

Growing Up Into Unity in Christ

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[0 : 0 0] Last year, the New York Times published an article entitled, How Social Isolation Is Killing Us. And in the article, it says, since the 1980s, the percentage of Americans, American adults who say that they're lonely has doubled from 20% to 40%.

And similarly, a quarter of Americans, so one out of every four, say that they have no one with whom they can confide any personal information. I mean, that's staggering, especially for Christians to think about because we have the church community.

And that number also doubled from the number in the 80s. And the wave of new research suggests that social isolation is bad for us. It says individuals with less social connection tend to have, among other things, and this is a quote, disrupted sleep patterns, altered immune systems, more inflammation, and higher levels of stress hormones.

And one recent study found that isolation increases the risk of heart disease by 29% and stroke by 32%. Another analysis, it pulled data from 70 studies of over 3.4 million people, and it found that socially isolated individuals had a 30% higher chance of dying in the next seven years.

And that was highest, that effect was highest among the middle-aged people. And another longitudinal study, and this is the last one I'll cite, is that socially isolated children, even when they controlled for other factors, ended up having poor health 20 years down the road.

[1 : 2 9] So despite this clear sociological diagnosis that people are observing, especially in a culture like ours, living in a city, the culture of it, the very society, the way it's structured, it drives isolation.

It makes us further withdraw from each other. It's the whole transience of the city, right? It's the whole anonymity of the city, where there's so many people, and you don't know who they are, right? It's the whole busyness of the city.

It drives isolation. And ours is, if I may define it, it's a consumeristic culture, right? More than a communal culture, right? We're defined more by transactions for things, for goods, for services, than relations with one another.

And unfortunately, this kind of consumeristic mindset could also creep into the church. And the base motivation for a lot of churchgoers throughout the world, throughout this country, is self-centered and consumeristic.

Even though the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many, many Christians today come not to serve, but to be served, not to give, but to receive.

[2 : 4 1] Instead of relating to the church as a community, as the family of God, many people nowadays relate to it like a service provider. If you don't provide the services I want, if I don't get what I need, if it displeases me anyway, well then, see you later.

I'll just drive down to the other church down in the neighborhood. And in this passage, Apostle Paul forcefully challenges that individualistic and consumeristic mindset and paints a picture of this beautiful and glorious picture of the family of God.

And his point is this, that we grow up into our unity in Christ by ministering to one another the gospel in love. So we grow up into our unity in Christ by ministering the gospel to one another in love.

That's the main point. And I'm going to unpack that in three phases. The first, I'll talk about the character of church unity, verses 1 to 3. Then I'll talk about the call to church unity in verses 4 to 6.

And then lastly, I'll talk about the conduit of church unity in verses 7 to 16. Paul begins in verse 1. He says, I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

[3 : 54] And there's a reason why he begins with the word therefore because he's rooting everything that he's about to say now into what he said in the first three chapters of the book of Ephesians. In the first three chapters of the book of Ephesians, he expounded the gospel.

This is what God did for us to save us. And now in the next three chapters of Ephesians, he'll tell us how the church should respond to that gospel. So he's exhorting us to live in light of the gospel.

So that's what he's doing. And the expression to walk in a manner worthy of the calling is simply he's saying we should live in a manner worthy of the calling. Walk is a common metaphor for life, right?

We talk about life as a journey. We tell people to walk the talk, right? So that's what Paul is doing here. And then Paul goes on to describe what walking in a manner worthy of our Christian calling looks like in verses two to three.

And he proceeds to describe the character of church unity. He says, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

[5 : 01] First, it involves humility, right? And not just the little dose of humility, but he says, all humility, right? Bible consistently and repeatedly tells us that God despises pride but loves humility.

For example, 1 Peter 5.5, quoting Proverbs 3.34, says, clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another. For God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

And the reason why God does that is because it's unseemly for us as his creatures to boast in ourselves and to have pride as we were the creator, right? When we glory in our supposed abilities and accomplishments in relation to other people, then, and instead of recognizing our weakness and utter dependence on God, then we are glorying in ourselves and we are not being humble as we ought to be.

If we glory in our supposed morality and spirituality in relation to others rather than acknowledging his grace at work in our lives and our sinfulness, then we are being prideful and not being, behaving as we ought to as creatures and as those who have been, received God's grace, salvation by grace.

And humility is always expressed with relation to other people in the same way love is, right? So you can't properly say that someone is a loving person if that person lives by himself and is never interacting with another person because there's no one to love, right?

[6 : 26] In the same way because humility is expressed in an absence, it's an absence of self-centeredness, it's really considering others better than oneself so humility can really only properly be said to be expressed in the context of relationships with other people.

And this is so wonderful because humility is distinctively Christian, right? You can peruse all the existing ancient Greek literature out there and you will find not a single instance where humility is commended as a virtue.

Every single instance of humility in other Greek writings will say that humility is for the slaves, it's for people who are servile, people who have no backbone, that's humility, that's weakness, that's how the world defined humility.

But in contrast to that strain of thought, following the example of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but humbled himself taking on the nature of a servant, taking his example as a cue, Christians praised humility as a virtue and commended it to everyone.

And it's even true today, isn't it, if you think about it, right? If you think about our society, you will hardly ever find yourself meeting a non-Christian who says to himself, ah, I was too prideful, Levy.

