

GOD'S PLAN FOR EBC—MATURITY EPHESIANS 4:11-16

The word “church” has many meanings in our day. We use the word to describe a building or a meeting place, as in “Let’s meet at the church.” We use it to describe a Sunday morning worship service, as in “I’m going to church this Sunday.” We use “church” to describe an incorporated, non-profit, organization. We also use the word to distinguish between denominations or affiliations, as in the Roman Catholic Church, a Baptist Church, or a Mormon Church.

But when the New Testament uses the word “church,” it is not referring to any of those things. In the New Testament “church” is used in two ways. First, it describes what theologians have called the *Church Universal*, which is comprised of all who have put their faith in Jesus and who have been reconciled to God by His blood. John described it in Revelation as a great multitude from every nation, tribe, and language.

Paul was referring to the Universal Church in Ephesians 1 when he said that the church is Jesus’ body, “*the fullness of him who fills all in all*” (1:22-23). Whereas in the Old Testament God filled the temple, now He fills Christ, and Christ in turn fills His own so that the church (His body) is the visible expression of Christ’s presence and power and glory on earth today.

So the primary way God accomplishes His purposes in the world today is through the Church. The way people get to authentically encounter Jesus, the way His will is done on earth, and the way His kingdom advances is primarily through His body, the Church Universal. And if you have put your faith in Jesus you are a member of that great church.

The second way the word “church” is used in the New Testament is when it describes a local expression of the Universal church comprised of believers who meet together regularly and collectively work together to express the life of Jesus and do the will of Jesus.

The local church is like a sports *team* that works together to score points for the Kingdom of Christ. Jesus Himself is the Owner and General Manager of these teams that He has assembled all over the world. He has personally and thoughtfully assembled each of these teams for the specific community and circumstances in which they are located, and He has designed every one of them to win.

He said, “I will put together my teams (I will build my church) and the gates of hell will not prevail against it” (Matt.16:18). He has assembled teams comprised of players, each of whom has skills, talents, and abilities that perfectly complement and balance the other players on the team, so that when they work together in the way He has designed them to work together they do so in a manner that is perfectly suited to be victorious.

But that’s not all. He is not only in charge of player selection and recruitment; He is also in charge of player development. In other words, He takes individuals, many of whom are ill-equipped and inexperienced, and by His Spirit He infuses into them whatever talent or ability He knows will enable them to make a vital contribution to the team’s success.

This is reality. It’s true of every local church that has been established by Jesus, and it’s true of our church. Our church is not a random, coincidental collection of Christians. We have been selected and assembled by Jesus Himself for the purpose of impacting our community for Jesus Christ.

So, a local 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 came up with this definition after studying the New Testament teaching about the local church. And probably the clearest and most comprehensive instruction comes from Ephesians 4. I'd like to look at this passage because it identifies God's plan for *our* church. Beginning in verse 11 Paul says, **verses 11-12.** *¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² 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).

The first thing I want to note about this passage is that the work of the ministry in a local church is not performed by pastors and others who are in spiritual leadership. The leaders' job is to equip the "saints" (the people who comprise the local church) to do the work of the ministry. In other words, if Jesus is the Owner and General Manager of the team, leaders are like *coaches* and saints are like *players*. It's the job of coaches to prepare and equip the players to effectively perform their particular role so that the team works together to score points.

And there is no such thing as a benchwarmer on God's team. There is no such thing as inactive status. He drafted each one of us and assigned each one of us to be on this particular team at this specific time. And *all* of us have a vital part.

If God brought you to EBC then you have a significant role in the overall effectiveness of this church. Because Jesus has given each of us gifts and abilities that complement the gifts and abilities of all the other members of this church, and it's only as we work together that we will be and do everything He wants.

But notice what else Paul says in verse 12. Saints are being equipped for the work of the ministry in order to build up the body of Christ. What is the body of Christ? *We* are His Body. He is the Head, and we as individuals are body parts that collectively make up His body.

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 as every body part does what it is designed to do, the life of Jesus is authentically revealed and expressed. 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 summarizes Jesus' vision for His church. To use another metaphor, as the Conductor of the symphony Jesus wants His entire orchestra to be on the same page, playing the same tune, in the same key, to the same time. *Unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God* means that we are all in agreement about the essentials of the faith. We know who Jesus is, why God sent Jesus to this earth, what His death and resurrection accomplished, where He is right now, and that He's coming again to judge the living and the dead.

But it's not just doctrinal assertions or theological facts that Paul is talking about here. It's also experiential truth. Paul is talking about knowing Jesus personally—so much so that He is our delight, He is our joy, He is our first love. He's talking about knowing Him so well and so personally that we can sincerely say, "For to us to live is Christ."

Paul calls this *mature manhood* in verse 13. The Greek word translated *mature* in my version 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**. “...*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.*”

That phrase “*to the measure of the stature*” 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 this language 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.

