

Ephesians 4.7-13 (1984 NIV)

Becoming a Maturing Church

Introduction

Story is told of a little girl who visited a fun fair with her mother. They stopped by a stall that sold cookies.

The man stationed at the stall was clearly charmed by this cute little girl. So he stretched out a cookie jar and said to her, "My little sweet one, welcome to the world of cookies. Now put your little hand into the jar and take some for yourself. It's free!"

The girl swayed her head with a shy smile, refusing the kind offer. Her mother turned to her and said, "It is okay. Go on and take a handful."

Again, the girl looked at her mother and swayed her head.

The man then said, "Ah! I see you are a very shy girl. Let me help you." He dipped his hand into the jar, took a handful of cookies, and said, "Here you are. Take them and enjoy yourself."

Now with a big glee on her face, the girl took the cookies, and said loudly to the man as she was about to walk away, "Thank you!"

Her mother was a little confused and asked the girl as they were walking away, "I have not known you as a shy person. But why did you refuse to take the cookies yourself?"

The girl replied with a cheeky smile, "Because his hand is much bigger than my hand!"

This girl might be young, but she was certainly smart. And that smartness also reflected a certain measure of maturity.

Conversely, some people may be old in age, but may still act foolishly and immaturely.

The fact of the matter is that growing old in terms of biological years is no guarantee that a Christian has become spiritually mature in behaviour and thinking. It all very much depends on how that person is allowing the Lord to shape his behaviour and thinking so that he can behave and think more and more like Christ.

Indeed, what we should desire as a church is not only to celebrate the Lord's work in our midst, but also to celebrate our maturing as His church and not our aging as a church.

In his letter to the Ephesians in Eph. 4:7-1-13, Paul tells us how the Lord helps us become mature as His church.

I. The Lord helps us become mature as His church by giving to us people of different calling and giftedness (vv. 7-11).

Paul used an OT text in Psalm 68:18 and adapted it for his point to his hearers in Eph. 4:8 which says, “When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.”

This verse actually refers to God’s going up at Mount Sinai. But Paul applied God’s going up to Jesus’ ascending. However, Paul’s adaptation is in harmony with the imagery of the psalm—i.e. God as a divine warrior who rose up to his throne as conqueror, and when he had received tribute and plunder from the defeated captives, he distributed the spoils to his soldiers.

Paul went on to say in vv. 9-10, “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.”

Paul pointed to Jesus as the one who “descended to the lower, earthly regions”. The majority of scholars interpret this as Jesus descending from heaven to become a servant of the Father at His incarnation here on earth.

And after He had finished the Father’s work by dying on the Cross, by rising from the dead and thereby conquering death, He ascended to the highest heaven from where He first came down. He then gave gifts to His people/soldiers of faith. The Lord did not leave His church alone. In His grace, He gave them people with different calling and giftedness to help them grow up.

I believe Paul is also here telling us how the Lord Jesus Christ is helping us to mature as a church by His own example—He descended from the highest so that He could ascend back to the highest when His work was done. By the example of Jesus’ life and ministry, Paul is reminding us that the way UP is DOWN. Jesus humbled Himself and came down. The Father exalted Him and brought Him up to the highest when His work on earth was done.

In the same way, when the Lord gives to His church people of different calling and giftedness, He wants them to exemplify in their servanthood His example of humility and gentleness, patience and forbearance (Eph. 4: 1-2).

There is no need to fight for first place as we serve the Lord in the Body. When we seek for prominence, we will end up blotting out Christ’s pre-eminence. There are two dangers when we begin to seek man’s prominence rather than Christ’s pre-eminence in our service.

