

Text: Ephesians 4:1-16

Title: “Our Progress Along the Avenue”

ILLUSTRATION - At the FWPC Gala this weekend I heard the amazing story of Abby Johnson who for many years worked for Planned Parenthood. As a matter of fact she won the employee of the year award for her proficiency in talking young women into having an abortion. Outside the Planned Parenthood facility believers prayed every day, many of them praying that Abby would be saved and stop the evil practice. One day she, for the first time, watched on ultrasound an abortion being performed and it so sickened her that she vowed to never perform another abortion. Next door to the Planned Parenthood facility a pro-life organization had set up an office. Abby knew exactly what they stood for and how they had been praying. She secretly slipped out of the Planned Parenthood facility, walked in the back door of this pro-life organization’s office, and sat on the couch across from one of their volunteers. She simply asked, “What do I do?” That day Abby put her trust in Christ and immediately quit her job at Planned Parenthood, packed up her belongings and walked out a different woman. Since that day in 2009 Abby has given herself full-time to following Christ and standing up for the rights of the unborn. At the close of her testimony Friday night she encouraged us to not lose heart in the battle. She said, “There is power in conversion because there is power in Jesus Christ.”

Turn to Ephesians 4 where we’ve been camping out over the past few weeks. It’s the kind of life-change that Abby Johnson experienced that Paul had in mind when he wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus.

Ephesians 4:1 - As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

So we’re saved to walk in a new way of life ... a way we have called “The Avenue.” And as we walk along this avenue, this way of life, we grow and make progress in Christ. But we can’t do it on our own. When Christ saves us He connects us to His Body, the church. Christ has so created and configured the church to become the AVENUE by which believers grow into the fullness of the life of Christ.

“THE AVENUE” GRAPHIC. So in response to this and in obedience to Christ our church has developed “The Avenue.” We are Travis AVENUE Baptist Church. And our name must be synonymous with this discernible path ... this identifiable process ... this avenue toward maturity in our faith. We want everyone to be making progress from “I am a Guest,” to “I am a Member,” to “I am a Disciple” to “I am a Servant.”

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION – One of our men reminded me that along “The Avenue” it takes time for us to grow at each of these intersections, but we don’t want you parking. There are some places in town where if you park more than 30 minutes you get a ticket. Well, we won’t issue citations, but we don’t want you parking too long. If you’re a guest, don’t park too long there. Pray and get God’s direction about a church home. Plant your life with a local church like ours. As you become a member, don’t park there. This isn’t a country club that you join for the privileges. The church is the avenue by which you grow into the fullness of the life of a disciple. Here is where real character change, life-change, begins to happen. And it’s not just about growing deeper. So don’t park there. It’s about going wider and discovering a place where you are engaged in meaningful service.

Now with Ephesians 4 before us one more time I want you to see how important it is for your spiritual development to be vitally connected to the Body of Christ, the church. Again, Christ has created and configured the church to be the AVENUE by which you and I come into the fullness of the life of Christ. If you don’t have that longing, that desire, to come into that fullness then there’s something wrong. This is what Christ saves us for.

Let’s line these up so you can see how they fit together. So far we’ve learned that in this connection to the church...

1. WE DISPLAY HUMILITY (v.2).

We grow in our relationship with Christ through our relationships with other believers. So we’re instructed...

Ephesians 4:2 - Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

The Gospel tells us that Christ has endured our sin and loved us through it, and we need to do the same for one another. This enables us to do the next thing.

2. WE PROTECT UNITY (vv.3-6).

Read Ephesians 4:3-6.

Our unity is not based upon human appeal. You look like me and we both have similar hobbies and we both like to drink coffee at the same place so I’ll sit by you and we’ll be buddies. That’s fine, but it’s not the real basis of our unity. If we’re not careful cliques can develop based upon human appeal. Our unity is not based upon human appeal. It is based upon the spiritual action of God of making us one in Christ.

And then in these relationships we see that we are all a little different and so ...

3. WE ACCEPT DIVERSITY (vv.7-11).

So while there is unity that doesn't mean uniformity. It means there is diversity in the gifts Christ has given each of us by which we serve God and others.

Ephesians 4:7 - But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

And then we learned that Christ prepares and equips every believer for ministry. He does this through gifted people that He gives to the church.

Ephesians 4:11 - It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers,

The word for "pastor" means a shepherd. A shepherd leads, feeds and cares for the flock of God. That's the role of a pastor/teacher. Teaching and preaching become the main way that the pastor is to prepare believers to do what God has called them to do. And in connection to that the next verse says that this ministry I have is to prepare you for the ministry you have. So...

4. WE PERFORM MINISTRY (v.12).

Ephesians 4:12 - to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

Works of service are for all of us to do, not just a hand full of dedicated people. The word "prepare" is a rich word. Sometimes in the NT it describes fixing something that is broken. When fishermen went out on the Sea of Galilee to catch fish, their nets come back ripped and torn from the days catch. Before they could go back out to catch more fish the nets had to be repaired. Our lives, like fishermen's nets, get tangled and twisted. And we need to be repaired and prepared to go back out tomorrow and start all over again faithfully serving God and others.

