**The Practices of a United Church**

Ephesians 4:10-16

Good morning brothers and sisters! What a privilege to be with you today! And ***thank you so much for sharing Pastor Darryl with Oakwood***. No doubt Oakwood got the better part of that deal - blessed by His wisdom, godliness and ministry experience, while you all are stuck with me. You got the short straw there for sure.

My wife, Kristin, is here with me today. We have four boys - three in college and one in 7th grade. We’ve been in Tampa five years now - and we are huge fans of Florida.

I’ve been blessed **to know Darryl for 3-4 years** now and I’m honored to consider him a good friend and ministry partner I have learned a lot from. He really is a wonderful pastor, theologian and leader, isn’t he? And he is a tremendous bridge builder and unifier.

He and I are working together with a growing coalition of gospel-centered churches called **Tampa Bay 4 Christ**. I’ll share more about that later - but for now just wanted to share the context of how we know each other and what set up this pulpit swap. I recently heard this description of biblical partnership:

**Biblical Partnership:**

* I know you > I love you > I like you > I need you

Darryl and I have walked through this progression and ***today is an expression of “I need you.”*** My church needs his voice, his heart, his experience. And, apparently, he thinks you all will benefit from some of what I bring. You can fill out your customer satisfaction survey with the QR code on the back after the service.

***Every relationship begins with a meeting*** - you somehow get to know each other. With another believer there is a rapid bond of love that forms because we love Jesus so we quickly move from knowing each other to loving each other. But it takes time and relationship to grow from loving a brother to **LIKING each other**. You get to know their sense of humor, their story and experiences, their joys and struggles. And then, over time, you appreciate how much you NEED each other - that God planned the differences between you so He could give you a Tom Cruise and Renee Zelwegger “You complete me,” moment. (Jerry Maguire).

That idea that we need each other - that we truly complete each other - is wonderfully true in marriage and also wonderfully, **beautifully true IN THE CHURCH**. Our hope and prayer, in time, is that our two churches will follow this progression to know, love, like and need each other - growing into the unity we already have in Christ. So let’s dive into Ephesians 4 where we will see the big picture of what Jesus is doing and then ***how we can engage in that work as the Church Unified and the Church mobilized TOGETHER.***

**What Jesus is doing:**

“He who descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.” Ephesians 4:10

What a beautiful picture of ***the life and ministry of Jesus!*** The One who created all things, who is in very nature God, the eternal Son of God *descended* from His throne in heaven to be born fully human.

But Jesus descended further than that - He lived **a life of humble service that led ultimately to the cross** to pay for our sins. He descended, in that sense to the deepest pit of hell as he endured the wrath of God in your place and mine. But the story of Jesus doesn’t end there in suffering on the cross or in death, sealed away in the tomb. The one who descended also ascended - first in victory, triumphing over sin and death forever. Then he ascended back into heaven, taking His seat at the right hand of the Father - in the position of ultimate authority, glory and honor.

**And why did Jesus descend and ascend?** Look at the purpose of His amazing gospel work: “that he might fill all things.” HOW is Jesus working now to fill all things?

Verse 11:

**Gospel Saturation:**

“He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry.” Ephesians 4:11-12

* Jesus is filling all things **through us**, His Church

Do you see the point? Jesus is filling the earth with the knowledge of His glory, goodness and love - ***THROUGH US***. He gave us different kinds of leaders to equip all of the saints for the work of ministry. That is how our humble Savior who descended to the lowest place and then ascended above all things - that is how King Jesus is working to reconcile all things to Himself - through us. Through His One, Unified Body.

Pastor Darryl is part of a growing network of pastors and leaders called **Tampa Bay 4 Christ** that is pursuing this goal of ***GOSPEL SATURATION*** - to fill every part of Tampa Bay, to reach every person in our entire city with the good news of Jesus Christ. Our vision is Ephesians 4:10 - that Jesus would fill every part of Tampa Bay through us, His Church. It’s the NT expression of the promise in Habakkuk 2:14.

The Big Picture: Gospel **Saturation**

“The knowledge of the glory of the Lord will fill the earth as the waters fill the sea.” Habakkuk 2:14

***Aren’t you glad this is a PROMISE?*** Jesus will build His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Matthew 24 - “This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed in all nations as a testimony to them, and then the end will come.” Our mission cannot fail. Jesus will fill all things.

