

"So that the Body of Christ may be Built Up"

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 00] Now, if you hadn't realized, let me tell you that we are at a watershed moment as a church family. The intimation that I read out dutifully from the presbytery earlier may have sounded wordy and long, but this is the nub of it, that we are calling a second minister to this church.

We are adding another word servant to the team here, and we haven't done this before. It's new territory. It's breaking new ground, and that's saying something for a congregation that has existed for a quarter of a millennium.

That is new, isn't it? We're doing a new thing, and the reason that we are doing it is for the building up of the body of Christ. It is for the growing up of God's church here.

And this passage from Ephesians is written for such a time as this. It's one of the great passages in the church in the whole Bible. And it's very fashionable just now for churches to have a vision, a piece of paper that lays out kind of, here's our priorities for the next five years, and that is a really good thing.

It's a good thing to do, and the free church has a vision as a whole. Do you know what it is yet? Could you tell me? A healthy gospel church for every community in Scotland.

[1 : 34] It's a great vision. It's a good thing, isn't it, to have a vision as a church. But what that looks like on the ground here in Aberdeen, what a healthy gospel church is, I think, comes down to what Paul has just said and what we have just read.

We will have a piece of paper with a vision by the end of the year, or maybe sooner, I hope. But if you ask me now, what's the vision, the big vision for Bon Accord, I would bring you here to Ephesians chapter 4, verses 1 to 16.

And I can tell you already that whatever piece of paper that we produce as a congregation, it will be based on this. Because God's vision for us is much better than any vision that we could come up with.

And that's what Ephesians is, is a letter. It is a vision of the church. Now, if you're not familiar with Ephesians, it's a book of two halves. A what, and then a how.

Chapters 1 to 3, what is the church? And then chapters 4 to 6, how do we do church? How do we be the church? What is the church?

[2 : 50] Just flick back to chapter 1, if you would, page or 2. Paul, see, is writing to the church, verse 1, to God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus.

God's set apart and gathered people in that city, in Christ. What has God done to set them apart and make them his people? He goes on to say, the Father chose them in love before the beginning of the world.

The Son redeemed them by his death on the cross, shedding his blood to purchase them. And the Spirit sealed them for eternity, marking them out as God's possession forever.

That's the first bit of chapter 1. The church is a people saved by the triune God, holy to him, in and through the work of Christ. So, Paul kind of brings us from the mists of eternity past right up to the present.

Listen to this, verse 22, that God has placed all things under Christ's feet and appointed him to be not only head over the church, but listen, head over everything for the church.

[4 : 08] What's the difference? Well, get your head around this. He says, God has put Christ on the throne of the universe in order to bend the resources and powers and history of the cosmos to the salvation of his people.

He is head over all for the church. In chapter 2, he goes on, Christ is building his church together, not only as a holy people, but a holy temple.

People from across the known world, Jews and Gentiles, as a dwelling place for God by his spirit. Consequently, to verse 19, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

In him, the whole building is joined together and rises to become what kind of a building? A holy temple in the Lord. So what is the church?

A people set apart for God, by God, for God to live in, in and through Christ. And in chapter 3, he says, perhaps the most mind-blowing thing of all.

[5 : 22] Why has God done all this? Why the church? Well, Paul says in 3 verse 10, his intent was that now through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Why has God done this? Why does the church exist? Not only for our good, and not only to show the world what he is like, but to display his manifold and multicolored and multifaceted wisdom to powers and forces that we cannot even perceive.

Do you see that the sheer size and the cosmic significance of the church in God's plan? That's how big it is.

What is the church? Paul has said it is God's great masterpiece conceived in eternity and built through history.

A people saved for his presence and glory. That is what the church is. And brothers and sisters, we are a church. That is what we are.

[6 : 38] That is who we are, me and you, together. That is a description of us. And would you, in a million years, have ever come up with a description that glorious and that wonderful of what a church is?

That is God's great vision, his great plan for the church. So then how do we live out that identity? Chapter 4 is where Paul begins to tell us that.

Verse 1 begins with a therefore, then, and he begins to draw out the implications of that identity for us now. And the very first thing he says is, there is one church, not lots of churches, one church, one body, so keep the unity.

