

“Church Growth”
Ephesians 4:7-16
March 15, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

Paul had a very high view of the church, and that can be seen more clearly in Ephesians than in any of his other letters. He returns repeatedly to two descriptions of the church that powerfully demonstrate this high view. First, he calls the church the body of Christ (1:23; 4:12). That means more than the simple truth that the church consists of different parts that are to work together harmoniously, like a body. It means also that the church is the continuation of Christ’s ministry. As we recite in the Apostles’ Creed, Jesus has ascended into heaven and is seated on a throne in heaven. Where is the world going to see Jesus today? The only place they are able to see him is in his body, the Church. The second description of the Church is the “fullness of Christ” (1:23; 3:19; 4:13). It means that all that Jesus is, his love, mercy, holiness, is meant to reside in the Church. So both of these images teach that the Church is central to what God is doing in rescuing this world.

It’s not a hard thing to complain about what’s wrong with the world. But if you want to be part of the solution, join yourself to a church and work for the strengthening of that church. Several weeks ago, the Mission’s Committee met with a married couple called to plant a church in London that seeks to reach alternative culture people. The alternative culture there consists of Punks, Goths and members of the Wave culture. I had only the vaguest idea of these groups, so I asked them to explain who these groups were and how they differed from one another. They explained that the Punks were angry about the general state of affairs in the world, and so they dress in angry, outlandish ways. They are the ones with Mohawks dyed in garish colors or clothing with spikes attached. The Goths think that everything in the world is bad and dark, and to pretend otherwise is dishonest. So they seek to be honest by dressing in black and looking as close to the living dead as they can. The Wave culture consists of those who live conventional lives during the week, but escape on the weekends to remote places where large gatherings get high together on drugs. All three of these cultures have something in common with Christianity, in that they see the brokenness and the dark side of life. But where they differ from Christianity is that they see no hope. We believe that Jesus is the only hope, and we believe that Jesus comes to this fallen world today through the Church. So if you want to be part of the solution, join this Church and work for its health. In today’s passage, Paul focuses on church health. Let’s consider now what he says about this.

I. The Goal of the Church – Maturity

One of the questions I am asked from time to time is, “How are things going at Altadena?” One way to answer that question is to do so superficially by describing how we stand relative to the three B’s: bodies, bucks and buildings. I could say that our finances finished the year in the black, or that we are about to take another step in our improvements at Altadena Park, or that we are steadily adding members to the church. But we all know that it is possible to be doing well in all three of those areas but still fail to be doing well in the ways God intends the church to be doing well. So answering this question well requires that we know something about the goal God has for his Church. What would it take for God to say that a church is doing well?

Paul informs us about God’s goal for the church in verse 13. It is **“to 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.”** God’s goal for the church is maturity, defined as reaching “the stature of the fullness of Christ.” In other words, a mature church is one that looks like Jesus. As Jesus loved the lost, so a mature church loves the lost. As Jesus was full of joy, so a mature church is full of joy. As Jesus submitted to his Father in suffering, so a mature church submits to God even when do so leads to suffering. As Jesus prayed, so a mature church prays. Looking like Jesus in these ways and more is our goal.

Paul says that such maturity happens as we “attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.” Unity of the faith refers to adhering to a common set of doctrines. To believe in the importance of doctrinal purity is seen today as divisive and unloving. But Paul didn’t believe that to be the case. God has handed down to the church the most precious thing in the world, the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the church’s duty to preserve this gospel and pass it along faithfully to the next generation. If the Church loses such doctrines as the uniqueness of Jesus as the only way to the Father, then all is lost.

Doctrinal purity, in Paul’s view, is not cold and hard, because it is accompanied by “the knowledge of the Son of God.” This is not just another way of talking about doctrinal purity, but refers to an experience of Jesus. The Church only starts to look like Jesus as a result of experiencing Jesus. We behold his beauty, taste the sweetness of his love and marvel at the greatness of his mercy.

II. The Means to the Goal – Spiritual Gifts

How is the Church going to grow toward that goal? What is the process that leads to such maturity? Paul talks about that in the early part of our passage. The ascended Christ has done what conquering rulers have long done, giving gifts to his friends and allies. Paul says in verse 7 that Jesus has given gifts to

“each one of us.” He uses the word “grace” to refer to gifts here because these gifts are part of God’s grace at work in our lives. Every Christian has been given a gift by Jesus. It is Jesus’ decision about these gifts, not ours. If our church is to grow into a healthy, mature church, our members must know what their gifts are and use those gifts.

How can you know what your gift is? There are five lists of spiritual gifts, including the one in verse 11 of our text, and between them at least twenty different gifts are mentioned. They seem to be listed in something of a haphazard way, which leads me to conclude that these lists are suggestive, not exhaustive. So how can you know what your gift is? There are two clues in verse 12 of our text. The first clue lies in the phrase “for the work of ministry.” Paul names several teaching gifts that Jesus has given, the first two (apostles and prophets) which were present only during the foundational years of the Church. The ones that are still present, evangelists, pastors and teachers (or possibly pastor-teachers), function to equip the saints for these works of ministry. As John Stott explains this, the model for the Church that Paul assumes is not the pyramid, with the pastor at the top directing everything, nor the bus, in which the pastor does all the driving while the congregation rests peacefully while traveling to their destination. Rather, the model is that of the body, with each member being vitally important to the functioning of the whole.