And His plan to fill all things is the Church - the One Body of Christ. ***His plan is the Church Unified***, well connected and collaborating to do His work - the work of ministry. When we live in the unity Jesus paid for it magnifies the truth and beauty of the gospel!

What do you call it when your brain tells your hand to move but it doesn’t move?

What do we call it when your brain tells your foot to move but it doesn’t? **PARALYSIS**.

If my hand suddenly stopped responding, or my left leg suddenly stopped obeying my brain - I would absolutely freak out. I don’t do well with pain or discomfort. There is a reason women have the children not men. ***I like it when my body works the way it is supposed to.***

And you know what? **So does Jesus**. He is not a fan of paralysis. He doesn’t like disconnected body parts that are trying to operate independently of one another. ***He wants His BODY to function like an integrated, healthy body***, all responding immediately and joyfully to the direction from HIM - the HEAD.

Ephesians four shows us **the PRACTICES of a church united**. Three steps to living out the unity we have in Christ. First:

**Three Essential Steps to Living as the Church United:**

1. Grow up into **Christ**

“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.” Ephesians 4:12-13

This is the goal of Jesus for His church - mature manhood. That we would all increasingly reflect the character, goodness and love of Jesus - that we would grow up INTO HIM; that we would grow to be more like Him. This begins with the KNOWLEDGE of the Son of God. ***Do you KNOW HIM as the God who descended FOR YOU?*** He saw you dead in your transgressions and sins, He saw you as a rebel deserving God’s wrath and judgment, and He came to save you.

Jesus is the wonderful, merciful Savior. You won’t be able to serve Him and work in obedience to Him until you KNOW HIM.

1. Grow up into **Christ**
   * **Know** the Suffering, Sovereign Savior

“He who descended is also the one who also ascended… that he might fill all things.” Ephesians 4:10

Jesus suffered and died not only to save you but ***also to FILL YOU so He can USE YOU*** in His plan to fill all things. Do you know Him as the Suffering Savior who died for you? Do you know Him as the victorious King who rose from the grave and reigns at the Father’s right hand? Growing in unity starts here. If we don’t know Jesus as the great UNIFIER, as the One Sovereign Head - we have no chance to function as a unified body. But the more we do know Him the more we will love His whole Bride, His whole body for whom He died.

And the more you know Jesus the more you experience His love.

1. Grow up into **Christ**
   * Experience His overflowing **Love**

“To know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” Ephesians 3:19

In chapter five of Ephesians we are commanded to be filled with the Spirit. But back in chapter 3 we are told how to obey that command. It’s about ***knowing the love of Christ personally, deeply, experientially*** - with a knowledge that surpasses knowledge. When you’ve felt the healing grace of Jesus it changes you forever.

**I grew up in a good Bible-teaching church** in the northern suburbs of Chicago. I heard about God from my earliest days and my Mom tells me I asked Jesus into my heart when I was still very small. Praise the Lord for faithful, Jesus-loving parents and Bible teaching churches, amen?

But even with that healthy, positive church and family environment I still grew up with more FEAR of God than I did LOVE of God. I never doubted that God existed - I knew full well that He was there and that He was holy, holy, holy. And as I entered my teen years I knew I was not holy. So I did what any God-fearing pre-teen would do - ***I got saved at every opportunity***. Raise your hand - I’m in. Stand up - ok. Please don’t call us to come forward. Phew. Just look up at the speaker.

“Getting saved” over and over again is not a mark of great spiritual maturity. It’s a sign that you haven’t yet really understood the gospel. And thanks be to God, I had a very involved youth pastor who taught me about God’s grace and acceptance.

I was struggling with my secret, teenage boy sins - and my pastor explained it to me this way. He said, “If you took your Dad’s new Mustang and totalled it, would he be upset with you?” Uh, yeah! ***“But would he still be your Dad?”*** Of course! Nothing could change that!

**The light bulb of the gospel** came on for me then, when I was 12 or 13. I learned the truth that “nothing you do can make God love you more; nothing you do can make God love you less.” He has loved you perfectly, completely, infinitely in Christ. You can’t add to it or take away from it. Just receive that gift and rejoice in it!

***Have you experienced the love of Jesus that way?*** Have you been overwhelmed by God’s infinite grace and mercy TO YOU, the chief of sinners? What starts with knowing Jesus, moves into experiencing His love and this propels you to grow in maturity to BE more like your Savior who died for you.