[7 : 48] You just won't because that's not something they value. That's not something that they think about. And C.S. Lewis explains that in his book, Mere Christianity. He says, there is one vice of which no man in the world is free, which everyone loathes when he sees it in someone else, and of which hardly any people except Christians ever imagine that they are guilty of themselves.

I've heard people admit that they are bad-tempered or that they cannot keep their heads about girls or drink, or even that they are cowards. I do not think I have ever heard anyone who was not a Christian accuse himself of this vice.

And at the same time, I have very seldom met anyone who was not a Christian who showed the slightest mercy to it in others. There's no fault that makes a man more unpopular and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves.

And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others. The vice I am talking of is pride or self-conceit. And the virtue opposite to it in Christian morals is called humility.

End quote. Isn't that true? It's so wonderful. It's great virtue because it's about Christ. It's what Christ modeled for us. That's why it's distinctively Christian to pursue this virtue.

[8 : 56] And almost every time I pray for all of you and every time I pray for myself, I pray for this. I pray for humility because humility is the fountain of all virtue. And I implore you to pray for that for one another and for me as well because if we're...

And this is critical to maintaining the unity of the spirit, isn't it? Because if you're prideful, then you will have a critical spirit, right? So if you struggle with being judgmental of others, right?

If you struggle with always thinking that maybe this often occurs to you or maybe all the time it occurs to you that, you know, I could probably do that better than that person is doing. You know, I probably understand that better than that person.

You know, if that's happening to you all the time, you're probably not right all the time, right? But that's an instance of pride. And it destroys community. It destroys unity. When we devalue other people's opinions and vaunt our own opinions, right?

When we're prone to assume the worst of other people's motivations, when we're quick to entertain hearsay that impugns other people's character, these are all examples of pride.

[10 : 04] And we need instead humility so that we can be united and have the character of the church unity. Second, Christian maturity involves gentleness, or as RSV puts it, meekness, right?

It is one of the fruit of the spirit described in Galatians 5, 23, and it refers to a disposition that says, I'm not going to take things into my own hands. Instead, I'm going to entrust myself to God and let Him be my defender.

And this is also critical to maintaining the unity of the church. And this is, again, like humility, is consistently praised and commended throughout Scripture.

In the Beatitudes, right, Jesus said, blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. Matthew 11, 29, Jesus describes Himself this way. He says, take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and lowly in heart.

They're two same words used here, humility and gentleness. Nowadays, it's common common to confuse meekness with weakness, right, with cowardice.

[11 : 09] Some people do have, just by their natural disposition, kind of a low spiritness and a lack of courage, right? And because of that, they can appear meek, right?

But that's not meekness, right? Because meekness is not rooted in fear. That's just timidity. That's just lack of courage. Meekness is rooted in strength. It's rooted in faith in God, right?

And it's only the strong people who can be meek, right? Because you have such a confidence in God to be your defender, such faith that He can come through for you. You don't feel the need to defend yourself when you're under pressure, when you're being criticized unfairly.

That's meekness, right? That's strength. It takes faith to be meek. And it's so people who are meek are so essential to unity because it's those people that function kind of like the tendons in the body, right?

That can withstand pressure and hold the muscles and bones in the body together. They're like the tendons. And the reason why is this. When Paul talks about in Galatians 6.1 or 2 Timothy 2.25, when we deal with people, other members of the church who are caught in sin, who are going in the wrong direction, they're in theological error, right?

[12 : 20] He says, it's the people who possess a spirit of gentleness, same word, that can restore them and correct them. Because if you don't have the spirit of gentleness, even though we might be well-intentioned, we'll probably do more harm than good when we try to restore that person into the church.

That's why the people who are meek, who are gentle, are essential for maintaining this unity of the church. And third, Christian maturity involves patience. The Greek word for patience is literally a combination of two words that mean anger and a long time.

So you could probably figure out what that means. This person takes a very, very long time to get angry. It means long suffering, right? And once again, God is described in this way, right?

Every time God reveals his character, he says Exodus 34, 6, he's a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness, right? Anger stems from small-mindedness, and it poses a great threat to the church because it's volatile and frequently flares up in dissensions and creates factions.

And patience, in contrast, describes this resilience, right? A large-heartedness that can overlook inconveniences, annoyances, and be patient to suffer long, right?

[13 : 44] Now, that doesn't mean that people who are patient are immune to irritation, right? Rather, it still hurts for them. It's still hard for them, but they suffer long. They withstand it for a long time.

They're patient for the sake of loving one another. That's what that means. And all these virtues, humility and gentleness and patience can be summed up in this last phrase in verse 2, bearing with one another in love.

Love is what ultimately enables us to bear with one another. And that's such a great word, isn't it? Bear with them, right? That word is used in other parts of the Bible to refer to enduring persecution.

And that's so funny to me because Paul understood, he tells me that Paul understood like we do, that sometimes we, even as Christians, ourselves can be totally insufferable. So he tells us, put up with them.

Bear with them. Suffer long with them. And not begrudgingly, not reluctantly, but in love. In truth, love is what enables us to do all of this, isn't it?

[14 : 56] Because we're naturally haughty and harsh and hot-tempered with people that we don't love. It's love that enables these virtues to flourish.

So I'll speak of that actually in greater length later. But this is what describes the character of church's unity and maturity. That's what it looks like to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called.

And it's by walking in this manner that we can be, it says in verse 3, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We need to be eager to maintain it.

The word means make every effort to maintain it. The word is used to describe the planning, the elaborate planning, extensive planning that is required for a long, arduous journey.

