

The DNA of Christ's Church



Ephesians 4:11-16

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We have been on the subject of the church, and our intention this morning was actually to transition to the next topic, which would have been work. But to be honest with you, there is one sermon that I really want to share with you from Ephesians chapter 4 because in my mind this passage kind of puts together everything that we, as pastors, have been trying to preach about over the last several weeks. This is one of my favorite passages of Scripture concerning the church. It is from this passage that we have been saying for years and years: "The main is to keep the main thing the main thing." Usually, that is the title of the sermon when I preach on this passage—which Mike Pullen asks me to preach at least once a year—to remind us that the main thing is to keep the main the thing the main thing. That is not my title this morning, though. The title of this message is The DNA of the Church. Turn your Bibles to Ephesians chapter 4 as we try to see what is the true DNA of the church, and I pray this is the DNA of

Hardin Baptist. Normally, we read this whole passage and we only get through the first two verses, but because you have heard me preach on this passage so many times, you know those first two verses by heart. We are going to try not to spend the entire message on those two verses, but just give you a summary and then look at what 13–16 really say. Let the words of this passage sink in because this should be the DNA of Hardin Baptist Church.

Scripture

"And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until 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, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 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."

I was listening recently to a podcast by Brother Josh, who is teaching pastors in Malawi. In this broadcast, he made this statement that he heard growing up in Hardin Baptist Church, "the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." He said that he didn't understand until years later that I actually did not originate that statement but that I had actually heard it from someone else, so I want to make sure you guys fully understand I did not originate the phrase, "the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." I think I have tried to tell you many, many times, but sometimes I forget. I came to pastor Hardin Baptist Church in 1983. Just a short time after that I was graced to get to go to a Bible conference that was being taught by Ron Dunn at First Baptist Church in Paducah, Kentucky. He was teaching on Romans chapter 12:1–2, and he made that statement somewhere in his sermon and it stuck with me. Now I

want to be honest with you, I stand before you now, probably 36 or 37 years after hearing him teach Romans 12:1–2, and all I remember him saying is that phrase. I personally believe I know what those verses teach, but I could not tell you what Ron Dunn said in that sermon except “the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.”

I want to make sure we all know the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing, but I want to make sure that we do not just have a slogan or a phrase. I want to make sure that out in the community, or in a Sunday School class, or in a bible fellowship, if someone said to you, “Why in the world does Brother Ricky say the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing,” each one of us would open up our Bibles to Ephesians chapter 4, verses 11–16, and we would point out the following principles we are going to talk about this morning. I don’t want you to remember the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing; I want you to remember the four principles that actually make up the DNA of the church.

Normally, at Hardin, we teach through books of the Bible verse by verse, paragraph by paragraph, chapter after chapter, from start to finish. I am always a little cautious when we do what we are doing right now where we are addressing topics and trying to apply what the Bible teaches to different areas of our life. I want to make sure we do not take anything out of context. Ephesians chapter 4 is in the last part of Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus, and it is in that part where it is dealing with practical application. But the practical application to the church, and in the life of individual Christians, is coming out of this truth that he has told us in the first three chapters of the great things God has done for us in Christ. I want to make sure you understand that you do not do something for God hoping God will do something for you in return. What we do for God should be a response to what God has already done for us in Christ.

God Gave Gifts to the Church

As soon as Paul’s feet come out of those theological clouds, he plants them firmly in the soil of the earth where we live and he talks about the church. He will talk about the family later, he will talk about work later, he will talk about spiritual warfare later, but the first thing he talks about is the

church. In the first part of Ephesians chapter 4, he wants there to be a unity in the church and he reminds us of seven things that should cause us to be unified in the Spirit as the church of Jesus Christ. Then he reminds us of this truth: Jesus Christ defeated death and ascended into the heavens, and when He did, He set captivity free and He gave gifts to men.