1. Grow up into **Christ**
   * Mature in Christ-like **Character**

“So that we may no longer be children… Rather… grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” Ephesians 4:14-15

What a calling! ***Grow up IN EVERY WAY.*** The more you know Jesus and experience His cleansing grace, the more you will grow to be like Him. The closer we get to Jesus the less we are blown and tossed about by our old sinful desires and by the lies of the devil and by the deceitful schemes of the sinners around us.

Oh, brothers and sisters - ***I was blown and tossed about for a long time*** even after I committed to Jesus personally at the age of 12. I remained a child, still falling for the devil’s usual temptations. Thankfully I have a very patient, godly wife, and the Lord has given me a steady sequence of strong, godly mentors and brothers to walk beside. But my wife can attest that it took a while and the blowing and tossing was not a pleasant ride.

But the beauty of the gospel is that **Jesus has promised to finish the work** He started in each of us. He will fill all things - including you and me. And as Jesus grows, like that mustard seed spreading through the garden of your life or like the yeast spreading through the lump of dough that is you - His grace touches and changes every part of you, as you surrender it to Him.

***Where is the Lord’s flashlight right now?*** What is the Holy Spirit pointing to in your life? Is there a closet in your mind that needs to be cleaned out? Is there a dark corner of worry and fear that needs the light of God’s sovereign goodness? Is there a dungeon of greed that needs to be transformed into a warehouse of generosity?

That is step one for us to live as the church united: to grow up into Christ. Here is step two.

1. Grow up into **Unity**
   * Remember there is **One** Church

“For building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith.” Ephesians 4:12-13

Paul’s logic here is not hard to unravel. **There is ONE SAVIOR so there is ONE CHURCH**. There is ONE HEAD to the Body so there can only be ONE BODY under that head. Jesus is not divided, so how can the church be divided?

Now let’s try to ***appreciate what they were up against 2,000 years ago***. The Law of Moses had been expanded into a detailed set of customs and practices deliberately to protect the holiness of God’s unique and chosen people.

What threatened the purity of God’s holy people? Unholy people! Gentiles! Samaritans - which were Jew-Gentile mixed families. There was a big, well built, very sturdy ***“dividing wall of hostility,”*** which Paul talks about back in chapter 2. The Temple wall in those days had an engraved sign on it - “Any Gentile who proceeds past this sign will have himself to blame for his death which ensues.” They were not so much about a warm, welcoming environment for people unlike them. They had lived for hundreds and hundreds of years to keep unclean, unworthy people out.

Oh, but ***Jesus turned all that upside down***, didn’t he? He redefined what made a person holy or unholy; clean or unclean. It’s not your genetics or your customs that make you unholy - it’s your sinful heart that makes you unclean before God.

The point is that the unity Paul wrote about in Ephesians 4 was no easier for the first Christians to pursue than it is for us. The challenges were different, but they were as deep in the culture as the things that separate churches and denominations today. We have a long way to go to build the kind of unity Jesus prayed for in John 17 and that Paul wrote about here.

But let’s take hold of this truth - that **there is only ONE CHURCH** in the world. The body of Christ is not divided, even if it looks very divided on Sunday mornings.

1. Grow up into **Unity**
   * Remember there is **One** Church

“There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope…” Ephesians 4:4

The gospel calls us to ***BE WHO WE ARE***. In Christ, you are holy. So be holy. In Christ, you are righteous - so live righteously. In Christ, you are loved - so live lovingly. In Christ you are forgiven, so be forgiving. That’s the basic message of the whole book of Ephesians. Know who you are and BE who you are. The same applies to us as a church. We ARE ONE - so let’s live like we are one. That starts with remembering the truth that there is only one church.

1. Grow up into **Unity**
   * Rejoice in God’s creative **Generosity**

“But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” Ephesians 4:7

God has sovereignly distributed a variety of spiritual gifts, natural abilities, leadership styles, experiences, resources and more throughout His global body. We can be jealous of what another believer has, or we can celebrate how their gift enriches us and the whole body.

I am not gifted at discernment. In fact, I like to say that **one of my spiritual gifts is being OBLIVIOUS**. It really is a gift TO ME - since most things don’t bother me because I just don’t notice them. That is not the greatest gift to a wife and children - being able to tune things out and just happily do whatever, oblivious to those around you.

But thankfully, ***my wife is VERY gifted with discernment***. She sees people - sees their hearts and knows their struggles. So we do a lot of our counseling together. I do most of the talking, but she is such a good listener and so helpful as we process what happened in the meetings.

