

Ephesians: *Time to Grow...Up*
Ephesians 4:11-16

As we return to our journey through Ephesians, the Apostle Paul is teaching the early church in Ephesus about the unity and diversity that Christ has entrusted to those who make up His body on earth. Paul's teaching here in Ephesians 4 provides a compelling picture of who we are and who we are to become as the local body of believers called the Church. So, with no further ado, let us read Ephesians 4:11-16: 11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 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, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 14 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. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 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.

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Ultimate Vision of Christian Community; 2) Failure to Thrive; and 3) The Truth About Church Growth.

I. The Ultimate Vision of Christian Community

Have you ever wondered what the Church is supposed to look like? Churches come in so many shapes and sizes...large churches and small churches, myriads of denominations, such a variety of worship styles...Catholic and Protestant...Presbyterians and Pentecostals. Here in Ephesians 4, the Apostle Paul has described the essence...the ultimate vision of what the Body of Christ should look like.

The ultimate vision of Christian community, the ultimate end of the local church, will be achieved when “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.” That’s the goal.

Now, it’s hard to know if Paul’s thinks this vision is fully attainable in this evil age or if Paul is looking to the next age to come, but regardless of the *when*, this powerful, Ephesians 4 vision is what the local church should be working towards at all times. Let’s take a minute to unpack this vision for a healthy and thriving church.

First of all, let’s remember what came just before this vision statement. Paul writes that God gave the church gifted leaders...the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the ministry. When the gifted leaders of the church are equipping the saints for the ministry, Paul writes that it is “for building up the body of Christ.”

As the Body of Christ is built up over time, the healthy church matures and eventually attains the unity of the faith. Once again, unity is a big deal for Paul...unity of the faith is something that every member of the Church should be working to attain. We already know that there is unity of the Spirit in the one hope, one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God

and Father is above all, through all, and in all. This unity is the Spirit is given to the church; but now Paul advocates that the church should strive to attain the unity of the faith.

What is the “unity of the faith?” Remember that Paul was writing to a hodgepodge of new converts...people from pagan and Jewish backgrounds, Romans and Greeks, men and women, people from various ethnicities and cultures. Amidst all of the diversity of the early church, Paul understood that what was most needed was to lead people to a singular, clear, unified faith. If I had to guess, Paul would have summed up the unity of the faith in three words: Jesus is Lord! Every group of believers needs a focused, clear statement of faith.

One of the things I love most about our denomination, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, is that the seven, biblical essentials of our faith are clearly defined and articulated. Every pastor, every elder, and every deacon must accept the essentials of the faith without exception, or they cannot serve the church as an officer. Our motto is well known: In the Essentials-Unity; In the Non-Essentials-Liberty; In all things-Charity. This practice is directly in line with Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 4. If we are to be a healthy, growing church, we must seek to attain to the unity of the faith. If you have not done so, I encourage you to visit our website or the EPC website to review the nine essentials of our faith.

Now, in order for a congregation to attain to the unity of the faith, the Word of God must be preached and taught with faithfulness and consistency. The Gospel and a biblical worldview must always be central to everything we do and say, or we will be easily divided by false doctrine and popular ideas. This work of attaining to the unity of the faith must always inform the work of gifted leaders in the church, and it’s one of the reasons I am deeply committed to expository preaching. Remember, however, that the unity of the faith is also dependent upon the full body of Christ actively engaged in ministry and doing life together. We don’t come to the unity of the faith by simply studying doctrine or listening to sermons. We come to discover the unity of the faith when we are following Jesus and serving as the Body of Christ. There are simply some things we cannot “know” until we are living an obedient life in the context of Christian community. For example: you will never truly believe that Jesus is Lord in regards to your finances until you trust Him with your finances. You will never truly believe that Jesus is Lord in terms of dealing with conflict until you obey His teachings on how to deal with conflict. The unity of the faith will only be attained when we are both learning and doing, amen?

