

Queen Victoria was England's longest-ruling monarch. In 1837, at 18 years of age, she became queen, and she ruled for 64 years, until she died in 1901. "But when she was young, Victoria didn't even know that one day she was going to be Queen - she was shielded from that fact, in case the knowledge would 'spoil' her.

When her teacher finally did let her discover for herself that she would one day be Queen of England, Victoria's response was, 'Then I will be good!' ... She understood that she needed to live her life based on her royal calling.¹ We do too.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the church in Ephesus, says **"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called"**

You know you've been called to something higher, don't you??? To live as a disciple of Jesus Christ, is a privileged position, but it's also a calling of great responsibility. It is a calling to live differently – to live a life of hope; a life of joy; a life of integrity; a life of holiness; and a life of love... What am I describing? Christ-likeness. Godliness. As God's children, we are called to Christ-likeness... How do we get there????

Usually when I go for a ride on my push-bike, I actually prefer to ride by myself, because it's really hard to be equally matched to somebody – to find somebody who's going to ride at exactly the same pace as me... I find I'm either hardly lifting my heart-rate, or as is becoming increasingly common for me these days, they're too good for me, and they just bust

me – I might be able to keep up for them for 15-20km, but then I just can't match them any more.... And so I like to just ride by myself...

And sometimes, some Christians feel, that to move on spiritually, they feel a need shake off, or distance themselves from other Christians, because they feel these other Christians are holding them back, or maybe they feel that these other Christians are too far advanced for them...

Today's bible reading, is about growing up – it's about maturing in Christ.... And sadly, sometimes we can get it into our heads, that the best way for us to “grow up”, is to distance ourselves from other disciples of Christ, because we feel they're holding us back – they're not as spiritual as I am – they're not as holy as I am – they're not as committed as I am....

And if today's lesson is about growing up in Christ, the first point of the lesson, is “The best place for someone to grow up, is in a family.” (now you're not going to argue with that, are you???)

We are certainly called, to **walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called....**, but that walk is **not** a solitary march – it's a walk **together** – It's a walk in company, with other disciples of Christ.... ² **with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,** ³ **eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.**

And so we journey together, and my role is not to grow up by myself, at the expense of all of my brothers and sisters – we grow up together. And sometimes you’ll be helping me to grow up in Christ, and sometimes I’ll be helping you to grow up in Christ, and we’ll all be helping each other to grow up in Christ – as a family – not leaving any behind... And for us to be able to stick together in this, we **must** practice humility; gentleness; patience; we must bear with one another in love; we must be ³ **eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.**

Do you get that? It says here that we should be ³ eager to **maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.** I take this command very seriously.

.... Whenever I’ve heard this passage preached on, it’s always been about maintaining unity in the one little congregation. And that way we could have our nice, little, BushDisciples unity, and it’s a very easy thing to preach on, and encourage... But do you know who this letter is addressed to? Let me read you the address: **To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus:** Paul wrote this letter to the Holy ones – to the Christians of a particular locality... Now, if Paul was to put **our** name in the address, he wouldn’t write “To the saints who are in “Bush Disciples” – What he’d write, is “To the Saints who are in St George, and are faithful in Christ Jesus.” ... This is much bigger than unity in our chosen little huddle....

For many years, I have believed, very strongly, that there are way too many divisions in the Christian church – There are way too many divisions in the Christian church, in our own

town. And my heart's desire is, for the saints – the Christians, in this district, to be one.

People who aren't Christians, are usually the first ones to ask the obvious questions, "*Why are there so many different denominations? – If you're all Christians, why can't you all get on together? Why can't you worship together?*" And sadly, I believe a large reason for this, is because we are **not** eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit ...