***I’m wired to start things*** - and I’m not super motivated to finish them or keep them going. I’m pretty ADHD, running this way and that to stir things up. But thankfully the Lord gave me a wife who is an incredibly gifted administrator and detail oriented person.

I am the baby of four kids - from a non-planning family of very spontaneous people. We decide what to do over Christmas break, over Christmas break.

Kristin is the oldest of three kids - born to to first borns - and both of her parents grew up in the military and then her Dad went on to serve in the military too. So she is the firstborn daughter of two military kid firstborns. ***And she married me!***

Now, marriage is a small picture of the church. Two believers made one in Christ. We have to always remember we are one and live like we are one, not letting anything divide us. And we have to ***learn to rejoice in the differences*** between us so they don’t drive us absolutely bonkers.

Do you see how Biblical partnership moves ***from I know you to I love you to I like you to I NEED YOU?*** As we get to know and love and enjoy each other we realize what a GIFT the different personalities and gifts are within the body of Christ.

Throughout Tampa Bay we have a mix of big picture visionaries and detail oriented practitioners. We have leaders doing a very simple form of microchurch and disciplemaking and other leaders overseeing massive multi-site megachurches. We have more charismatic brothers and sisters leading the way in worship and prayer. And we have more conservative theologians keeping us grounded in God’s Word. God has given us apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers - and we desperately need each other!

1. Grow up into **Unity**
   * Rejoice in God’s creative **Generosity**

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints…” Ephesians 4:11-12

Ephesians 4:11 has become a really key verse for us in TB4C. We don’t at all claim any authority for apostles and prophets - all authority is in the written word of God. But we do see ***different personalities and leadership styles*** as being so necessary and helpful in advancing the kingdom.

* Some people are wired as **apostles** - to take the gospel into a new place or to start a new program or ministry.
* Some are wired as **prophets** - to see the truth and safeguard the truth and speak up for God to make sure all we do lines up with God’s Word.
* Some are wired as **evangelists**, drawn to the lost and hurting - always pushing the rest of us to get out of our Bible studies and Sunday School classes and get out to where the lost people are.
* Some are wired as **pastors** - sheperds to care for the flock, to love and listen and counsel and support.
* And others are wired as **teachers** - to open the Bible, explain what it means and how it applies.

I’m sure you see this here **at Living Faith** and you’re thankul that you’re not a church full of just teachers or just evangelists or just apostles. God wonderfully and creatively gives each local church a balance of these leadership styles. And he does the same thing for the church in a REGION. Let’s rejoice in this creative generosity as Jesus gives His gifts to His body.

1. Grow up into **Unity**
   * Reach out in **Love**

“Rather, speaking the truth in love we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head.” Ephesians 4:15

So **whose job** is it to unite the church of Tampa Bay? Jesus is working at it - seeking to fill all things. But Jesus does not force us to be one. He prays for us - intercedes for us to be one - but it’s up to us to take the steps to know and love and like and need each other.

***We have a long way to go*** to learn what real collaboration and partnership looks like as the church of Tampa Bay. But we are praying and learning and meeting and trying any ways we can think of to create linkages between churches so we can grow up into Jesus and better represent the unity we have in Christ.

But progress is made when people speak up - lovingly, but directly. You don’t know what you don’t know. Neither do I. I grew up in the mostly white suburbs of Chicago. After my sophomore year of college I spent the **summer in the inner city**, 22nd street - the south side. And it opened my eyes to a world I never knew existed. There were literal train tracks - north of them was the black community, south of them was the hispanic community. A black gang ran the north side; a Mexican gang ran the south side. And in between was this white missionary family who took in five summer servants to help us see what we had never seen.

But that was ***just a glimpse*** - just a small snapshot - the very beginning of my understanding of cities and structural injustices, of generational pain and institutional suffering. And I realize I still know next to nothing about how to really pursue racial reconciliation and justice in this dark and broken world of ours.

This is ***why we NEED each other so badly*** - and we need time together to be able to listen and to speak the truth in love. One more step to living in unity.

1. Grow up into **Ministry**
   * Empower **Every** believer

“...to equip the saints for the work of ministry.” Ephesians 4:11

***Whose job is it to do the work of ministry?*** Is it the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers? No. Their job is to EQUIP all the believers - all of you saints.

The assignment of the pastoral leader in the church - whether paid, vocational or serving as an elder or group leader - the task is **to EQUIP the saints**.