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. Now, notice that his command is to keep, not create. Right?

[7 : 49] It's the unity of the Spirit. He is what brings us together. So keep it that way, he says. Keep the unity of the Spirit. And not when you feel like it and when it's easy, but make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Now, I think that we think and that we feel sometimes that if church takes that much effort, we must be getting it wrong.

If church is hard work, that it shouldn't really be like this. Don't we feel that way? It should come naturally to us. Relationships in the church should be easy.

We tell ourselves that we look at the newborn church. Look how easy it was for them. There weren't divisions, were there? They broke bread together. They did things together.

They prayed together. They were united together. But that doesn't mean that it couldn't have been different for them, does it? Divisions could have got in. There were opportunities, weren't there, along ethnic lines.

[8 : 56] Remember in Acts 6 that the Greek speakers felt overlooked by the Hebrew speakers? Or along personality lines in Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas fell out over whether to take John Mark with them as they went to spread the gospel.

And the very fact that Paul says, make every effort to keep the unity, well, it tells us, doesn't it, that it wasn't any easier for them then than it is for us now.

Now, brothers and sisters, do we expect church unity to be easy? Paul says, get ready for church unity to be really hard work.

Work for it, he says, strive for it. Make effort for it. Contrary to our instincts, being a church is hard work. It means that we are getting it right.

And you know, the last month or so has been hard work for some of us. Hard work. Things have come up in the course of church life that we could divide over.

[10:02] And I don't think that that is a coincidence. As we are breaking ground and growing as a church, that comes with growing pains. But when those cracks show, we have a choice, don't we?

We have a choice. Either to drive a nail into that crack and make it deeper, or leave it to grow and to spread on its own, or to say something's not right and to mend it.

Now, which of those options takes more effort? It's obvious, isn't it? It's a no-brainer that mending the thing takes more effort.

So it is in the church. But mending and tending the unity of the church takes more effort than letting it fall apart or driving wedges between us.

And so if being united with your brothers and sisters feels like hard work for you, well, that is not wrong. What is wrong is when, okay, not if, when, you are hurt by somebody, or rub up against somebody else, or there is tension between you, or you have wronged someone, or there is distance between you.

[11:20] What's wrong is choosing to let that grow. Brothers and sisters, do not do that. Put in every effort, says Paul, to mend the relationship, to restore the unity, to keep the peace.

Now, perhaps we think, well, it's not really my fault, or I'm not really involved. Why should I do the hard work of unity? Well, notice what Paul doesn't say in verse 2.

Just look in verse 2. He doesn't say, does he, that person should be completely humble and gentle. Does he? He simply says, doesn't he, be completely humble and gentle.

I hope you didn't do that thing when we read it, of thinking, oh, I'm really glad that person is here tonight to hear this, about being completely humble and gentle. That is not how Christ addresses us, is it?

He addresses our hearts. And Christ is saying to us tonight, isn't he, that humility, gentleness, unity, peace, begins in here, in each of our hearts, not over coffee.

[12:28] It begins in our hearts. We all have a responsibility for our own heart. Is your heart ruled by the humility and gentleness of Christ?

We all want to say yes, don't we? But listen to these words from Philipians 2 and ask, is this how I think about this person sitting beside me, or in front of me, or behind me tonight? Listen, in humility, he says, count others more significant than yourselves.

More significant. Is the person sitting beside you more important to you than you? Do you put yourself and your interests last so that you can put the interests of your brothers and sisters before yours?

That is hard work, isn't it? That does not come naturally to us. It doesn't come naturally to me. We think, don't we? Well, so-and-so doesn't deserve that.

Or I'm being really humble and gentle, but they're not doing their bit. But verse 2 goes on, doesn't it? Be patient, bearing with one another in love.

[13:39] He said, hasn't he, be the easiest you that you can be to be united with, and stretch your heart as far as it will go to be united with others, both and.

You only need to bear with others, don't you, when others get it wrong. Now, I said it wasn't easy. We're not easy. I'm not easy. You bear with me wonderfully.

But that is what God says is necessary for the unity of the church. Paul wants to know, not how easy are the people in your church, but how quickly does your patience run out when they hurt you? He turns the whole question around, and it's completely countercultural, isn't it? This is not where our culture is. It does not value patience and forbearance, does it?

