

Growing Up Together Into Christ

By David Sheats

Published by NTChurchSource.com

In the first three chapters of Ephesians, the apostle Paul lays out what is perhaps the clearest presentation in the New Testament of God's purpose, provision, and plan for us in Christ Jesus. He finishes his exposition with these words. *"Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."* (Ephesians 3:20-21) To see something of the glory of God in Christ Jesus is a great revelation. Seeing in some measure that God's plan is to work out His glory in the church today is an even greater revelation. But greater still, do we see how God has involved men in bringing God's purpose into expression? It is here that our vision often seems to fall short of the truth. It is God who is doing the work--but how is He doing it?

The first section of Ephesians 4 gives us the answer. Paul begins with an earnest plea: *"I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."* (Ephesians 4:1-3) Why do we find here such a strong exhortation to love? Is it not because without this attitude of heart and mind we will never be able to carry out the instruction that follows? As men are closely involved in the outworking of God's great plan, the demand may seem too great. We can accept the fact that Christ will build His church, but we shrink from the thought that He plans to use men to do it. This seems to present insurmountable problems, and the responsibility on men seems too great.

"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." (Ephesians 4:4-6) Our hearts say "amen" to this statement of truth, but the implications of how God is working it out are not easily comprehended. This truth is the foundation for all that follows. As we begin to work out this great salvation, I believe it will greatly help us to come back to this foundational truth again and again. We must let it judge everything that does not measure up. In God there is no division. He is One, and everything He is doing brings us into perfect oneness. Though our understanding may be weak and our experience of this oneness limited, let us not explain anything away. Rather let faith take hold of God so that He may lift us into the reality of this oneness that is true in Him.

"But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore He says: 'When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, And gave gifts to men.'" (Ephesians 4:7-8) He gave grace to each one and gifts to men. Have we accepted the implications of this truth? If God has given this grace and these gifts, we are immediately accountable. Not only are we responsible for the grace He has given us, but also we are responsible to recognize the grace and gifts He has given to others. We look for God's supply to us, but do we look in the right place? Paul says God has done this *"that He might fill all things."* Our guide in all things is that God may be all in all.

The Foundation Ministries

"And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head--Christ--from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love." (Ephesians 4:11-16)

Here we have the introduction of the foundation ministries of the church and the purpose for which they are given. They are all grace and gift ministries, men who have been called and chosen by God to lay down their lives and serve the church. No man can appoint himself to these ministries, and woe to the man who is called who does not fulfill the ministry God has called him to. Without these ministries operating in some manner, we do not have a basis for building as Paul describes. If we bypass these ministries and substitute an "every man" ministry or some other idea that seems good to us, I believe we will find ourselves coming short of God's purpose in the church, and the growth that He and we desire will not take place.

The purpose for these ministries is clearly stated. They are for our edification (upbuilding), to bring us to a unity of faith and experiential knowledge of God, and to mature us so that we will not be unstable, but rooted and grounded in our relationship with God. These ministries are not God's end purpose, but an essential part of His plan to bring us to His end purpose. They are given by God to equip each member for his or her place of responsibility in the body. These foundational ministries cannot do what every member must do, but are responsible to prepare members to fulfill their own ministry. According to this scripture, it is only when each member of the body of Christ is functioning according to the measure of God's grace that growth (maturity) of the whole body in love will take place.

Generally, two main errors seem to influence our thinking. The first is to think that the only functioning we need is the foundation ministries mentioned above. If these are functioning in some measure, we tend to think we have arrived. But what are the ministries for? They are not ends in themselves, but given for the purpose of equipping the whole body to function. We could even say that the purpose of these ministries is to lose their ministry. They serve the body until the whole body is functioning as one with a full expression of God's love.

We should be very honest in our evaluation of where we are in this matter. Is the ministry coming to us equipping us to fulfill our function in the body of Christ? If not, why not? Is the ministry feeding us with Christ? Are we eating the bread that is coming to us? If we are not being fed, are we willing to say so? Are we praying for the ministry? Have we made ourselves open to the grace of God coming to us through men? Are we serious about fitting into what God is doing? These and many other questions need to be honestly answered before God.

