

THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH EPHESIANS 4:7-13

This morning I'm going to be delivering the third part in a series about the Church. The first week we examined the *identity* of the church, and the second week the *composition* of the church. Today we will explore the *purpose* of the church, and our text will be taken from Ephesians 4:7-13.

Before we read the passage, I want to remind you that Church, as Jesus and Paul define it, is not a building, or a Sunday morning worship service, or a corporation with officers and membership and an organizational flowchart. *Church is a group of believers who have been sovereignly and strategically put together by Jesus Himself for the purpose of expressing His life, accomplishing His will, and advancing His kingdom in its community and beyond.*

I also want to remind you that the church does not exist for us, in spite of the fact that in a recent survey, 89% of American churchgoers said that the church exists to meet their needs or the needs of their families. The church does not exist to be a supplement to my personal spiritual growth, or to give me a weekly spiritual boost, or even to provide a context for me to worship God or know the Bible better.

Those things should happen as we gather together, but the church exists solely for Jesus—to reveal *His* glory, to express His life, and to accomplish *His* purposes. Before He even created the world Jesus ordained that the church would be the primary means by which He would reconcile a lost, sinful world to Himself during this relatively short span of time called human history. And members of the church are His ministers of reconciliation—ambassadors through whom He speaks and works in this earth realm.

Perhaps the most concise summation of the purpose of the church is given in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, beginning in verse 7 of chapter 4. *But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸ Therefore it says, "When He ascended on high He led a host of captives and He gave gifts to men." ⁹ (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that He had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) ¹¹ And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ... (ESV)*

We already learned in chapter 1 that God has chosen the *church* to be the primary means of implementing and fulfilling His eternal plan of glorifying Jesus and advancing His kingdom in this world. Here, in chapter 4, we discover how He does this.

Look again at **verse 7**. *But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift*. Paul has used the word "grace" frequently in this letter, but here it has an unexpected meaning. He is not talking about saving grace—the grace God lavished on us when He made us alive in Christ when we were dead in our transgressions and sins (2:5). He is talking about grace for ministry.

Just as in chapter 3 Paul spoke of the *grace* given him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (3:8), here he writes of the *grace* given to each person to do the work of one's specific ministry assignment given by the Lord. So, *grace* is synonymous with spiritual gifts—talents or abilities that Jesus gives every individual in His church so that each one can contribute to the strength and health and effectiveness of the church.

In a parallel passage Paul says, *“We have different gifts, according to the grace given us” (Romans 12:6)*. Here in Ephesians he says, *“grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.”* Paul’s emphasis is not the *amount* of grace that Jesus to each person, but that *all* have been measured out a portion of His grace so that when we function together, we are able to attain *the whole measure*, which Paul refers to in 4:13. What is measured to each one is the amount needed to make the full stature of the body of Christ.

This has been God’s plan from ages past. The Psalmist prophesied that the Messiah, after He had ascended to His position of power and authority, would impart these gifts to His people. Paul cites Psalm 68 in **verse 8**. *“Therefore it says, ‘When He ascended on high He led a host of captives and He gave gifts to men.’”*

Paul is primarily interested in the last line of this prophecy, *“and He gave gifts to men,”* for this provides scriptural verification that the ascended Christ gives gifts to His church (Snodgrass, 200).

For the sake of time, I am going to skip past the parenthetical statement in verses 9-10, to Paul’s identification of these gifts in **verses 11-12**. *“And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...”*

Notice, the gifts that Jesus gave for the strength and health and maturity of the church are *people*—more specifically, *leaders* who equip members of Christ’s body to fully engage in the work of Christ.

The Greek word translated *equip* was originally a medical term used to describe one of the things Dr. Bob does. It means “to set a broken bone”. Think about that for a minute in the context of the Body of Christ. The church is comprised of broken people, and God has provided different ones within the Body of Christ to help restore or to help put things in order so that those broken people become healthy, useful, strong, and functional, so the Body may be built up.

That word “built up” means to develop, to expand, to be made stronger and more complete. It is a term that has reference to progress and improvement.

This is God’s will for every church including ours. It is not God’s will that we stay the same; that when things reach a point where we feel comfortable or satisfied, we shift into neutral and say, “Okay, we’ve arrived.” As long as we are on this earth God is going to continue to develop, expand, and complete us.

But the thing I want to emphasize most from verse 12 is who is doing the work of the ministry. It does not say that these leaders are doing it. The leaders are the trainers and coaches, equipping *the players* to do it. Yes, they are doing it with them, but everyone is involved. Christ’s work is a collective effort. We all participate together.