Do we plan like that? Do we strategize it? Are we eager? Do we make every effort to maintain this unity? And this is important because Jesus said in John 17, it is by our unity in being united with one another as He is united with the Father that the world will know that you sent me and love them even as you loved me.

[16 : 05] That's what Jesus said in John 17, 22 to 23. The very credibility of our witness to the world is contingent on our unity. That's an urgent matter.

That's why we need to be eager, make every effort to maintain this unity. We can't be content to let disagreements, contentions, just sit and fester.

We can't do that. We have no luxury for that. We need to be eager and make every effort to maintain unity even though that would require diligence and necessitate all humility and gentleness with patience.

But we don't have to despair in this endeavor and the reason why is this. It's also in verse 3. Take another look. It says, maintain the unity of the Spirit.

It doesn't say attain the unity of the Spirit. It doesn't say forge the unity of the Spirit. It says maintain the unity of the Spirit because it's already ours in Jesus Christ.

[17 : 07] Because Jesus died for our sins, made a way for us to be reconciled to God and because in that reconciliation we have been filled with the very Spirit of God. We all share the same Spirit of God.

That means we are already one in Christ. We have the unity of the Spirit. That's the reality. unity. And now He says, so that's why it's not up to us to forge that unity. But He tells us maintain that unity.

We're bonded together, the bonded peace. And that brings me to my second point, the call to church unity. This is the reason why we don't need to despair in our pursuit of unity, in pursuing that character of church unity, because we've been called to it.

It's something that God's already accomplished. The word calling is repeated twice for emphasis in verse 1. It says, walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

It's intentionally redundant. Paul's using that language to emphasize the importance of this call. And it's repeated twice more in verse 4. There is one body and one spirit just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call.

[18 : 18] A call. It's always passive because it's God who calls. And when God calls, when the king calls, it's not just this passive invitation. It's a summons.

We're summoned into his presence, into relationship with him. And this word calling is intimately related to words like election or predestination that come up all throughout the book of Ephesians and in other parts of the Bible as well.

And that's why it says in Romans 8.30, and those whom God predestined, he also called, and those whom he called, he also justified, and those whom he justified, he also glorified.

And isn't this so different from the way we typically conceive of calling, right? So Paul's talking about our calling to God himself and through that our calling to one another, right?

But that's not how we typically think about calling, isn't it? When we think of calling, we think, oh, my vocational calling. What do I do? When we think of calling, we think of what difference can I make in the world, right?

[19 : 22] Right. And that's because we've adopted our culture's narrative and superimposed that individualized, that personalized, that self-centered vision for life.

That's why we think of call only in that way. The primary way in which the Bible conceives of calling is to God first and foremost and to one another as a church. So if you're thinking about your own calling and you don't have the church in that equation, you don't have what God has for you in that equation, that's not real calling that God has for you.

So in verses 4 to 6, he continues to describe this great call we have and he uses three theological triads based on the Trinity to describe our common calling as a church.

And in this set of descriptions, he uses the word one seven times to drive home his main point that we have been called to union with the one God and that that is the basis for our unity in the church.

It's the call to unity. In verse 4, he begins by saying there is one body and one spirit just as you recall to the one hope that belongs to your call. One body, one spirit, one hope.

[20 : 38] There's only one body of Christ. It means only one universal church. And because of that, you can't, if you're a, if you're, by definition, if you're a Christian, you really are a member of a church.

And it's because that concept of the fact that every Christian seems to be a member is so neglected that we now as a church have to formalize membership so that people recognize what they're committing to when they become a Christian.

They're part of the church. But the Bible assumes it. It calls church Christians members. It calls it all, every member of the body is intended for God to serve in the context of the church for the glory of God and maturing in God.

And that's why it's so contradictory when a Christian says that he can love God without participating in the life of the church. You can't love God without loving the people of God. You can't love the head of Christ without loving the body of Christ.

And 1 Corinthians 12, 13 says, in one spirit, we were all baptized into one body and all were made to drink of one spirit. That's why baptism and the spirit, that's why the spirit is tied here to one body because being one body means we have the one spirit.

[21 : 47] And spirit of God, the Holy Spirit is particularly associated with the Christian virtue of hope because the spirit is the down payment, the guarantee of our future inheritance. Because of him, we have hope.

So we have one body, one spirit, one hope that belongs to our call. The second triad is in verse 5. He says that we have one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

The word Lord in the New Testament, especially in Paul's writing, is usually short for the Lord Jesus Christ. And especially in this context because it's preceded by mention of the spirit and followed by the mention of the Father, it almost undoubtedly refers to the Lord Jesus Christ.

And this phrasing, one Lord, recalls Deuteronomy 6, 4 to 5, which the Jews know as the Shema. It's really one of the most important pieces of Jewish confession. Something that they recited to themselves twice a day, every day.

And it's this, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might.

[22 : 52] This expressed the truth that there's only one God and because God is one and he's a unity, there's no division within himself, our allegiance to him, our love to him should be total, complete, undivided.

That's really the calling here. And so there's one Lord and it's remarkable, isn't it, that Paul, that faithful Jew, that Pharisee who observed every minutiae of the law, he calls the Lord Jesus Christ Lord.

That's something that Jews would have never thought to say. That guy that lived 2,000 years ago, Jesus, he's that one Lord.