A second mistake is to think that we can achieve God's purpose by every member contributing, without recognizing the special place God has given to the foundation ministries. We may not want to recognize any gifts as "special" or more important than others. This is sometimes known as an "every man ministry." This teaching is not found in scripture, and I believe if we accept this view, we will miss what God wants. No person is more "special" than another person, but God has an order in His church and we are responsible to understand and move in that order. God's plan is perfect and we cannot

improve upon it. We need God's grace ministries. God has given them to serve us, and we need to know those who labor amongst us so we can benefit. They are God's vessels through which He has chosen to work. Let us not set them aside but instead pray that God will give the ministry we need through them.

It cannot be overemphasized that these ministries are given to serve. Jesus spoke very clearly about this in John 13 as He washed the disciples' feet. Ministry does not take a place of lordship in the assembly, but a place of servitude. This is one of the basic traits we should look for in a minister. If Christ is truly calling a man to labor and he is being led by the Spirit, a servant's heart will be very apparent. This attitude of humility and example of servanthood should prepare the way and open our hearts to receive from Christ through His chosen vessel.

It is not our purpose here to expand on the functioning of ministry, but to highlight the importance of ministries in the growth of the church. Based on Paul's teaching in Ephesians, I believe we cannot set this subject aside and expect to achieve God's end goal in the church. There are many associated matters that must be dealt with in faith before God. How do we recognize God's ministers? What qualifications must they meet? What should we expect? What if we are not being fed through the ministry? Do we look for these ministers within the assembly, or do they come from without? What if none of the above-mentioned ministries are functioning in our gathering? These and many other questions may fill our minds, but I believe if we see in some measure the importance of a God-chosen ministry functioning in the assembly, and if we are serious about the purpose of God, we will take these questions before the Lord until He sheds light for us to walk in. As we walk in that light, we will see God provide what we need.

The Unity of the Faith

Paul says that ministry is given *"till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."* What is this *"unity of the faith"*? What is the *"fullness of Christ"*? These questions may have puzzled us, but can God give us answers?

Perhaps it will help if we contrast what is *not* unity of the faith. I believe we all agree that no person or gathering of God's people will ever come to a point of having "arrived," with no more need of maturity in the expression of God's life and love. At the end of his life, Paul said, *"Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind."* (Philippians 3:12-16)

Can we also agree that unity of the faith cannot mean that every member of the body will come to the same level of maturity at the same time? There will always be new members coming in and children that are growing up. The very nature of life is that it is always reproducing. We would never expect a child to be more than he can be for his age. There is only one time when this process of growth will end, and that is when the trumpet sounds on the final day and we are caught up to be with Christ for eternity.

If the "perfect man" does not mean some state of maturity at which we arrive and never need to go beyond, what does it mean? The word "perfect" sometimes scares us, but Jesus said, *"Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."* (Matthew 5:48) Is this possible, or is it just an

ideal that we aim at but never attain? Consider also this scripture: *"I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me."* (John 17:23) Again, is this possible here on this earth, dwelling as we do in "vessels of clay"?

Let us carefully consider Paul's statement as a whole: *"...till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting."* (Ephesians 4:13-14) Is he not saying that all these things will exist together at the same time? In other words, when the body is brought to the *"unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God,"* it will also be *"a perfect man,"* with Christ filling the whole body. In this condition we will not waver in our faith, but be solid in our relationship with Christ and with one another, unmoved by strange doctrines or unspiritual men that do not hold Christ in His proper place.

Therefore, in order to come to unity of the faith, we need a controlling revelation of Christ as God's full purpose and provision. With *"the knowledge of the Son of God"* laid as the solid foundation in a gathering of God's people, and the gathering walking in that revelation, there will be an expression of *"the fullness of Christ."* God is looking for a pure testimony of Himself. He is to be experienced and expressed in a many-membered body. What man brings into the church always confuses, defiles, and destroys the testimony of God, but when this revelation of Christ controls the church, the expression of man will no longer defile and take away from the glory of God. God's blessing will rest on such a testimony, one that declares only who He is, and that testimony will have power to draw men to God.

