so that the body may be built up, verse 13, until we all reach unity in the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

To attain to maturity to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ is another translation. And here we come across another underdeveloped or underutilized aspect of our transformation. Part of our transformation journey must include us becoming more mature in Christ. Mature here means complete. It's the telos word in Greek, if you know that.

But it's not, or perfect, some people say perfect, but it's not quite that. It's not an overnight success. In fact, the definition of this word helps us to understand that there's a process involved. We all know how maturity, we attain maturity.

It's not an overnight thing. You do it through experience. You're bumping your head, making mistakes, but learning from your mistakes. In other words, you've got to have people who have been there and done that to help you through and change that. That's what we're supposed to be doing together.

[32 : 17] Seeing people make mistakes and saying, hey, I've been there, I've done that, I've bumped my head. What we looked at last week, restoring gently, let me help you not make that same mistake again. Here's how to reconnoit to that particular issue.

But just to bring out this idea of how maturity grows, telos, mature, we get mature from going through the necessary stages to reach the end goal.

It's developed into, something is developed into completion by fulfilling the necessary process. The root word from telos, tel, we get it from the telescope.

It's a well, it is well illustrated with the old pirate's telescope extending one stage at a time until it reaches full length and full effectiveness.

You know how a telescope works? It only works once you've extended it and reached it. That's how, and that's how maturity works. You reach the goal, but it's a stage by stage process.

[33 : 19] How do we know we're becoming more mature? Well here we become less affected by bad teaching and we become more united in good teaching. So verse 13, we want to reach maturity in the faith.

Verse 14, 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 men in their deceitful scheming.

Okay, what that means is we must be careful not to follow every new fad or spiritual fad that comes along. You know, and they come along every so often, don't they? Does anyone remember the Bible code?

That was, whew, in the 90s there was the Bible code, the prayer of Jabez, the Sibylline oracles. Does anyone remember the gold dust fad? No?

Because yeah, I thought it was in the southern suburbs as well, as it happened. People would come and there would be gold dust. All these things have come in God. A mature church won't be affected by them because we're solid, we're stable, we know what is good teaching, we know

what's bad teaching.

[34 : 31] One mark of an adult is that we tend to be unflustered by small issues. Children, on the other hand, are easily frightened and easily amazed. You know, they look at something that's shiny, just think of all those little toys with LED and the kid, you know, they just love it, they want that.

Some adults like it as well, I must be honest. A church that is united and grounded in the great truths of the Bible, the great truths of what it means to be the church, what Paul unpacks in Ephesians, won't be drawn to foolish and childish teachings, but rather see them for what they are. Devious little schemes intended to disunify us. Being mature helps keep us united and being equipped helps keep us mature. I'll just say that again.

Being mature helps keep us united and being equipped helps keep us mature. That's how that circle works. So, in closing, if we're going to be transformed individually, we have to take seriously the place of the church in our change process.

We must work at being united in our doctrines. We can't just decide for ourselves what we're going to believe and how we're going to believe. We've got to listen to what comes out of the Bible. We must be mature in our thinking, not swept around by every new Christian fad that comes along every so often, but be grounded in the deep doctrines of the faith.

[36 : 00] And we must be ready to be equipped to exercise our gifts, but to be trained in the exercise of our gifts for each other. Christianity is not a spectator sport, but if you're on the side of Team Jesus, you're on the winning team.

And I hope you think that the vision of the church, of who we are, will help us understand it's a bit more exciting, a bit more interesting, a bit more fun to be part of that team.

Well, let's pray to God and ask Him to help us to do these things. Dear Lord Jesus, we have seen that your church is an integral part of what you are doing in the world.

Yes, you call individuals to your service, but we individually, communally act together as your church, your body. And Lord, we long to be more unified with each other, to be more mature, and to get this works of service done well.

Lord, give us a heart for each other. Give us a heart for your word and for loving each other to be built up in love and to show the world the amazing riches and glories that belong to us because we belong to you.

[37 : 24] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.