

Spiritual Scams

Ephesians 4:13-14

September 11, 2016

Last month we dug into Ephesians 4:7-16 and learned that each Christ-follower has been given a spiritual gift and that each one of us has been called into Christian service. One thing that happens when we use our gifts in ministry is that the church grows and matures. Today, let's focus in on this idea of maturity in vv. 13-14. Spiritual maturity matters because spiritual scams are all around us!

In fact, there are all kinds of scams around us. Money scams, identity fraud, phone scams, get rich quick schemes, charity scams, Ponzi schemes, and internet scams. This just begins to scratch the surface. Sometimes scams target the elderly but other times it's the young. They often target the poor but they also target the rich. They target people who are less educated and also very smart people. Ok... basically, anyone who is human can be scammed. Even good people, even God's people can be deceived by scams!

And, many of these scams are spiritual scams. I remember a particularly popular scam back in the 80's. Remember the booklet, "88 REASONS Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988?" 3.2 million copies were printed. 200,000 were sent to U.S. pastors.¹ The booklet was written by Edgar C. Whisenant, who "predicted that Jesus would return to rapture His church sometime...[in] September ...When the September prediction failed, [he] updated the time to October...[he] remain[ed] undaunted: 'The evidence is all over the place that it is going to be in a few weeks anyway.'"

"Thousands took the booklet seriously, some even quitting their jobs to prepare. Attendance increased in some churches." Some saw it as a scam, others just weren't quite sure what to think. The saddest part of this whole thing is that it revealed just how few Christians at that time were truly able to discern why this kind of reasoning is so unbiblical.

And so, the main question for us this morning is this: How do we avoid getting spiritually scammed today? And, how do we avoid looking foolish as Christians in front of an unbelieving world? How do we make sure that we don't bring embarrassment or disgrace on God's Church?

Ephesians 4:13-14 teaches us that Christ wants to build up His body, the church, "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. 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."

This phrase, "unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God," is talking about Christian doctrine. It's talking about the core things that we can know to be true about Christ; things that we can stake our faith on with confidence and conviction.² As a Grace Community, we are not just united around loving each other genuinely. Although that is certainly important, we should also be united around God's Truth and a common theological understanding of who Jesus is.³

But properly understanding God's Truth is a process for us as Christ-followers. We have to pay attention to this word "until," in v. 13. "Until" is not just about waiting a certain amount of time for maturity to happen on its own. This word "until" points to a key purpose for being here as a church.

¹ <http://www.equipt.org/article/88-reasons-what-went-wrong>

² *NIV Study Bible* 2001, p. 1990 footnote.

³ *NIV Study Bible* 2001, p. 1990 footnote.

We need to be working together toward mutual maturity. An essential for spiritual maturity is unity in our doctrine; our system of beliefs.

Absolute truth exists, it matters very much, and it can be and should be known. To put it simply: Doctrine matters! What we believe about God and His Word matters! Christ-followers should value this and pursue it together until we all reach maturity.

It's interesting how v. 13 contrasts with v. 14. The idea of a mature man⁴ is set against the idea of an infant. Ephesians 4:13-14 says, "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. 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 people in their deceitful scheming."

V. 13 goes from the positive goal of the mature body being built up to the negative image in v. 14 when the body is not being built up. V. 14 describes the immaturity of an infant being tossed around by the waves. It's kind of an odd mix of biological and nautical imagery. It's not so much that the seas are even that rough; but, they are being blown here and there by EVERY wind of teaching. Paul's image of an infant causes me to find myself thinking, hey! Somebody get that little baby out of the boat!

But Paul is not talking biological children here; he is talking about spiritual infants. He's putting the challenge before all of us, that we should be actively maturing in our spiritual development. It brings to mind a warning in Hebrews 5:11-14, "We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. 12 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! 13 Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. 14 But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."

We can't afford to become lazy in our Bible learning. We must guard against spiritual sluggishness and distractions that hinder our maturity.

This is why Ephesians 4:13 describes our ultimate maturity as "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." Failure to become mature means that we are still infants in our faith. If we are unable to evaluate and discern the various spiritual teachings of our time, we will fall as "easy prey to every new theological fad."⁵

A critical question for each one of us today is this: Is Spiritual Maturity one of my primary goals in life? We are either maturing spiritually or we are in an unhealthy state of arrested spiritual development. What are you doing to mature yourself spiritually? Let me suggest a few strategies for spiritual growth:

1. Participate in a Small Group. Let "iron sharpen iron" as you connect with other believers in a dynamic environment where you can really spar biblically and theologically. Our greatest accountability, prayer, and encouragement often happens in a smaller setting.
2. Become a member of our church. Be intentional about committing yourself to this church body. Bring yourself under greater accountability and put yourself in a place where you are more invested in its work. Stretch yourself to better understand our Statement of Faith and key doctrines. Challenge yourself to be more intimately connected with the inner workings of the decisions that are made on

⁴ εἰς ἄνδρα τέλειον Also see more in O'Brien pp.307-308

⁵ O'Brien, Peter T., *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, 1999, p. 309.

the budget, hiring, and election of church officers. Actively support our efforts toward effective ministry in our community and world.