Unity of the faith does require some spiritual understanding. I believe that basic spiritual understanding brings us into and keeps us in a right relationship with Jesus. We need both a beginning and an expanding revelation of who Christ is, what He has done, who we are in Him, and who He is in us. By faith we must walk in that revelation, and as we do, Christ will be expressed. Where does the revelation come from? Ministry is God's provision to serve Christ to us, to bring the body to this unity of faith. Those who have a revelation (from God) minister (serve) the revelation until every member sees. When we each see for ourselves and are walking in that revelation by faith, we will no longer be *"tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting."* We will not be shaken if someone brings a "new doctrine" that sounds good. We will recognize it immediately for what it is because it does not fit into what God has revealed to us and what we are experiencing as we walk by faith.

That was how Paul labored, both in person and in his writing. He says of his ministry: *"I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily."* (Colossians 1:24-29)

This teaching Paul refers to is not an intellectual understanding of the historical Christ, but a "revelation understanding" of an indwelling Christ. *"That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith"* was his heart-cry to God in prayer. Ministry holds the revelation of Christ before the body until every member

is "eating and drinking" and being nourished by the word of faith. As each member responds in faith, abiding in Him, does not Christ bring the *unity of the faith* which cannot be accomplished in any other way?

We have already noted that in the beginning of Ephesians 4 Paul sounds a strong appeal to "*keep the unity of the Spirit*." That is the beginning place. As we are brought into the life of God by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we are one with Him. Paul then states that there is "*one faith*." Of course there can only be one faith, because there is only one God. It is because there is one faith that we can be brought into that experience of the one faith together. When our hearts are united in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, there is perfect unity. In that condition, we do not shrink from the word "perfect" because we realize that the perfection is of God, not us. We can never be perfect separate from Him, but as we abide in Christ we are "*perfect in one*" because He is perfect.

So then, if the church is in this condition, have we arrived? Are we further along than Paul who wrote these words? My answer is no, but that now we are in a proper condition to grow up into Christ. With proper spiritual relationships, we can partake of all the grace that God wants to bring to us through each vessel. Together we can experience all that God has for us. When the body is in this condition we are in a healthy place, able to grow and bear responsibility in God. We can now function as one man, as one body, underneath Christ our Head. We are available to God to do His will in all things, and He can use us as He likes. As we continue to do His will, we will mature in Christ. God will not put more on us than we can bear, but as we mature we can bear more responsibility in the work and purpose of God here on this earth. Every member has a part, and none is left out.

To summarize, what I see Paul saying is that God requires a perfection of relationship with Himself and with each member as He brings us to a maturity of expression of His life through the body as a whole. Is this perfection possible? Can we know a pureness of heart and attitude toward every member? I believe it is possible, and not only possible, but God's norm. It puts the responsibility properly on each member to *abide in Christ*--the command of Jesus to every believer. Can we do this, no matter what level of maturity we are at? I believe we can. As we do, we will be "*perfect in one*" as God is one, and reveal to the world who God is through an increasing expression of love.

The New Man

In the verses that follow in Ephesians 4 (beginning with verse 17) Paul instructs the believers that there needs to be a change in their lives. Evidence will follow a true profession of faith. This is explained as putting off the deeds of the "old man" and putting on the deeds of the "new man." The terms "old man" and "new man" are used by Paul to describe two classes of people. "*...knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.*" (Romans 6:6) In the previous passage, the human race is divided into those who are descended from Adam and those who are descended from Christ. The first is termed the "old man" while the second is termed the "new man."

If we have descended only from Adam, we are in the old man and we will express the deeds of the old man because we are dead to God and alive to sin. However, if we have been translated into the new man by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the power of His Spirit, we are to put on the deeds of the new man. We can do this because we are now alive from the dead and Christ dwells within us by the Spirit. Our whole outward expression cannot change immediately, but change will come if we respond in faith to the authority of Christ, the Head of the new man. The new life cannot be hidden. It will manifest.

Ministry is God's chosen way to initiate this change. Ministry is a supply of Christ to the body so that the whole body will be transformed into His image and likeness. Ministry holds Christ and His grace before us so that we may grow up into a mature man, unto the *"full stature of Christ."* It is God who is doing the work, but His chosen method is men filled with the Holy Spirit, men with grace who are called and meet the qualifications of God. They are servants to serve the Word of God to us that we may eat and grow up into Christ.

