

Ephesians 4:11-16

The Maturing Church (Part 2): Increase of Unity around the Truth.

We deal patiently with children when they are immature; after all, maturing is a process that takes time and experience and is facilitated by careful training. So when children make light of things that are very weighty, we don't despair, we simply try to show them the importance of what they treat so casually. When children, on the other hand, make a big deal out of matters of little consequence, we don't get frustrated, we rather give them a broader perspective that helps them to make truer evaluations. However, when we see immaturity in an adult, we are alarmed. When an adult treats an event of great moment as a trite thing, or responds to a triviality as though it were of great magnitude, we discern that something is wrong. I remember having a conversation with a woman who voted for a particular presidential candidate. I asked her why she voted for him. If I was unhappy with her choice, I was dismayed by her rationale (if we can call it that). She said, "Oh, Politician B just looks like such a grumpy old man always so stiff and business-like. But Politician A is young and handsome and really dynamic." There was no engagement with the proposed policies or track records of these men, just superficial observations of their appearance and age. Now this way of evaluating potential leaders might be excusable when voting for class president in highschool, but it is a dangerous policy in the world of American politics. I wanted to say, "Grow up!" Part of growing up is learning to think.

Sadly, studies have indicated that, despite the increase in technology and vast information highways, the nation is generally growing more ignorant. Mind you, people are not growing less confident in their opinions. Instead, people tend to be like the man who says, "I may be occasionally mistaken, but I am never in doubt." How one feels on any given subject now has more weight than any evidence you may set forth from research or logical argument you may present from established facts. If this is true of the culture in general, I'm afraid that it is even more evident in the church. The Pew Forum indicates that 26.3 % of the population is Evangelical.¹ While that may sound encouraging, consider that a similar Gallup Poll in 1990 boasted that approximately 1/3 of the population was evangelical. Yet, as David Wells explained, "A 1993 survey that measured religious commitment in terms of such modest tests as church attendance, personal prayer, and some formal beliefs found that only 25% of the Americans who claim to be born again are in fact religiously committed. When this refinement is factored in, the invincible army is reduced to a relatively small band of only 8% of the population—and at that a band that turns out to be seriously hobbled by its entanglements with modern culture."² Notice that even this 8% is based on only "some formal beliefs." If we pressed on for the number professed evangelicals who have a consistent biblical worldview I fear we would be seeing only a fraction of one percent. Many who call themselves Christians don't want to think; and, sadly, they don't want to think too hard about God and His revelation in the Word of God, the Bible. Wells assessed the weakness of evangelicalism and concluded, "The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is not inadequate technique, insufficient organization, or antiquated music, and those who want to squander the church's resources

¹ <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>

² David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 18.

bandaging these scratches will do nothing to stanch the flow of blood that is spilling from its true wounds. The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is that God rests too inconsequentially upon the church. His truth is too distant, his grace is too ordinary, his judgment is too benign, his gospel is too easy, and his Christ is too common.”³ The message of our text is that we will see the uncommon and incomparable Christ, embrace the cross of His gospel, flee the wrath to come, and glory in His extraordinary grace, when God’s truth, which is kept at a distance, is brought near and imbibed by our souls. God will not rest too inconsequentially upon the church when we love Him with all our minds, abiding in Him and having His Word abiding in us.

John Piper so picturesquely said, “Thinking is one of the important ways that we put the fuel of knowledge on the fires of worship and service to the world.”⁴ Contrary to what many believe, Piper says that the knowledge of God does not dampen the fires of worship and service, truth fuels them. Jonathan Edwards exemplified his stated aim to raise the affections of his people to the level of their knowledge of God. The greater their knowledge of God, the stronger and deeper and more abiding their affections. Paul said to the Ephesian church, and the Holy Spirit continues to say to the church today, “You must be growing up; and the maturing Church is increasing in unity around the truth.” As God calls us to love Him with our minds in this text He calls us to doctrinal unity (v. 13), then shows us the need for discernment between truth and deceit (v. 14), and finally engages us with the declaration of the truth (v. 15).

First, we hear the call to Doctrinal Unity (v. 13). After telling us in verses 12-13 that Christ gave teachers to the church to equip the saints for the work of the ministry and then describing the purpose of their ministry as building up the body of Christ, he says that this building up must continue “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.” So the goal before us as a church is unity in the truth. A math teacher, training and equipping potential engineers, may celebrate the diverse backgrounds of his students, but when he gives the same equation to the entire class he aims to receive the same answer from them all. He wants unity around the facts. In verse 13 God clearly reveals that He wants us to have unity around the truth.

