

Playing Our Part in God's Grand Design

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Date: 10 September 2023

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[0 : 0 0] reading is from Ephesians chapter 4 verses 1 to 16. That is on page 1175 of the church Bibles. Page 1175. Ephesians chapter 4 starting at verse 1. As a prisoner for the Lord then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

Be completely humble and gentle. Be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says, when he ascended on high he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.

What does he ascended mean except that he also descended to the lower earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens in order to fill the whole universe. So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers to equip his people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work. This is the word of God.

[2 : 0 3] Thanks, Robbie. And let me add my welcome to Simon's. As Simon said, it's Vision Sunday, this Sunday. And before we get stuck into the passage that we've just had read, let's join together in prayer. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word to us this evening and we pray that by the Holy Spirit you would move us by the vision for Christ's church that the Apostle Paul has laid out in this letter. Would you motivate us to serve your son as we serve each other and awaken in us a deep sense of your purpose and significance for our lives. We ask it in Christ's name. Amen.

Well, the architect Louis Kahn was a brilliant architect. He was a deeply flawed individual, but a brilliant architect. And he used to tell his students that if you're ever stuck for inspiration, that you should ask your materials for advice. You should say to a brick, say to the brick, brick, what do you want to be? And the brick would say, I like arches. I like an arch. I want to be an arch.

And then you say, that's good. I like arches too. But arches are expensive and I could use a concrete lintel instead. So brick, what do you say to that? And then the brick would say, I like arches. I'm going to be an arch. The brick has a stubborn sense of its own destiny. Now maybe that's you. Maybe you have your life plan clear in front of you. But very often we don't know what we're meant to be. Why am I here?

What am I doing with my life? And this is particularly true when we're young, when we're students, finishing high school, just starting out in adult life. But we can ask these sorts of things at any stage. Where's my life headed? What am I doing with myself? Well, did you know that God has a plan for your life? You have a part to play in God's grand design. And it's all laid out for us here in the letter to the Ephesians. So we flick back a page to chapter 1. In chapter 1 verse 10, in chapter 1 verse 10, we're shown the epic scope of God's big plan, which is to unite all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. Amazingly, we're included in God's big plan. That's what it says in chapter 2 verse 10. We are God's handiwork, created in Christ to do good works, which God has prepared for us according to his eternal purposes and which center on God's masterpiece, the church.

So if we've become joined to Christ by faith, if we're Christians, then we're now building stones, a new humanity being built together in Christ, as it says in chapter 2 verse 22, into this amazing living structure that we call church. And Paul writes in chapter 3 verse 10 that it's through the church that God's master plan that God's master plan will be accomplished in Christ. Now isn't that amazing? If you're a Christian, then you're a part of that. You have a part to play in God's plan for the entire cosmos. So then, you might ask, what do I do? In chapters 4 to 6 of Ephesians, Paul sets out in practical terms how we are to live out our lives in the household of God. And as we zoom in on our chapter 4, chapter 4 verses 1 to 16, and in fact we're going to zoom in even further to 11 to 16, we're going to see that our good works, our good works are all about how we relate to one another in the church family. This is Christ's vision for the church. We've got two headings this evening. The gifts Christ gave us and the goals Christ gave us. The gifts Christ gave us and the goals Christ gave us. So first, the gifts. So what are we to do? What part do we play? Well, in the first place, we are to receive, receive gifts. So read along with me in verses 7 to 8.

[7:03] So it all starts with Christ descending, coming to earth, dying for us on the cross, and then ascending, conquering death and ascending to heaven. Then the risen Christ gives out gifts to his church, but they're not the gifts we might expect. They're people. He gave gifts of the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastor teachers, which is one category. And what these all have in common, apart from the fact that they're people, is that all of the gifts named are ministers of the word, the people who in one way or another brought us the Bible, whether they were involved in the process of writing down what we now call the New Testament or faithfully teaching the apostolic gospel to the church today. So that's something that we can be thankful for, the generous provision of God's