"And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues." (1 Corinthians 12:28) Here Paul gives an order of ministry, and in this case I believe the order is significant. Apostles are given by God to lay a foundation of truth for a gathering of God's people. Prophets are given by God to hold God's vision and purpose before us until we each see the vision clearly for ourselves. Teachers are given to break down that vision into practical parts and teach us how to walk it. These ministries could be thought of as the "eyes" of the body. Their function is crucial and without them the growth and activity of the body will be greatly hindered.

In order to see the change come about that God is looking for, we must "walk" in the word that is coming to us. It is a very active place of faith before God. If we are abiding in Christ and walking in His word, the growth will surely come and the deeds of the old man will be put off as the deeds of the new man are put on. But if we do not hold fast to the Head and walk in Christ, the change will not come. This working is very active and demanding. Discipline is never easy. Change does not come easily.

Let us emphasize again at this point that it is a *body* that God is building, not just individual believers. Many have missed this, and if we do not see this clearly and allow God to adjust our thinking accordingly, we may find ourselves only thinking of God and ourselves. We do need to focus on God. *"For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen."* (Romans 11:36) But Christ is not separate from His body. God has created one new man in Christ Jesus. The "new man" Paul refers to includes all who are descended from Christ. (See Ephesians 2:14) *"Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually."* (1 Corinthians 12:27) This is a tremendous revelation and it provides us with a framework in which to walk if we see it clearly.

The testimony God is looking for, the testimony that has power and meaning, is a *corporate* testimony. The matters mentioned in the last part of Ephesians 4 all pertain to our proper interaction with other members. *"Therefore, putting away lying, 'Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,' for we are members of one another. 'Be angry, and do not sin': do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil. Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need. Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you."* (Ephesians 4:25-32)

Growing Up Together

I believe that a careful and prayerful reading of Ephesians 4 will reveal that the growth that God and we are looking for will take place *together* with our brothers and sisters. As we have already mentioned, there are many reasons for this. One primary reason is that this is the nature of God. *"Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are."* (John 17:11) The oneness that is true of the Godhead is now to be expressed through a many-membered body. The calling of the body of Christ is to express the nature of God. God's nature is love, and it is expressed as members are joined to each other by the Spirit and function together in one body.

The plan of God is perfect for bringing this about. The full expression of sin in the "old man" took us down a path of independence and self-sufficiency. We did not need God, nor did we need each other. We certainly were not "our brother's keeper." But in the "new man," created according to Christ Jesus, all that has been reversed. We are now dependent on God and on the grace of God that comes to us through the other members. We now *are* our brother's keeper, and God will reveal through us His great care and love for every other member. In so doing, together we become an expression of the nature of God, and God will use this witness to draw others to Himself.

If we see this truth clearly, it will direct our focus and put the proper importance on our functioning in the body. This is so important as we consider the subject of maturity. So often we earnestly desire to grow up in God but we do not clearly see the way. The body of Christ is God's plan for the growth of every member. There is no other plan revealed in scripture. A perfect God always does things perfectly, so let us not look for another way. Instead let us diligently look to God for a clear revelation of His plan, and then let us walk in that plan in faith before God. Results are guaranteed, for it is God who works all things in the church.

Another reason that our brothers and sisters are so important in our growth is that it is often very difficult to see ourselves as God (and others) are able to see. We get used to living with ourselves. We often make excuses for our weaknesses, and even if our reasoning is faulty, we convince ourselves that it makes sense. To change the way we see ourselves takes the power of God, and that power often comes through another member who is more objective or who sees more clearly than we can.

A familiar example of this is the account of Peter and Paul (See Galatians 2:11-16). Both were men of God, filled with the Holy Spirit, and well exercised in the things of God. Their devotion to the Lord was perhaps beyond anything we have ever known. God had dramatically revealed to Peter that He had broken down the wall between Jew and Gentile, and Peter had walked in that truth in many ways. Yet when the test came in another way, for some reason Peter's vision became clouded, and he pulled back and allowed a separation that was not of God. It took a strong rebuke from Paul for him to see the error of his way. We may think the Holy Spirit could have done this without using Paul, and that may be true, but the Holy Spirit chose to use Paul. Can this account speak to us?