Paul says: There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Well if this is so, then why is there not "One church, of faithful disciples of Christ, in this district"???? Why do we have 9????ⁱⁱ

And you'd have every right to say to me, "Michael, you believe there should be only one church – you hypocrite – you left a church, and started another one... Haven't you added to the problem???" Well, hold on to that question. We're going to get to that a little bit later. At this point, I want you to understand that we are to be **eager** to be in unity with other Christians... I'm not going to dodge that question – we'll be coming back to it.

But we won't get to it, if we don't move on.

A few weeks ago, we talked about the grace to become a minister of God. And I said “I’m happy to be known as a minister of Christ, but only if you too, recognise that you also, are a minister of Christ.” I am not the only minister here. You are ministers too – by the grace of God... And we talked about how none of us are more important than the other – we just have different roles.

Well Paul lists here, 5 specific roles that we find within the Christian church. Apostles; Prophets; Evangelists; Shepherds; and Teachers...

Now, if we’re all ministers, well maybe we probably need some kind of ministerial training, don’t we??? – we need to be equipped... And Paul says that God has given **these** people ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.....

When you become a Christian, you don’t just instantly know all about Christ; you don’t just instantly know how to live; you don’t just instantly become a great Bible scholar and a repository of all Godly truth... We need to be taught; we need to be built up; we need to be trained, and Apostles; Prophets; Evangelists; Shepherds; and Teachers, are the ones who do that training... So, what do each of these roles look like?

The Apostles were eye-witnesses to Christ – they were eye-witnesses to the resurrection, and they testified about Christ, and wrote it down in the bible. They had what we call “Apostolic Authority”. And if you want to know what the

Apostles taught, read your bible. They had the authority to teach the truth about Christ and salvation.

So, if anybody ever teaches you something which is contrary to the apostolic witness that we find in the Bible, well just don't listen to it – it's a load of rubbish. *That's why when the JW's come knocking on your door, don't listen to them – don't be convinced by them, because they've changed their bibles, and taken away what the Apostles have taught us about Christ.*

The second role, is that of the Prophets. Sometimes, somebody with a gift of prophecy, can deliver a word from the Lord – a specific word for a specific person (or a specific church) for a specific situation, which when heeded, leads the recipient into a deeper understanding of God's will and purpose. Now, as you can imagine, if anyone should presume to speak as God's mouth-piece, that **could** be open to horrendous abuses, and we are told in the Bible time and time again, to "Beware of **false** prophets"... But we have to be careful, **not** to 'throw the baby out with the bath water'. Let's not discard prophecies altogether. Can you imagine just how helpful, a direct word from the Lord can be, in guiding us in His will??? 1 Thessalonians 5: ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast what is good. ²² Abstain from every form of evil. So, if God gives somebody here, a word of prophecy, we are to test it, and if it is from God, we receive it. If not, reject it.

Thirdly, there are the Evangelists. Thank God for the Evangelists. Somebody led you to Christ, didn't they? It might have been your parents; it might've been your Sunday

School teacher; If might've been an RE teacher; It might've been a Christian friend; or maybe Billy Graham; or maybe it was on Christian television or Christian radio.... But somewhere, there was an evangelist who led you to Christ – who got you started in your Christian faith. Thank God for the Evangelists.

Then there are the shepherds, and the teachers. An evangelist will make a major impact on your life, but their input is for a very short time. After the evangelists have done their work, the shepherds and the teachers begin their life-long ministry of building us up. And often these are the same person. A shepherd is someone who guards the flock – they keep the wolf away... But my understanding is, that a shepherd really has two rolls – to care for and to love the flock, and to guard the flock.

2 Timothy 4:³ For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. And a shepherd is someone who guards against this...

A shepherd is someone who, when one of the flock says, “I’ve been listening to ‘so & so’, and I’m really finding this teaching helpful...” – the shepherd is the one who says “Hmmm. Let’s have a look and see what the Bible says about this.” “Is this teaching more Christ-centred, or self-centred” “Is this teaching in line with what the apostles taught?” And in this way, the shepherd is guarding the flock...

