

TJW, HT, 20.1.08, Ephesians 4.7-16

I don't have Sat-Nav in my car - I think it takes all the fun out of getting lost, looking at the map, stopping to ask directions, and knowing where places are. I guess one day they'll be fitted in every new car, but for now I'm holding out.

But I do know plenty of people who love Sat-Nav - no more arguments in the car about missing a turning - just listening to the voice calmly telling you exactly how to get to your destination.

Jesus Christ has a clear destination for his people, his church. There's a shape he wants to mould us into - there's a place he wants to take us.

He lays it out for us in the Bible-passage we're looking at this morning - Ephesians 4 - and you might like to turn to it now, so we're ready to look at it together in a moment.

And not only does Jesus set our destination for us here - he also tells us what he's given us to get us into the shape we should be in.

He's given us both the destination, and the means to get us there.

Now I'm actually going to take this passage backwards. In a moment we'll see what Christ has given us to get us where we should be. But first we need to see what the destination is.

And in this passage... **1. Christ's goal for the church** is that we should be **united in maturity (13-15)**.

Every Christian has a secret wish for what they want their church to be: a Bible-school, or a friendship network, or a social club, or a centre of outreach, or a place where they can hide.

Verse 13 tells you Christ's wish, his goal for us [READ verse 13a].

Unity in the faith. That is: all having the same depth of trust in the same Jesus Christ.

A Mum and Dad may have many things that come between them - but what usually unites them is that they have the same depth of love for their children.

And the one thing that holds Christians together is us all holding to the same Christ. Unity in the same faith.

And we must also, says God here, reach unity in the knowledge of the Son of God.

This of course means us knowing Christ personally - trusting him.

But it also includes our knowledge of his teaching - our understanding of his words to us in the whole Bible.

A Christian who is not bothered to grow in knowledge of God's Word in the Bible is someone who is trying to grab the steering-wheel out of Christ's hand and steer his church away from the destination that he has set for us.

Unity in the faith - and in the knowledge of the Son of God.

And also... maturity in Christ - verse 13 [READ verse 13b].

The picture here is this. God lives in his people, as his Holy Spirit lives in us.

And that amounts to Jesus Christ living in us. That is just what God has done.

But we don't yet put into practice the full reality of Christ who is in us.

When a baby is born its DNA is fully in place. What the baby has to do now is grow up and mature physically, with the DNA that's already there controlling its development.

When we put our trust in Christ, he makes us a new creation, like being born again. He gives us a new spiritual DNA.

And what we've got to do is let the new spiritual nature grow and develop, shaping us, and moulding us.

When that happens our fundamental attitudes will change. The way we approach life will change.

The patience we have with one another, when we disagree, will grow.

We will be more and more willing to bear with one another when our personalities and visions clash - or when we feel a fellow-believer has disappointed us.

As we're preparing ourselves this year to plant a new church, and to re-vision what we do here at 'home base', that great task could easily

make us swap this great goal of maturity in Christ for something else - something much less valuable.

"I just want the church-plant to work." Or:

"I just want it to work - without it affecting me very much." Or:

"I just want us to have bigger numbers in two years' time, so it looks like a success."

If our eyes move too much to any of those goals, we'll be like a footballer who takes his eye off the ball at the last minute - or a golfer who doesn't keep his head down while he's swinging - and misses the ball altogether.

The goal that Christ sets for us as a church is to mature into the whole measure of the fullness of him whose presence is already in us. We've got to let the new spiritual DNA he's given us control every decision, reaction, emotion.

And great things happen when we're growing into maturity.

We're not swayed by false teaching - verse 14 [READ].

There are plenty of Christian books that people find inspiring, but which aren't true to the Bible - and mature Christians will know the difference.

(I'm grateful that our Vine bookshop in town is stocked with good books!).

One of my great callings as a minister is to help us become people who know which Christian teaching is good, and which is false.

And if we're mature we'll build each other up in love. Read verse 16 [READ].

Someone told me this week that their boss at work never praises them, and only opens his mouth to criticize. That's no way to build someone up.

Every Christian here is part of the body of Christ. You're joined to every other part of the body - and the only way we'll grow is by building each other up in love.

Sure, that will sometimes mean challenging someone if they're obviously lying about something.

But much more often it will mean thanking them for something they've done - telling them that you think they've really got a gift for something - offering to lend them a good Christian book that will help them in an area where they need to grow.

Someone recently e-mailed me about another member of the church family. It was simply to say: "I think that this person has really got a gift for helping other people spiritually, one to one, and I've told them so. And I want you to know, too, Tim, in case you hadn't spotted it." I hadn't spotted it, and I'm really glad to know.