No believer, no matter how spiritual he or she may be, is above correction through another member. Any of us can become blind. A whole gathering of God's people can become blind in some area of truth. The churches mentioned in the first three chapters of Revelation are examples of this. The Corinthians were blind to many things and needed instruction, and they had difficulty recognizing the instrument of God's choice for correcting this blindness. Paul strongly appealed to them to recognize the grace of God that was coming through him for their good (see 2 Corinthians 10,11). To recognize this possibility and to see God's provision in the body for this danger is to keep ourselves open to God and His mercy and grace.

As we dwell together in unity and interact with each other under the authority of Christ, a deep humility will be worked in each member. *"Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you."* (1 Peter 5:5-7) There is no substitute for this working. As we submit to the Lord in this matter, God will affect every strand of self-sufficiency and pride. *"But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'; nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another."* (1 Corinthians 12:20-25)

I believe that another reason we pull back from this intimate working is that it is very demanding. It requires commitment with no reservation. It requires labor, bearing with one another, forgiving one another, laying down our lives for one another, and being willing to receive from one another. It can be draining at times, and unless we are drawing on the grace of God we will faint and give up. What do we often substitute for this challenging work? We have the Bible and the Holy Spirit within, and we think that is sufficient. We do need the scriptures for the purpose they were given, and we must be alive to God by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. But can we read these scriptures and honestly say that is enough? The scriptures point us to Jesus and tell of His plan for us in the body. Are we willing to give ourselves to Jesus and what He is doing? What God is doing, He is doing in the church. Real growth takes place in the body of Christ as we get involved according to the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Growing Up Through Exercise

In all teaching and learning there is a very clear principle: no learning takes place until the student exercises himself in the teaching. Nothing becomes part of us until we put into practice what we are taught. This is true in physical exercise and skills, mental learning, and spiritual matters. Instruction is an important part of learning, but it is only a part. The thoughts held before us through instruction will soon be lost unless they are immediately put into practice in some manner.

In traditional school learning, these principles are well known and forced upon the students. Lectures are given, homework is assigned, and laboratory sessions are scheduled. Accountability is required at every turn from both student and teacher. Progress is required, and if it does not take place, changes are made until it does take place. We are very familiar with these things in the natural realm, but how should these principles be implemented in spiritual matters? Our Father is in heaven, and it is not so obvious where the laboratory is. The instruction also does not seem to be so obvious. How shall I know whether I am responding to God or to man?

There is only one mediator between God and man, and that is Christ Jesus our Lord. This is an absolute truth that must never be violated. No matter how much we may want to help another, we must never come between a member and Christ. This is easily stated but not so easily done. In our desire to help another grow faster in the Lord, it is a great temptation to take control, to keep things on the right track and speed up the process. This is where we are utterly dependent on the Holy Spirit to give us discernment and wisdom so that we can move in union with God. God wants every member to be connected to Him, and all ministry that comes through one member to another member has the goal of attaching that member to Christ.

This same truth must also be the controlling factor when seen through the eyes of the one *receiving* from another member. For God's results to be realized, we must see the supply coming from God, not just the member. This means we must know one another according to the Spirit, not according to the flesh. Our spiritual eyes must be firmly fixed on Jesus Christ, and by the Spirit we must be able to recognize the gift of God coming to us through earthen vessels. This is essential, for us to be nourished in our relationship with God and not become focused on man. If we only see naturally, we will either withdraw and become critical because we see faults in the vessel, or we will become attached to a gifted man and lose our vision of Jesus. Either error deprives us of the grace that should be coming to us through other members according to God's choosing.

If both the member giving and the member receiving are functioning properly, direction will come and we will recognize God as the source. At this point, the question is whether we will act upon the word coming to us. Our teacher is the Holy Spirit, and it is God with whom we have to do. Are we under His authority? Are we submitted to Christ our Head? If we are, we will obey because we love Him and we delight to keep His commandments. As we obey, the word becomes the "engrafted word" and the result is that Christ is formed in us. We are changed into His likeness, and our roots go down into God so that we cannot be shaken. But let this truth sink deeply into our heart: this growth does not take place unless we exercise ourselves in the word that is coming to us.