It values outrage and vengeance and grudge-bearing. But brothers and sisters, when we stop bearing with one another in love, we give up on our calling.

[14:43] Because I wonder if you notice the most important word in verses four to six. There's lots of important words there, aren't there? Spirit, Lord, faith, God. But the most important word is the one that he repeats seven times.

And it's the smallest word in those verses. It's that one. One. One. There's only one body. Not two or five or however many of us there are.

There is no us and them in the church, he's saying. There is only us. If we have one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father, then we are one body.

So do everything in your power to keep the unity of the spirit, he says, in the bond of peace. That depends on each of us, friends. And that is hard work. But staying as one is at the top of Paul's list of ways that we live worthy of the calling that we have received.

Is unity that important to us? Is it as important to us as it is to Paul? Next, Paul explains then how Christ equips us for that hard work of unity.

[15:57] It's a second point. Christ builds up his body through servants, serving servants. Now you might wonder, what has this got to do with unity?

It's not obvious, but just look at verse 13. And think all those verses from verse 7 all need to happen until verse 13, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God.

Unity. That's still what he's driving at. So what does Christ do to grow us in unity? Paul says he gives the church servants. See that in verse 8.

This is why it said, when he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people. Now this takes a little bit of work.

So that quote comes from Psalm 68. We sang those words. And in the ancient world, when a king went to war, he would win wars, win battles, and as a sign of his victory, take captives from his opponents and take them home to serve him.

[17:04] And Psalm 68 pictures God doing that. He is the great king who has marched from Mount Sinai to Mount Zion. And as he does so, he has conquered nations.

And to stress his victory, he has taken captives. Now notice in passing that in verse 9 and 10, Paul clearly identifies that great God and king of Psalm 68 as Christ.

What does he ascended mean? But that he also descended only to ascend. Now sadly, we can't get into that, but it's such rich Christology. But just don't miss that.

That as far as Paul is concerned, the God of Psalm 68, the God of the old covenant, is the Lord Jesus Christ. And in his great victory, he has taken captives.

Now, who are those captives? Well, Paul is one. Did you notice that? How does he describe himself in verse 1? A prisoner for the Lord.

[18:10] Physically, he was in prison at this point, but in a deeper sense, he's saying, I am captive to Christ. I am his prisoner. And if you just run your eye down from verse 7 and 8 down to 11, kind of skipping over those verses in brackets, his thought runs straight from verse 8 to verse 11.

He took many captives and gave gifts to his people. So, verse 11, Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers.

You see what it's saying? When you read that list, did you think, here are the sought-after positions and roles in the church? Or did you think, those are jobs that only a slave could do?

Paul is saying, do you know how you got your minister? He was a rebel to Christ, that Christ conquered and took as a captive, and Christ has given him to you, his church, to serve you on his behalf.

We are about to call another minister, but you know, don't you, that the word for minister in the New Testament is the word servant. So, who is coming and how are they coming?

[19:26] Christ is giving you another servant of his word, a slave of his, who was once a rebel to serve his church. And some of you will have seen that change happen in the man that we are going to call, and what a wonderful thing that is, that Christ takes rebels and makes them his servants and sends them back to serve his church by speaking his word to us.

What a wonderful thing that is. If someone said, if only he would do that again and again, would that he would take rebels from among us and make us his slaves to speak his word to his church.

In passing, I once heard a minister give a talk in this passage to a room of guys who were trading for ministry, and he said, do you know you are God's gift to the church?

Now, he got that from verse 8. He gave gifts to his people, but if we understand what Paul is saying, that is clearly not the kind of gift that he has in mind. Paul is not saying to ministers, you're the best thing that's ever happened to the church.

He's saying to ministers, you are Christ's slave for him to give ye to whoever he sees fit to serve.

Now, those are two very different ways to understand what it means to be a gift.

[20:52] So, what work does Christ give ministers to do? Well, he tells us in verse 12, doesn't he, why did he give those gifts to his people? To equip his people for works of service.

Okay, I and whoever else comes here are here to serve you by equipping you to serve. Servants serving servants. You don't get a minister simply to do ministry.