3. Step up to the next level of leadership. We can't afford to have anyone do nothing; so make sure you start doing something. It may mean helping at Kids Club, in Sunday School, or in the nursery. It may mean leading a new adult small group. God might be calling you to serve as an Elder, Trustee, or on our Global Connections Team. Personally, I stepped into a new role as Lead Pastor. And I've gotta tell you, it's really stretching me, in good ways. God is using it to mature me and grow me in my faith. Do hard things for God! It's challenging but it's also exciting and rewarding. And, it's an effective way to grow and mature in your faith.

4. Be a Berean in every area of your life. Whether it's your daily quiet time, the sermons, or a Christian television show or podcast, embrace an attitude of expository listening.⁶ More often we hear the term "expository preaching." The idea of Expository Preaching is that, rather than someone giving you their own ideas and opinions, they are studying God's Word to see what it says. Then, that message is delivered with authority, not because of who the preacher is, but rather because of who God is and what He says in His Word. So practice expository listening. Everything should be weighed against the Scriptures.

In Acts 17:1-12 we read about this guy named Paul, who is traveling all over the world trying to persuade people that Jesus is the Messiah. And, he is convincing many people, and not just Jews but non-Jews as well. And oftentimes Paul causes quite an uproar. Because things got so bad in Thessalonica, the believers sent Paul away to Berea. And, as soon as they get there, Paul goes right to the Jewish synagogue and starts teaching about Jesus again. Now, I'd imagine that the people in Berea must have heard something about the uproar over in Thessalonica. Even though it was about 40 miles away by boat,⁷ Thessalonica was a major city of its time. I'm guessing news traveled fast even without the Internet.

Here's the point, rather than being thrown into turmoil, the Bereans responded in a more mature way. Acts 17:11 tells us, "Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." So we find here a wise and healthy response to Paul's message. There was still great eagerness, but it was tempered by the maturity of comparing Paul's teaching with that of Scripture. I'm certain that Paul was glad for this. After all, Acts 17:2-3 tells us that Paul "reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving..." This was Paul's custom, not to lean on his own intelligence, but on the truth and power of God's Word.

Also note that, in v. 11, the Bereans were examining the Scriptures EVERY day. "Here was no mere emotional response to the gospel, but one based on intellectual conviction."⁸ These Bereans stand in solidarity with our Swedish heritage in the EFCA. "Where stands it written?"⁹ or "Huru Staar Det Skrevet" was the required foundation for our Christian belief and practice. In other words, show me where it says that in the Bible if you expect me to believe it. As a church, we choose to be centered around God's Word as our main authority.

Spiritual maturity is our primary defense against the Spiritual Scams of our day. Scams like Prosperity Gospel Scams¹⁰ which say that Jesus died so you and I could become financially wealthy and never have any problems. But we know that in Matthew 16:24 Jesus says, "...Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

⁶ Exposit = explain. Exegete = interpretation

⁷ about 50 by land

⁸ Marshall, I. Howard, *Acts: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Eerdmans, 1980, p. 280.

⁹ See more from Arnold T. Olson.

¹⁰ ECFA = Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability and a system of checks/balances in how money goes in/out of ministries

Another one is the “They’re Such Nice People” Scams. I had a friendly woman named Karen who came to my door last year and wanted to tell me about the Bible. So, I said, “sure.” We spent several weeks going through the Bible and I tried many times to explain to her that Jesus is fully God; that the doctrine of the Trinity is all throughout the Bible. But she had been deceived for many years. The teachings of the Jehovah’s Witnesses had scammed her. And here she was at my kitchen table not realizing that I wasn’t going to fall for this scam. She was such a kind, well-intentioned person. But, she was sincerely wrong. Hebrews 1:3 assures us that Jesus is the exact representation of God’s being.



Pluralism Scams are also out there in our world. The bumper sticker, “Coexist” is a nice reminder that we should all get along. However, some will take it farther and claim that all spiritual roads can coexist because they all lead to God. They’ll say that ultimately we all believe the same. But when you do an honest comparison of Islam, Judaism, Wicca, and so on, you’ll find that they are quite different from each other and that they lead to different places. As Christians, we understand that in John 14:6 Jesus taught that, “...no one come to the Father except through me.” So, either Jesus is a liar, or He’s right. But as Christ-followers we certainly can’t agree with the idea that all spiritual roads lead to God.

How do we avoid getting scammed spiritually? The answer is that we must become spiritually mature and “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) Our defense against Spiritual Scams is Spiritual Maturity. Brothers and Sisters in Christ, be on your guard; let nothing move you. Stand firm in your doctrine!¹¹

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on September 11, 2016 by Pastor Jerry Johnson.

¹¹ See 1 Corinthians 15:58 & 16:13