- The first danger lies with those called and gifted to serve in positions with great influence and public recognition (like the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers in Paul's time). And the danger is this—they can become big on self but small on service. When the Lord so blesses a person in his ministry, it can also be so easy to misuse one's calling and giftedness to build up one's ego rather than the Body. Not drawing people to God, but really to oneself. Not serving the people for the Lord's glory, but performing before people for one's own glory. Spiritual giftedness is then exercised with spiritual immaturity. God's ability becomes MY ability, God's people become MY people. And when the called and gifted become big on self but small on service, they become too small-hearted to celebrate the success of others because "I must always be better".
- The second danger lies with those who are receiving the ministry of the called and gifted. People are blessed by them as they are served. But when people have to come back to the same person for help on the same problem all the time, they make themselves dependent on the person rather than on God. They never grow to be strong enough to deal with their own problems in the Lord's strength. They can't understand and apply the Bible for themselves, they can't think through issues themselves, they can't make decisions on their own, they even doubt their own prayers and dare not pray for themselves. So they run to the same Bible teacher or pastor or counsellor to have this person fix whatever problems they may have. They are like children who fail to grow up and stand up on their own feet.

These two dangers can give rise to co-dependence. This is when the one helping feels so needed and wanted that he feeds on this for his self-importance. He is always willing to be there even if it means making a spiritual baby or emotional cripple out of the one being helped. He does not work at helping others to grow and be mature so that they can one day stand up on their own. This is really an abuse of divine calling and giftedness—when we hinder people from growing and dealing with their own issues in the Lord's strength because we allow them always to depend on us.

Rev. Dr. Matthew Lim, the Pastor of Small Groups at International Baptist Church one time, was a member of my Ordination Council. I have known him for many years. In fact, the Lord used him to pick me up when I was a backslidden Christian. He brought me to his church, mentored me, baptized me, helped me identify my calling and gifting, and gave me opportunities to serve in church.

He received his doctorate from the Asia Baptist Graduate Theological School at a graduation service conducted at the Baptist Seminary in Singapore. I was then a faculty member of the seminary. When his name was announced and he came on stage to receive his degree, we observed a ritual in academia—i.e. the whole faculty of the Baptist

Seminary stood up as a gesture of welcoming him into the fraternity of academia. I remember feeling very happy that I was able to receive my spiritual mentor in early years as a fraternal peer in academia.

On the day of my ordination, Matthew was assigned by the Ordination Council to pray for me because of his contribution in the early years of my spiritual growth and ministry. He felt the same way towards me at my ordination as I had felt towards him at his doctoral conferment. He said to me, "John, I feel so happy today that I am able to receive you as a fraternal peer in the ordained ministry."

Indeed, there's a kind of blessedness when people help one another to know their calling and exercise their gifting so that they can grow to become partners in the Lord's work. The Lord wants us to help one another to grow and be mature so that we can one day stand up on our own, know our calling, exercise our gifting, and become partners in ministry.

The Lord helps us become mature by giving to us people of different calling and giftedness. The Lord desires and wants each to answer his call and serve with his giftedness. When each of us does that, we serve God by serving one another in our calling and with our giftedness. That's a mark of a maturing church.

On the other hand, an immature church will probably be full of people who keep crying out, "Let someone come meet my needs" rather than "Let me go meet someone's needs."

Don't get me wrong, there will be times in our lives when we are faced with great needs and would need help from people. A mature person will be humble enough to ask for the help needed. On the other hand, pride will stop us from asking for help and much to our own detriment.

But what is problematic is when those who have been in the Lord for a long time continue to come to church every time to have their needs met. God's intention is that we grow from "come meet my needs" to "go meet another's needs". He does this by calling and gifting every believer in the church.

His purpose is that the church may be built up, may become mature to the fullness of Christ. This does not mean ultimate perfection. Rather it is to be complete as befitting of one's phase of life. For example, a baby may not be as complete as an adult. But the baby must be able to do that befitting of a baby—e.g. able to cry for milk when he is hungry. If not, the baby is demonstrating some abnormality because it cannot even do what is expected of his age.

In the same way, if people in the church are only interested in what they can get rather than what they can give since their Day 1 in church, then something is seriously hampering their spiritual maturing.

Paul says that the Lord gives gifts to people to meet the needs of one another. The Lord wants each of us to move from “who can meet my needs” to “whose needs can I meet” as we mature in our faith. This process of maturing happens when the majority of the people are looking for ways to meet the needs of one another.