If we are seeing properly and believe that God is working all things, we will recognize the opportunities immediately before us to work out the instruction God has brought to us. So often the opportunities present themselves in the laboratory of life, but we do not see the connection. There may be many reasons for this, but let us mention a few common ones. First, do I believe that God is working all things together for good? Do I love Him? Have I accepted His calling? If so, I should be seeing God in all things, not just on Sunday morning. Do I have my mind set on serving God in another place, rather than where I am? This can cause me to miss the opportunities right before me. I may be dreaming of serving God somewhere else, while He wants to do something in me (and through me) today, right where I am. Is He my God of today? Am I content as Paul was in whatever circumstance I find myself, or am I chafing at the limits of the laboratory? Brethren, let us move in faith in all things, even the little things before us. If we will, we will grow up into Him and be ready for what God brings our way tomorrow.

In spiritual learning (as in all learning), the word does not take root in me just because I obey one time. I must consistently and deliberately exercise myself over a period of time if there is to be any permanent change in the expression of God's life. Let me give an example. Suppose that in some way the Lord makes real to me that worrying is not of Him and I realize that I do a lot of worrying. That moment of revelation may be very dramatic. I may come before God in sorrow and deep repentance as I realize how much I have been doubting God and hurting His heart through unbelief. As I experience the mercy of God, I rise from prayer sensing that my relationship with God is cleared, rejoicing in His goodness and mercy to me.

Unfortunately, many times this is as far as we go. We think the work is done because we have dealt with God and confessed our fault or sin. But this is only the turning point. This revelation must now be walked out. Because my mind has been exercised in a certain way, an hour later a thought may come and my first response is to start worrying again. It is only normal; this is how we are made. At that moment, the Holy Spirit is faithful to show me what is taking place. Now I have a choice. Will I obey what God has revealed to me and walk in His word, or will I entertain doubt again? If I love God, and if I am serious about my relationship with God, I must consciously pull my thoughts back and make them

subject to Christ. Only I can do this. God is there, shedding light to my heart, and His grace is there to strengthen me as I obey, but I must obey. Then, not only must I obey once, but again and again. As I do so, I start to catch the thoughts more quickly. If I am consistent over a period of time, I will see my normal patterns of thinking altered, and eventually I won't even begin to doubt and worry. When a problem comes, I have become exercised in God so that my first response is to take the matter to Jesus and leave it there.

We always have a choice, and we will always need to be attentive, but we should come to a place where the normal expression of our life is to "think in God." We will think according to who we are in Christ and who Christ is in us. We are in union with Him, and we think from that place. We are being transformed by "the renewing of our mind." As our minds come under the discipline of God, it opens the way for the other members of our body to be brought under His control. This process does not happen overnight. As we have already said, it also does not happen automatically because we have believed in Jesus or have been filled with the Holy Spirit. It only happens as we submit to the discipline (training) of the Holy Spirit and respond to God as He speaks and sheds light on our paths. Those who do not respond do not grow, and in this place of weakness they are vulnerable to the enemy and his devious ways. God wants us to be strong in Him.

The Expression of Oneness Through Love

Consider these well-known scriptures: *"And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."* (John 17:26) *"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."* (1 John 4:7-11) *"And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love."* (1 Corinthians 13:13)

These and many other scriptures convey to us the mind of God regarding the supremacy of love. The very nature of God is love, and He is bringing us to a full expression of that love in the body of Christ. No matter what we do or what we hold dear, if it is not infused with a divine love that originates in God himself, it has no value to God. *"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing."* (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

What is the nature of this love? Paul expresses it this way: *"Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails..."* (1 Corinthians 13:4-8) Knowing the nature of this love does not in itself give us the ability to express this love, but it does give us a standard by which we may evaluate. Each of these statements about love strikes right at the heart. They raise a standard that seems impossible, and separate from God it is impossible. This is a supernatural work that only the Spirit of God can do in us--no man can do it on his own. Yet a full expression of this love is what God is looking for in the body of Christ. It is what gives power to the testimony of the church.