Lord. That's a staggering theological statement and that truth, that doctrine was formulated not because they just thought about it in their head but because of the reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ because he proved through his life death and resurrection essentially that he is a son of God.

They had to adapt that and say no, he is the Lord, he's a person of the triune God. And our faith, just as hope is peculiarly associated with the spirit, our faith is peculiarly associated with the Lord Jesus Christ because the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news that he died to save us, that is the core content of our faith.

[24 : 17] That's what we need to have faith in and that's Paul later talks about that as well when he tells us to strive for that unity of faith. And it's in that faith, into that faith that we are baptized, Colossians 2.12 explains, we have been buried with Christ in baptism in which we were also raised with him through faith, right?

That's what baptism represents and we have baptism coming up at the end of next month, right? And baptism class we're offering starting next week after the service. So if you are not a believer, if you have not been baptized, you should seriously consider partaking in that because baptism is the initiatory rite by through which we enter into that communion, that body of Christ.

Christ. And that means we have died with Christ. It signifies that we've died with Christ, we have risen with him and because that's why he says here, now we have one faith, one Lord, one faith and one baptism.

And if these were not enough reason for us to pursue unity in the church, he adds one more triad in verse 7. He says, we have one God and Father who is over all and through all and in all, right?

God the Father is the fount of all existence and he rules over all things and God the Father is the sustainer of all things so it's also all through him so he's the goal and end of all existence and that means everything is in him and for him and to him.

[25 : 44] So he says, God the Father who is over all, through all and in all. Why is this a basis for unity? Because if there were many gods in this world, if there were many deities who ruled different parts of the world, then there would be complete justification for divisions in the world.

If there were many fathers, then we would be warranted in splitting our allegiances. But because there is only one God and one Father, the church should be united in its worship of the one Father.

So our one call to the one triune God is the basis for church unity. And the fact that Trinity, which is three in one, is the basis for this unity should also signal to us that it doesn't mean that he wants uniformity, rather he seeks diversity within unity and that unity and that's what he talks about in the following verses.

My final point, the conduit of church unity in verses 7 to 16. Notwithstanding the oneness of the church in God, Paul notes in verse 7 that grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

Now, this word one is in an emphatic position in the sentence structure. It's the first word in this sentence in the Greek and it's kind of really, you know, kind of sticks out after all those, you know, one words, right?

[27 : 14] One baptism, one faith, one Lord Jesus, one spirit, one hope, one father and all of that. He says, now each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift has been given a grace, right?

And this grace is not a saving grace. He's referring to equipping grace for ministry as the context of the following context makes clear. And the purpose of God giving each of us, every single one of believers of this grace is not so that he can differentiate the individuals and elevate one person over the other but it's to make each one indispensable.

It's to make each one fill a role so that we've together formed this interdependent body of Christ. That's the goal. That's the vision of this each oneness that God gives the grace to. And notice the precision of this language.

This is so helpful for understanding how the gifts operate in the church. Grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

That means Christ singled out who will receive what gift and he measured out how much of it we would receive.

[28 : 26] God chose each of you to receive a particular gift according to a specific measure so that you can fulfill your ministry in the body of Christ. You know Christ didn't just you know kind of walk across and then just dump all of his gifts and then like confetti and see oh let's see who it lands on.

He singled you out and measured the gift for you. Isn't that amazing? That means you have a part to play. That means you have an integral role to play in the ministry of the church in the life of the church.

And each of us is playing a role that's uniquely suited to us and notice how it's described. It's a grace. That means it's a gift. We don't earn it. Some people don't get it just because they're better than you or they did something more right than you.

No, it's God's grace that he sovereignly apportions to you. That means we don't need to look around and compare. That means we don't need to look around and feel inferior or superior.

That means we don't need to be divisive over who uses what gifts because the whole point of it is not independence but interdependence that we each use our gifts to grow.

[29 : 35] And Paul proves this by quoting Psalm 68, 18 in verse 8. When he ascended on high he led a host of captives and he gave gifts to men. And then he continues in saying he ascended what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions the earth.

He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens that he might fill all things. Now if you have the ESV there's a slight over translation here in verse 9 because it says that Christ descended into the lower regions comma the earth.

So that sounds like it's a reference the lower regions is a reference to the earth which means he'd be referring to Christ's incarnation but that's not what he's referring to. The NASB the New American Standard Bible gets it right.

It translates it now this expression he ascended what does it mean except that he also had descended into the lower parts of the earth. Right. That's the construction in the Greek.

So he's not referring to earth as the lower parts he's referring to lower parts of the earth and if you like if you search through scripture and check the Old Testament the Greek translation of the Old Testament and find this phrasing the lower parts or the lowest parts of the earth it always refers to the realm of the dead right the Hades right.

[30 : 56] So he's referring to the same thing that Peter talks about in 1 Peter through 18-19 which is for Christ also suffered once for sins the righteous for the unrighteous that he might bring us to God being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison right.

So he's saying here that between his death and resurrection Christ in his spirit went and proclaimed his victory over the imprisoned spirits in Hades where the disobedient spirits were in prison.

So he descended into lower regions the earth and after that he ascended he says he who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens that he might fill all things.

This language is very similar to chapter 1 verses 19-23 where he talked about God how Christ subjected all powers rulers and authorities right. Now he went far above them so he's talking about spirits right.

