

Session 1: Unity in the faith

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until 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.

Ephesians 4:11-13^{NIVUK}

The goal for the body of Christ, the Church, is unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God. Each disciple of our Lord Jesus should always be aiming to be more mature in the faith. Those that are truly maturing will increasingly demonstrate life-transforming knowledge of the Truth, which will in turn lead to a commitment to unity. God commands His people to be united. God blesses unity, based on a resolute adherence to the truth, as revealed in His word.

Reflection/discussion

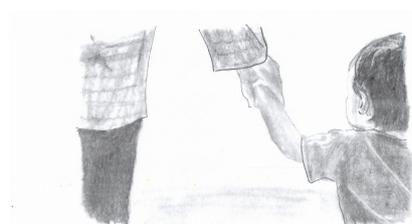
God blesses unity

Psalm 133

1 Corinthians 1:10

Philippians 2:1-4

1 Peter 3:8-9



Jesus wants us to be child-like, but not remain childish.

Childish people are self-centred, nit-picky, always dissatisfied when their inconsequential personal preferences are not followed. As a result they always disrupt the unity in the local body of Christ.

Here is what Jesus said about such people:

'To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the market-places and calling out to others: "We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn." For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon." The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.'

Matthew 11:16-18^{NIVUK}

Those growing towards maturity cultivate child-like attitudes. They facilitate unity in the local body of Christ.

He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'

Matthew 18:2-4^{NIVUK}

Reflection/discussion

What are the child-like attitudes that Jesus says we must have to enter the kingdom of heaven; which would also facilitate unity in the local body of Christ?

Session 2: People not like us

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until 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.

Ephesians 4:11-13_{NIVUK}

Every human is unique. God intentionally made it so. The unity we are aiming for in the body of Christ is unity in diversity, not uniformity.

The devil, worldly cultures and institutions tend to aim for uniformity. It is not surprising because uniformity and the suppression of individual thought and personal responsibility make people easy to manipulate and control.

The equipping of individual believers should always aim for unity, not uniformity. After all, each person is individually accountable to God.

So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

Romans 14:12_{NIVUK}

Reflection/discussion

Examples of attempts to control people through uniformity

Genesis 11:1-9

Examples from history (e.g. the Nazis)

Contemporary examples



Everything God does is perfect. There are perfect reasons why God made each person unique, but still expects unity among His people.

Reflection/discussion

Advantages of diversity

1 Corinthians 12:12-20

The natural tendency is for people to relate only to their "own kind". Such people limit their growth towards maturity. They will not be effective in fostering the right kind of unity in the local body of Christ. In fact they are likely to cause division and disunity, because they tend to exclude people who are not "like them" in some way. This is contrary to the will of God for His people.

We must make every effort to get to know and understand people who are "not like us". They will help us in our quest towards maturity.

Session 3: The wind and waves

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 people in their deceitful scheming.

Ephesians 4:14_{NIVUK}

A sign that a believer is leaving childish attitudes behind and is pressing forward towards spiritual maturity is that they demonstrate increasing understanding of the truths and principles in the Bible, taking into account the various contexts, and are making every effort to live accordingly.

They love the truth and are therefore not easily deceived.

Reflection/discussion

Love of truth protects against deception

2 Thessalonians 2:9-12

James 1:22-25

Truth is often challenging and corrective. Only those who genuinely want to grow towards maturity intentionally seek the truth. Immature believers want to be told only what they find affirming and comfortable. They have “itching ears”.

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather round them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

2 Timothy 4:14_{NIVUK}

Just as Jesus, and the apostles warned, there is increasing deception, especially among so called believers. There are “winds and waves” of false teaching everywhere. Those who are not intentional about working towards spiritual maturity will be tossed about. We must embrace the truth, even if it brings persecution and suffering.

In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:12-17_{NIVUK}



Session 4: Speaking the truth in love

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

Ephesians 4:15-16^{NIVUK}

Believers who are pressing towards increasing maturity not only have to embrace truth for themselves, but must demonstrate their love for others by speaking the truth to them. Maturing believers understand that they have a responsibility to build up other members of their local body of Christ, by loving them in action and by speaking the truth to them in an appropriate manner.

In many local churches, believers who are living in blatant disobedience to God are talked about in their absence, without anyone, including their leaders, loving them enough to call out destructive behaviours. It is equivalent to seeing someone you claim to love heading towards a cliff edge without warning them of the danger.

People may choose to ignore the truth when it is spoken to them, even when it is properly communicated out of a heart of love. Maturing believers do not try to force, manipulate or control people to do as they say. Their responsibility is to make sure that the will of God, as revealed in correctly understood scripture, is made known. Ultimately, each person will give an account to God.

Reflection/discussion

Speaking the truth in love

Consider the following:

Develop an on-going caring and affirming relationship.

Only speak the truth you are practicing.

Avoid "Do as I say, not as I do." - Romans 2:19-23; Matthew 7:1-5

Do not demean or shame others.

Be humble, remember that you are not perfect.



It is not about your personal preferences but about the objective truth of the word of God.

Session 5: Always be ready

Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For,

'Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech. They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.'

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. 'Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.' But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

1 Peter 3:8-17NIVUK

A good and effective person in any endeavour undergoes intensive training to produce the necessary characteristics in their attitudes and behaviour. A well-trained and successful soldier is always ready to engage effectively in a fight. This is even more important in the good fight of faith. It is a good fight because it is lined up with the will of God our Creator.

