



We've been doing a series of messages on the church. We've seen how central the church is in the plan of God. We looked at John's vision in the book of Revelation where he saw Jesus standing and walking among the lampstands. These lampstands represent the churches of John's day and of our day. The last two weeks we've learned about two of the most important things a church is called to do: we're called to look up to God in worship and we're called to reach out to others in sharing the gospel.

One of the things we haven't addressed is the whole question of who is in charge. When you talk about any kind of organization, that's always what people want to know. Who is making the decisions around here? How does this place really run? How is it organized? Who is the boss? Whether we're talking about a business, the government, or even a team, those are the questions you ask.

One of the things we're going to see this morning is that the answer to this question will be largely be determined by what we view the church to **be**. Some people view the church as they would any kind of human organization. But the church is unlike any organization on earth. As a matter of fact, the church is not an organization at all, and as soon as we define it as such we lose our way. This is why so many churches are dying today and many more are just hanging on for dear life. They've lost a sense of who and what they are. But Scripture is very clear that the church is not an organization. Turn with me to Ephesians 4.

**"And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love" (vv. 11–16).**

## **I. The church is the body of Christ.**

As we look at these words written by the Apostle Paul it's interesting that he never mentions the word "church." The whole chapter is a description of the church, and yet Paul doesn't even use that term here. Instead, he chooses to use a term that's far more descriptive—the body of Christ. In v.12 he talks about **"the building up of the body of Christ."** Paul's assumption in this passage is that the church is Christ's body.

Jesus had a body. With his body he touched the leper and passed out loaves of bread. When he sat with his disciples on the night he was betrayed, he broke bread and said, **"This is my body which is broken for you."** The next day his body was beaten and bruised and he died on the cross. His body was removed by Joseph, prepared for burial by some women, and placed in a tomb. Three days later they came to the tomb and found it empty. His body had been raised up. And for 40 days he appeared in bodily form to over 500 people. Finally, his body ascended into heaven where he's seated at the right hand of God.

But that wasn't the end. Before he left, he told his disciples to stay in Jerusalem until something unusual happened. They stayed and they waited until on the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, actually fell upon that little band of 120. At that moment, that ordinary group of people became something extraordinary; they became the body of Christ. Today, we're still his body, filled with his Spirit, called to be Jesus in this world.

You see, the church is **not** in essence an organization. The church is an organism; it's alive. A body is an organism; it has a life force within it. The life force of the body of Christ is the Spirit of Christ. Contrary to the old song, a body isn't made by the foot bone being joined to the ankle bone, and the ankle bone to the knee bone, and the knee bone to the hip bone, etc. A body is formed as one original cell reproduces until it becomes a body in which every cell and every part shares out of that original life. The secret of a body is that all the parts share the same life. That's what makes us different than an organization. Organizations derive power from the contribution of individuals, but a body derives its power from sharing the same life. There is a supernatural connection of all believers as we share together in the very life of Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

This past weekend I spent time with an old friend who is a pastor in the Presbyterian church. I'm sure if he and I sat down and talked about specific teachings of his church and my church we

would have found a lot to disagree on. But as we sat and talked together about Jesus it was obvious we share in the same reality—the life of Jesus Christ. Our respective organizations could probably never be one, but we're one because we share out of the same life.

All this isn't to say that the body of Christ is disorganized or that each part isn't important. The body is very organized. But how?

## **II. The body of Christ is directed by its Head, Jesus Christ.**

In this passage before us, Paul tells us. He says in v.15 the head of this body is Jesus. We see an even clearer statement of that back in Eph. 1:22-23, **"And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all."**

The head of any body is responsible for growth and for all the activity that takes place. Everything that happens is to happen under his direction. Unfortunately, when we think of the church today we don't normally think of Christ as the head. We think of a man, usually the Senior Pastor, as head. We figure he's responsible for directing the body. If something goes wrong, we look to him. If a decision needs to be made, go to the top. Every once in a while someone comes into the office of our church and says, "Who's in charge here? I want to talk to him!" We shrug our shoulders and say, "Good question!"

But the Scriptures are clear—Jesus Christ is alive and he's in charge! That's not just verbiage. That's the truth and the challenge is to live that truth and look to him. This is the challenge Israel had when all the other nations around them had a king but God told them that he was their King. But they looked at the nations around them and said, "We want a king like they do." Samuel said, "God is your king?" They said, "No! We want a king like everyone else." Samuel turned to God and God said, "Don't worry about it, Samuel. They've not rejected you, but they've rejected me" (1 Samuel 8:4-9). Then they chose Saul to be their first king. He was handsome and tall, an impressive leader, a guy they could be proud of.

Many churches do the same thing today. Christ is the head of the church, but we look around at how businesses run and how countries run and how football teams run and we say, "We need a man. We need someone who will lead us and represent us and take us to the next level like everybody else." So we hire someone like that and maybe the church grows and the preacher gets on the radio and all the while Christ Jesus is looking on and saying, "You've rejected me."