Now, if the biblical order of things isn't maintained then those gifted for ministry will not do the ministry they are supposed to do with their spiritual gifts, which means that the pastor finds himself doing all the ministry, which takes away from his task of equipping the saints for the work of ministry, which means they will not be performing the ministries they are supposed to perform and so you can see how this can absolutely paralyze the church to

where no real ministry takes place. So what has developed in many churches is this mentality that we pay the pastor and the staff to do these ministries and everything that supports the ministries. No, Christ by His Spirit gives spiritual gifts and abilities to all the members of the church so they can serve. And in this way the potential for ministry is staggering.

Now Christ's goal in all of this is for all of us to grow in Christlikeness, so, next...

5. WE AIM FOR MATURITY (vv.13-14).

Christ's aim must be our aim. And here is His aim...

Ephesians 4:13 – (That) 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.

So we are becoming more fully develop followers of Jesus Christ, and as a result...

Ephesians 4:14 - Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.

So we're to be mature, not immature, not like infants. Physical babies are selfish. They can't feed themselves. The whole family revolves around them. Babies are adorable, but how sad is it when a baby doesn't mature to where they can feed themselves and begin to contribute to the life of the family. The same thing is true spiritually. We must set the standard among us that we are all aiming for maturity.

Then midstream in v.14 Paul switches images from an infant to the sea.

ILLUSTRATION – Maybe you've fished before using a hook with some bait on it and a bobber or cork to let you know if a fish gets on your line. If there's not much weight at the end of the line, and there's any wind blowing that bobber will be blown in whatever direction the wind is blowing. If you want it to stay put you need to put some weight on the line.

We're talking here about the weight that spiritual maturity brings to our lives. Then we won't be blown here and there by false teaching or ill-motivated leaders. Some can be very persuasive and if you're not grounded in the Word of God and in the mind of Christ you can be led astray. So we aim for maturity.

And this brings us back to Christ. Next...

6. WE SUBMIT TO AUTHORITY (v.15).

Ephesians 4:15 - Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

Paul is using one of his most popular ways to referring to the church ... the Body of Christ. The image is found in many of his letters. Maybe he's thinking about the way Christ has created and configured the church and Paul thinks, "Wow, that's just the way my body works." The Body has a head (a brain) that controls and sustains the body. The Body is alive because Jesus is alive. That should give us great hope. No matter how discouraged we may get about church, Christ is alive and therefore His Body is alive.

But it is only as we are each rightly connected to the Head (Jesus) that the body functions as it should and we all grow up together into Christ. There is instantaneous connection between the Head and every single part of the Body. My little finger moves because my brain told it to and the little finger responds to the prompting of the nerves that are directly connected to the head.

ILLUSTRATION – Years ago we had a man in our church who was injured in an oilfield accident. The accident left him without the use of his legs ... paralyzed from the waist down. So the lower part of his body was no longer connected to his brain (head) through the nerve system. As a result of his injuries his movements were restricted. He either moved about in a wheelchair or with the use of crutches and braces on his legs. He had an amazing attitude about it all, but in spite of that it was only with great effort that he could do some of the things that others did without even thinking about it. And consequently simply getting from one side of the room to the other produced beads of sweat on his brow.

When parts of the body of Christ are not rightly connected to Christ the Head the church will experience the same symptoms. Just like my paraplegic friend, it will only be with great difficulty that we will be able to accomplish the most basic tasks. Sin breaks our connection with the Head, Jesus Christ. And you may think that your actions or attitudes don't affect anyone else, but they do. It disconnects you from the Head and because you are part of a spiritual body, the Church, it affects all of us. If I'm out of fellowship with God it weakens and hinders the body. Why? We are not able to function at our full potential and capacity to accomplish the work God has given us to do as a church.

So it's important that we are speaking truth to one another to encourage one another in our walk with Christ. This doesn't mean that we have a license to tell other people off ... "I'm just speaking the truth in love." That's not what this means. In the context this means we are

speaking the truth of the Gospel and the truth of the Word of God to one another in a way that causes us to grow in connection to our Head ... Jesus Christ. So when we're all growing individually in our individual connection to the Head then collectively we will conform more to the will of Christ and engage more in the work of Christ.

And because of all of this...

7. WE EXPECT STABILITY (v.16).

Ephesians 4:16 - From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

So v.15 says we will all grow up *into* Him ... in our connection with Him as the Head. Then v.16 says that *from* Him comes something amazing. He joins and holds us together; and He causes us to grow and build one another up in love as we all do the work He has given us to do. We need one another. My spiritual gifts minister to and build you up and your spiritual gifts minister to me and build me up and so we are all built up together. So what happens is that as we grow together in this way the church begins to think and act and look and love like Jesus. And our neighbors and the nations will be blessed by our witness and service to them. So here's what I'm asking you to do:

- #1 - Get rightly connected to Jesus. Today, you can connect your life to the life of the Son of God by putting your trust in Him. If you're already a believer, make sure no sinful attitude or action is causing you to be disconnected from Christ.
- #2 – Get connected to the life of the church. Get in an SBS class or another small group where you begin to grow in relationships.
- #3 – Get involved in service in the church and in the community.