These rulers authorities powers and dominions that were subjected in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and having subjected them he led them out like the host of captives. He declared his victory over them they were the captives and with the gifts that he received from the captives he liberally dispenses to his people and that's what he was referring to and he receives from God the spirit of God and he gives that and that's what Colossians 2.13-15 has in mind it's a parallel passage and you you who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh God made alive together with him having forgiven us all our trespasses by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands this he set aside nailing it to the cross he disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him right these evil spirits had a legal right over God's people because of their sin but by having atoned for their sin and having risen victoriously

[32 : 56] Christ destroys any claim that they have over God's people triumphs victoriously over them and he puts them to shame and leads them out as host of captives that's what he's and this would have been so comforting for us it's like whoa like Paul you're going some crazy places here but for the Ephesians this would have been so helpful because in Ephesus these underworld gods were deeply revered and feared and that's why they sought the patronage of Artemis they believed that Artemis could offer them protection but what what Paul is telling them here is this no you need Jesus and Christ alone because he's triumphed he's subjected all authorities in heaven and on earth if you belong to him you have nothing to fear and it's because he's the sovereign lord that he can now dispense his gifts sovereignly to his people Psalm 68 18 that he quoted here is probably in the background also of Acts 2:33 which describes how being exalted at the right hand of God now

Jesus having received from the father the promise of the Holy Spirit has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing right so having received the gifts right he's received the spirit of God from the father after his victorious triumph and ascension and it is from that gift he gives a measure of his gift to his believers and so we live in this new covenant age and we are to be the conduit that is used by God that we receive the gifts to fill all in all to fill the whole earth with the glory of God with the authority of God and that has not just church ecclesiological implications but also missions missiological implications because God's intention his plan is to fill everything to fill all in all and how does the gift of Christ manifest itself how is the spirit's fullness manifested in the church

Paul says in verse 11 and he gave the apostles the prophets the evangelists the shepherds and teachers these people are gifts to the church because of the gifts they have received from Christ and the list of gifts here is not intended to be exhaustive since Paul elsewhere lists additional gifts but the fivefold ministry as this verse is typically called does represent kind of the foundational aspect of the gospel ministry of the church all of these gifts have something to do with proclaiming by teaching this ministry of the gospel and notice also that Paul doesn't seem to have in mind a period of time when these gifts will cease but Paul doesn't say that these gifts will be operational only until the end of the first century or the second century these are gifts for the new covenant age that we live in the new covenant age that follows the ascension of Christ it's the age of the spirit and it's that age that we are currently in and

I'm going to go into details and explain apostle prophets and teachers and evangelists and shepherds now I want you guys to stick with me especially with the apostles and prophets because I probably never taught this outside of the membership class context on a Sunday setting so if you follow with me I think it will offer a lot of clarification for what these things mean and how they function just because there's so much confusion out there and the first is the apostle an apostle by definition is someone who is sent out to proclaim the gospel where it's not being proclaimed so it's like a church planting missionary and once again I have to add a qualification because I don't mean by this that we have currently the same authoritative capital A apostles like the twelve disciples of Jesus and apostle Paul because they were directly commissioned by Jesus Christ and given a foundational role in the ministry of the church as

Ephesians 2 20 talks about now we often assume that the word apostle in scripture only refers to the twelve apostles and maybe plus Paul because they're named as apostles specifically in Matthew 10 2-4 and Revelation 21-14 also mentions the twelve apostles as the foundation of the church so we think of oh apostle means those kind of people the foundational and we think that that's the only way in which the word is used but that's not true because yes the twelve are certainly apostles and the twelve by twelve I mean twelve minus Judas and Matthias who later replaces Judas but the word apostle is also used as a broader category than the twelve because in fact if only the twelve are apostles then apostle Paul is not an apostle and James the brother of Jesus is not an apostle even though he was the head of the church of Jerusalem and if you look at this let's look at some of these and apostles as a broader category is seen clearly here in 1 Corinthians 9 and 1 Corinthians 15 5 to 8 because it talks about how these are people who witnessed the resurrected

[38 : 10] Christ and were personally appointed and commissioned by Christ to go and when he talks about this he says and when Paul says that he says he appeared to the twelve and then he says he later appeared to all the apostles so he clearly distinguishes apostles from the twelve so apostles can be used as a broader category to refer to all those who are personally appointed and commissioned by the resurrected Christ so that would include people like Barnabas who's called an apostle Acts 14 4 1 Corinthians 9 6 it would include Andronicus and Hunia Romans 16 7 and it would include Apollos 1 Corinthians 4 6 to 9 and now there seems to be actually an even broader category yet a third way in which it is used and these apostles were not ones that were not even directly commissioned appointed by Christ but yet they were still like church planting missionaries right and that's clear in the example of Apollos right because Apollos is described as an apostle in 1 Corinthians 4 6 to 9 but Acts 18 24 to 26 tells us that Apollos only knew the baptism of John right and it tells us that because of that