For generations now ***we have ACCOMMODATED the saints***; we have ENTERTAINED the saints; we have EDUCATED the saints. But honestly, the American church for the last 20-30 years has not done a good job of equipping the saints. We have created a CONSUMER culture where the expectation of the average believer is simply to show up for “church” just like they would show up for a movie. Come in, toss in some cash and enjoy the show. Then file out politely and come back next week, while you chit chat about what bits you liked that week.

***Imagine if President FDR mobilized the American people*** from Pearl Harbor in 1942 until D-Day in 1944 - expanding the military, preparing to go save France and all of Europe from the tyranny of the Nazis. Millions of soldiers, sailors and airmen gathered and trained in southern England, talking about the battle that had to be fought across the channel.

But then soldiers set to work ***building hotels and resorts*** along the shoreline of England. What if instead of building amphibious landing craft to transport them into battle they built sailboats and waverunners to play around on the water?

Oh brothers and sisters, we have embraced **a peacetime mentality** and a comfortable practice of church and have lost sight of the fact that we are in a life and death battle over the souls of countless BILLIONS of people on this planet. We have labored and built comfortable hotels and luxury cruiseships we call “churches,” and have lost sight of the military mindset of soldiers who live in tents because their next mission is coming any minute and they have to be ready to go.

Do you see we have become ***settlers instead of soldiers?*** We have settled into a comfortable complacency that does next to nothing to reach the lost people who are right here beside us in Tampa, to say nothing of the remaining 2 Billion unreached people on the planet who have never once heard the name of Jesus.

The only way we have a chance of finishing the task of making disciples of all nations is if we learn how to ***EMPOWER EVERY SINGLE BELIEVER***. It can’t be a movement driven by paid, seminary trained pastors or a strategy of building expensive church buildings everywhere. That strategy is simply too slow and too expensive.

1. Grow up into **Ministry**
   * Mobilize a **Collaborative** movement

“...from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint… when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” Ephesians 4:16

That is a miraculous verse. ***How is the church designed to grow?*** With the PASTOR building it up in love? No. The church is designed to BUILD ITSELF UP in love. But that depends on each part working properly. That depends on no paralysis. ***No part of the body being asleep***.

Don’t you hate that when you wake up in the middle of the night and it’s like you’re laying on someone else’s arm? Your arm got under you and all circulation got cut off so it’s like this hanging appendage with no feeling. You move it and rub it and gradually the blood gets back in there and it wakes back up.

How many of us have had times **when we’ve been that arm that fell asleep**? Maybe you’ve been that wrist that got carpel tunnel. Maybe you’ve been that ruptured Achilles. (I am a really slow learner. I ruptured my right achilles playing indoor soccer when I was 30. My doc warned me about the other one, but I played for 2 years after that recovery and then ruptured the other Achilles.)

So there’s a question for each of us today: ***have YOU been mobilized into YOUR masterpiece mission?*** Ephesians 2:10 says that God prepared good works in advance for us to do. There is a unique assignment with your name on it. Have you found it?

The body of Christ here at Living Faith will not function as it is supposed to ***if YOU don’t find your place***, plug in and do the work of ministry. And the body of Christ in Tampa Bay will not function as it is supposed to if YOU don’t get to work on your kingdom assignment to bring salt and light to a dark and broken and dying world.

Let’s summarize.

**Gospel Saturation** - Jesus is filling all things ***through us***

**Three steps to a Church United:**

1. Grow up into Christ
2. Grow up into Unity
3. Grow up into Ministry

***I hope you feel the power of this gospel promise*** - the one who descended also ascended in order to FILL ALL THINGS. That includes you. That includes me. That includes Living Faith and Oakwood. It includes every part of Tampa Bay - and every people group on earth. Jesus is relentless in His love. He keeps pressing forward, keeps moving us outward.

But we have to ***grow up into Christ***. We have to know Him, to experience His love and to mature in Christ-like character. We have to ***grow up into unity*** - remembering that there is only One Church, rejoicing in our many wonderful differences and reaching out to one another in love. And we have to ***grow up into ministry*** - empowering every believer as a gospel worker, and mobilizing a movement of collaboration.

John 17 is the prayer of Jesus that ***we would all be ONE*** - “so that the world will believe.” Jesus prayed that and continues to pray for our unity in Him because that unity will be the most powerful witness of all. Anyone can divide - that’s easy human nature. Only a work of God can unite.

So let’s keep talking and dreaming together. Let’s get to know each other more so we can love each other and like each other and increasingly realize how much we need each other!

Let’s pray!