

The Mature Church

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A Rhetorical-Critical Study of Ephesians 4:1–16

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Preface

THE AIM OF THIS book is to determine and present the meaning of spiritual maturity in Ephesians 4:1–16 and demonstrate its use as a critical standard to evaluate the spiritual maturity of the church. To achieve this aim, a method of rhetorical criticism appropriate for interpreting Ephesians 4:1–16 is developed and, accordingly, the communicative function of Ephesians 4:1–16 in the epistle determined. Ephesians 4:13 is then interpreted to obtain the meaning of spiritual maturity. A self-administered questionnaire was developed, pre-tested, and distributed to a sample of church leaders in a specific context. The data from the questionnaires returned were analyzed. The meaning of spiritual maturity in Ephesians 4:1–16 and the understanding and level of spiritual maturity of the leadership of the church were compared. The following are some of the highlights of the results and conclusions:

First, Paul's main purpose in Ephesians is for Christians to understand that they have a new identity and to exhort them to celebrate it (Eph 1–3). In response, they are to live a life that is commensurate with that identity as an expression of their gratitude to God for it (4:17–6:20); but in order to be able to live as exhorted, they need to be growing towards spiritual maturity (4:1–16).

Second, spiritual maturity is a final destination intended for all Christians, who are progressively becoming one body that befits Christ as its Head. Its indicators include stability and constancy in the truth, ability to discern error and reject or correct it, and ability and orientation to speak the truth in love. As a result of the church growing towards ultimate spiritual maturity, unity increasingly becomes a reality, implying that it is spiritual maturity that brings about unity, not the other way around.

Third, in several of the dimensions of spiritual maturity, the church leadership's understanding is not in agreement with Ephesians 4:1–16. That is by no means to say the church leadership does not agree with this portion of Scripture on anything. For example, in consonance with the position of Ephesians 4:13, the church leadership generally acknowledges the necessity

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of human effort to strive towards spiritual maturity and the necessity of systematic and authentic biblical teaching for the attainment of spiritual maturity. This is significant, since without such acknowledgement, investing towards spiritual maturity in terms of time, finances, and training is highly unlikely. However, whereas the corporate essence of spiritual maturity in Ephesians 4:13 projects an expectation of increasing oneness of the body, the church leadership understands the corporate essence of spiritual maturity as the ability and constancy of all Christians to be able to stand on their own, individually, thus missing the corporate essence of spiritual maturity according to the text.

Furthermore, from the text, the primary means of attaining spiritual maturity is the participation of all Christians as started off and continuously equipped and guided by the ministers Christ appointed and gave to the church as gifts. In contradistinction, a majority of the church leaders understands the baptism and confirmation rites to be the primary means of attaining spiritual maturity. The church leadership also understands that spiritual maturity becomes complete when people accept Christ as their Lord and Saviour. With such understanding, the leadership of the church would be handicapped, or at least would not be motivated, with regard to developing effective spiritual growth programmes for the church.

Also, Ephesians 4:13–16 presents spiritual maturity as absolutely necessary and a lack of it as a dangerous state for the church to be in, but the church leaders' understanding of the necessity of spiritual maturity reflects lack of awareness about, an indifference to, or a naiveté about the fact that a church lacking spiritual maturity will likely succumb to the machinations of false teachers and other forces of error, who are resolved to deceive, mislead, and destroy. The implications of these findings for the work of the church are identified and presented.

Introduction

THE CHURCH IN AFRICA is often described as one mile wide and one inch deep. That means, whereas the church is widely spread, the depth of the faith of the believers is rather superficial and generally weak. This is indicated by the fact that many Christians engage in practices that are not consistent with biblical teaching, or they simply fail to be “salt and light” (Matt 5:13–16). But with regard to spiritual maturity, the church in Africa may not be an exception. Lack of spiritual maturity seems to be one of the major problems facing the global church. On the other hand, the church is mandated to evangelize, disciple, worship, and respond to the social and spiritual needs of society. Also, in order for any church to be alive, it must grow, or else it dies. Both of these aspects require not only a mature church but also a maturing church.

The author of Ephesians emphasizes that the church should become mature. He says that God has put in place the conditions for maturity, so that with such maturity the Ephesians would no longer be infants, tossed by the wind of every doctrine. The author seems to imply a particular level of maturity that the church is to reach, to grow out of the state of infancy. Therefore, Ephesians 4:13 seems to be a New Testament basis for striving to reach church maturity. There are other passages in the New Testament where the notion of growth or maturity for the church and individual believers is found.¹ However, Ephesians 4:13 is possibly the only passage in the New Testament where the ultimate goal of maturity is specified. A valid interpretation of this passage, which would lead to determining the meaning of Christian maturity, is therefore called for.

