

This is sermon #10 in our series of sermons on the basics of the Christian Faith. And the question we will consider today is, “Why is the Church so important?” in the message of the Bible. That question assumes that the church is an important part of the message of salvation that the Bible brings. Raising that question as one of the basics is motivated by the conviction that this is a part of the biblical message that is not well understood or appreciated.

We are affected by the individualism of our culture – every single one of us. Individualism is the dominate motif in our society and it affects us all in varying degrees. And one of the results of that is that there is an almost irresistible influence on us all to minimize the biblical significance of the church and to maximize the cultural significance of the individual. One evidence of this is the discomfort that we feel with the statement in the Westminster Confession of Faith that says that “outside [of the visible church] there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (25:2). When those words were originally written, Christians would have agreed with them without hesitation. They would have said, “Of course, ‘there is no ordinary possibility of salvation’ outside of the church.” The reason that we hear them so differently is that we have all been influenced by the individualism of our culture so that we tend to think of salvation in terms of me and Jesus rather than Jesus and the church.

This individualism has been a massive force in the thinking and living of our world. It is basically the idea that I am free to choose for myself what to believe and how to live. There is a sense in which that is a good thing. At a political level it is a good thing that no one is allowed to force us what to believe and how to live our lives. The biblical critique of the individualism of our day does not call for religious tyranny. But the emphasis on personal freedom today goes far beyond political freedom. It has become freedom from as many outside restraints as possible. For society to have some measure of order there must be some restraints. Things like murder and stealing and a variety of other things cannot be tolerated.

But the emphasis is on as much freedom as possible. And the good life is seen as each individual pursuing his or her own desires with as little restraint as possible. Our society minimizes as much as possible anything outside of the individual that tells us what to do and how to live. And this has influenced Christianity so that one’s individual relationship with God is seen as what really matters and one result of that is the idea that belonging to the church is considered to be an option.

The Bible paints a very different picture. Our individual relationship with God is important and necessary, but the essence of salvation involves being incorporated into the church. The Bible speaks of salvation as being added to the church. Acts 2 describes the day of Pentecost, which was the day that the Holy Spirit was poured out and as a result many people were saved through the preaching of the apostles. Acts 2:41 says “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul writes “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” To be baptized by the

Spirit is to receive the Holy Spirit. That is what happens when we are saved. And Paul connects that with being united to the body of Christ which is the church. “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.....”

It is vital that we understand how much we are influenced by the individualism of our time and it is vital that we allow our thinking and our priorities to be corrected and reshaped by the Bible. Romans 12:2 tells us “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind....” Our minds are renewed by the word and Spirit of God. We are to be shaped in our thinking and believing and living by the Word of God and the influence of the Holy Spirit. And for our subject this evening that means that we will think very differently about the significance of the church for salvation and the Christian life than the way we are influenced to think by the individualism of our day.

Now I want to give some biblical insights as to what this looks like by highlighting a few things from Ephesians 4:11-16. We will not cover everything in this passage. What I want to do is demonstrate from this passage how central and integral the church is to the Christian life – to the life of the saved.

Verse 11 says that Jesus gave apostles, prophets, evangelists and shepherds and teachers to equip the saints. Apostles and Prophets refer to the men in biblical times who were inspired by God to write the Bible. Evangelists are those who are specially gifted to do evangelism. And shepherds and teachers are usually considered to be what we think of as pastors today. And there is a lot of overlap here between today’s pastors and today’s elders because elders are also shepherds and teachers. If I were focusing on the difference between today’s pastors and elders I would take the time to deal with that, but for what we are focusing on right now it is best to focus on the overlap. In the biblical teaching about salvation the church is very significant and in the biblical teaching about the church pastors and elders play an important role.

Verse 12 explains what that role is. “[T]o equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” “Saints” are people who have been saved. They are the people whom God has brought from spiritual death to spiritual life so that they have repented and believed and been given new desires to live lives that are pleasing to God. In biblical terminology every believer is a saint. Saints are holy people – not sinless in themselves, but they are holy in Christ. So what this passage shows us is that people who have been saved – the saints, are embedded in the church where they are being equipped by shepherds and teachers “for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”

In the Bible the growth of individual Christians and the building up of the body of Christ are inseparable. The Bible is not interested in the spiritual growth of the individual apart from the building up of the body of Christ. The Bible does not view us or address us as individuals in isolation from the church. We are individuals and we must believe and repent and obey and grow as individuals, but that is never envisioned or contemplated in isolation from the church. And that is the picture of the Christian life that Paul is drawing for us in these verses. To be saved is to be saved into the body of Christ and to grow as a Christian is to grow as a part of the body of Christ.

Think of a human body. Think of a growing child. Everything grows together. If the hand would be severed from the body, it would cease to grow. Every part of a body is part of the whole and the whole body either grows or does not grow together.