Did you know that? You get a minister to help and equip and resource and strengthen you to do the ministry. So that the reason we're bringing in another minister isn't to take opportunities of service away from the church, it is rather to equip and strengthen and resource us together to do more and to serve well and to grow together as a church that the body of Christ might be built up.

Do you know if you're a Christian that you are a bodybuilder? Did you know that? I asked this question at the prayer meeting. I didn't know what the spiritual equivalent of a protein shake is. I thought more about it in the week. And it is this pure spiritual milk of God's word, isn't it? That's what he gives us. Pure spiritual milk. This is nutrition, isn't it?

[22 : 14] To grow on. This is how the body is built up. In verse 16, he talks about a body joined and held together by every supporting ligament. Ye.

You are a joint, a ligament, a supporting tendon in this body. If you're a Christian who is part of this church, you have a role in building up the body. And in fact, if you are not building up the body and not doing your work, the body won't grow proportionally.

The body grows, verse 16, as each part does its work. So see that a church is not something that a minister or a group of elders or a leadership team or a core team can do.

Building up the body takes the whole body of Christ if you are part of the church, you are a body builder. So see what Christ is doing by giving you not one but two ministers.

Surely he is equipping us for greater works than these. Think how much more we might be resourced, helped, strengthened for service by two word servants.

[23 : 25] So get ready for that. Get ready for that. Get ready to serve. It's not going to happen overnight.

In fact, to take it that as long as we are here, we will be body building because we build up the body together until, verse 13, 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 until we are all perfectly one, until we are all fully grown Christians.

That doesn't take a year or two, does it? It doesn't even take a lifetime, but many, many lifetimes to build up the body of Christ here at Bonaccord.

We stand on the shoulders of giants and we are to grow up into further maturity into our head Christ. And so our unity grows then from our shared reason for being here, that we are here to build up the body of Christ.

So do not let anything distract you from that great vision. Whenever you think of your church, think, well, thinking this or saying this thing or doing that thing, will it serve to build up my brothers and sisters or will it not?

[24 : 48] And if the answer is no, don't do it. Commit it to the Lord, give it over to him, ask him to give you a new heart towards your church family.

If you have done that and you're still struggling with it, come and speak to me, please, one of your elders. That's what Paul says we're here for, to equip the church to be one and growing together. Before you think, do, say, think, will it build up? The answer ought to be yes and I trust it is. We are a church of bodybuilders.

We are united in faith. We are growing into maturity. I'm not saying that this is something that we must all regularly examine ourselves over, but I'm saying it's the diagnostic question for our hearts, isn't it?

Am I serving to build up this body? And now that's quite a negative implication, kind of don't do X, Y, and Z things, but how positively can we build up Christ's body?

[25 : 56] We build up the body, says Paul, by speaking the truth in love. This is 14 to 16. Paul says there are two directions a church can go in.

Cracks, they never stay as cracks, do they? They either grow and spread or they are fixed. And so with the church, we're never standing still. It's one direction or the other.

So here's one direction we can go in. Verse 14, we will no longer be infants tossed back and forth by the waves, blown here and there by every wind of teaching.

See, unlike people, churches can shrink in age and regress. And churches that once aspired to maturity can become infants again in faith.

And it's really distressing as an image, isn't it? Think of infants being thrown about on the waves. It is a terrifying thing. Just a side note, as much as we despise false teaching and craftiness and cunningness and deceit, we must never lose compassion for those who have been deceived by

false teaching.

[27 : 08] They are like these infants. We must love them, mustn't we? But at the same time, let us never go that way ourselves. Verse 15, here's the alternative.

Speaking the truth in love, speaking the truth in love, we will grow up to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head.

So notice the contrast. Growing up into a mature body versus being helpless babies. Why?

Because by contrast, we're not being blown about by every wind of teaching, but rather, we are speaking the truth in love to one another.

And again, it's not the minister who does this, is it? Who does it? We, us, do the speaking, the teaching, encouraging, exhorting, correcting one another as we speak the truth of God's word in love for one another.

It is the minister who equips you to do that. To see now why I say that the church cannot grow up without you. It doesn't matter how much I say from here if you are not saying it to one another.