Priscilla and Aquila had to take him aside and instruct him so that he would know the way of God more adequately so this guy clearly was not appointed and commissioned directly by Jesus yet he is described as an apostle why because he had the commission to go to be sent out for proclaiming the gospel so there's three different categories of apostles that the New Testament itself uses employs to explain this relationship and we shouldn't be surprised by that because we do the same thing in English don't we right we have only one president here in our country right but yet throughout the country there are a whole bunch of presidents of all kinds of corporations but when we refer to the president of the boys and girls club as the president no one's thinking we mean the president right I mean it's the context that determines the meaning so in the same way throughout the New Testament they use the word apostle in three different ways in multiple ways to explain that so if anyone claims to be and the first two well actually I'm going to summarize that later but so if anyone if you find anyone that claims to be an apostle today right then immediately you should assume not that type of apostle right not the twelve not the ones who were directly commissioned and by Jesus Christ but if they insist that they are that type of apostle oh no I am that type of apostle I have authority I might what I teach is normative then immediately we say heresy and don't listen to what they say okay that's what we do this is how we respond now summarize okay just that was a lot of information so summarize the first two categories of apostles the twelve plus the rest of the apostles were directly appointed and commissioned by Christ they lay the foundation for the church as it says in Ephesians 2 20.

and because of that they were authoritative and reliable messengers of God they were the ones that guaranteed that the gospel tradition would go on right and because of that they fulfilled an office they fulfilled the office of apostle which no longer exists today because the foundation has already been laid there is no longer the office of apostle but while the office has ceased the gift of apostleship continues and it's described here as a gift and that's an important distinction right and that distinction right and that distinction is the same reason why in our church we don't have people who are officially called with titles like apostle prophet evangelist right and shepherd teacher and that's because these are gifts not offices right there are only two offices in the church and those are mentioned in 1st Timothy 3 and Titus 1 right and that's the elders and deacons and evangelism and evangelism and teaching all serve and teaching all serve and build up the church but their role and their role is crucial as we will all see but they are not charged with the leadership and stewardship of the church in the same way that the officers are right so they're different we have to distinguish the office from the gift now the next gift from christ the church is prophets prophets prophets are those who have the gift of prophecy prophecy prophecy is when god not through an inferential process like reading like but through an intuitive process kind of a spontaneous process receive something from god to communicate to the church in his classic systematic theology textbook uh... wayne grudem defines prophecy this way paul is simply referring to something that god may suddenly bring to mind or something that god may impress on someone's consciousness in such a way that the person has a sense that it is from god it may be that the thought brought to mind is surprisingly distinct from the person's own train of thought or that it is accompanied by a sense of vividness or urgency or persistence or in some other way gives the person a rather clear sense that it is from the lord right and we believe that this gift of prophecy exists here in the new testament because it doesn't say anywhere that it stops it doesn't say anywhere that it ceases while everywhere is mentioned it assumes that prophecy will be used and to function to build up the church so first corinthians 14 1 to 3 says pursue love and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts especially that you may prophesy for one who prophesy speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation do you guys get those purposes that's important because if you think you're a prophet and everything that you say seems to be tearing people down cutting them down bringing discouragement and despair not consolation and encouragement and upbuilding then you're probably not prophesying and if you did receive a prophecy then you're probably either misinterpreting and or miscommunicating it where was i prophets and the purpose of this there's another purpose described in first corinthians 14 24 25 is to disclose the secrets of an unbeliever's heart so that convicted of sin falling on his face that unbeliever will worship god and declare that god is real among you there's another purpose for the gift of prophecy prophecy and when it comes to prophets also there are different measures of the gift in the new covenant age after christ there was the prophets who were very closely associated with the apostles many of them apostles themselves who laid the foundation as described in phoesian 2 20 the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with christ jesus himself as a chief cornerstone that's what it says in phoesian 2 20 there are however prophets who do not play this kind of foundational role and all the prophets that follow them don't fulfill that kind of foundational role and that's why when instructing the church about prophecy and how to use prophecy in the context of the worship service

paul says in first corinthians 14 29 let two or three prophets speak and let the others weigh what is said right prophecy has to be weighed it has to be tested as it says in first desalians 5 19 to 21 because these prophecies are not final authoritative and normative in the same way scripture speaking prophets and the apostolic prophets of the new testament are you might wonder then why is new testament prophecy different why does it change from the old testament to the new testament well it's because as hebrews 1 1 to 2 tells us long ago at many times and in many ways god spoke to our fathers by the prophets but in these last days he has spoken to us by his son whom he appointed the heir of all things through whom also he created the world in other words jesus christ is the ultimate and final revelation of god the father so he doesn't need to speak to us in the way he did in the old testament through the prophets because christ is the ultimate and final uh revelation of god that means then all the the all the prophecies we have now it's not normative and authoritative in the same way those teachings of the apostles and the old testament prophets were they apply those teachings the scripture level authority things apply to all people in all places but the prophecy we get now is circumstantial and it has to do with specific application of the truths of god this is the fact that the apostles are the ones that are in the tradition of the old testament prophets is clearly seen in second peter 3 2 where he says the predictions of the holy prophets that's old testament prophets and the commandment of the lord and savior through the apostles right so peter envisions the apostles as standing in line with the same authority as the old testament prophets not new testament prophets in this standing in line of the same as old testament prophets now um how does so does that mean does this prophecy then challenge the authority of god does can it does it threaten the authority of god the sufficiency of god's word no of course not right because the spirit of god never contradicts the word of god right uh and and it has to do like i said with circumstantial and applicatory content right so it's this and let me give you some examples actually now because the bible tells every believer right to to go right to and decide make disciples of all nations right so we are all called to the great commission but the bible doesn't specifically tell tell us to go to china instead of japan does it it doesn't it doesn't it doesn't address those kind of specific right applicatory and circumstantial things it's the spirit of god that leads us in that way right is he challenging the word of god that no of course not it's it's not functioning on the same plane right and and so it's the same thing right if we're all called to encourage one another in first desalonians 5 11 but that doesn't mean that scripture tells bob in the church specifically to encourage charlie because he's been really down with the sins that he's struggling with it's the spirit of god that does that it's not contradicting each other there's no contradiction you might still have one last lingering question about prophecy and that is well then how do we test it well scripture i mean preaching you could test it right you hear a preacher say something you go through scripture and search it like is it there or not right is that what it really says you can test it how do you test prophecy this is actually uh not all that different from something that we do uh uh all the time and well first i'll mention that there is a gift of discerning between spirits which first corinthians 12 10 mentions so that's helpful but the secondly we're all supposed to function in testing uh the spirit and and then testing whether this prophecy is from the lord or not and let me give you a couple examples so when a mechanic when you go you hear some noise in the car or you see some