Now, I have to be careful here because I was reared on the King James Version of the Bible at Ledbetter Baptist Church. I still love the KJV of the Bible. I wish modern translations had kept that old world "verily, verily" instead of saying "truly, truly," because as a kid I just loved this translation. It was easy to memorize. Sometimes, when I teach Ephesians chapter 4, I struggle to read this from the ESV where it says, "He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers." I want to quote to you what the KJV says when it says, "and He gave some *to be*..." 'To be' is in italics because what the King James translators tried to do when they put a word or phrase in italics was to say these words are not in the original language that Paul wrote but were added to make it smooth in the English. This has just been talking about God giving gifts to men, and when the King James says, "And He gave some," it is not saying He gave some men the gift of prophesy, and He gave some men the gift of apostleship, some men the gift of evangelism, or some men the gift of being a pastor, or some men the gift of being a teacher. That is not what it is saying. It is saying He gave some churches these gifts. This is about the church in general and Hardin Baptist Church in particular. The Bible is teaching God gives the gift of leadership to His churches, and the leader in the church, whether he is an apostle, a prophet, an evangelist, or a pastor/teacher, is a gift from God. How did God give that gift to the church? He gave that gift to the church by the virtue of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I think the reason so many churches in our area are not fulfilling what God has called them to do is because they do not view their leaders as a gift from God. If the churches in our area viewed their leaders as gifts from God, we would not talk about them the way many of us do. We wouldn't go out in public and say what we have said if we truly believed that the leaders in our churches were gifts from God. But I want to tell you what

people say to me all the time, and it is a compliment to you. People in the community actually tell me that they have never heard our church talk about me in a negative way. Now, we know there are some that do, and some that have—but that makes you guys different, that makes Hardin Baptist Church different. Why? Because in the DNA of our church, we understand that God has given us our leaders (Kory, Chris, Nick, Abbey, Shelley, Matt, Tyler, and Ellen) as a gift.

This past weekend, Celisa and I celebrated our 40th year anniversary. All of the plans we had got cancelled because of COVID, so I wracked my brain trying to think what gift I could give her in honor of being married 40 years together. I finally came up with my gift to her, but I had no idea it was going to really do what it did. I said to her, “Starting on our anniversary, I am going to take off from church and give you two weeks and do whatever you want me to do around the house. When we get everything done around the house, we will move to the farm, but for two weeks whatever you want me to do I am going to do it.” Can any of you ladies say amen to that? Celisa was ecstatic! I cannot tell you how many times yesterday she stopped and just bragged on me for what I have gotten accomplished around the house this week. Not one time has she criticized the gift I gave her. Here is what was so neat, not only did I give her the gift she wanted, but I gave her the gift she needed. I know sometimes our churches do not have the leaders they want, but I pray if the leaders in this church are who we are supposed to have, they are who we need whether we want them or not.

1. Leaders Equip the Saints

Now, verse 12 is going to start with us, as leaders, the leaders of this church, having to keep the main thing the main thing. I remind myself often that if I am going to keep the main thing the main thing, what will be the main thing of my life? I believe this Bible passage teaches that the main thing is for me as a leader to equip the saints, and that is you. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you are not a sinner saved by grace. You were a sinner, but because you have been saved by grace, that old sinner you were is dead and you are now alive in Christ, and you are a saint of God. I am here because of you...saints!

Can I say something critical of the King James Version? The King James Version inserted what is called the fatal comma. The King James Version says that He gave some to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints, for the work of ministry, and for the building up of the body of Christ. What that sounded like was that God gives pastors, God gives apostles, God gives evangelists, God gives teachers, God gives prophets to the church, and the leaders do three things. ¹ They equip the saints, ² they do the work of ministry, and ³ they build up the body of Christ. Therefore, throughout the English-speaking world, we have had this distinction between the laity and the clergy. That fatal comma in the King James Version of the Bible almost caused us to turn the church into a spectator's sport to where we hire a pastor and leaders, and they equip us, they do the work, and they cause the church to grow. The church shows up on Sunday morning, and we amen and applaud them, cheer them, pray for them, and keep them going because we are the spectators and they are the clergy. That is not true! You will never see a sign about Hardin Baptist Church where it will declare the minister being Bro. Ricky, because I am not the minister of this church; I am just the pastor, one of several pastors. Do you know who the ministers of this church are? It is you, the members.