That is the kind of growth that this passage describes. To be saved is to be incorporated into the body of Christ and the growth of the individual and the growth of the body are inseparable. This passage describes the life that results from salvation. And the life that it describes is the saints building up the body of Christ.

The work of shepherds and teachers is to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for the building up the body of Christ. This is how the Bible envisions the Christian life – the life that is the result of salvation in Christ. The Christian life is the work of the ministry for building up the body of Christ. That is what we are saved to do.

We see this same truth in 2 Corinthians 5:15 which is such a helpful verse for describing what it means to be saved. 2 Corinthians 5:15 says that Jesus “died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.” The result of Jesus’ death is that believers no longer live for themselves but for Christ. Our text gives us more detail about what it means to live for Christ. To live for Christ is to build up the body of Christ.

Now that includes our everyday lives of work and family and enjoying God’s gifts. To build up the body of Christ includes living all of life to the glory of God. But all of that is intended to happen from a position of embeddedness in the body of Christ. The body of Christ is being built up as the members serve Jesus in all of life. As you do your work to the glory of God, the body of Christ is being built up. As you enjoy God’s gifts with thanksgiving, the body of Christ is being built up. The body of Christ is built up when the members of the church are scattered and seeking to live every part of their lives to the glory of God. But that scattered life is nurtured by the together life of the church. The teaching and shepherding of pastors and elders is intended to equip the saints for the work of ministry which is the life of serving God and other people and that builds up the body of Christ.

Verse 13 gives us some more detail about the meaning of the equipped saints building up the body of Christ. “[U]ntil we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” There are basically three things here. First the “unity of the faith.”

So the body of Christ is built up when we all attain to the unity of the faith. And the ministry of shepherds and teachers is to equip the saints to build up the body of Christ which includes attaining the unity of the faith. The body of Christ is built up when it grows in unity. The surrounding context describes that unity for us. Verses 1-6: ¹“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were

called to the one hope that belongs to your call— ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

The body of Christ is built up when it grows in unity and that unity involves humility, gentleness, patience and bearing with one another. The shepherds and teachers are to equip the saints to build the body by contributing and nurturing unity and love. But unity also involves unity in doctrine. Verse 14 speaks about the goal of "no longer being children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine."

The body of Christ is built up when there is unity in doctrine and that is an important part of how shepherds and teachers equip the saints to build up the body of Christ. The saints build up the body by growing in their knowledge of the truth and helping one another to grow in their knowledge of the truth. The body is built up as it grows in its unity of its knowledge of the teaching of God's word and we are all to help one another in that growth.

Second, the building up of the body of Christ also involves attaining to the knowledge of the Son of God. Knowledge of the Son of God involves both knowledge about the Son of God and knowledge of the Son of God. Jesus is a person and the body of Christ is built up when the members of the body grow in their personal knowledge of Christ. We grow in our knowledge of Christ just as we grow in our knowledge of a family member or a friend. It involves both knowledge about, but also personal-relationship-knowledge. Knowing Christ is at the heart of the Christian life and the body is built up as its members grow in their knowledge of Christ. This is what happens when we worship and when we pray and when we live life in relationship with Jesus.

And this happens as the shepherds and teachers equip the saints for the work of the ministry for building up the body of Christ. We do this together. Verse 13 says, "until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God." "We all." The body grows together, and we all contribute to that growth.

Thirdly, he mentions maturity. "[T]o mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Maturity is the goal. And Christ-likeness is what maturity looks like. But the interesting thing here is that Paul is speaking about the maturity of the body of Christ. It is a corporate maturity that he is speaking about. It is a corporate Christlikeness that is the goal. It is what it means to build up the body of Christ. The body grows in maturity, which is Christ-likeness.

This is very interesting and significant. Paul is not talking here about individual growth in maturity. He is speaking about corporate growth in maturity. And the point is that it is only as the body grows in Christ-likeness that the members grow in Christ-likeness. This shows how profoundly corporate the biblical teaching about the Christian life is. It does not envision growing in Christ-likeness on our own, but as members of the body so that the growth of any individual is part of the growth and maturing of the whole body. What this

means is that as we grow in Christ-likeness we minister to the body, but also that our growth in Christ-likeness happens as others in the body minister to us.

This is the opposite of independent. It is a description of profound interdependence. This is exactly opposite of the individualism of our culture. To be a Christian is to belong to Christ and to belong to his body which is the church. And that is at the core of our identity. Christianity is about belonging. Belonging to Christ and belonging to his body. It is similar to marriage. When you get married you are no longer your own. You belong to the person you marry. Your very identity – your sense of who you are - includes your relationship to your husband or your wife. So it is with belonging to Christ which includes belonging to his body. This becomes a key part of your identity. In Romans 12:5 Paul writes, “[W]e, though we are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.”