And that's why the shepherds and Teachers often go together. It's really hard for a shepherd to guard against false teaching, if the shepherd cannot counter it with Godly teaching, because there's a lot of false teaching out there. Whatever your heart desires – whatever your itching ears are wanting to hear, there's certain to be somebody out there offering it, and you'll get exactly what you want, but you won't get the truth... So what's the role of a teacher?

The role of a teacher, is to preach Christ. It is someone who can take God's word, and open it up in a way, that helps all of the saints to **understand** God's word; to know Christ better; and to understand how we should live our lives – according to God's word. That's what I'm doing now – **my** main role in the church, is as a shepherd and a teacher. My job, is to love you and keep us together, and to help to equip you to be a minister for God... It is to encourage you to grow in Christ, and in your knowledge and love of God – It is to encourage you to maintain fellowship in the wider church, and at the same time, to help you to recognise good teaching and to distinguish it from the bad.

So, I've already said today's reading is about "growing up" – it's about "maturing in Christ".

What does a mature Christian look like? *Is it based on age, so we look at someone really old, like Roy or John (in fact Roy reminded me just the other week, that he's the oldest one in our church), so do I look at Roy and John and say "They look really old, so they must be mature Christians", and then and then I look at someone really young (like my wife), and therefore Robyn must be an immature Christian.... Nup....*

So, what **are** the attributes of a mature Christian? (Well, this isn't a comprehensive list – it's just what I've pulled out from this reading) – The attributes of a mature Christian:

- Humility
- Gentleness
- Patience
- They bear with one-another in love
- They're eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit

These things tell me that Mature Christians grow together as a body – grow together as a family, and it's about living in such a way, as to maintain our togetherness in Christ.

I'm going to be bold and say, “You won't find a mature Christian who doesn't meet together with other Christians. You won't find a mature Christian who doesn't seek regular fellowship with other Christians.”.. because that's one of the elements of maturity – that they eagerly desire unity... I've often heard it said, “I don't have to go to church to be a Christian” – well you do, if you want to be a mature Christian....

But here's some more attributes of a mature Christian, and these ones relate more to the **essence** of our faith – what we believe. Mature Christians:

- Have a unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God (that means together, as a body, we believe the same stuff.)

Liberal theology throws around the phrase “unity in diversity”, and they say, “You can believe what you like – we can all believe something different, and in our diversity of belief, we have unity...” I have a one word

comment on that – “Codswallop” (for those of you who didn’t know, that’s a technical theological term, used to describe an untruth).

Mature Christians have a **unity** of faith – they believe the same things... When the Apostles talk about ‘unity in diversity’, they’re certainly not talking about a diversity of belief - they’re talking about a diversity of gifts, and having a unity of faith.

- And this unity of faith, is to **the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ**. That means we’re constantly yielding ourselves, in submission to Christ, focused on Him, to know Him and His will.

Mature Christians are:

- No longer swayed by false doctrine
- They are able to recognise human cunning & craftiness in deceitful schemes
- And they Speak the truth in love

At this point, I’m coming back to answer the question that I promised I wasn’t going to avoid – “Why, when I believe that unity is so important, in practice, there are times for a church to (in the positive) be re-born and renewed, (or in the negative) to split... And at this stage, in accordance with v15, I pray by the grace of God, for the Christian maturity, to speak the truth in love.

Mature Christians, will **not** be swayed by false doctrine.
Mature Christians **can** recognise human cunning & craftiness

in deceitful schemes... And as **you** grow in Christ – as you study God’s word – as you are trained by the Apostles; Prophets; Evangelists; Shepherds; and Teachers, you can expect to become one who is not swayed – you can expect to become one who **does** recognise when the devil is attempting to lead you away from Godliness...

But the thing is, we’re not born as mature Christians. And my desire, is to be part of a church with a whole heap of brand new Christians – immature Christians, being trained in maturity... Now, these people might be teenagers, or they could be old codgers... But new, or even old immature Christians, are more easily swayed by false doctrine – and they don’t so easily recognise deceitful schemes ... What is a shepherd to do????

