



Central  
Peninsula  
Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

*Growing Together in Maturity*

Ephesians 4:7–16

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series: Sit, Walk, Stand: A Journey Through Ephesians

I was on Facebook the other day and saw a photo of a little league baseball team winning their championship game. What an accomplishment! I thought back to my childhood when I lived in Daly City. I played little league and my 5th grade team also accomplished something remarkable too. You wouldn't have predicted it from the start; we were a rag-tag group from all different nationalities, some came from troubled homes, others from supportive families, urban, suburban. We had personalities; there were the clowns, the quiet steady ones, the gifted athletes, the anxious types. With all that diversity, it wasn't surprising to see there was arguing, making fun of each other, a fight. That was just the first day of practice! We weren't that good either, routinely striking out and letting easy fly balls bounce out of our gloves or off our chests.

Something happened one game early in the season that I believe was a tipping point to our year. One of the struggling kids made an amazing defensive play and another kid from the bench jumped up and screamed, "I love you!" We all giggled, but we knew he meant it. We felt the same way too. You see, we were becoming a team. We were discovering each of our unique abilities and were growing and settling into positions that suited us best. Instead of arguing, we started encouraging and helping each other develop. We kind of adopted one kid whose parents were out of the picture. And at the end of the season, we accomplished something amazing. We didn't win the championship, in fact we only finished third, but we became a real team who united and grew both in our playing skills and in our friendships. Most importantly we grew in the unspoken love we felt for one another. I'll never forget that team.

Now we're all grown up but haven't you always sensed a desire to be a part of a team that accomplishes something great? Where you and every other person discovers and uses their unique abilities for the benefit of the team? Everyone would be uniquely and individually valued and needed. Differences would be worked out in love and respect. That sounds appealing, doesn't it?

If you think that only happens in childhood sports or in the movies, think again. The church is made of people who each have unique gifts that were designed to be used for the common good.

We're continuing our study in Ephesians. Last time Paul told us that focusing on the wonderful blessings we have in Christ is the just the beginning of our Christian life. We are called to

walk together, committed to unity. Today we'll see that within this unity is a wonderful diversity of supernatural abilities, called spiritual gifts, that each of us have. The way we grow in unity is to use our gifts to serve each other in mutual acts of love. When we do that, something amazing, larger than life happens: we grow into spiritual adulthood together, as a group. That dynamic doesn't happen anywhere else on earth but in the church.

**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.) (Ephesians 4:7–10).**

I don't know about you, but I was scratching my head the first time I read this. Ascending, descending, ascending?! Let's start with verse 7 and the grace we've been given. Back in chapter 2 Paul told us about grace. He said our salvation is a free gift from God. In the same way, Christ has given His followers spiritual gifts, called "grace." We did nothing to earn it. Each one of us has at least one; no one is gift-less. They aren't just meant for super-spiritual people, the gifts are for all of us. If you're wondering, "what exactly is a spiritual gift?", that question will be answered, but Paul wants us to focus first on the giver, beginning in verse 8.

As I dove into this I discovered that verse 8 is actually a quote from Psalm 68, written by King David. It's a song of military triumph where David says some impressive things about God. God overwhelms and scatters His enemies. God is merciful and gracious. He cares for His people and for the weak. Most likely David sung this in 2 Samuel chapter 6, where he saw the Ark of the Covenant moving back into Jerusalem as a symbol of God returning to His capital city like a king who has returned victorious from battle. As the king advanced over the enemy cities he took their most priceless treasures and brought those spoils home. That's what winning kings do. That's the idea here—only Jesus is the victorious king! But He doesn't keep the treasure. He gives it away because He's generous.

In order for Him to "ascend" He must have first "descended" in verse 9, meaning first He died and was buried in a tomb. But God's power resurrected Him and He ascended to heaven. He didn't conquer His enemies by military force. Through the cross

and the empty tomb He destroyed the power of sin and death and defeated the devil, plundering his kingdom, in a sense.