We are commanded to keep ourselves in this love which originates in God himself (see Jude 21). This is very different from trying to attain to our own understanding of the love of God. We can never love in this manner by our own ability. Our place is to abide in Christ and allow Him to express His love through us. As we abide in union with God, the Holy Spirit will pour this love into our hearts, and our place then is to allow this love to be expressed through obedience. *"As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love."* (John 15:9-10)

Not only can we not express this love separate from God; neither can we express this love separate from one another. Listen carefully again to Paul: *"...but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head--Christ--from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love."* (Ephesians 4:15-16) Love by its very nature must have an object of expression to be seen. God wants His love revealed, and the primary place it is to be seen is in the church, the body of Christ. This is our place in the plan of God: to reveal God's nature together.

As the body of Christ here on this earth, we are called to declare truth. Jesus said that He is the truth, so a declaration of truth is never separate from a declaration of the person of Christ. But Jesus is also God and His nature is love, so a declaration of Jesus will also never be void of love. Someone has said that if truth is declared without love it is no longer truth, and if love does not declare the truth it is no longer love. They always go together. We must know the truth, walk in truth, and speak the truth, but love must be there at every point. This is often the reason we do not grow as we ought. We try to speak the truth with the best intentions, but if it is not infused with the love of God, it will not be received. It is as we *speaking the truth in love* that we will grow up in all things unto Him. Are we willing to look diligently to God about these things, that God may have a full expression of love in a many-membered body?

According to Paul's teaching, a growing expression of this love is linked to the proper functioning of each member of the body. This is not a simple matter. Every member must maintain a pure relationship with God. Every relationship in the body must be brought to a spiritual level, where we accept each other as Christ has accepted us. We each must know our measure of grace and be willing to function in it. We cannot think that we are sufficient in ourselves; neither can we think that we are nothing and our participation does not count. If God has given each one a measure of grace to function, we need everything God has given. Speaking the truth in love on a consistent basis as God brings the body to full maturity is a great working in every way. Yet this is the plan and purpose of God, and this is how He has designed to reveal who He is. It is in this context of unity and love that we will experience all that God is and has for us. It is here that God is glorified.

Unto Him Be Glory in the Church

We began with a quote from Paul's prayer in Ephesians chapter 3. Let us quote the whole prayer. *"For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height--to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."* (Ephesians 3:14-21)

If we are seeing anything of this great mystery and how God is working it out, I believe it must drive us to our knees in prayer as it did Paul. Only God can work this great mystery. It is beyond us, but it is not without us. God is working this great mystery in and through men. This is not something that will be worked out in heaven in the future, but on this earth now. So many have missed this. Some wonder when God will begin to build His church. Some wonder when we shall see the unity of the faith. Others look to the future when we shall finally see the glory of God. So often in our minds, these promises are all for a future day that never comes. That view leaves us with a vision of a God who has high goals for His children, but is not able to bring them about. Is God the God that He has revealed Himself to be? Brothers and sisters, all of these things are for *now*, in the company of people who are submitting to Christ as Lord and allowing God to build them together a habitation of God in the Spirit.

The biggest hindrance to seeing the glory of God come into full expression is our own efforts to please God and try to do something for God. We can do nothing for God. The church is the work of God, not of man. *"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure."* (Philippians 2:12-13) Defilement enters in when we do not know this place of rest, ceasing from our labor and letting God do His work in and through us. Will we give this serious attention before God? Will we allow God to deal with everything that hinders the unity of the faith?

Brothers and sisters, together we can know the love of God which passes knowledge--now. Together we can know the fullness of God--now. Together we can comprehend the width and length and depth and height of the love of God--now. God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we can ask or think. The question is, will we allow Christ to dwell in our hearts through faith? Will we give ourselves to God and what He is doing? Will we lay down every expression of self-effort and give ourselves to God as vessels through whom He can work His great work? The choice is ours. God will never take away our choice.

Let us not look for another time. Let us not miss God and what He is doing now. Now is the day of salvation. The glory is to be experienced now. The testimony that God wants of Himself is now. Now is the preparation time. Now is when we are being made one. It is now that the bride is being prepared for her Husband. Soon we shall hear the sound of the trumpet. Soon we shall go home to be with Him. What a glory should fill our heart at that expectation! What diligence this should inspire in our loving response to our Lord and Savior. Unto Him be glory in the church! Hallelujah!