Reflection/discussion

How to be ready always: from 1 Peter 3:8-17

Consider the following:

- Personal characteristics to keep developing
- Attitude and behaviour towards other believers
- Response to threats and unjust suffering
- Ability to give the reason for the hope we have
- Developing effective communication skills



In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.

2 Timothy 4:1-2NIVUK

Session 6: Distinguishing good from evil

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so.

Hebrews 5:11-14; 6:1-3^{NIVUK}

Childishness is rooted in a lack of ability to distinguish between right and wrong, resulting in instinctive self-centered actions and reactions. As people start to move on to maturity, they become more intentional about their choices.

In terms of daily walk with God, a believer builds on the important foundations of on-going repentance and on-going faith in Jesus, ever moving forward towards maturity, by constantly training themselves to distinguish good from evil, rejecting evil and living a good life, in line with God's will.

Sadly there are many believers who remain immature, irrespective of the number of years since they truly believed. Some may even attain positions of 'leadership' without intentionally continuing to press on towards maturity. This may account, at least in part, for the moral failure and false teachings that are so rampant among believers.

Reflection/discussion

What sorts of attitudes result in stunted spiritual growth?

How should believers train themselves to distinguish between good and evil?

Suggest some examples where it may not be so easy to distinguish good from evil?

Reflect on/discuss strategies for distinguishing good from evil in these apparently "grey" areas.



Session 7: Pressing on

Maturity is relative. Believers in a local church will be at different levels of maturity. The important thing is for all to continually be pressing on towards the goal, to be conformed to the image of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: in this world we are like Jesus.

1 John 4:17^{NIVUK}

A believer who is truly maturing in the faith will never consider themselves to have “arrived” seeing that the standard we are aiming for is so high.

Reflection/discussion

The example of Paul

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ - the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ - yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:7-14^{NIVUK}

If any believer could claim to have attained the final goal of spiritual maturity, it would be Paul. On the contrary, he humbly made it clear that he hadn't yet attained his goal.



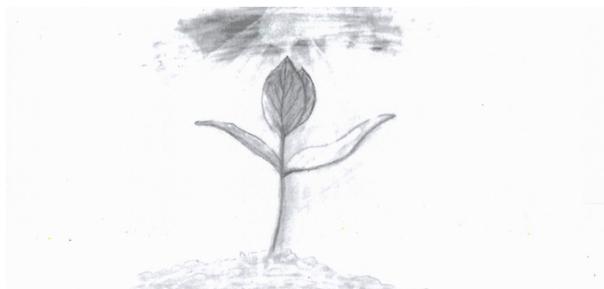
Suggest practical ways by which we may follow the example of Paul?

“...forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.”

Session 8: The parable of the sower

Based on Matthew 13:1-23

In the parable of the sower Jesus gives various reasons why those who have access to the word of God may never reach maturity. The sign of maturity is the production of fruit, lots of fruit.



'Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: when anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.'

Matthew 13:18-23^{NIVUK}

Although this parable is primarily used to describe responses to the preaching of gospel to unbelievers, there is also a relevant application to the responses of believers to hearing/reading word of God. The message about the kingdom extends to every area of life.

Reflection/discussion

Four types of responses:

- seed sown along the path
- seed falling on rocky ground
- seed falling among the thorns
- seed falling on good soil

Reflect on/discuss how a believer may avoid the first three, and cultivate the last response.

Session 9: Evidence of increasing maturity: Self-control

It is generally agreed that self-control an indicator of maturity.

There are many common sayings such as:

- “The man who can master himself can master everything else.”
- “A mature person controls his body instead of allowing his body to control him”.

There are a number of Bible texts about self-control.

Reflection/discussion

Reflect on/discuss practical ways to develop self-control with reference to the following texts from the Bible.

Proverbs 16:32

Proverbs 25:28

2 Peter 1:5-7

James 1:26

James 3:1-2



You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself. If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

Galatians 5:13-25_{NIVUK}

Session 10: Evidence of increasing maturity: Good influence

Influence is the capacity to have a significant effect on someone. People can be influenced for good or for bad. Influence can be intentional or unintentional. As people interact in the local body of Christ, they will influence one another, whether they mean to or not.

Maturing believers, who demonstrate their increasing maturity by caring for the welfare of others, will be intentional about influencing people for good, through their own personal good conduct, and by faithfully discharging the ministry gifts God has given them.

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.

Matthew 24:45-47_{NIVUK}

Reflection/discussion

Good versus bad influence - *Examples*

Proverbs 16:28-29

1 Corinthians 15:33

Rehoboam and his young advisers. 1 King 12

And so on...



Let us make every effort to be people who are a good influence on others.

Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

Daniel 12:2-3_{NIVUK}

Luke 12:32-48

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Colossians 3:15-17_{NIVUK}

Session 11: Evidence of increasing maturity: Reliable service

The Bible makes it clear that reliable service is expected of believers.

Every believer who is intentional about pressing on towards maturity will not only make every effort to find their place of fruitful service, but they will also prove to be reliable and faithful.

Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

Matthew 20:25-28_{NIVUK}

Reflection/discussion

Becoming increasingly reliable servants in God's household

- Learning how to serve selflessly

Serving selflessly involves letting go of ego-driven desires and the need for recognition. This ensures that our service is driven by obedience to God and by genuine care and compassion for others.

- We should aim to build others up, helping them to become better disciples of Jesus who are able to go on to make other disciples for our Lord.



You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others. Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer. Similarly, anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor's crown except by competing according to the rules. The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this..'

2 Timothy 2:1-7_{NIVUK}