Put in another way, immaturity is seen when people keep saying, “It’s all about ME!” These are people who come to church for what they can get out of it.

People in a maturing church recognize that they are part of the Body of Christ—they are not there just for their own benefit. They actively look for ways to connect with other members of the Body for mutual strengthening and encouragement.

The will of God is that we find our place of service as we know our calling and giftedness. We recognize that God gives us different calling and gifts so that we can be in different spheres of service. E.g. the administrative arm of the leadership is not less important or less spiritual or less in ministry value than the ministry arm. We already have enough elitism out there, and there's no need to bring it into the church. It is not a matter of which is more important or more spiritual or has more ministry value. It is a matter of different focus and functions. It is about placing people with the right gifting and calling in the right place.

In Paul’s time, the ministry of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers was foundational because those were the days of the infant church. The Lord did not intend the church then to remain in its infancy. He intended for it to grow and mature. And as the church grew, the mark of that maturity was their unity in the faith and knowledge of Jesus Christ (vv. 12-13). In their diversity of calling, giftedness and personalities, they had unity because there was a belief in interdependence and mutual respect for the different calling and giftedness.

It should be the same with us today. Each of us needs to give a higher priority to those things that we do best, as good stewards of the grace of the Lord. But the focus here is not on the individual, but on the contribution that the individual makes to the whole Body of Christ. Spiritual gifts are not given to us for our personal benefit as much as they are given for the building up of the Body of Christ. Our text tells us that we are given gifts so that we may contribute something to the Body of Christ, so that we may fulfil our mission to the church and through it.

When people are focused on having their needs met, then chances are they will be most likely to gripe and grumble. That's when they are most likely to be miserable and not grow. But when they shift from being served to serving others, they grow. They come not to be served but to serve—they become more like Christ, and less like consumers demanding the best service.

The Lord helps us to maturity by giving to us people of different calling and giftedness. As a Body of Jesus Christ, we are to grow from an “it's all about ME” mentality to “it's all about US” mentality. Even more than that ...

II. The Lord helps us to mature by moving us from “it's all about ME” to “it's all about HIM” (vv. 12-13).

Some come to church in order to make up for the bad choices they've made during the week—to somehow get reconnected to God with a spiritual “fix”. It is very much a ME thing.

The newspapers once reported that thousands of students and parents flocked to temples to pay their respects to the Chinese philosopher Confucius. They saw this as an apt time to pay such homage because of the current examination period in schools. Temple authorities reveal that petitions typically peak at exam periods, at the start of the new school year, or when the student is not doing well academically.

One parent was quoted as saying, “We're here to ask for extra blessings through the year, we're not expecting a miracle. It's additional psychological help, but in the end, the children must do well and work hard on their own.”¹

I remember when I was still a schoolboy and my father was running his own business, he would go to all places of worship. For one period, he would attend mass in a Catholic church to seek divine help for his business venture. I am not sure if he really believed in God at that time. But I am sure he really believed in his business at that time. Nothing must stop his business from succeeding. If a god could help him, then he would go and seek help.

It was also during that time that my mother would encourage me to go to mass with him, especially when my exams were drawing near. The reason for that is obvious. I remember attending mass feeling somewhat peaceful but almost not understanding what was going on—the songs were strange to me and the prayers were in Latin. I must admit that my attendance in mass had very little focus on God. It was all about ME.

¹ *Straits Times*, 22 Sep. 08, p. B1.

But our corporate worship is more than a ME or WE thing, it is ultimately a GOD thing—it's about HIM.

When we worship the Lord in heaven, we are not divided into traditional and contemporary worshippers or English and Mandarin congregations. All will worship Him together at the same time in the Lord's presence. It is not about YOUR way or YOUR style, OUR way or OUR style. It's not about ME, but about HIM. I believe there will be no segregation of worshippers and worship services in heaven. I believe it will be one people (His people) worshipping the Lord at the same time, coming together and bringing down all man-made barriers. So our task here on earth is to learn to worship together and accept one another. In our unity as His people, we appreciate the diversity and variety that God has given to us.