Ministry is not for a few seminary-trained people who have conspicuous gifts and talents. God has called and equipped each of us to be fully engaged in fulfilling His plans and purposes on this earth. And that means *all of us*, including *you*.

There is no such thing as a benchwarmer on God’s team. There is no such thing as inactive status on God’s team. He drafted, equipped, and assigned each of us to be on this team at this time. And all of us have a vital part.

We are called the body of Christ. Jesus is the Head, and each of us is an individual body part that fits together with all the other body parts and collectively makes up the body of Christ in a particular location. And each body (called a local church) is an expression of Christ in its community.

So, the purpose of divinely appointed human leaders called apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers is to actually help prepare each body part to function in the way God designed it to function and to ensure that it is functioning in relation to all the other body parts. And when every body part does what it is designed to do, Jesus is expressed and experienced—by us *and* by the community.

So, when Paul talks about *the building up of the body of Christ*, he's talking about every person in the church knowing what he/she is supposed to do, every person equipped and fit to do it, and every person actually doing it. And the more we function together, every body part doing what it is designed to do, the more Jesus gets to be revealed and experienced and encountered—by us *and* by people in the community.

That's the definition of *maturity*, and that is God's goal for every local church. Look at **verse 13**. "...*Until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*"

This verse summarizes Jesus' vision for His church. It describes what He wants to accomplish as we meet together, as we interact with each other, instruct each other, encourage each other, and build each other up. This *is* the end result; this is what it looks like.

The first thing in verse 13 that Jesus wants to accomplish is that *we all attain the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God*. This simply means that we think alike about certain things. We have a common understanding about truth and reality. That, in the words of verses 4 through 6 of this same chapter, "*There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all*" (4:4-6).

The unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God means that we know who God is, we know who Jesus is, we know why God sent Jesus to this earth, we know what His death and resurrection accomplished, we know where He is right now, we know that He's coming again, we know that on that day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord, we know that there is a heaven and hell and that all peoples of the earth will populate one or the other depending on what they do with Jesus.

We may have different opinions and different convictions about a lot of things related to the Bible and theology—baptism, spiritual gifts, communion, the timing of the Lord's return, etc. But unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God means that we are all on the same page about the things I just mentioned, which are the essentials of the faith. And not only are we on the same page, but we are also *focused* on those things. Those essentials are what we are all about.

That means we are not majoring on the minors. It means none of us has His own agenda, none of us is doing His own thing, none of us is riding a hobby horse, none of us is trying to be novel or clever so that he/she attracts a personal following. On the contrary, we are all about Jesus, we are all focused on Jesus, we are all pursuing Jesus.

And as we do these things Jesus becomes more and more prominent in our midst so that His name is exalted, His glory is revealed, His grace is magnified, His character is displayed. And as this happens there is a simultaneous transformation taking place in *us*, His body. Paul calls it *mature manhood*.

The Greek word translated *mature* refers to the fully developed body of an adult as opposed to the under-developed body of a child, which is not nearly as strong, coordinated, or capable. Jesus' goal for us as a church is that we be a fully functional, fully developed

body, so that the work He wants to do in this world through us might be most effective and productive.

That idea is conveyed in the next phrase in **verse 13**. “...to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

That phrase “to the measure of the stature” literally refers to someone who has come of age. Someone who is old enough and mature enough to obtain certain privileges that come with reaching a certain age. If we were speaking *Koine Greek* today, we would use this word to describe how old someone has to be before they can get their driver’s license, or before they are old enough to vote. Basically, it means a person has arrived at an age where he is able to experience things, enjoy things, and accomplish things that he was unable to before.

In this context it means that we get to become an accurate, complete expression of Christ. It means that as we function together in the way He designed us to function—everybody doing his/her part—Jesus does more of His work through us. He wins more victories against Satan and His demons; He brings more people to faith in Him, and He advances His kingdom more rapidly.

Please note: the emphasis in this passage is *not* on the individual Christian. The kind of maturity Paul is talking about is not personal holiness or godliness. He is talking about corporate maturity, which is far more consequential than individual maturity in terms of what it does for Jesus and His kingdom. He is saying that maturity is defined by *everybody* in the church being involved, being equipped, working together, and functioning in their particular roles as the Body of Christ.