I will never forget in the winter of 1982 and 1983 sitting with the pulpit committee of this church and them asking me if they called me what I would do as a pastor. The only thing I knew to say was, "Could we just try, to the best of our ability, to build a church around the truth of Ephesians chapter 4?" and we went through chapter 4 verses 11-16, and that has become the DNA of this church. The leaders of this church have the responsibility to keep the main thing the main thing, and if we keep the main thing the main thing, here is what we will do: we will equip you, the saints. This word equip, was a word in the biblical world used to get a ship ready to sail. That is why I am here. That is why all of our leaders are here. We are here to make sure that this church is ready to set sail; that we keep sailing.

When I am in Brazil, I cannot tell you how many times I have sat on the bank of the Amazon River in a little hamburger shack and look out at the

Amazon River. This river is huge, and I see ships going down it; ships, not boats! Cruise ships that come from other countries in Europe make it all the way to the Amazon River, all the way to the city of Manaus and the pass by Parintins. But there is another kind of ship that goes down the Amazon River. They are not cruise ships; they are cargo ships. They are loaded with soybeans, automobiles, sugar cane, oil, raw materials, and finished products from other countries. They come down that river and I sit there, and while I am eating my cheeseburger and drinking my maracuja, I see both a cruise ship and a cargo ship.

As a saint, how do you view the church? Do you view us as a cruise ship, or do you view us as a cargo ship? I hope there is not a person here who believes the church is a cruise ship, because if you view the church as a cruise ship, you are going to believe the church is about you. You are going to believe that you are a passenger, and membership affords you to have a group of people around you that is all about you. I want to bust your bubble if that is what you believe. Hardin Baptist Church is not a cruise ship. We are a cargo ship. As a cargo ship, what is in our DNA is never being a passenger. It is never about what you want or about you as a church member. It is about our cargo. God has placed—in the belly of us—the gospel of Jesus Christ. As a church, the cargo has been unloaded into our lives, and we, just like a cargo ship, go from port to port transporting the cargo. God has brought each one of us in this church here for a purpose. And our purpose is to make sure that we get the cargo, which is the message of Jesus Christ, to every person, not only here in our community, but around the world so that they hear the good news of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

2. Saints Do the Work of Ministry

When you are a crew member on a cargo ship, you never ask the question or think about what you want. It is about what is best for the cargo and what is the best thing you can do to help our church get the cargo from here to there. So, my responsibility as the pastor is to make sure we understand who we are and what our purpose is through my teaching and through my preaching. That is the responsibility of every staff member we have. So what is the responsibility of the crew members? It is to do the

work. Now, let me just say that even as a pastor, it is still my responsibility to do my personal work as a Christian too—but all of us together do the work of ministry. All of us find a place where we get dirty. All of us find a place where we rub elbows and get shoulder to shoulder with people. Right now, we have to stay six feet away from each other, but we minister to people, whether it is inside the walls of this church or outside the walls of this church. Please hear me, not all of us can have a responsibility inside the walls of this church. Most of us will have a responsibility outside the walls of this church and that is what makes the church the church. We do not just do this for us, we do this for them, and we do this for God.

3. The Work Builds Up the Body

What does the work of ministry do? It builds up the body. What builds up the body? It is not having a preacher who is more skilled than other preachers in the community. It is not about us being in this location. It is not about us. It is about us doing what God has called us to do, and that is the work of ministry. As we do the work of ministry, that is what builds up the body. Please hear this. If you are going to say that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing, you have got to believe this—leaders equip the saints, saints do the work of ministry, and it is the work of ministry that builds up the body of Christ.