God, given teachers throughout the history of the church and for the preaching of God's word, where it's faithfully taught up and down our land today. So the first surprise is that the gifts are people. But the second surprise is that they're not the ones doing the ministry, at least not the only ones, because Christ gave these gifts in order to equip his people for works of service. In other words, to equip his people for ministry. That's what ministry is, to serve. To minister is to serve. So it's not the pastor teachers doing all the ministry, but their specific ministry is to equip the church, the whole church, all Christ people, all of us, for doing ministry. Now that's not to devalue the ministry of the pastor teachers. Their ministry is crucial for other members to know how to exercise their own gifts, which, verse 7, are given to each one of us. Now this is therefore a critique of misconceptions that we might have about church, where we think that it's just the person up front, or just the staff team who do all the ministry. And that's a kind of consumer attitude towards church, isn't it? Where we think that we're just here to sing a few songs and get our weekly sermon fix. But Christ's vision, Christ's vision for the church is for every member ministry, where the leaders actively equip the others to serve. That's when the church is built up. Now Martin, our pastor teacher here at St. Silas, reminded us this morning that this is what we're already striving to do at St.

St. Silas. It's the ministry mindset shift, as he said, that is from the ministry of the few to the ministry of the many, from the ministry of the few to the ministry of the many. As we receive the God-given word through his God-given pastor teachers, we are thus equipped to do our own God-given works of ministry.

[10:31] We are receiving the word so that we can be speaking God's words to each other. Now this is essential for building up the church. And this leads us on to our second main heading, the goals that Christ set us.

Well, over the summer, we were staying for a week next to a beach, and some days were sunny and calm. But other days, the wind picked up and it made for pretty big waves and strong undertoes, which if you're a strong enough swimmer, are actually pretty good fun to swim in. But it was on those days when the big waves came rolling in that we wouldn't let our two little children go in the sea. It would have been far too dangerous and risky for them. And that's basically the picture that Paul's giving us here in verses 14 to 15.

He contrasts the mature adults with immature children. Now, of course, we don't want to remain spiritual infants lacking in understanding, gullible, liable to be overwhelmed, and vulnerable to being tossed back and forth by the swell of false teaching that's out there. Much better to be mature in Christ.

So how do we get from being infants to being mature in Christ? When we're setting big goals for the future, it's often wise to break those big goals down into smaller steps. And Paul does that for us here. If a big overall aspiration is to grow the church to maturity, then he breaks it down into its component parts. So there's a couple of aspects to this in verse 13. Goal number one, unity in the church. We are to be unified in our common faith. And this brings us back to the first verses of our chapter where Paul goes big on unity. We are to keep or maintain the spiritual unity that's demanded in verse 3, which is already objectively ours in Christ. We're different people coming from different backgrounds, but in Christ we are united. We are one body. We are one body and ours is a unity that is grounded in the unity of God. One Spirit, one Lord, one God and Father of all. And this is expressed in our unity of our response to God. One hope, one faith, one baptism. Now our unity in the church, our unity here, although an objective reality, subjectively is something that we need to keep working at. How we relate to one another really matters, and we need to be doing so in humility, gentleness, patience, and love. And remember that we're in this together. We're not independent of each other. We're not dependent on the person at the front doing everything. The whole church is being equipped so that we can grow the household of God to maturity. So we might be thinking about that. Which relationships in the church family do we need to be working on? How can we be pursuing unity with grace and love?

Goal two, we're needing to be learning Christ together. The second goal of building up the church is for us to be learning Christ and doing so together as a church family. Growing in the knowledge of the Son of God. Not so much learning about Christ, but knowing Christ, pursuing our relationship with him, learning to more and more entrust our lives to him. Again, this is not a solo project. We're doing this together. We build up the church family by reminding each other who Christ is and what Christ has done. And that can happen in our roots and growth groups or in a coffee shop around the kitchen table as we share gospel truth and encourage one another in our daily walk with Christ. [14:55] Maybe you're someone who journals as you read the Bible. Have you thought about sharing what you're writing down in your journals with one another? A pertinent word, a timely word to a friend. And we can be thinking about ways that we can steer our conversations and helping others better learn Christ.

Well, at St. Silas, we want to be a church where we can be freely and naturally talking about God and his word in our everyday conversations. And so both these goals, unity in the church and learning Christ together, require relational activity. And God places us in relationships with other believers to help us to help us to become more like his son. This is where playing our part in God's grand design really comes to the fore. Because as we can see in verse 15, for the church to become mature, each of us need to be speaking the truth in love. You know, one of the complaints of our culture, one of the complaints that you hear is, don't I have a voice? Well, God has given us a voice and a mandate to use it. Achieving God's good goals for your relationships in church requires words, words of truth spoken in love. Specifically, your words about God's words, your words communicating God's words to those in the church family, those who he has put you in relationship with. We're trying to create a culture here where it's as natural and as necessary as drawing breath on us. God's word reverberating around the church family, just a normal part of being an ordinary Christian. Over the summer, we ran, I say we, Amy ran a series of workshops on one-to-one ministry. And one-to-one ministry, if you're not sure what that is, is basically just opening up the Bible with another person. Another great way that we can be speaking the truth in love to one another. And if you are at the first of these workshops, then this will be revision. But we are thinking about this phrase, speaking the truth in love, and thinking of all the ways that this might happen in the church family. And if you were there, you'll remember that speaking the truth in love requires three things. Firstly, a willingness to speak. Secondly, a knowledge of the truth. And thirdly, the sensitivity to do so in love and grace.