Note that, according to Paul’s vision, the unity of the faith is deeply dependent upon us all attaining to the knowledge of the Son of God. This concept of knowing Christ is the language of intimacy in relationship. Paul uses this phrase in Philippians 3:8 when he writes, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. A healthy, God-honoring church is one where more and more people are coming to know Jesus as the Son of God, our Lord and our Savior, the Lamb who is worthy of our praise and obedience...and that knowledge is not just head knowledge...it is a knowledge that comes in having a vital, intimate, every moment, every day, all day relationship with the living Lord! This kind of knowledge, again, is a product of learning and doing. Not only should we be reading the Gospels to know

Christ more, but we need to spend time in silence, seeking Christ through the Holy Spirit that we might come to recognize His voice and enjoy the intimacy of His company. This is the practice of spiritual disciplines.

Now, as the local church attains to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, Paul writes that the Body will grow into “mature manhood”. I think we all know that there’s a big difference between the body of Christ that is “immature” as compared to the body of Christ that has grown into “mature manhood.” The immature church is famous for squabbling, posturing, divisions, consumerism, and pettiness. The mature church will be known for its steadfastness, modesty, faithfulness, loving kindness, fidelity to Christ, and generosity.

Paul places the picture of maturity within a familiar metaphor...growth of a child to adulthood. He writes, “Until we all attain...to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” I don’t know about you, but this sentence makes me think of a little boy standing next to his father (show pic). Any boy can tell you that the “measure” of his growth is the “stature” of his father, right? We all want to grow up and become as tall (or taller) than our dads! But it’s more than just acquiring height. As boys, we want to grow up and become men...we want to be able to do what men do, use the tools that men use, know all the things that men know. I have spent my whole life enamored and amazed by my father. As a boy, I was certain that there was nothing my Dad could not fix. He was big and strong and smart and athletic and a bit dangerous if you crossed him. He was my role model, and all throughout my childhood I longed to grow up to be like him and to be able to do all the things he could do. That was my “measure”...the stature of the fullness of my dad’s person, prowess, and abilities. I think that’s very much the picture here in Ephesians 4.

Paul knows that the first century church in Ephesus, although remarkable in their new-found, hard-earned, Holy Spirit empowered oneness...is still a body that is young and in desperate need of growth and maturity. So, Paul presents the vision for anticipated growth: that each and every day, as they live and work and fellowship and worship together, they will mature; they will grow to reflect the stature, the character, the nature, the wisdom, the kindness, the gentleness, and the love of Jesus Himself! This is the vision for all Christians, and for every gathering called the Body of Christ!

To illustrate his point, Paul goes on to describe the change that will come about in the quality of their individual lives and their collective life together as the church grows and matures into the stature of Christ. The anticipated outcome of the church’s maturity is captured in vs. 14, “...so that we many 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.

Now, I know Jesus said we must become like little children to enter the Kingdom of God...and that is true. We must have that innocence of intent and the humility of a child to enter into a dependent relationship with Jesus. However, here in Ephesians 4, Paul is challenging the new believers to *grow up* in their faith, to mature into the stature of Christ, so that they won’t be as

vulnerable and as fickle as “infant believers” who are susceptible to being swept away by a great many things. OK...it’s time for a story.

Many years ago I served a congregation on the East Coast. To this day I dearly love that body of believers, and Christy and I will always cherish our years of serving beside them; however, I want to take just a minute to tell you a bit about their history.

In the early 90’s, the Senior Pastor who had grown that church to nearly 2000 members over the course of many years lost his way. He began to preach that Jesus was just a messenger...not the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Because he was so beloved and was such an entertaining communicator, the members of the congregation decided to wait it out and see if he would return to orthodoxy and sound biblical preaching...but that never happened. Consequently, many who were faithful to the Word of God began to quietly leave the church, while those interested in hearing an alternative narrative of Christianity began to fill the pews. This went on for several years until the Senior Pastor fell out of grace following his affair with the church organist, which prompted him to abandon his post. After a year or so, the congregation called a very fine, faithful man to serve as their new Senior Pastor, and that was the Senior Pastor who I was called to serve alongside as an Associate Pastor in the spring of 2003.

Now...it just so happened that the very same year I arrived to serve the church was the same year that Dan Brown published his fictional novel entitled, *The Da Vinci Code* (show pic of book). Many of you might recall Brown’s book caused quite a stir because the fictional story inferred that Jesus was married and had children. I read *The Da Vinci Code* and found it mildly entertaining; but many of the “sheep” in the flock I was called to “shepherd” read *The Da Vinci Code* and found themselves in a sea of confusion regarding their faith. I kid you not: we spent months working to defend biblical Christianity against a manufactured fairy tale published by a popular author in a fictional novel.