unpleasant fumes from the car and you decided to take your car to a mechanic and then your mechanic tells you oh your catalytic converter is is is gone it's broken you have to get the replaced now if you are anything like me one you have no idea what a catalytic converter is you don't know what it does and you don't know where to fit it right so you have no way to externally verify what the mechanic told you you had you can't so what do you do you test it the only way you can do you trust the mechanic did he tell you the truth before has it been right about the diagnosis before did he seem like a sincere person did he seem like he was trying to put one over you or manipulate you see these are the things criterion we use every day to judge whether something that can't be externally verified is true or not we do the same thing with scripture right like when you go to a dentist right like they tell you oh you need to get a root canal therapy and then we're like what like this is ridiculous i mean what do you do how do you test that you can't verify that yourself you can get a second opinion right or you could see if what that dentist described fits the pain that you're experiencing right you there's many ways in which we judge subjective things to decide whether it's true or not if you can't externally verify it so same thing we do with prophecy when a prophet shares something with you we ask ourselves is this consistent with the tenor of scripture is this this does this prophet have reliable character is this a godly person has she been truthful in the past does this prophecy accord with your knowledge of the present situation is it consistent with the character of god does it resonate in your heart and bring conviction and consolation if yes then receive it from the lord for your upbuilding if not then move on if it really was prophecy then god will get your attention another way that was a long digression sorry guys after prophet paul is evangelist and these rest few will be shorter the word evangelist comes from the greek word evangel which means good news or the gospel evangelists are those who are gifted to make known to others the saving message of jesus christ and we have people who are gifted in this way they have a zeal for evangelism and unbelievers they kind of they're like magnets that attract unbelievers to themselves right and they're supposed to be gifted to gift to church and next paul mentioned the shepherds and teachers it's interesting that he joins these two words together unlike the preceding gifts paul joins these two words into a with a single governing article and he joins them with a stronger conjunction than all the other words that preceded to suggest a close relationship between the two they're not identical but he does that probably to suggest overlap because every shepherd right also if if this is uh then is probably involve some kind of teaching right because a shepherd grazes and guides and guards the flock so in the same way shepherd of a church would have to to nourish the flock defend protect the flock and guide the flock right so it's so there's because there's some overlap uh i think he seems to be connecting them together and if you remember the distinction i made earlier between gifts and offices then you might be wondering why we have pastors which is another word for shepherd as offices in the church and that's not because the pastor itself is technically speaking an office but because we simply call the office of elder pastor oftentimes nowadays and that's because shepherding is one of the tasks of the elder as it's clearly seen in acts 20 28 to 29 at first peter 5 2 and all of these is all these gifts are analogous to christ's ultimate gift right christ is the ultimate apostles was sent out ultimate mouthpiece of god the prophet ultimate evangelist the good news he embodied he's the ultimate shepherd he's that lays his life for his sheep he's the ultimate teacher so all these gifts that function in the church is analogous to his gifts that's why it's given a core measure of christ's gift now we'd be mistaken to think that only people who are gifted in

[53 : 19] these ways are called to do the work of ministry okay and if you are breathing a sigh of relief saying oh no i don't have any of those gifts well sorry but you're not off the hook right because first as i mentioned earlier not only is this gift this list not exhaustive he says in verses 11 to 12 christ gave the apostles the prophets the evangelists the shepherds and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry for building up the body of christ notice the parallel between verse 12 and verse 16 verse 16 says from whom the whole body joined and held together by every joint which with which it is equipped when each party's working properly makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love so many parallels there right equip work build body right so they're not all the same same words but they're the same concepts so he's talking about and it's not just these gifted individuals that do the work of ministry rather every part each part of the body every single member of the church is supposed to do ministry and that means if any one of us is not doing our part if any member is not fulfilling the ministry that god's given to him or to her that means the growth and the progress of the entire body is hampered and many years ago john calvin made this incisive observation he said that man is mistaken who desires his own separate spiritual growth for what would it profit a leg or an arm if it grew to an enormous size what's the point your point is to serve the body so let's not get entrenched in this privatized personalized individual spirituality with between jesus and me let's be involved to integrate in the body of christ serve the church are you living this truth out today and the goal of this ministry is this until verse 13 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 so earlier in verse 3 he said maintain this unity now he says attain this unity it's because it's two different types of unity first was the unity of the spirit this is the unity of the faith the unity of the spirit is a reality that's that's that's true for all christians upon conversion but unity of the faith working toward having the sharing the same doctrines the same values especially confessing the same truth about jesus christ as it says of the knowledge of son of god that's something we need to work for attain that's why it's a grave sign when a lot of churches especially in this region in new england neglect unity of the faith you a different god well hey at least you worship a god come worship with us on sunday oh you believe that god the father is god but not jesus well that's okay come worship with us you believe only the spirit of god is god oh come worship with us we will can meditate yoga right no that's not enough apart from the unity of the faith apart from attending the unity we cannot maintain the unity of the spirit that's a broken unity and we're called to the mature manhood to the measure of the stature of the fullness of christ and that phrase recalls paul's prayer in chapter 3 17 to 19 that christ may dwell in your heart through faith that you being rooted and grounded in love may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of christ that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled with all the fullness of god that's the measure of the stature of the fullness of christ that we grow into as verse 15