Lord, give me grace to speak the truth in love....

A shepherd’s role, is to guard the flock.

The wild dog problem in the Balonne shire, is worse than it ever has been before. There once was a time when wool and mutton were the staple economy of this whole region. All the farmers were sheep cockies, with just a few cattle about to make one’s diet a bit more interesting. Wild dogs – dingos – kill sheep by the dozens – by the hundreds – by the thousands...

When everybody had sheep, everybody cared. Every shepherd, did his bit to protect his sheep, and to keep the wild dogs out of the district. – no dingos allowed.

But then when the wool industry crashed, and the cattle industry boomed, a lot of people didn’t worry so much any

more. Cattle aren't any where near as vulnerable as sheep, so the wild dogs bred up, and now they're a menace. Some people have found they've had to give up sheep altogether, because there's just so many dogs ripping their flock apart...

That's the state of the Balonne shire at the moment, and that's why they're spending so much effort across the shire to try and control dogs...

Now, let me take this analogy another massive step (away from reality, and into fantasy)...

Imagine, if instead of controlling wild dogs, the council started breeding them up and releasing them... Imagine if the good shepherds out there, were doing their best to control the dogs, but the hierarchy were the source of them....

What is a shepherd to do???

I'd leave that shire and go to another one – Or I'd put up a dog fence, and for the sake of the local flock – to keep the local flock together, I'd build a place of safety, where the sheep could be sheep, and the flock could grow...

Do you understand what I'm saying???

When ungodly teaching, and hollow, deceptive theology – when human cunning & craftiness in deceitful schemes, are not guarded against, but become the ways of a denomination – when they become the tools of the trade of its leaders – when they become the content of its publications, and the substance of its worship.... When those who are supposed to be shepherds, become the wolves... What is one to do?

Where there is no unity of faith, what is one to do? When one who speaks the truth in love, is branded as “intolerant” and “opinionated” What is one to do?

Christian unity must include unity of faith – unity of belief... I left, because there was no unity of faith between the denomination and the congregation. I believe God’s desire is for there to be Christian unity in this town. And my hope and my prayer, is that all faithful Christians in this district, would eagerly desire unity enough, to be able to shake off the bonds they currently have to tradition – to break the ties they have to wolfish shepherds, ... and that we could all just grow together in Christ, as one body... Eagerly desiring Godly unity...

This is what it means to build ourselves up together in love. Paul is urging the Ephesians, to walk in a manner worthy of their calling – to become mature Christians, eagerly desiring unity, so that the body builds itself up together in love.... And I do not believe that means denomination by denomination building ourselves up... I believe it means the Christian church together – in love – in faith – in truth – in unity – in Christ.

This, is our holy calling.

Let’s pray,

Lord, we pray for the Christian church in St George & in this district.

Put into our hearts, an eager desire for unity.

Lord, we thank you for your Apostles; Prophets; Evangelists; Shepherds & Teachers

Lord, help us to learn from them, and to grow together in Christ.

Lord, help us to recognise Godly shepherds and teachers.
That together, we may grow, and be equipped for Christian
ministry in this district.

Lord, we are all part of the body...
But sometimes each part of the body isn't working properly
The body has become disjointed, and separated.
It's been dismembered, and parts of it are off – it's gone
gangrene...

Lord, Build your church.
We pray for real unity
Righteous unity.
That each part is working properly,
Making the body grow,
So that it builds itself up in love.

Lord, give us love for one another.
Give us love for other Christians in this town.
Make us One, Lord we pray.
Amen.

Questions?

ⁱ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Rich* (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1998), pp. 13-14. Found at <http://www.cheriefresonke.com/who-you-are-in-christ-part-1/>

ⁱⁱ Anglican; Roman Catholic; Uniting; Presbyterian; AOG; COC; Brethren; Bush Disciples; Bowhay house church