However, this does not mean that we lose our individuality. It is also part of the richness of belonging to Jesus and thus belonging to his body that the profound corporate nature of the Christian identity does not obliterate our individuality.

Paul hints at this in verse 7 when he says, “But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” This is part of the Biblical teaching on spiritual gifts which is that each individual in the body of Christ is gifted in a unique way to equip them “for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” Paul’s emphasis in this passage is on the gifts of apostles, prophets, evangelists and shepherd-teachers, but in other places he lists a variety of other gifts and an important aspect of the body centered nature of the Christian life is this encouraging truth that every member of the body is uniquely gifted to serve the body.

In 1 Peter 4:10 Peter teaches this when he writes, “As each as received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God’s varied grace.” I take the time to mention this at this point so make sure that we understand that the church-centered nature of the Christian life gives significant emphasis to our individuality. There is a huge difference between individualism and individuality. Individualism means being focused on ourselves. That is the antithesis of the Christian life. But individuality has to do with our uniqueness as God’s workmanship and our God is infinitely creative in the way that he forms and gifts his people. This is an important part of the richness of the corporate nature of the Christian life. A huge part of what it means to be a Christian is that we are not isolated individuals, but we are part of the body of Christ. But the members of the body of Christ are unique individuals – each one precious in his or her own way and each one gifted in a very special way to serve the body.

Let’s look finally at the last two verses of this section – 15-16. Verse 14 says that the goal of the saints being equipped for the work of the ministry so that the body of Christ is built up is that “we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine.” And then verses 15-16 describes what not being like children looks like – “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by

every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

There is not a lot that is new here from what we have already covered. Paul is describing how the saints, equipped by the shepherds and teachers, for the work of the ministry build up the body of Christ. The goal is the same – Christlikeness. Paul mentions also that the growth comes from Christ who is the head of the body. But what I want to highlight at this point is the idea that the body grows as the saints speak the truth in love. The vision here is of the body of Christ growing in Christlikeness by the power of Christ through the members of the body speaking the truth in love to one another. And Paul finishes this section by saying that “when each part is working properly ... the body grow[s] so that it builds itself up in love.”

Speaking the truth in love to one another is a key part of the way that the saints do the work of the ministry for building up the body of Christ. The goal of our salvation is the building up of the body of Christ. This is a huge emphasis in the NT. Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, ascension, session at God’s right hand and outpouring of the Holy Spirit is the ultimate cause of the body of Christ and of the building up of the body of Christ. While he was still on earth, Jesus said, “I will build my church.” (Matthew 16;18) But here in this passage we learn that Jesus’ way of doing that is through his saints equipped for ministry. As they speak the truth in love to one another the body of Christ grows up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.

Speaking the truth in love. That happens in all kinds of ways. Teaching classes, mentoring, raising children, participating in bible study groups and informally when we speak with one another and visit with one another. We talk about many things. We talk from the perspective of the Bible. We share our thoughts. We influence one another. We pray together. We also influence one another by our example. The Greek that is translated as “speaking the truth in love” is literally translated “truthing in love.” It involves speaking, but it also involves how we live.

There are a lot of passages that describe this interaction. Paul wrote to the Romans in Romans 15:14 “I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.” 1 Thessalonians 4:18, “Therefore encourage one another with these words....” 1 Thessalonians 5:11 “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.” 1 Thessalonians 5:14 “And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.” Hebrews 10:24 “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” Ephesians 5:17-18, “[B]e filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” 1 Corinthians 13:11 “[C]omfort one another....”

The spirit in which this is to be done is the spirit of love. “Speak the truth in love.” And love, I remind you “is patient and kind. It does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not

irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

And the overall context is the gospel. We are all imperfect in many ways. We fail in many ways. We sin in many ways. And yet through faith in Christ we are accepted by God. We are loved by God. Our efforts in service are pleasing to God even though they are shot through with sin because we are received on the basis of Christ’s righteousness. That must always be the context in which we speak the truth in love to one another. There is no room for legalism. There is no place for a critical spirit. As we relate to God by his amazing grace, we are to reflect that grace in our dealings with one another.

If correction is necessary Galatians 6:1 gives us the way – “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.” But we must be very careful about correction. We must remember the emphasis that Paul gives to bearing with one another. Peter says in 1 Peter 4:8 “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.”

So the Christian life is life in the body of Christ. The saved are saved into the church. And the goal is the building up of the body. Spiritual growth is together growth. If we grow others grow with us because growing means becoming more like Christ and Christ gave himself for his church. The church, the body of Christ is part of the basics of the message of the Bible and the biblical vision of salvation and the Christian life. That emphasis is the antithesis of the spirit of our age, but salvation is salvation from the slavery to sin and self that defines the world. It is not living for ourselves but for Christ and living for Christ involves living for his body.