So, why were so many “Christians” at that church...most of whom were very well educated, “successful”, intellectually sound individuals...why were they so easily and powerfully influenced by Dan Brown’s novel? The answer is obvious, right? For years the “sheep” of this particular “flock” had been poorly fed by their shepherd. In fact, many people entrusted with offices of leadership failed to protect those sheep: the pastor/shepherd had failed to equip the sheep with the Word of God; the elders of the congregation had failed to defend the congregation from his false teaching; and the presbyters of the local Presbytery had failed to hold the Pastor accountable to the vows he had made regarding fidelity to scripture. The result was predictable—a congregation of 1800 souls who found themselves vulnerable to the “human cunning and craftiness” of an author whose “deceitful scheme” was to tell heretical stories about Jesus in order to sell books and make money.

My former congregation on the East Coast lacked just about everything that Paul writes about in Ephesians 4:13-16. For example, there was absolutely no “unity of faith.” I remember hosting a class called, “I’m Glad You Asked”. I had a few dozen people who would show up every

Sunday to ask questions, and then I would do my best to address their questions. Many members of that class were operating on the assumption that “truth” was ultimately unknowable but that we all had “interesting” ideas that were unique to each person. In other words, they were not interested in biblical answers; they were interested in sharing their variety of opinions. And of course, their biggest problem was that many people in the church did not know Jesus...many of those who made up the church had no true, personal, experiential knowledge of the Son of God because they had been taught that Jesus was just a man, not the Son of God.

Now, to be sure, there was still a remnant of faithful believers within the congregation, but many of the members had been spiritually stunted by the previous pastor. Whereas Paul envisions a church growing into “mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” many people in that congregation lacked conviction as to who Jesus was! So, when a rumor spawned by a deceitful author suggested that “Jesus had been married and had children,” many within the church bought it hook, line and sinker! Now, I’m happy to say that my former congregation was not terminally ill. Over time the congregation grew in faith and conviction, and they are a vital congregation to this day. However, many churches in our country are not only immature...they have a far worse diagnosis. In the medical world we would call their condition: *failure to thrive*.

II. Failure to Thrive

Three of the most horrifying words in the medical field are: failure to thrive. Failure to thrive is the determination that, for any number of various causes, a body is not growing and/or functioning in the basic processes necessary for survival. I have recently walked with a young couple whose infant child is even now living in a precarious state with only one developed lung and a challenging prognosis. Prior to her delivery, the doctors were predicting that she would be a “failure to thrive” birth. Failure to thrive is a very serious condition, one that often leads to the death of a child or perhaps our elderly family member whose medical condition has made it nearly impossible for them to eat or breathe. Apart from a radical intervention of some kind...apart from a miracle...failure to thrive is typically about the worse news you can receive.

Sadly, many churches throughout our country could be accurately diagnosed as “failure to thrive.” They are congregations who are not growing like they should; they are not functioning as they should; they are malnourished, anemic, apathetic, and barely alive. I suspect many here today or those watching online have stories of your former church declining and dying right in front of your eyes...it is a far too common story in the 21st century.

Failure to thrive in churches can result from a variety of causes. Most often a relatively healthy church falls into decline when the pastor/shepherd fails to preach and teach the whole truth of God’s Word. In such cases, the failure to thrive is due to malnutrition. Churches decline when all the ministry is performed by professionals. If that goes on long enough, the failure to thrive is due to slothfulness. Churches decline when they get so rigid and judgmental that they lack grace. In those cases, failure to thrive is due to hard heartedness. Churches decline where there is no culture of prayer...in those cases failure to thrive is from the lack of Breath. I could

go on and on, but the bottom line is this: as the Body of Christ, we are either growing, or we are dying. There is no neutral position; there is no such thing as maintaining the status quo. We either grow up, or we fail to thrive. And that leads me to my final subheading:

III. The Truth About Church Growth

If you've spent much time around churches and pastors, you probably know that many churches and pastors are very concerned about the numbers. How many people are attending? How many people have been baptized? How many people have joined the church? How many people are in small groups? How many people are serving? How is the giving? Church leaders love to spend time talking about church growth as it pertains to numbers, but here in Ephesians 4 Paul reveals some profound insight into church growth that has little to do with numbers. Paul's language of growth has to do with becoming a healthy, growing body. He writes:

15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 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.