So, how does this actually work in our culture, because you probably know that we have a couple of strikes against us when it comes to applying this. First, we live in an individualistic culture, and Christians in our culture have been greatly influenced by it.

For example, we tend to emphasize *personal* spirituality—we talk about personal Bible study and prayer time, personal holiness, personal growth, and our personal walk with the Lord. And, somehow, we separate our personal walk with the Lord from our involvement in the Lord’s church as though they are two different categories of spirituality. And we think that God is *more* interested in and concerned about how we are doing *personally* than how we are connected to and participate in the church.

That’s why so many people think that while being part of a church is a good thing, it is optional. They view their involvement in the church as more of a supplement to their own personal spiritual growth rather than God’s actual goal for their lives.

That’s why if you to ask people in our culture why they go to church many would say things like, it gives them a spiritual boost, or it helps them know the Bible better, or they are inspired by the worship, or it helps them stay on track in their spiritual lives, or it strengthens their family.

There is nothing wrong with wanting those things to happen as a result of being part of a church, but all of those things are self-oriented. The emphasis is on what the church does for the individual.

But that is *not* God’s view of the church. That is not why God insists we be part of the church. He insists that we be part of the church because the church is the primary means by which He is working in this world and He has a very important job for the church to do—reconciling the world to Jesus. He insists that we be part of the church because He has designed each of us to be a body part that fits together with other body parts, and which is

essential to the whole body to function effectively. If one or more parts is missing a body does not work properly.

Have you ever taken an engine apart and put it back together, and when you finished assembling it you had a few parts leftover? They might have been tiny, seemingly insignificant parts. But what happened when you tried to start that engine?

Someone might say, "But I work better by myself! I can be more efficient and more effective when I don't have to be part of the group."

That is a fallacy when it comes to the work of Christ. If we think we can do substantial work for Christ independently of the church, either on our own or with other groups or organizations that are not associated with the church, we don't understand the Scriptures or the heart of Christ.

The primary way that God works in this world is through His church. The primary way that Jesus reveals Himself and does His will in this earth realm is through His body, the church. And He does this when all of His body parts are engaged, coordinated, equipped, and working together, each part functioning in the way that Jesus Himself designed it to function.

Someone else might say, "I hear what you're saying, pastor, but I've tried being part of the church and I've been burned. I've tried plunging in and plugging in and I've encountered conflict and personality clashes and strong, stubborn wills that have made my experience unbearable, and that makes me hesitant to get involved. I'd rather just be a loner or a spectator."

I understand. A lot of us have been burned. Some of us have become disillusioned with the church. But I plead with you to understand what Paul says about your involvement. It is not optional. I plead with you to, in the words of Hebrews, fix your eyes on Jesus, so you don't grow weary and lose heart (Heb. 12:4).

Please, do not underestimate your role in this church (or whatever church you are part of). Do not underestimate the role of the person sitting next to you, no matter how young or old they are, no matter how long they have been a believer. We all have an important part, and it's only as each part does its work that God's work will effectively be done here in our community and beyond.

So, if you do not know how to be connected or engaged, please talk to one of us who are in leadership, and we will tell you how. The leaders here are committed to helping you discover where you fit and how you function, and we are committed to helping you become equipped to do just that.

I'm not talking about you getting busy in the church. I'm not even talking about you volunteering for some task, as much as we need volunteers for particular ministries. I'm talking about fully engaging and connecting with the people in the church, entering into the life of the body, and fixing your attention on the head of the Body, the Lord Jesus. I'm talking about discovering the grace Jesus has given to you, your spiritual gift, and using it to serve Him and others. I'm talking about becoming fully equipped so that you are functioning in the way Jesus intended and are making a vital contribution to the effectiveness of our church.

This is God's purpose for our church. May God help us become everything He intended us to be!

The Purpose of the Church Ephesians 4:7-13

Main Idea: Jesus has made provision for all believers to be strong, healthy parts of His body that are able to powerfully express His life and do His will as we function together.

Definition of a Local Church

A group of _____ who have been sovereignly and strategically put together by Jesus for the purpose of _____ His life, _____ His will, and _____ His kingdom in its community and beyond.

Allocated Ministry Gifts (7-8)

Something for Everyone

Prophetic Fulfillment

Parenthetical Statement (9-10)

Ministry and Maturity

People as gifts (11)

The goal of gifts (12-13)

Equipping saints for ministry (12a)

Building the Body of Christ (12b-13)

Attaining unity of faith

Maturing into manhood

Achieving the fullness of Christ