There might be a lot of activity and a lot of programs, but this is when church ultimately becomes boring. You look around and you know this is all about us. You know there is nothing here that couldn't have happened without God. This place may be impressive, but a lot of corporations are too. People may join and sign

up but lives aren't really being changed. Why? Because we've lost our dependence on Jesus, the source of our life.

This past week I heard about a pastor of a church who has fallen into sin and been disqualified from leadership. It's a sad story that's been repeated over and over again. The saddest thing is the church he has led was way too dependent on him. He founded the church and made all the important decisions and his particular talents were the thing that kept the church growing. But now he's gone and I wonder what will happen to that church. I think that church will actually become stronger because they will be less centered on a man and more dependent on Christ.

You say, that sounds good, but where do **we** come in? Don't we need leaders? Don't we do something? The answer is yes.

## **III. The body depends on the proper functioning of each part.**

It's clear from this passage that each member of the body has a different role to play. And he gives us the pattern for how that works. He says Jesus has given to the body certain people with certain gifts whose role it is to equip others. The idea behind equipping is to help something fulfill its purpose. This word was used in surgery when a doctor set a broken bone. The idea is to repair and equip people to function in their God-given purpose. This is the job of apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers.

Apostles and prophets are those who lay the foundation for the church on the truth of Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:20;3:5). The church today is built upon the foundation the original apostles and prophets of Jesus laid. There are also evangelists and pastor-teachers. Evangelists are like obstetricians who aid in the birthing of new believers. They're gifted in sharing the gospel and leading people to faith in Christ. Pastor-teachers are like pediatricians who care for and feed these new babies with first the milk and then the meat of God's word. At CPC we have certain men and women who have the gift of pastor-teachers. In the case of some of them, we've freed them up so they can serve in that capacity full-time, but they're not the only ones who have that gift. We have some very effective pastor-teachers in this church who have never received a paycheck.

Notice nothing is said here about a group of people set apart for ministry as members of what we call clergy. The word clergy comes from the latin word, *clericus*, which means priest. I can remember growing up in the Catholic church and thinking of priests as almost another race of people. They wore different clothes, spoke a different language and didn't marry. But the Bible knows nothing of that and says we're all priests. Peter calls garden variety believers **"a holy priesthood who offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God..."** (1 Peter 2:5). Each one of us has direct access to God. And each one of us is called into the ministry. Paul says it's the job of these foundational gifts to

**“equip the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”** That word “service” could also be translated “ministry.” Who does the work of the ministry? The saints! Who are the saints? They’re not those people on stained glass windows who lived in the Middle Ages. He’s not talking about St. Joseph and St. Claire. He’s talking about St. You. If you know Christ, you’re a saint!

In the last few weeks there’s been quite a scare about a dangerous virus commonly called the swine flu. I read an article this past week that said you can walk down the streets of Mexico City and it’s like no one is around. Let me tell you about another virus that’s even more dangerous to the body of Christ. It’s a virus that infects people with the idea that being a part of a church means nothing more than being a consumer. In this case, the church becomes more like a supermarket than a body. You come solely for what you can get out of it and as soon as your needs are not being met by what is found there you find somewhere else to shop. That kind of thinking is a deadly virus that will kill the church.

Let’s be clear: As the head of the body, Jesus distributes gifts to each member of his body. Some of these gifts are “equipping gifts.” As these equippers do their work, the rest of the body begins to do the work of ministry so the body can be built up. Far too often it’s the other way around. The ministry is left to the professionals while the people equip them by showing up and paying their salary. So church becomes a spectator sport where the most you ever do is bring people on Sunday so the minister can minister to them. It’s like that great definition of football—11 men down on the field in desperate need of rest and 40,000 people up in the stands in desperate need of exercise!

As a believer, you have at least one spiritual gift that comes directly from the Lord and is meant to build up the body of Christ. Besides the ones we see here there are gifts of service, helps, administration and leadership, giving, showing mercy, exhortation, words of wisdom and knowledge. You might wonder, “How do I know what my gift is?” The best thing to do is just jump in and find a way to serve. You may stumble at first, but eventually you’ll find something you love to do; something others in the body affirm you in. As a young man I was in awe of good preaching. And then I had a chance to teach a bible study once and I thought I had died and gone to heaven. I’m not sure others felt that way. At that point I might have had the gift of teaching but I don’t think anyone around me had the gift of listening! But the more I taught the more it became apparent to those around me that this was a gift. So I worked to develop that gift and God opened doors for me to use it. That’s how you develop and discover your gifts.

And do you know what? The church can’t afford for you **not** to discover and use your gift. That’s what he says in v.16. He talks about the body **“being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part...”** Every part, even the smallest part, is crucial. I recall so well ten years ago when I cut off the tip of my finger on a lawnmower. It was just a tiny piece, but I was a mess! You may feel invisible. You may think you have such a tiny contribution to make that it doesn’t matter, but I want to tell you the body will be a mess if you don’t function as you should! If each part doesn’t contribute, the body can’t grow and mature.

