

BECOMING A PEOPLE OF GRACE

STUDY FOURTEEN

Body Life at Its Best

Ephesians 4:11–16

If there's a message the church of the twenty-first century needs to hear, it is this one. The church is a family. The church is a body. We are not a corporation.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

IN the 1960s, Ray C. Stedman, pastor of Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California, inspired his congregation to live out Paul's principles for church life in Ephesians 4. Stedman coined the term, *body life*, to describe what happens when people use their spiritual gifts and relate to one another with an open-hearted, vulnerable, and unguarded style.

“We easily forget that the church is a body,” wrote Stedman. He continues,

We have tried to operate the church as an institution, a corporation, a business. But the reality Paul wants us to grasp in Ephesians is that the church is a body, made up of “cells”—and the cells are individual believers, you and me and our other brothers and sisters in Christ. Each cell has a unique role to play in keeping the entire body healthy.¹

Red blood cells, white blood cells, nerve cells, muscle cells, skin cells—there are more than two hundred types of cells in the human body, and each type operates in a specialized way. Each type is essential; each cell is important. When cells work in harmony, the body stays healthy. But what happens when some types stop functioning? Or when damaged cells attack other cells? The body degenerates and even dies.

Body life in the church operates by the same principles. Like cells, we must all function in harmony to benefit the church body, but if we stop using our gift or we fight among ourselves, the body suffers and local churches die.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

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Because so much was at stake, Paul begged his readers to “lead a life worthy of your calling” (Ephesians 4:1), to be humble, gentle, patient, tolerant, and loving toward each other. From the depths of his heart, Paul pleaded,

Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. (4:3)

At our salvation, Christ outfitted us with the necessary tools—at least one spiritual gift for each believer—to achieve His vision for the church. Each church possesses the potential for unity and peace when every member exercises his or her gift. But it’s up to church *leaders* to unlock this treasure. The unity-through-diversity dream won’t happen without the leaders of the church taking specific steps to urge church members toward unity. Thankfully, Paul outlines these steps in Ephesians 4:11–16, and in this study, we’ll discover what they are!



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Whether or not you are a church leader, you fill an influential role in someone else’s life. You can implement the principles in this passage in your personal sphere of influence. Ask the Lord to open your eyes to ways you can apply what His Word is teaching you.

Also, although Paul was speaking to leaders, church members need to hear what he has to say. The purpose of this passage is to inspire leaders to equip you so that you will mature in Christ. Ask the Lord to help you be receptive to the influence of your church leaders and responsive to the Lord’s unique calling for you.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

The apostles and prophets in Paul’s day pioneered the Christian movement, codified God’s Word in the Scriptures, and established the doctrines of the faith. Their work is the foundation on which evangelists and pastor/teachers built local churches, then and now. Paul listed these four vital leadership roles as “gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers” (Ephesians 4:11).

What was the primary responsibility of these church leaders? What were their core purposes? And what was the ultimate outcome? Read *Ephesians 4:12–16*, and we will set out to answer these questions.

Body life in a church is at its best when it reflects an openhearted, vulnerable, unguarded style where the leadership doesn’t remind people of who’s in charge, where image is never at stake, and where the body really does function as such. —Chuck Swindoll



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Observation: Responsibility, Purpose, Outcomes

First, let's observe Paul's immediate reason for addressing church leaders: to spell out their primary responsibility.

The Leaders' Responsibility—Ephesians 4:12

God gave specific gifts to leaders to fulfill an essential task so the church could experience body life. Read Ephesians 4:12, and in the space below, write down what church leaders are supposed to do and what God's people are to do as a result.

Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. (Ephesians 4:12)

Does this verse surprise you? So often, we view our leaders as church employees. We think *they* are the ones to do God's work and build up the church—which we assume is to increase attendance and erect buildings. But that's "corporate" thinking and it's wrong!

Do Paul's instructions change your thinking about what your church leaders should do and your role in the ministry? If so, in what ways?