Coming of age, in this context, means that a local church develops and matures to become an authentic expression of Christ. It means that a local church is able to function in such a way that Jesus’ will and work is being done through them.

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’s talking about corporate maturity, the maturity of the whole church, which is comprised of everyone in the church. That is far more consequential than individual maturity in terms of what it does for Jesus and His kingdom. Paul is saying that maturity is defined by everybody in the church being engaged, being equipped, working together, and functioning in their particular roles as the Body of Christ.

Jesus’ goal for every local church is that it be a fully functional, fully developed, and fully coordinated body so that the work He wants to do in this world through it might be most effective and productive. So that as the church functions together in the way He designed it to function—everybody doing his/her part—Jesus wins more victories against Satan and his demons; He brings more people to faith in Him, and He advances His kingdom more broadly.

The results of that maturity are identified in **verses 14-16**. This is what maturity looks like: “...*So that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love*” (ESV).

These verses describe two things about maturity—one stated negatively and one stated positively. The first, in verse 14, is that we will no longer be children.

Incidentally, this is not a slam on children. Children are wonderful; children are precious. But children are not meant to *stay* children. They are meant to become adults. And in the process of becoming adults they change. They become less needy, less gullible, and less vulnerable. They are not so easily manipulated or deceived. They become more discerning and more dependable and more responsible.

We can tolerate a child’s silliness and naivety and irresponsible behavior while he/she is still a child. But if those traits continue when he/she is supposed to be an adult, we’d be disappointed and concerned.

In the same way churches are intended to become increasingly mature, with members whose faith is solid, stable, and secure. Paul says, “...*so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.*”

Paul had firsthand experience on ships that had lost their moorings and were drifting aimlessly at the mercy of the wind and waves. He had been on high seas where it didn't matter what the crew did with the sail or how the captain steered the rudder. That's a scary position to be in, because one can easily be shipwrecked and lost at sea.

Paul describes an immature church as one that is not anchored in the truth, one that is unable to distinguish between truth and error, and is, therefore, being tossed back and forth and blown here and there by deception and error. Immaturity, here, is associated with being gullible or easily deceived or manipulated by false teachers and religious charlatans, which is extremely dangerous.

Paul says that *one of the ways we can be sure that we are mature and fully grown in the Lord is that we are anchored in the truth.* We have a firm grasp of what God says in His Word, and we are able to interpret all of life in light of that truth. And that knowledge of the truth makes us stable and steadfast and immovable, even during the inevitable storms of life.

Paul goes on in **verse 15** to identify the second manifestation of maturity. He says, *“Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...”*

The goal of the Christian life is *to grow up in every way into Christ.* Think about that statement. We are to grow *into* Christ.

The goal of the Christian life is not to bide our time until Jesus comes, or try to keep our nose clean and stay out of trouble. The goal of the Christian life is not to be an expert on the Bible, or be busy in the church. The goal is to continually and progressively *grow into Christ.*

This means that we are progressively becoming like Jesus. His image is steadily being restored in us so that we are becoming more and more like Adam and Eve *before* they sinned.

In one of his other letters Paul said it this way: *“...We are being transformed into the likeness of Jesus with ever increasing glory...” (2 Cor. 3:18).* And he told the Galatians that the goal of his ministry was that Christ would be formed in them (Gal. 4:19). In Ephesians 4 Paul says that one of the manifestations of maturity is that Christ will be formed in us in “every way.” “Every way” means in our thinking, our desires, our perspectives, our priorities, our attitudes, our responses, our behavior, our treatment of others.

That is the goal of the Christian life. Which means that we are (or we *ought* to be) in a constant state of change. We ought not to be the same persons we were five years ago, two years ago, or even six months ago. We are progressively being conformed to the image of Christ, which means we are getting better, we are getting easier to live with, we are becoming less selfish and more concerned about others, we are becoming more authentic and more gentle and more humble and more helpful and, most of all, more loving. We're becoming better spouses, and better parents and better sons and daughters, and better friends, and better neighbors, and better employers or employees, and better citizens.

Do you know what that means for those of us who are in our fifties and sixties and seventies and even eighties? It means that our *best* years are still ahead of us. Maybe not our most productive years or our most active years or our most enjoyable years or our most mentally sharp years. But it means that with each passing year Christ's character is more accurately displayed in us.

Is that happening to you? Is it happening to us as a church? Are we more accurately expressing Jesus than we were a year ago or six months ago?

That's the real test of whether we are growing or not. It's not how much of the Bible we know or how many people are coming to our church or how many great programs we have or how many missionaries we support. It's about becoming more and more like Jesus.

The highlight for me of our October Vision series happened on the first week, when Michael Tourtellotte shared his testimony of how God enabled him to respond with love and trust and humility when he wasn't chosen to be the Assistant Pastor Candidate. This is something that Michael (and some of the rest of us had been preparing for and looking forward to for years. And to see the way he responded to that disappointment, to see the way he affirmed the Search Committee, and most of all, Mark Idol, was an expression of Christ. We encountered Jesus through Michael that day.