#### **IV. The body is to grow into maturity.**

And that would be a travesty, because the goal of all of this is maturity, not just for individuals but for the church as a whole. What does maturity look like? In v.13 Paul describes it as **“the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.”** In v.15 he says **“we are to grow up in all aspects into him...”** Maturity is defined by the person of Christ. We grow into what he is. When babies are born their heads are disproportionately large. As time goes on, their bodies grow into their head. So we grow into our head—Jesus. This isn’t talking about numbers; it’s talking about the quality of our life together and our impact on the world.

We grow into what he is. Normal, healthy bodies will grow. As a kid I was always small for my age. When all my friends got their growth spurt, I was left behind. My parents always told me, “Don’t worry. You’re healthy. You’re going to grow.” I didn’t believe them. But finally, in my sophomore year of high school, I grew about a foot. My parents were right. Growth in the body of Christ may take time. We can’t always see the changes. It doesn’t always happen on our time schedule. But if we focus on staying healthy, we’ll grow.

But what happens if we don’t stay healthy? Paul says in v.14 we remain like children, thrown around by every passing religious fad. Notice how he defines spiritual immaturity as religious gullibility. He says, “I want you be stable and mature; able to discern truth from error. Here’s what I want you to focus on to stay healthy: ‘speak the truth in love.’” In order to stay healthy and grow to be like Christ, we have to maintain truth and love. We have to hold to the truth of God’s word, but not in a cold, arrogant, merciless way. We have to love people, but not in a compromising, wishy-washy, purely sentimental way. So we take an issue like same sex marriage and we speak the truth—we believe it’s wrong; we believe God’s word would call it a violation of his will. But we also realize God loves those people. They’re not the enemy; they’re victims of the enemy. And loving them means getting involved in their lives and finding ways to help them.

## V. Elders are to shepherd the flock under Christ's headship.

One of the ways the body grows in maturity is through the oversight of elders. We haven't talked about elders yet. They're not mentioned in this passage because being an elder isn't a spiritual gift, rather it's a calling. We know in the rest of the New Testament elders play an important role in the church. Look at 1 Pt 5:1-4, **"Therefore, I exhort the elders among you...shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory."** Notice the church isn't called the body of Christ, but the flock of God. This flock has a Chief Shepherd named Jesus, but also a bunch of under shepherds called elders. Notice a few things about elders:

First, this is addressed to elders, not a single elder. There is no biblical model for having just one leader of a church. There should always be a plurality of elders; a team of qualified men that lead. No one individual has authority from God to direct the affairs of the church. A plurality of elders is necessary as a safeguard to the all-too-human tendency to play God over other people. The task of the elders isn't even to run the church, but to determine how the Chief Shepherd in their midst wishes to run his church. Much of this he's already made known through the Scriptures. But in the day-to-day decisions of the church, elders are to seek and find the mind of the Lord through prayer and biblically-related discussion.

The second thing you should notice is that elders are called to **"shepherd the flock of God."** A shepherd is someone who guides, protects and feeds the flock. Look how they're to do that—not out of compulsion. Elders don't serve for any other reason than they want to and the Lord has led them to do it. They're not to do it out of guilt or because "someone has to do it." They're not to do it for any kind of ego reasons, nor for financial gain. Instead, they're to shepherd with eagerness and a sense of gratitude.

Third, notice their humility and gentleness. It's not all about them. They are servant leaders. He says, **"not lording it over the**

**flock."** They're not to be heavy-handed. Even right here Peter models that for them. He was an apostle and one of the closest disciples of Jesus, but he doesn't pull rank and appeal to them as an apostle; he appeals to them as a fellow elder. He models this idea of true servant leadership. He steps down from being an apostle and says, "Listen, I'm a fellow elder just like you."

Finally, notice where an elder's authority comes from: **"proving to be examples to the flock."** Whatever authority an elder has comes from the example he sets. His authority isn't in his office or title, but in the kind of life he leads. In Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus he talks in detail about the qualifications of elders. Every single one of the qualifications is character-based. There is no age requirement mentioned. He says nothing about their education or affluence. Elders aren't to be chosen because they're successful in business or the biggest givers. They're simply humble and mature men of faith who love Christ and his people.

## CONCLUSION

Let me back up. We've seen that:

1. The church is the body of Christ.
2. The body of Christ is directed by its Head, Jesus Christ.
3. The body depends on the proper functioning of each part.
4. The body is to grow into maturity.
5. Elders are to shepherd the flock under Christ's headship.

Let me close with one word of application: find your place in the body of Christ. I know many of you have done that and you're serving in that capacity but many of you haven't and it's time. It's time to put your gifts to work so the body of Christ can be built up and strengthened.

When I was coaching Little League, I would use an object lesson to teach them the importance of every team member. I took one pencil and dared the strongest kid to snap it in two, which he always did with ease. But then I bunched about 13 pencils together, the amount of kids on our team, and I asked him to try breaking that, and they would always try but never succeed. It's the same way with the church. As individuals, we're weak. But with each part of the body doing his part we are built up into **"the fullness of the stature which belongs to Christ."**