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The purpose of the church staff isn't to do the work of ministry; it's to train others to do the work of ministry. It's an eye-opening thought, isn't it? We are not to be a group of spectators watching a few people do the work of ministry. We participate. It's like the cells working together. And when they work together, the church is healthy. It's remarkable!
—Chuck Swindoll

Four Core Purposes—Ephesians 4:13–15

The surest signs of a healthy church are God's people doing ministry and building up each other. But what does "healthy" mean, exactly? What is the purpose of all this equipping, doing, and building up in the church? Paul listed four core purposes, and the first two are in [Ephesians 4:13](#). What purposes do you observe in this verse?

What is the next purpose in [4:14](#)?



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And what is another purpose in *Ephesians 4:15*?

A healthy body is one in which believers exhibit unity, maturity, stability, and truth balanced with love. None of these signs of health are possible, however, without the body's connection to its Head. Read *4:13–15* again, and this time write down each time Paul refers to Christ. What do you think Paul was trying to communicate about the church's link to Christ?

This is body life at its best. We grow up. We are not adults living like children. We are adults handling ourselves in an adult manner. One of the great things about being an adult is you're no longer selfish. —Chuck Swindoll

The Ultimate Outcome—Ephesians 4:16

The church connection to its Head leads Paul to assert the ultimate outcome of believers using their spiritual gifts. What was Paul's point in *Ephesians 4:16*?



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The most wonderful fruit from the tree of knowing Christ is *agape*—the love of Christ. Body life is at its ultimate when Christ’s love is lived, spoken, and experienced among its members.

When the body of Christ, the church, is at its healthiest stage, you will witness the outworking of humility (the absence of pride), gentleness (the absence of force), patience (the absence of impatience and rage and anger), tolerance (the absence of legalism and restrictive thinking), and love (the absence of ignoring others and fighting with one another). —Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: The Meaning of “Equip”

A key concept for Paul is *equip*, which is the first step in a series that leads to a healthy church body. The Greek word Paul uses also appears in Matthew 4:21, referring to James and John “repairing their nets.”

Reflect on this image of a fisherman repairing, mending, or completing a net as you consider Paul’s statement to church leaders to “equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church” (Ephesians 4:12). What insight into the meaning of Paul’s command can you infer?

The reason fishermen repair their nets is to put them into action, not to put them on show. The steps are simple: prepare the nets, put them into service, catch fish! How do Paul’s instructions mirror this three-step process of equipping, deploying, and yielding?



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Just as fishermen mend a tear in their nets to make them stronger, church leaders see the needs in their church members, complete what's lacking, and put God's people into service using their spiritual gifts with amazing results in the church. "The whole body is healthy and growing and full of love" (Ephesians 4:16).

The purpose of your time in the body of Christ initially, thanks to these gifts, is to be built up or equipped so that you function in ways that you otherwise would not know to function.

—Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: The Common Good

Paul's teaching on body life echoes throughout his writing to other churches, specifically, the church at Corinth. How do the following verses add to your understanding of what Paul taught in Ephesians 4:12–16?

1 Corinthians 12:4–6

1 Corinthians 12:7



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1 Corinthians 13:1–3

Body life at its best is a beautiful blend of submission to Christ as our Head, acceptance of one another's gifts, and mutual love as we support one another. Let's see how we can bring these principles to life in our world.

Application: Body Life in Action

Ray Stedman's church in California put body life principles into action during special Sunday evening services in which people shared honestly about their struggles, offered practical help, prayed for one another, welcomed outsiders, and celebrated each other's gifts. The openhearted, vulnerable, and unguarded style of ministry transformed their community.

It's possible to put body life principles into action in our own sphere of influence. Can you think of ways you can improve the body life of your immediate family? How can you equip, serve, and build up those nearest you?



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What can you do today to encourage and celebrate the spiritual gifts God gave those you love?

How can you draw others together in unity and build up one another? Maybe the answer is as simple as singing worship songs together, sharing a meaningful verse, or offering encouraging words. Bring body life home and enjoy what Paul dreamed for God's people: relationships that are healthy, growing, and full of love.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, the future feels uncertain and everything in me tries to take control of things out of my control. Grant me a sense of quiet confidence in You. Point me to what's important, such as showing humility, gentleness, patience, and tolerance toward others who are also just as stressed out as I am. Mostly overflow me with Christ so that His love not only meets my needs but pours out to others through me. Bless me with unity, maturity, stability, and truth. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. Ray C. Stedman, *Our Riches in Christ: Discovering the Believer's Inheritance* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1998), 188.