In verse 10 Jesus *“ascended higher than all the heavens”* and now oversees the church from the most honored position there is—seated at the right hand of the Father. He has all the credentials to determine how to perfectly distribute gifts throughout the church. He calls the shots. We don't call the shots. We need to keep that in mind if we discover we're gifted in ways that don't meet our expectations. Have you been to a birthday party when a child excitedly unwraps a present and then discovers it's a gift he didn't like and there's a big let down? You've all seen that. That response doesn't consider the intent of the giver. We can respond like that as well. As with all of God's gifts, we need to be full of gratitude and ready to use them as He intended.

**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 (verses 11–12).**

While there is only one giver—Christ—there is diversity in the gifts themselves. A spiritual gift is a supernatural ability given to you from Christ through the Holy Spirit that allows you to serve others in specific and effective ways. When we begin our lives as Christ-followers the Spirit transforms us, not into pleasant religious people, but into new people because we've been spiritually born again. In that newness Christ gives each of us gifts.

We see some gifts here in verse 11, but this isn't an exhaustive list of all the gifts. There are at least 19 mentioned in the New Testament. We can't cover them all today, but here they are including the Scriptures where they can be found: administration, apostle, discernment, evangelism, exhortation, faith, giving, healing, helping, interpretation of tongues, knowledge, leadership, mercy, miracles, pastor-teacher, prophet, teaching, tongues, wisdom (1 Corinthians 12:7-11, 27-31, Romans 12:6-8, 1 Peter 4:10-11, Ephesians 4:11-12).

Take a good look at this list. These are amazing, impactful gifts. In this room there's helpers, wisdom, leaders, and so on. Which one do you think you have? Note that spiritual gifts are different from your natural talents and abilities. You can be a great athlete, skilled craftsman, or a top developer, but none of those are spiritual gifts. In and of themselves, they are natural abilities you want to honor God with, but they were latent at physical birth. You receive spiritual gifts at the moment of spiritual re-birth. Now we do see that Christ chooses at times to give gifts that tap into and super-charge our existing abilities, but He also gives gifts that give us entirely new abilities.

The church can't be built up nor can we fully mature into spiritual adulthood without a diversity of gifts all operating at the same time. For example, just think about what it takes to pull this Sunday service off. It's not just about what happens on this stage with music and teaching. There's student and children's

programs, ushers and greeters, teams of volunteers all serving and using their different gifts. Beyond Sunday there are community groups that meet throughout the week, there are outreaches like Bags of Love. We have a prayer team, a transportation ministry, etc., all fueled by volunteers who use their gifts and are passionate about serving and loving others in the name of Jesus. Can you see how no one gift is more important than another? We need the diversity of gifts all in operation so we can grow and carry out our mission.

In verse 11 Paul specifically mentions four of these gifts that are foundational to the establishment of the church. The gift of **apostle** refers to the special ability given to the 12 men whom Jesus personally appointed to be His apostles. They witnessed His ministry first-hand and were given remarkable powers to spread the Gospel, planting the first churches and performing miracles. By this definition the gift no longer functions. But we do see apostle in a secondary sense today. For example, we see missionaries that establish thriving churches seemingly from scratch in unreached areas. That's a secondary use of the apostle gift.

**Prophets**, along with apostles, were people appointed and inspired by God to convey all that we have in Scripture. In this sense the gift no longer functions either because the Bible is closed, meaning nothing more can be added to it. We do see a secondary kind of prophesy today and in the New Testament, where someone offers a supernatural message from God directed to the church somehow, perhaps a message of encouragement or warning.

**Evangelism** is the ability to convey the Gospel of Jesus Christ in such a way that people are noticeably drawn to it and respond, accepting the free gift of eternal life. Note that we're all called to share the Gospel to non-believers in authentic ways but not all of us have the gift, and that's ok, as long as we're genuine in our sharing.

Now with the final gift, the arrangement of the phrase **“pastors and teachers”** in the Greek indicates that while there are distinctions between these two, they are in essence one spiritual gift, two sides of the same coin. Pastor-teachers are responsible for the spiritual growth of the flock, loving and correcting, caring and healing, and protection from predators. They point out the truth of Scripture in a way that brings new understanding and application to the listeners. There are some people with the pastor-teacher gift on staff here, but did you know that some of our volunteers, like some of our community group leaders, are pastor-teachers as well? It's true.