[28 : 18] Do you see? If we are not speaking the truth in love, we will not grow to become in every respect the mature body of Christ. Now, often that phrase speaking the truth in love is taken as kind of saying something hard to hear but doing it in a loving way.

To be honest, that is sometimes what it means. But what else could it mean? Well, here's what I saw this week in my Bible and I wanted to share it with you.

I was thinking about that situation that you told me about and as I prayed about it, these verses came to mind that I want to share with you. We provide a setting, a formal setting, every second and fourth and fifth Wednesday night of the month for this.

That's what our life group studies are for. It's not the only way but these are opportunities for us to get together and speak the truth of this passage of Scripture into one another's lives that the body might be built up.

You want me to think of this body metaphor. Perhaps our minds have gone to all the different functions of the body and perhaps you're thinking, well, I'm not a mouth. I think of myself more as a kind of hand or a limb or an ear, something like that but Paul's not saying that.

[29 : 36] He's saying that speaking the truth of love is more like the oxygen that keeps the whole body alive and growing. If we stop breathing, it doesn't matter what part of the body you are.

if we stop breathing, you are going to die. Speaking the truth in love should be normal in our church. It is what we grow on, what we mature on.

If it's not, we will be stunted. And now, if you don't know how to speak the truth in love, well, that is why I am here to equip the saints for works of service.

that is what we want to do as a church. Connect with your life group or perhaps you need help getting a handle on your Bible and how it works, your daily Bible reading or just confidence in speaking about Jesus to one another.

Practice over coffee. If you need help, please make it known. We want to be speaking the truth in love for one another, for the growing up of our church.

[30 : 44] If Christ builds his church by giving you word ministers, should it surprise us that we build up his church by speaking his word in love to one another?

And you know, if that is what we want our relationships in the church to be about, then unity and peace will be the outcome, won't it? If what we want our relationships here to be about is the truth of God's word spoken in love, we will be one.

But God's truth delivered in love for that person is not the goal, is it? And as we finish, here's what it's all for.

There is one body to keep going to maturity. What's this all for? It is all for growing up, isn't it?

Even for a church with a history as long as Bon Accord, they're still growing up to do. We're not finished yet, are we? Christ has not returned. We are still growing to maturity.

[31 : 50] That word comes up twice. Verse 13, until we become mature. And verse 15, to become in every respect the mature body of Christ.

Christ. And that is where I want to leave us tonight, with this great vision for what God has purposed for us next. It is what it was yesterday and the day before and what it will be tomorrow, growing up, building up.

That is his intention, isn't it? Maturity. There is still ground to break. There is still territory to conquer. There is still growing up for us to do. And Christ has called every one of us together to grow in him

and to build up the body to maturity until we all get there together.

Until we are all united and all mature in Christ. So I hope that leaves you hungry for what Christ has for us next.

Okay? I hope that leaves us ready for being strengthened in service. I hope that leaves us with things to pray about tonight for ourselves and one another.

[33 : 03] I hope it leaves you excited for the works of service that God has prepared in advance for us to do here at Bonacord Free Church. Let's pray about that together.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we are in awe and blown away by the scope and the scale of your vision for us.

Lord, we could never have imagined that you would purpose us for such great things. Father, we thank you that you have set us apart and called us and saved us to build up the body of Christ.

Lord, what a privilege that is to belong to the church. Father, we praise you that you have made us your dwelling place. And Father, we pray that we would never lose sight of that.

Lord, help us, we pray, to be who we are, or to be the church as you have called us to be. Father, we pray that you would help each of us to build up the body.

[34 : 14] Lord, we pray that you would help us to be speaking the truth in love for one another.

Lord, we pray that you would grow us up as a church to ever-increasing maturity.

Lord, we pray that we would do that by the means that you have given us. Lord, we thank you for providing for us to have a second minister. And we ask, Lord, that you would bless that to us richly.

Lord, we trust that it will not be wasted time and resources. But Lord, according to your word, it is exactly how your church grows and exactly how we are built up.

So Lord, bless it to us, we pray, and continue to provide for us. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen.

Amen. Well, we're going to sing about peace that is among us from Psalm 122 together and the final three verses.

So please do stand as we praise God and pray for the peace of our church. Let's sing together.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[35 : 28] Thank you. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.