Admittedly, these are easier said than done. And some of us will find some of these harder than others. We really need to be working on all three aspects to be playing our part in building up the church family. Otherwise, our words can be more destructive than constructive. Firstly, we need to be willing to speak. Now, that's maybe stating the obvious, but how often do we manage to talk about God's word even after we've been sitting through a church service and listening to a sermon together?

And conversations even between close friends might be hard. So just think about the kinds of chat that can come up when friends care about each other spiritually. And I should say that the following

examples are fictional. So if they bear any resemblance to actual conversations, it's purely coincidental.

But think of these conversations. How's your relationship going with God? I've not seen you at church recently. I'm sorry that you're going through this.

[18 : 52] Yes, that was a difficult passage that he tackled this morning. Christians shouldn't behave like that, should they?

Yes, I've been struggling with that sin too. Relationships can be messy and involve messy situations because we're all flawed individuals.

But that's exactly why we need to keep working at this. We need to be willing to speak. But secondly, we need to be speaking not just any old thing, but speaking truth into each other's lives. God's given us a voice, but this must be conditioned and controlled by God's words. So as we grow together by learning Christ through his word, we'll be better equipped to speak truth to others that promotes our mutual spiritual growth and maturity.

And thirdly then, our speech must be constrained by love. We need to be spiritually discerning in this and careful that our words are marked by humility, gentleness, and love that we speak.

[20 : 08] Only what is helpful, verse 29, for building each other up according to our needs. Only then will our speech be constructive. And sometimes we won't realize just how important, just how impactful our words can be.

Each of us, those of us who are Christians anyway, can probably think of times in our lives, situations where God has used other people to point us to Christ by speaking the truth in love to us. And I recall many years ago, not long after I'd returned to church after many years of wandering away, that an older, mature Christian brother spoke bold words of truth into my life, without which I'm not sure where I'd be now.

I was nearly back to church, but there were aspects of my life which were dragging me down. And going out late on a Saturday night was one of them, and that impacted my attendance on Sunday mornings.

Well, this mature Christian realized that my spiritual well-being was precarious, and he dared to speak truth in love into my life.

[21 : 18] You need to get serious, he said. You need to make the right choices, and actually what you need right now is a spiritual equivalent of an intensive care unit. You need to be hooked up on an intravenous drip to God's words.

And he advised me firmly but compassionately in no uncertain terms that it would be wise for me to be in attendance at every single Sunday morning and evening service, on every midweek Bible study and prayer meeting for the foreseeable future.

Now that was an admonishment. Not easy to hear, but it had the desired outcome, and was clearly spoken out of a faithfulness to speak the truth in love.

And I'm so grateful to him for risking that for me. So perhaps you know someone who's struggling right now, someone who needs you to be speaking words of truth and encouragement into their lives.

How can you seek to build up them with God's word this week? God has given each of us unique spheres of influence, a unique network of relationships, and the household of God is built up on those relationships.

[22 : 34] We are an integral part of God's design, not just another brick in the wall. Christ, as the head of a church, is the one who leads the church and supplies all that the body needs for its growth.

We might feel like we're a small, insignificant part of a larger body, but as you do your part, when each part is working properly, then the church will grow to maturity and be strengthened in love.

This is Christ's vision for the church. Do you see the significant role that you're to play in that? Let's pray before responding together in song.

Lord Jesus, you are our risen, ascended king, and we will gladly serve you.

You have promised to build your church, and the gates of hell will not prevail. So we pray that you would continue to build your church here in Glasgow, for we are your people, living, building stones, being shaped into your likeness.

[23 : 55] Would you grow us, therefore, into Christ-like maturity and give us opportunities to serve each other by speaking the truth in love to one another? Would you grant us unity in the church as

we seek to be learning Christ together?
Amen.