Since the New Testament books were written within a particular rhetorical tradition, interpreting New Testament pericopes requires both understanding the rhetorical conventions of the first readers and applying

1. Cf. Heb 5:11; 1 Pet 2:1–3.

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a method of rhetorical criticism commensurate with the context of the first readers. An interpretation of a New Testament pericope would, therefore, necessitate an understanding of the rhetorical devices that the writer would have used and how the original readers would have interpreted the message. This implies that the interpretation of New Testament writings, hence, also Ephesians 4:1–16, should incorporate rhetorical approaches. A number of methods of rhetorical criticism exist,² but apparently these methods miss out one significant element, that is, the consideration of the first readers as distinct rhetorical communities whose rhetorical conventions would have been adopted by the writers of the New Testament texts. These methods were seemingly developed without first addressing a key meta-theoretical question of a socio-historic nature, namely, what rhetorical elements should be understood and incorporated in a method of rhetorical criticism for a New Testament passage?

Therefore, some pertinent questions need to be addressed: How should Christian maturity be understood in the light of Ephesians 4:1–16, and how can this understanding be used as a critical standard to evaluate the understanding and level of maturity of the church in a given context? Towards answering these questions, first a method of rhetorical criticism appropriate for interpreting Ephesians 4:1–16 is developed, then the communicative function of Ephesians 4:1–16 in the epistle is determined, after which Ephesians 4:13 is interpreted to determine the meaning of Christian maturity, more precisely, the dimensions of Christian maturity. Following a description of the understanding and level of spiritual maturity of the church in a specific context and exploring universal applicability, a critical evaluation and discussion is pursued in light of the meaning of maturity in Ephesians 4:1–16 and the state of the church from a maturity stand point.

The Epistle to the Ephesians presents, as one of its central themes, the meaning of Christian maturity and an implied exhortation to the church to strive for such maturity. The definition of a mature church according to Ephesians 4:13 forms a valid basis for evaluating the understanding and level of maturity of the church in a given context.

This is a rhetorical-critical study of Ephesians 4:13 and its implications for the life of the church. A rhetorical-critical approach will be used to study, interpret, and draw the implications of this particular passage. Since this study focuses on interpreting a particular New Testament passage

2. Such as those by Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*; Andrews, *Practice*; Mack, *Rhetoric*; and Cornelius, “Effectiveness.”

using the rhetorical criticism approach, it is deemed important to discuss rhetorical criticism itself in relation to New Testament interpretation, with a view to proposing an appropriate method of rhetorical criticism to be applied to interpret the text. Our view is that rhetorical criticism is an approach of which one finds various methods.

Following this introduction, chapter 2 looks at rhetorical criticism as a New Testament hermeneutic. In chapter 3, I examine the communicative function of Ephesians 4:1–16, followed by a presentation of an interpretation of Ephesians 4:13 in chapter 4. Chapter 5 presents a discussion based on a basic field research on spiritual maturity and the African church, with a reference to clergy and leaders in a specific context as a case study of Christian spiritual maturity in the church. In chapter 6 I identify and discuss the implications of the meaning of spiritual maturity in Ephesians 4:13 for the church today, including drawing key lessons from the case study. Chapter 7 is the conclusion of the book, in which two important questions are addressed and specific recommendations made.

Rhetorical Criticism in New Testament Hermeneutics

2.1 Introduction

THE PURPOSE OF THIS chapter is to develop an appropriate method of rhetorical criticism. New Testament hermeneutics is briefly discussed, basically to delineate its essence, assert its necessity, appreciate pertinent issues, and examine particular considerations in interpreting the New Testament epistles. Thereafter, rhetorical criticism is examined in terms of its efficacy for biblical interpretation, especially the New Testament, and various methods of rhetorical criticism. From the discussion on New Testament hermeneutics on the one hand, and rhetorical criticism on the other, a method to be applied to interpret Ephesians 4:13 is proposed.

2.2 New Testament Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, a method of textual analysis, and historically associated with the interpretation of biblical texts, pertains to the process of exposing hidden meanings or understood as the science and art of biblical interpretation. The term “hermeneutics” possibly originated from Hermes, the name of the Greek deity who supposedly served as a messenger for other deities, transmitting and interpreting their communications to their respective recipients, both fortunate and unfortunate. According to Thompson, hermeneutics was “derived from the Greek verb, *ἐρμηνεύω*, ‘to interpret,’ and from the noun, *ἐρμηνεία*, ‘interpretation.’”¹ One aspect of hermeneutics would be the study of the rules that govern interpretation of

1. Thompson, “Hermeneutic Inquiry,” 230.