says we're to grow up in every way into him who is the head into christ now if you look around the room and look at the infants in our room you will probably notice that they have disproportionately large heads right and that's because they do right and that's normal right by nine months of life babies have like i think they said half of it's already their brains already half the size will reach in adulthood by two years of age already three-fourths the size of adulthood and when their body is clearly not three-fourths the size of adulthood that's why it's so big that's the picture that paul is painting here we as a church have an outsized head in jesus christ and he wants us to fill it out to grow up into the size of christ that we can more fully experience the union with him isn't that a glorious picture and we have an integral role to play in that because the church is the conduit for church unity it is through our ministry from him from whom we receive the gifts and it is through our ministry that we become more like christ we grow into christ likeness and when we do that we become a stable church right unlike children who are tossed to and fro by the waves like a little piece of shipwrecked part of a ship right that's just floating and at the mercy of the winds and the waves no the church that is growing in christ like this is stable and how then and this is with this i'll conclude do we minister to one another paul says in verse 15 rather speaking the truth in love we have to grow up in every way into him who is the head into christ and what is the truth of which he is speaking ephesians 1:13 says that we heard the word of truth the gospel of your salvation and believed in christ we were sealed with the promised holy spirit so the truth that paul has in mind is not just any truth it's just mean just you know telling being blunt with each other no he's the truth of the gospel when we remind one another gospel we root one another in the gospel story that's how with every joint with which it is and each part is working properly it makes the body grow so it builds itself up in love and what does that practically look like right it doesn't mean that you we go to the bible okay what does the bible say about this specific issue and share that with someone imagine a sister in the church comes to you and says hey i'm going through a divorce proceeding right now because i found out that my husband cheated on me right at that point you could you know wax eloquently about the biblical grounds for divorce and saying oh yeah you can get a divorce no that's not i mean that conversation might have to happen later but first we minister the gospel right hey in her loneliness in her feeling of rejection we tell her hey remember the church was unfaithful bride but christ is a faithful bridegroom who came to redeem her his bride we bring comfort consolation right we minister the gospel or when a brother comes to you and confides in you that he's struggling with these angry outbursts with his children our first inclination isn't to call child protective services although that might need to happen later depending on the severity no but first we minister the gospel we don't brush it aside and say oh that's not a big deal everybody sins no we told him that hey we sinned and the father was justified in his wrath toward us but he in love sent his son to die for us so that we experience this grace and love and so you can be gracious and loving toward your children that's the ministry of the gospel that's how we speak the truth in love to one another right and that's essential sometimes we think that gospel is just the abc of the christian life but the gospel

is the a to z of the christian life every single point of maturity in the christian life comes through the gospel in jesus that's why we can never outgrow christ but because paul is aware of a tendency among christians to defend and minister the truth in an unloving way that undermines the very truth which they speak he adds the important phrase speak the truth in love right john stott has a helpful quote he says thank god there are those in the contemporary church who are determined at all costs to defend and uphold god's revealed truth but sometimes they are conspicuously lacking in love when they think they smell heresy their nose begins to twitch their muscles ripple when the light of battle enters their eye they seem to enjoy nothing more than a fight that's not what paul has in mind was to speak the truth in love if we don't embody the truth we speak it will have no effect and so he ends he began this passage in verse two by telling us to bear with one another in love and now he ends by telling us to speak the truth in love because the body grows so that it builds itself up in love christianity is really one way to think about is nothing but a cascade of love the father's love for us sending the son the son loves us and dies for us and pours out his spirit to us and filled with the spirit and love of god we love each other and through that love for one another other people outside know that we are disciples of christ and come to know them it's all about love from the beginning to the end and that's why we are the conduit of this church unity and we're united when we are united in love in jesus christ i'll close with this illustration is when hannah and i have gone a couple times to symphony hall to listen to an orchestra play and sometimes they have a free show if it's the youth orchestra which is wonderful because they're still really really talented uh and and when you go at before if you get there a little early before everybody starts playing their pieces uh there there's this you hear this oboe it's a concert a plays d like a i don't know if that's a or not concert a plays the oboe and then every other instrument and then you hear them come up and they they tuning to that one oboe right it's really cool how they do that and and the reason why they use that is because the oboe it comes factory tuned you don't have to tune it it's it's never out of tune right and so they use the oboe to tune the rest of the instruments that's exactly what we do when we grow into christ we grow into christ we grow in his love and as we align our lives and our values to him we become more united with one another that's how we're the conduit of church unity so let's grow up into unity in christ together by speaking the truth in love let's play god we thank you whoa for this truth and we pray that we would be able to live by it that we would truly be galvanized by it that we would embody it that we would become little christ's so that all those who encounter us may have a glimpse of your beauty and glory and love in jesus name we pray amen and see you on the end you or you you