Now, there is today a repudiation of the idea of propositional truth claims, and some especially decry any call for conformity to any particular set of truth claims. But the words “unity of the faith” refer, not to faith as the subjective act of believing, but to the objective, propositional Knowledge of the Truth. “The faith” is the body of truth revealed by God in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ and recorded by the Prophets in the Old Testament and the Apostles of the New Testament, and handed down to the church. It is as Jude said “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (3). It is the faith that Paul so beautifully celebrated in the first three chapters of Ephesians. God has spoken. God continues to speak through His Word, the Bible. He wants us to find common ground in what He has said.

It is importance that we have patience and humility with each other as we grow in our understanding of God’s Word. Your elders would love for all of you to affirm every article of the WCF without exception. Yet we know that there is hesitation on the part of some for different reasons. Some have not had time

³ Ibid., 30.

⁴ John Piper, *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 15.

to weigh the words of the confession in the scales of Scripture. Some disagree over certain inferences drawn from the Scriptures. So we are patient with each other, but still ought to pursue unity as we study the Bible together. We can prayerfully search the Scriptures to see whether these things are so.

We must also take care not to insist on unity in matters of conscience. In Romans 14 Paul recognizes that there are disagreements over whether people should eat non-kosher meat, drink alcohol, or observe special festivals on the Jewish calendar. He treats these as matters of indifference and warns against drawing up battle lines and insisting that others adopt one's own practice. We want to agree together on everything that God has said, but we don't want to invent doctrines to bind each other's conscience. You don't watch TV on principle. That's great. Don't look down on those who do watch TV. You feel free to let your children read *Harry Potter* so that you can discuss its themes with them. Fine. But don't despise those who don't think that series is good for their children. God's truth should inform every area of life. But let us not make our personal scruples into a law for everyone to follow.

So, how can we grow in the unity of the faith? For starters, we can pray, as Paul prayed in chapter three, "that you may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth . . ." The knowledge of God must be revealed by God. In addition, we are still picking up the pieces of our fractured lives from humanity's fall in sin. So, we need the Spirit of God to overcome our damaged minds and cause us to see the truth clearly. We can acquire the tools to rightly handle the Word of Truth. If you have never had instruction on Bible study method, then I strongly suggest that you seek it out. Study the Bible in the community of faith. Covenant Groups are a great place to grow together in the unity of the truth. We're not asking you to mentally check out and simply repeat after me. God is calling us to be fully engaged with His truth, and by doing so under His grace, we will grow in the unity of the faith.

It must be said that our unity is not only to be around the objective, propositional knowledge of the Bible, but also around the subjective, personal knowledge of the Truth— "The knowledge of the Son of God." The word used for "knowledge" denotes personal, experiential knowledge of someone. Our unity must be found in the intimate knowledge we gain of our Lord. This is not divorced from propositions. It's absurd to think that we can be close to someone without being able to say anything about him. In fact when we confess our theology together we should do so as Solomon describing the beauty of his Shunamite bride. Let's be done with cold formalism. To hear some theological dialogue you'd think we were morticians examining a corpse. But, when we think about God and talk about His Truth, we should be as passionate lovers beholding our spouse. When we discuss His Word it should be like celebrating a letter of self-disclosure from our true love. On the one hand, we should tremble at the Bible as the Word of the High King of Heaven. On the other hand, we should adore and treasure it as the Word of His grace. Psalm 2 tells the kings of the earth that in the presence of Christ they should "rejoice with trembling." That's how our thoughts and talk about God should look—rejoicing with trembling. May we mature until we all attain this unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God. Doctrinal Unity.

Secondly, we see the need for discernment between truth and deceit (v. 14). When Paul says "to mature manhood" he uses the Greek word for male adult, and not just adult. He wants us to picture a

sturdy man with all of the physical, mental, and moral fortitude to weather the vicissitudes of life. In His humanity as the last Adam Christ is perfect manhood. The goal for us as a church is “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” The vital necessity of maturing is seen when we consider what we are up against. Verse 14 says we are to be “no longer children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.” We need discernment because the world has been full of lies ever since the serpent said to Eve, “You will not surely die.” By discernment I mean the ability to identify the real thing.