What that person did in e-mailing me - that is every member of the body doing its work, and the body of the church building itself up.

We long for our church-plant next year to lead to bigger numbers, don't we - to more people coming to Christ.

But the growth and the building-up that God talks about here is not numbers, but our spiritual maturity.

And if we're not helping and training and encouraging each other to grow in spiritual maturity, then any growth in numbers will just be for show - it will have no depth.

That's Christ's goal for us: to be united in maturity.

And here's... **2. what Christ has given us to get us there.**

First, Christ has given each one a different gift - verse 7 [READ].

The word 'grace' in the Bible usually means the free offer of salvation and forgiveness if we trust in Jesus. Of course that grace is offered equally to everyone, with no differences between us.

But here 'grace' is something given differently to each person - so in this verse 'grace' means: the gifts Christ gives us so that we can serve him.

(That makes sense because in the Greek in which this was originally written, the word for gifts is 'charismata', which comes from the word for grace - 'charis'.)

Christ has given gifts to every single one. Sure, they're different. Sure, some are up-front, and some are behind-the-scenes.

And, sure - right now some are being well used, while others are under-developed, and maybe some are unknown even to the people who've got them.

Verse 7 is the verse to remember when you catch yourself thinking that you've got nothing to offer in the service of Christ. "To each one a gift is given", he promises.

A crucial task for us this year will be to spot and encourage and develop each other's gifts. I know that for many of us the biggest worry about Next Big Step is the human resources we'll need.

If that's your worry, I understand that. But Christ says that he has graciously given gifts to every single believer. We can trust that he'll use the church-plant to bring out more of them.

To each one a gift has been given.

And Christ has also given the church ministers to equip his people - verse 11 [READ].

The apostle Paul refers to 'apostles and prophets' a couple of times in this letter - and what he's got in mind is the people whom God used to bring his revelation - whose messages have been written down for us in the Bible. Their words are the foundation that we build on, which God has given us in the Bible.

(There are ministries in the present-day that we can rightly call 'apostolic' and 'prophetic', but that's not what Paul is talking about here.)

And in the present-day God has given us, in verse 11, evangelists - people who go out teaching Christ to people who don't yet know him.

And he's especially given, as it says here, 'pastors and teachers'.

'Pastor' means literally 'shepherd', and in the Bible these roles often overlap. A pastor leads by teaching God's word to people.

So probably a pastor-teacher is one person. That is the role, in this church, that Andy and I are called to.

And do you see in this passage that it's these pastor-teachers whom Christ gives to his church, to help lead the church to maturity. They don't do it all, but they do have a crucial role.

Verse 12 defines that crucial role. Actually, verse 12 is my job description from God: 'to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.'

'Works of service' there doesn't just mean: serving in the background. It means: the work of serving God - all of it.

So that's my job, and Andy's too: to pastor and teach so that you are equipped to serve God.

That's the big thing that God says you should expect from us.

It's what we will have to answer for before God: not, did we make everyone happy - not, did the numbers on a Sunday grow - but, did we pastor and teach so that God's people were equipped to work in his service?

And of course Andy and I can't equip each one personally. We'll often specially equip some - Home Group leaders, or Ministry Leaders - so that they are each ready to equip and build up others.

This equipping involves: preaching - meeting with individuals to read the Bible together... to talk and pray about being faithful to the Lord when life is hard - to encourage someone to try a new ministry, and be trained in it.

We're always grateful to hear that someone thinks we're meeting God's job description for us reasonably well. Do tell us how we could do it better.

And do tell us if you ever think we've stopped doing it and started doing something else - like trying to please ourselves, or please absolutely everyone - rather than pleasing God.

This 'equipping for work in the Lord's service' is the big thing we'll be doing in the next few months, to prepare for Next Big Step.

There'll be three Church-Family Nights in the next four months, packed with training and equipping. At the first one, a week on Thursday, there'll be a whole menu of training-options to choose from: becoming more prayerful - understanding how people become Christians - understanding the Bible well for ourselves - teaching the Bible to children - to name a few.

We'll be repeating some of these, and adding more, at future Church-Family Nights.

It is this kind of equipping and training that Christ gives you in his church, through his teachers, so that we can all reach unity in maturity.

A Christian will grow and mature if they put themselves regularly under the teaching, the training and equipping which the pastor-teachers provide...

A Christian will grow and mature if they're doing their part in the body, and looking to build others up.

There's no other way - because this is what Christ has given us, so that we may reach the goal he has set for us: to be united in maturity.