What does this have to do with discovering your gift? It means that Jesus has given your spiritual gift to you for the purpose of ministry, of service to others. Your gift is not for the central purpose of feeling good about yourself, but about serving others. So an important question to ask yourself would be, “To what ministry need does my heart resonate?” If I were to take an A flat tuning fork to the piano and sound it near the strings, the A flat strings on the piano would begin to vibrate. Those strings have the gift of A flatness, so to speak. Your gift can be discerned by asking what ministry need gets your juices flowing. Perhaps it’s the needs of children, or of youth. Maybe it’s the lost who don’t know Christ. Perhaps it’s those who suffer from not knowing the truth. If your heart resonates to a particular need, start there to know your gift.

The second clue in verse 12 about how to discover your spiritual gift is seen in that phrase, “for building up the body of Christ.” When Jesus gives gifts to the church, he does so that the Church might be built up. So if an area where you are serving doesn’t build up the church, that is probably not your spiritual gift. How do you know if your service is building up the church? If others are blessed by your gift of helps and service, they will let you know the effect you are having upon them. Pay attention to the effect your service has on others.

One more important part of discovering your gift is submission to Jesus’ sovereign wisdom in the gift he has given. We are not to decide what gift we would like and then act as if that is our gift. I did that for years myself. I thought that to be a good pastor, I needed to be an extrovert. The problem is

that God made me an introvert, and it was only when I learned to submit to the wisdom of God in letting me be who he created me to be and in giving the gifts he had given me that I became more effective in serving him. This also helps me tremendously in receiving those Jesus brings to our church and those who directs to other churches. There are gifts given to people that Jesus chooses to send to other churches. That is his business and not mine. My role is to submit to his wisdom in this and use the gifts he's given me and love the people he's sent to be around me in this church.

III. The Result of the Goal – Stability and Growth

As the church grows in health and matures, there are two results that Paul mentions. First, we will have stability, no longer being like infants tossed around on the sea. He's talking here about those who lack convictions about what is true. They are persuaded by whomever they last spoke to or heard from. This kind of stability is the opposite of the relativism that is so prevalent today. Our world is afflicted by both a theological relativism and an ethical relativism. Theological relativism says that there is no absolute truth. Some worship Jesus, others Mohammed, and others no one at all. The relativist says that it doesn't really matter, because these are all just ways to try to comfort ourselves amidst the challenges of life. This theological relativism leads to ethical relativism, believing that there is no absolute right and wrong. Anything goes as long as there is mutual consent. The only thing forbidden amidst such relativism is the person who claims that there is truth and error, right and wrong.

I don't need to tell you that our world is suffering from a plague of relativism, with horrendous costs. Perhaps you read this week of the baby who died of starvation after the mother and caregiver died from a drug overdose, and neither was discovered for ten days. The greatest victims of this relativism are the weakest among us. In an article he wrote this week, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks said that we need more than sympathy for such tragic situations.

It's not only money and better policy that are missing in these circles; it's norms. The health of society is primarily determined by the habits and virtues of its citizens. In many parts of America there are no minimally agreed upon standards for what it means to be a father. There are no basic codes and rules woven into daily life, which people can absorb unconsciously and follow automatically. Reintroducing norms will require, first, a moral vocabulary. These norms weren't destroyed because of people with bad values. They were destroyed by a plague of nonjudgmentalism, which refused to assert that one way of behaving was better than another.

The Church is called to be the body of Christ, speaking for Christ to our world by, among other things, declaring clearly that there is truth and error, right and wrong. This will be the result of the people in maturing churches.

Another result of maturity that Paul mentions is growth, which comes as we speak the truth in love. To speak the truth in love isn't just speaking honestly. Such honesty is required elsewhere in the Bible, but what Paul is talking about here is the need to speak the truth of the gospel. Gospel truth includes two main points. Point one is that by nature we are hopeless sinners. Point two is that anyone who acknowledges that they are powerless to do anything about their hopeless and sinful condition, but who looks to Jesus to do something based on his substitutionary death, will be forgiven fully and loved forever by God. To speak only one of those points is to speak falsehood, not truth. The form this falsehood most commonly takes today is in the omission of point 1 about being a sinner. If we soft-pedal the part about sin, we train people to be self-centered narcissists. Much contemporary parenting is characterized by this silence about sin. We all want our children to grow up to be confident and to have a healthy self-esteem. The way to get that isn't to tell them that everything they do is great. Rather, it comes by telling them the truth of the gospel. They have little rebellious hearts that disobey God, and this is not a small problem. It is such a big problem that only God himself can solve it, which he lovingly offers to do through Jesus. This is the truth of the gospel that we are to speak, both inside the church and outside the church. We are to speak it lovingly, just as it has come forth from a loving God.

CONCLUSION:

The Church is called to be the channel for God's solution for this broken world. Are you part of the solution, or just one who complains about the problem? To be part of the solution is to be a committed and fully functioning part of the body of Christ, the Church. It means to be active in using your gift for the building up of the body. Does that describe you? Is there a step you need to take in becoming part of the solution? I would challenge you to ask yourself what ministry need motivates you to action, and then volunteer in that area. We need you here in this church, and the world needs the Church. The Church is called to be the answer to the prayer requests Jesus taught us to pray, that his will would be done on earth as it is in heaven and that his kingdom would come.

I enjoy visiting my son and daughter-in-law in Philadelphia. But there is one thing that makes me sad when I visit them. They live in a part of the city with several of these large, formerly glorious church buildings that are now vacant. These churches have died. It requires more than a grand building to make a vibrant church. The main thing required is serving people speaking the truth of the gospel in love.