And when we mature as a people who worship the one and only true God and Creator of all things, we move from worship as an event in church to worship as a lifestyle in the world. Indeed, worship in the sanctuary can never be oblivious to what is happening out there in our wider society.

Why do we worship God? It is not to escape life out there, but to deal with life out there. It is a natural part of worship to bring with you the concerns of your life. We gather here and we bring in the fears of life, the worries of our family, the concerns of the world and we lift them up in prayer, and we seek God's comfort and guidance.

Why do we worship God? Because our lives are so full of concerns and issues that we have to have some place to take them. But true worship must move on to focus on God.

This is where many of us make a mistake. We assume that worship focuses on us—"I'm not getting anything out of worship. I'm not being nurtured by worship. I don't get a blessing out of worship." In the sanctuary, every believer is a worshipper and not a paying spectator. So our response should be "Lord, take my life and let it be consecrated all to Thee" and not "Lord, take care of my life or I confiscate all my money back from Thee!" Also in the sanctuary, every believer is a worshipper and not a performing star/passive spectator. So our responsibility should be NOT to distract others from focusing on God by the things we do.

When we truly worship God, we are reminded that we exist to serve Him, not He exists to serve us. If we view God as one who exists to serve us, then we are not worshipping Him, but we are really worshipping ourselves. Even God has to serve us!

Worship at its best, always motivates the worshipper to roll up the sleeves and to get to work. "Enter to worship, depart to serve"—this phrase is commonly posted on church bulletins. In our English Bible, the word for "worship" and the word for "service" is the same Greek word in some

instances (e.g. *latreia* in Rom. 12:1). Worship and service go hand in hand. In the Christian life, one cannot have worship without service to follow.

In v. 12, Paul tells us that God's people are to be prepared for "works of service". Indeed, true worship will always result in service. We cannot enter the sanctuary to worship without departing into the world to serve. Worship must move from an event in church to a lifestyle in the world. Regardless where we are, our service in the Lord's name is our worship of Him in where we are—i.e. even in the marketplace, our work there is still our worship/service in the Lord's name.

Traditionally, the term "worship" has become synonymous with singing with an emphasis on songs that either exalt God or express our devotion to Him. These are valid ways of worship. However, to restrict the idea of worship to words expressed in melody is to ignore the breadth and depth of worship as presented in Scripture.

Our worship of God is to result in our physical service of Him. If the praises of God can be sounded in the sanctuary on a Sunday by the words we sing, then they should be seen in the workplace on a weekday too by the works we do.

The Bible uses a variety of words for activities that we might classify as worship. This is because true worship has a broad range of applications. We need to revere God. We need to praise Him. We need to thank Him. We should be happy to sing songs that do these things. We also need to serve Him in touching and reaching others.

What God calls us to do from one week to the next may change, but our response must always be that of Isaiah—"Here I am Lord, send me." That's maturing from it's all about ME to it's all about HIM. That's why Paul says in Eph. 4:13 that we are to become mature to the "fullness of Christ"—as we mature, we are to be more and more like our new self in Christ, and less and less like our old self without Christ.

Conclusion

Why are we here? Why do we come to worship today? We come in here, in part, to be challenged to do something out there.

So the question for us today is not why do we worship? Or why do we come to church today when there are other things we could be doing? The real question has to do with what we will do when we leave this place of worship:

- What is God calling you to do in the new week?
- Who is it in your life that you need to love a little more?
- Who is it in your community that you need to reach out to a little harder?

- Who is it that you know of who should be invited to come here?

Pray that the Lord will help us grow unto maturity in Him individually as a Christian and collectively as a church.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus,

Thank you for calling and gifting each of us in this church to do the Kingdom's work in and through us. Help us to be faithful in finding your place of service for each of us. Help us to contribute to the building of this Body in unity and love, and to the maturing of ourselves as your people and servants so that we can grow to be more and more like you.

We pray this in your most blessed name. Amen!