Now, I am adding a new point this morning. I have never given you this other point with the first three. If I could sum up verses 13–16, I would sum it up this way...until we grow up and do our part. What is the main thing? It is to keep the main thing the main thing. So, what is the main thing? Leaders equip, saints do the work, and the work builds up the body...until...until what? Until we all attain—not some of us, not part of us, all of us. Do you understand the responsibility you have? Do I understand the responsibility I have? I represent us. You represent us. You are us. It doesn't matter if you aren't a member here. If you have attended Hardin Baptist so long that everyone knows you go to Hardin, when they see you out in public they think you are us...and you are us, you just do not know you are us. You are a crew member. Quit being a passenger, and become a crew member!

How long have I got to do what I have to do? (Can I just make a disclaimer here? I am hearing in the community that some of you are saying I am ready to retire. You may want me to retire, but I am not retiring any time soon. Can I just put that rumor to rest?) I am 59 years young, but if I take the Word of God seriously, it says I have been given to this church as a gift, as one of the pastors, until we ALL...not until I am 62, not until I am 65, but "until we ALL," that is everyone of us, "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."

I do not know if some of you know this or not, but I have got the short gene inside my DNA. You will not know this, but my great granddaddy, Albert, (we called him Poppa) was about 6'3 or 6'4. He was a BIG man. When I was a little kid I remember him being down in the field, and when he would sing, we could hear him for two miles away. The problem was my great granddaddy married a lady who was little, teeny and tiny, and all of us Cunningham's got her short gene. None of us got his tall gene. I have lived my whole life wanting to be taller than I am. Do any of you have the short gene too and you wish you were taller? I do not know if tall people ever wish they were shorter, but short people wish they were taller. I used to have that chart on the wall because I saw someone who was 6'2 and they played basketball, and that is what I wanted to be. So in my closet, I had a stick and a piece of tape, and I had it marked out and I would measure myself...I never made it. I never could grow up to be 6'2 because I do not have the DNA.

Speak the Truth in Love

Can I just say this? You have the DNA of Christ, not Adam. Grow up with us! You have no excuse. I have no excuse. This church has no excuse not to grow up into the full measure of Christ because it is in our DNA. Then, Paul contrasts this in verse 14. He says I do not want you to be children anymore tossed to and fro. This is a picture of a boat with no motor, and a wave rolls it one way and then the wind blows it the other way. The thought is don't be babies, don't be children, in that every time a new something comes along, you are influenced by it! He says, "Rather, speaking the truth in love." Now, there is no English version of the Bible

that translates this correctly. You cannot literally translate this from Greek into English correctly, because when you do, you have to make a verb and a participle a noun. What this actually says in the Greek is "Rather, truthing it." I know you grammarians are saying you cannot say truthing it. I know, but Paul could because in the Greek language you could. The English translators were trying to figure out what this meant, and the way they conveyed it to us was that all of us are supposed to speak the truth in love. Now, some believe this means as a Christian we can say something harshly, critically, because it is the truth, and then at the end say, "Oh yes I love you." No. This is not talking about what you speak. This is not talking about what you say. This is talking about what you live out. We are to grow up so that we live out the gospel, and when you live out the gospel, you do it in a loving way where you put the needs of others ahead of yourself just as Christ did our needs. God wants us to be built up so that we will grow up, and as we grow up, guess what? If we are being equipped by sound, biblical teaching and preaching, then each one of us, as a part, can do our part. Then when we do our part, as we grow up guess what happens to the body? We grow up too. We cannot grow up until you grow up.

I was so proud of us when COVID hit and we all adjusted our lives to living in a country where we had to make sacrifices for the health of others. I pray I continue to be proud of us as we continue to truth out the gospel in a community, in a state, and in a nation that is getting more and more divided, to the point that if we are not careful, my grandkids will not see what I saw and have the privileges I had. I will be honest with you—I want to be on record saying I am not putting my faith in any political party or in any political leader. I am putting my faith in a grass roots movement called Christians and the church of Jesus Christ! I ask you to get off the cruise ship you are on and get on this cargo ship with us. We cannot do it the way we have done it, but we are going to continue to do it, and we are going to do it the best way we can because we do not believe the church is about us. We believe the church is about God and we believe it is about them, and we desire to take the cargo, the gospel, to every person from here to there.