The first attribute for church growth is what? Speaking the truth. Now, please do not think this charge applies only to the pastor, but let us agree it does certainly apply to the pastor! Pastors and teachers have great influence, so it stands to reason that the church won't grow if pastors and teachers are not declaring the Truth of God's Word. That said, the Greek word used by Paul here literally translates as "truthing". In other words, the word here encompasses more than our teaching. We are at all times to be "truthing;" that includes what we teach, what we confess, and what we are doing at all times. Our constant testimony is to be truthful...pointing the watching world to the Truth, who is Jesus our Lord, amen?

But notice, Paul wisely adds, "in love." Our "truthing" is always to be accompanied with genuine, tangible expressions of love. Paul knows that sometimes our "truthing" can come across with a harshness that is counter-productive to our mission; while at the same time our acts of charity can lead people to a squishy, toothless gospel if not accompanied by a declaration of the Truth. The growing church, according to Paul, speaks the truth, lives out the truth, confesses the truth IN LOVE...that is a telltale indicator of the growing church.

Next, Paul writes that we are, in every way, to grow up into Christ who is the head. Listen Colonial: everything about the local church...everything...is subject to the Lordship of Jesus. Jesus is the Head, we are the body. Cut the head off, and the rest of the body is not only useless, it's dead. I don't care if you serve in the garden ministry, or the prison ministry, or the youth ministry, or the lawn maintenance crew, or you make coffee on Sunday mornings...everything we do as a church should lead people to grow into a vital, dependent, intimate, connected relationship with Jesus, amen? If our ministry is not leading people to grow into Jesus, we are missing the whole point of being a church...and we will not grow.

And we are to grow *in every way* into Christ. That is to say, our attitude, our behavior, our thinking, our responding, our values, our language, our perspective, our worldview, our humility, our courage, our character...in every way a growing church is growing into the likeness and

person of Christ. He is the head...He is the source...He is the common denominator...He is the central nervous system...He is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End when it comes to the body of Christ, amen?

According to Paul, then, the whole body...when attached to the Head who is Christ...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.

Did you catch that? Did you catch the final ingredients for growth in the body? It was two things:

- 1) We must be attached to Jesus because He is the one who brings vitality to the body.
- 2) Every part of the body needs to WORK, and when each part is working properly, that makes the body grow.

Church, I was thinking about how to make this clear, and the Lord led me to look at the physical to understand the spiritual.

I want you to think about your own body. What makes your body grow? Well, when we think about our physical bodies, growth is a product of what we take into our bodies, and what we do with our bodies.

Now, consider that Jesus said, “I am the Bread of Life” and “I am the source of Living Water.” Jesus is the nourishment--the sustenance that leads to growth. If Christ is not in us, we will suffer from malnutrition, and we will not grow...we will most certainly fail to thrive. One of the most controversial things Jesus ever said was exactly this point in John 6:53, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” Jesus made Himself essential to both life and growth...we must take Him in. Everything begins with placing our full trust and hope in Jesus...we must take Him in as our Lord and the Savior of our souls.

Having taken Christ in, we are now prepared to do our part; for it is also necessary that we exercise...that every part of the Body works properly if the Body is to grow. In other words, we ALL have a role to play in growing the Body! Each believer has been given grace to help grow the Body of Christ. Our growth depends on Christ in us, but our growth includes and involves our working...our obedience...our willingness to serve one another and do so in such a way that our growing church “builds itself up in love.” Ahhh...Church, what if we measured our growth according to Paul’s teaching? What if our growth objectives focused on building up our congregation in love? Think about that...think about what it would look like and what it would mean to our city if Colonial was known for a church that is growing and building itself up in love? Gamechanger...world-changer, right? It’s not about the numbers; it’s about Christ in us, and all of us doing our part—in love—for love—with love, all for the glory of God and Our Lord Jesus Christ, amen?

Church, we will come back to this point next week, but I hope you will take this teaching of Paul to heart. Let us speak the truth in love...and let that translate into our behavior, our intentionality, and the development of our character, that we might in every way grow into Christ. And may we commit that we will all do our part, each believer working properly, that through the power of Christ who dwells in us, we might grow and build up this Body of Christ in love.

Will you pray with me?