From the descriptions of these four gifts you can see how they are foundational to the church. They're identified as equipping gifts in verse 12 because they train us and furnish us with all that we need for what? For works of service.

Service literally means “waiting a table.” When we serve one another we do so with an attitude of love and humility like we're

serving dinner in our homes to our most honored guests. We've been given gifts so we can give them away, in service to others. That's a radical concept, isn't it? And together, we see a rich harmony of gifts that reflect the fullness of Christ to the world, because He is the only One who possesses all the spiritual gifts.

One of the biggest misconceptions is the idea that all the "important work" of the church is done by a few talented people on staff and everyone else simply follows and supports them. The problem is that it makes certain gifts appear more important than others, which we know is false. The work of the church is everyone's responsibility!

In verse 12 Paul tells us the goal of all of us using our gifts: that the body of Christ is built up, meaning strengthened, having structural integrity to withstand challenges. We can't fully mature without each other. Your spiritual maturity, in a sense, depends on the person sitting next to you. What a thought!

Now I want to stop and pose this question and I'd like you to think about it for a second. Assuming we all serve out of our gifts, building each other up, over time what would all that interaction result in? What would we grow into? What would that look like? It's an intriguing question. I wonder if we would start to spiritually mature together. I wonder if we would start to grow into spiritual adulthood. Could that really be the outcome of all this service? I think so, and in verse 13 Paul answers those questions.

**...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 (verses 13–14).**

All of the ministry and serving we do is for the immensely important goal of spiritual maturity. The idea in these verses is not just some people maturing, but the holistic growth of the entire body. Paul says three things about what it looks like when we become spiritual adults.

First he says in verse 13 that we become spiritual adults when we work to attain unity in two areas: in our faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God. What we believe is true about our Christian faith and about our Lord will shape our actions. By putting into practice what we learn from our spiritual teachers and our time spent in God's word, our character and values will start to look more like Christ's character and values.

I haven't had a paper photograph developed in a while, but I have some knowledge of the process. A blank piece of photographic paper is very sensitive to light because of the way it's constructed. When the light source from the actual image impacts the paper, an exact duplicate image is imprinted on it, which is invisible at first but after a special treatment slowly

develops and becomes visible to the eye over time. It's like that with all of us as we expose ourselves to Christ through studying scripture and practicing prayer together. Who He is and how He loves becomes more obvious in us over time.

That's how we obtain *"the whole measure of the fullness of Christ"* in verse 13. We are united in both our faith and knowledge of Christ and we live that out each day of the week. Our actions are in agreement with our beliefs.

Secondly, Paul says we become spiritual adults when we grow out of spiritual infancy. Look at verse 14, *"so we will no longer be infants."* Right now we—Paul included—are spiritual infants. He's not insulting us; he's saying when we come to faith in Christ, whether young or old, we are born again as spiritual infants, spiritually immature. Isn't that true?

Let's think about infants. They cry, and they're erratic in their emotions and behavior. I ought to know. I have an 11-month-old little firecracker named Jeremiah. When I get home, his face lights up and he's so happy to see me... for about 5 seconds. Then he goes back to throwing his toys around his play area. He likes to smile and randomly giggles, but just as quick he'll get upset and cry because he's hungry or sleepy. He can't stay still or focus his attention either. He's like the Tasmanian Devil cartoon flying around the house knocking stuff over! Now that's a normal part of infancy, and that's OK.

What's troubling is when a baby isn't growing and developing like it should, at which point we call the doctor. It's like that in our spiritual maturity, something's wrong if we stay spiritual infants and don't take steps to grow. We can become self-centered, putting our wants above others, like infants. Our emotions can vary greatly depending on the circumstances of the day. We can make big plans to commit to the disciplines of study and prayer knowing we won't follow through. That is precisely why we need the Church! We need to be in ongoing relationships so we can learn to be aware of the needs and feelings of others. We need the encouragement and prayers of others so we can stay committed to growing in Christ.

Paul says a few more things about spiritual infants. He says they are *"tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there..."* Spiritual infants have trouble distinguishing sound doctrine from more harmful teachings and are more easily led astray. Having the support of a small group of Christians around you and taking the time to study will help you, over time, to grow in your ability to recognize sound teaching so you can apply the truth correctly in your life. We don't want to stay spiritual infants.