And that's what God wants to do in all of us. Paul says in **verse 15**. "...*Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...*"

The word translated "speaking the truth" is actually one word, a verb, so if we were to translate it literally it would be "truthing". It is almost impossible to adequately express its meaning in English, but it certainly means more than just *speaking* the truth. It has the idea of *being* true; not true in the sense of being "right" or even being theologically correct, but true in the sense of being *authentic*.

A truthful person, then, is someone who doesn't put on a mask and pretend to be someone he/she isn't. A truthful person is someone who doesn't have a hidden agenda or an ulterior motive. A truthful person is a genuine person.

The other highlight of this October Vision series was when we had our service in the new sanctuary (Oct. 14) and Dan Dettwyler (the General Contractor), confessed his frustration and anger with the elders who were pushing to have that service. Dan told us how the Spirit of God exposed this, brought conviction, softened his heart, changed his perspective, and enabled him to joyfully embrace what God wanted to do on that day. That's "truthing" in love, and that's Christ being formed in Dan.

But this verb "truth" also describes a person who is loyal and faithful. It describes someone who hangs in there with another person through thick and thin, for better or worse.

This kind of relational *truthfulness* is a wonderful quality all by itself. But what makes it even better—what makes it even more *potent* is when it is exercised and demonstrated in *love*. That simply means that "truthing" doesn't have an edge to it. Yes, it sees people and circumstances for what they really are, even if they're the result of foolishness or sin, but it's not condemning or demeaning or impatient or rude.

Instead, this "truthing in love" seeks to encourage and comfort and heal and help. Yes, it may mean calling sin, sin. It may involve challenging a person to repent. But it may mean saying nothing at all—just being there, just listening, or hanging out, or helping to clean up the mess the person has made.

But be assured of this, as we do this with each other we will change, because according to verse 15 "*truthing in love*" is the way we grow. This is *how* we become more like Christ.

And if you want to know what this looks like, read the Gospels and pay attention to how Jesus interacted with people. Do you remember Jesus with the woman at the well—the scandalous Samaritan woman who'd been married five times and was presently living with a man outside of marriage? Do you remember how He engaged her? Do you remember what Jesus did when He happened upon a woman who was caught in adultery, surrounded by her accusers who wanted to stone her to death? And what about Nicodemus? And Zacchaeus?

This is precisely how God intends for us to relate to each other, and with the same results. This is how we grow and become fully mature in the Lord. In fact, I would go as far as to say that we cannot grow and become fully mature in the Lord unless we are *truthing in love*. We've got to interact with each other in this way if Christ is going to be formed in us. It can't happen by merely going to church and being a spectator, or by listening to fabulous podcast sermons throughout the week, or having a personal quiet time in the Word and prayer each day.

We grow and change and become like Jesus as we authentically and lovingly interact with each other, because when we interact with each other we are indirectly interacting with Christ Himself, and it is Christ Himself who causes us to grow. Look at **verse 16**. *"...We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love"* (ESV)

Do you see how real church growth takes place? It occurs as individual body parts take their rightful places in relation to all the other body parts who comprise the body of Christ in a local community. Real growth occurs not in isolation, not in our own personal, private spiritual journeys, but as we are connected to each other. So as we interact with each other, as we complement each other, as we function together, and as we, together, submit to and follow our head, the Lord Jesus, we become more and more like Jesus, and He is expressed more accurately and authentically.

My dear brothers and sisters, please don't let your participation at Emmanuel Bible Church be merely to attend services on Sundays. Engage, connect, use your gifts, get involved in a Family Life Group, participate in our prayer meetings, and take part in activities where you can get to know others. Discover how you fit and how you are supposed to function as part of Christ's body here at EBC. It's God's will for you. It's God's plan for our church.

God's Plan for EBC Ephesians 4:11-16

Main Idea: God has made provision for all of us to be strong, healthy parts of Christ's body that are able to authentically and powerfully express Christ and do his will

Definition of "Church" in the New Testament

The *Church Universal*

COMPRISED OF ALL WHO HAVE PUT THEIR FAITH IN JESUS AND HAVE BEEN RECONCILED TO GOD BY HIS BLOOD

The *Local Church*

A LOCAL EXPRESSION OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH COMPRISED OF BELIEVERS WHO KNOW EACH OTHER, MEET TOGETHER REGULARLY, AND COLLECTIVELY WORK TOGETHER TO EXPRESS THE LIFE OF JESUS AND DO THE WILL OF JESUS

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

God's Purpose for the Local Church—Maturity (11-13)

The Role of Leadership (11)

Total Participation (12a)

A Fit, Coordinated Body (12b-13)

Fully Developed

Fully Capable

Maturity is defined by everybody in the church being engaged, being equipped, working together, and functioning in their particular roles as the Body

Spiritual Grown-ups (14-15)

Children no longer (14)

Growing up Into Christ (15)

Fully Functional (16)

Every part interconnected

Every part doing what it is supposed to do