The word “cunning” is actually the word dice. Gamers had become so skilled at defrauding and cheating other players that their game became a synonym for deceit. The world is full of tricksters, inviting you to play their game and win great prizes; but you’d better watch their slight of hand! The word craftiness is interesting, because it can have positive or negative connotations. It basically means “capable of anything.” In the Greek translation of Proverbs it translates the Hebrew term for skill. But in a negative context like this, between the terms “cunning” and “deceitful,” to say “capable of anything” has an ominous ring about it. Don’t underestimate humanity’s ability to steal your soul with a bait and switch that seems like a sure thing. “Deceitful schemes” are well laid plans designed to lead astray. The word “schemes” is the same word used in chapter six where he says “stand firm against the schemes of the devil.” Paul has already spoken of our spiritual enemies in heavenly places, so I have no doubt that here in Ephesians we are to understand that human cunning is aided by satanic delusion. These three dangers “human cunning, craftiness, and deceitful schemes” are all related to “every wind of doctrine.” As we are pressing on to the celestial city, our heavenly home, strong winds continually blow against us, winds of false teaching and human religion, things which Colossians 2.23 says “have an appearance of wisdom,” but are of no value for walking with God. So we need discernment. We must have sound doctrine, a clear understanding of God’s Word, so that we can test everything that’s presented to our minds.

Ephesians presents us with the overarching plan of God revealed in Scripture. We need this kind of “big picture” understanding of who God is and how He deals with mankind. Covenant theology has been concerned with this big picture, trying to trace the God’s plan as revealed in the Scriptures; a plan that belonged to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit before the creation of the world and is predestined to culminate in the revelation of the glory of God. We study the great movements of Redemptive History and try to discover how this story of God and His people climaxes in Jesus Christ. This big picture understanding helps us to see more of the wisdom of God and also to discern our place in redemptive history. Where do we fit into this narrative? Why aren’t we wringing our hands waiting for the rebuilding of the Temple and the reinstatement of the sacrificial system as some do? Do we have a moral obligation to support the state of Israel, our only concern being the divine promise made to Abraham? Why don’t we observe the Sabbath on Saturday as Jesus did? Why do we give our children the sign of baptism? How are believers to be engaged with the world? How can or should Christians be involved in politics? What kind of moral expectation should we have of non-believers? Most of these questions will not be answered by a simple proof-text, citing a handful of book-chapter-and-verse. Our ability to answer these questions is aided by this big picture understanding of Truth.

Of course, in order to have a big picture understanding of the truth we must be doing a careful reading of the text at the level of historical and grammatical questions. We won't have a clear view of the big picture if our reading of the particular passages is distorted. Now, the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit is our teacher who enlightens us to comprehend the truth with all the saints. Yet, this does not mean that we mystically gain discernment by waiting for private revelations from the Spirit. The Spirit works with the Word of God. So the Spirit grows our powers of discernment as we exercise our minds with the Truth.

Falsehoods abound in our world. We have charlatan preachers with prominent ministries that are broadcast nationwide. There are books galore that have great sounding titles and *use* the Scriptures and religious language that teach a worldly wisdom. Using the Bible and "rightly handling the word of Truth" are two different things. When someone tells me a pastor "uses" the Bible, I'm not encouraged. The Devil uses the Bible. In fact, the Devil tried to use the Bible against Jesus. I want to know if he is rightly handling the word of truth. A friend of mine was talking to a fellow Christian who was reading a book by a not-so-sound but very popular author. He shared with her that he was surprised she would be reading something so obviously distorted. Her reply was, "Oh, I'm not smart enough to judge whether he's interpreting the Bible correctly, I just really like how positive and encouraging he is." Beloved, the inability to discern truth from error is a sign of immaturity and if allowed to persist and grow too deep may be a sign of God's judgment, giving one over to a reprobate mind.

As a church, we are a community deeply concerned with the truth. Your Session is committed to holding each other accountable to the truth. We are committed to equipping you, the saints, with tools for Bible study, offering training in apologetics to help us all think clearly and biblically about questions of life. We have not grown tired of studying for our own growth. We want our church to mature so that we are not tossed about by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine. Friends, just because people are convinced that what they have experienced and what they believe is beyond question does not mean that you must agree or endorse their view. Nearly every religion has some subjective religious experience. All truth claims and all experiences should be weighed against the Word.

So we want doctrinal unity for the building up of the one body of Christ. We want discernment so that we don't become spiritual dupes. But we don't want to stop there. We don't want to keep the truth locked up in ourselves to grow stale. We want it to flow from us as God's grace to each other and to others.