Thirdly, Paul says we become spiritual adults when we base our relationships on truth and love. Paul wants us to be very clear about one thing. We can't miss this.

**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 (verses 15–16).**

The key to healthy relationships is speaking the truth in love! CPC cannot fully grow unless we are all willing to speak the honest truth into each other's lives, telling like it is, but telling it from a place of genuine, unconditional love.

If we are loving, but we don't tell the truth, no one will ever truly know us! They won't know how we feel because we're not being honest. Not telling the truth bothers us, especially when we're around that person. Over time we'll build an invisible wall and the relationship suffers. Sometimes we don't speak the truth because we're afraid of people's reactions; we don't want to hurt their feelings. We can become people pleasers. Relationships need to be based on honesty or eventually they'll fall apart.

At the same time, if we speak the truth without love, how do you think our words will come across? Probably cold and unloving. That person won't consider what you say, even if you're right. They'll be driven farther away from you because your words came without love, and again the invisible wall goes up. The expression goes, "no one cares about what you know, until they know that you care." Sometimes we don't speak in love because we're selfish; we want to show someone that we're right, that we have the superior viewpoint. In reality, we're not concerned with the truth as much as we're concerned with ourselves.

It's not always easy, but by committing to speak a balance of truth and love, and serving with our gifts, we'll grow out of our spiritual infancy and begin to speak and act more like Christ, who is our head in verse 15. We're His body, interconnected, in unity. Together, we'll become a community of people set apart from the rest of the world because through our acts of love we're becoming spiritual adults together. We are becoming more like one man, Jesus Christ. That's an amazing, larger-than-life goal. It can only happen here, in the Church.

In closing, I want to challenge you to make these truths part of your daily life because growing into spiritual adulthood is a life-long process. I want to offer some next steps you can take to grow.

- » Discover your spiritual gifts
- » Study passages: 1 Corinthians 12:7-11, 27-31, Romans 12:6-8, 1 Peter 4:10-11, Ephesians 4:11-12
- » Pray
- » Ask others

- » [spiritualgiftstest.com](http://spiritualgiftstest.com)
- » Serve
- » Community

First, discover what your spiritual gifts are. If you don't already know, aren't you curious now to find out? Begin by studying what the Bible has to say about the gifts. Take some time to study the passages I mentioned. Pray to God and ask Him to show you what your gifts are. Then patiently be on the lookout for God to confirm them. Ask other believers who know you well what they think your gifts are and honestly consider their feedback. There is a free, online spiritual gifts inventory you can take: [spiritualgiftstest.com](http://spiritualgiftstest.com). You can download a soft copy and score yourself. The results may not be exact, but at least you'll have a reasonable idea of what your top gifts may be.

Eventually you'll need to decide what you think your gifts are and when you do, put them to work, jump into ministry and serve. There are all kinds of opportunities to serve, both in and outside of CPC. A word of caution, you may have an issue with someone; it's part of working with imperfect people. That's why we need to speak the truth in love. But overall, you'll experience the joy that comes from exercising the unique gifts Christ intended just for you.

If you already know your gifts and you're not using them, what's holding you back? What's stopping you from being a source of strength and encouragement to the body and from growing in your gifts? You may need to take an honest, prayerful assessment of your priorities. So the first thing is to discover and use your gifts.

Secondly, you need to be involved in some kind of ongoing, Christian community. That can be a community group, WBS, Men's Fraternity, 20s, college group, or some organic, ongoing community. Community is a core value here at CPC, that's why we have so many options. It has to go beyond just Sunday morning. It's impossible to grow into spiritual adulthood just by you working on yourself as an individual. Lone Ranger types encounter challenges in growing, as do those who only drop in on church here and there. We can't fully mature unless we do life together with a little group of people surrounding us, where we relate to each other in honest and loving relationships, encouraging each other and helping one another apply God's word in their lives.

If we do these two things, we'll grow closer and more united, and we'll accomplish the amazing and larger-than-life goal of growing into spiritual adulthood together.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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