

## Read 1 Peter 2:4-10 - Pray

### Intro - Open to Ephesians 4:11-16

In our kitchen, a friend was kind enough to make us a 6-foot-tall sign with our name, Battershell, and inch markers so we can track Jude and Grace as they grow up. My parents already marked their height and Jude's, I think it is about time we mark Lexi and I as well as seeing if Jude has grown in the last month. But as he grows up, one way to track growth is height. Others are his language, maturity and his knowledge of the Bible and the world. The church is called by God to grow up as well. From a small group huddled in the upper room, to the 3000 called to faith on Pentecost, to the churches scattered through Asia and now all around the world, it is still growing in number. But when Paul talks to a church, he talks about spiritual growth within the body as well as its additions to the body. So that is where we are going to focus today. What does spiritual church growth look like?

Let me set the scene briefly for this letter to the Ephesians. It is a letter from the apostle Paul in prison to the church in Ephesus he started years before. He takes the first three chapters and explains his message of the gospel of Christ for which he is in prison. Then in chapter 4 through 6 he teases out how they should live out this gospel. Living it out in their church community, their individual lives, their families and relationship and lastly in their fight against spiritual forces.

Chapter 4 starts with these practical implications of the gospel for the church.

#### Read V7

The gift language starts in verse 7, takes a detour into an Old Testament quotation and explanation in verses 8-10, and returns in verse 11 where we will start today. This section shows us that Christ gives the gifts of these leadership roles and places qualified and gifted men in them.

So in 2022, in a new year and in God's grace and the measure of his gift let us discover the **progress**, the **purpose** and the **power** of biblical church growth. A growth we must tap into this coming year.

## One – Progress

### Read Ephesians 4:11-12

Now we are looking at Paul's writings in a particular period of Church history. We call it the apostolic age for a reason. The apostles, defined as those who were called by Christ either the original twelve or one abnormally born which is Paul, are to establish the foundations of the church. Along with them were a unique office called the New Testament prophet. An example is Agabus from Acts 11:27-30. He came from Jerusalem to Antioch and he prophesied that there would be a great famine. Luke records that this took place in the reign of Claudius confirming that Agabus was a true prophet. This spurs the church to send relief for those who endured this famine in Judea and then sent it with Barnabas and Saul.

Now, it's important to realize that there can be no more apostles because no one can still meet the qualifications to be an apostle anymore. No one else fits the description of 1) commissioned by Jesus and 2) witness to the resurrected Christ. The same applies to prophets who were a gift to the church to be a part of the signs and wonders authenticating the ministry of the church and the formation of the canon of scripture. Apostles and Prophets set the foundation as Paul said earlier in chapter 2 verse 20, and the evangelists and Pastor/Teachers will continue to build the structure.

So, the new and current leaders of the church are gifts to the church that continue. These are evangelists, which are bold preachers not tied to a single congregation. They travel as missionaries between churches or to communities with no churches to preach the gospel. Next there is the combined description of the Pastor/Elder as the pastors and teachers. We know these are not separate offices for two reasons. First, within the text, you notice in the NASB or most translations that the word "some" precedes apostles, prophets, and evangelists. It precedes pastors but not teachers. Secondly, the terms for elders, overseers and pastors are used interchangeably in the New Testament and all carry the function of teaching and proclamation. 1 Timothy 5:17 may be the clearest example where "the elders who rule... work hard at preaching and teaching". But Paul's point in listing these offices is not to be an exhaustive list but to show that these offices in the church then and now are to: verse 12, equip.

The equipping of the saints (the general term for anyone saved by God and are now a part of the church) is the work of all of these leaders. To equip, in the Greek is to be restored to the original condition or to be made complete.

Both of these definitions fit within the biblical framework. First, as image bearers of God, Adam and Eve were created without sin, but in their fall, in our sinful condition, and in our sins today we have tainted our human condition beyond our ability to repair it. So, evangelists and pastors as their primary function are to preach and teach the truths of the gospel. To be restored to the original design. The same is true of being made complete. Which is more likely given the context as we get to verse 13.

This equipping work of leadership is for the saints to have works of service, or in some translations, “ministry”. The saints, the body of Christ are the ones equipped for the ministry. Now this can break a lot of bad perceptions about the work of the pastor/leaders and the body of the church.

First, I am called to equip and serve you. That’s the goal. If you are not growing in 2022, if you are not being equipped by our church, it falls on the leaders of Bethany who are responsible to God for this task. **We will equip you with the Word of God and pray for you and with you. We will help you endure the testing of your faith and in the midst of suffering because all of these things are being used to bring you to maturity.** Now, we may have done everything we can, short of dragging you into your Bible and into the pew, but if you are active in the church on a regular basis and are still not growing, then we will answer to God for that. If you are absent... then you are neglecting God’s gift of his church leaders for you.

Second, the saints are called to serve. If the church leaders equip, God will call those within that church to be future pastors, missionaries, evangelists and deacons. We call specific deacons from the example of Acts 6, which supplement the organizational ministry of the pastors. They fulfill a specific role here. But we find the same Greek root here in the word “service” but it is now applied to everyone in the church. So, you have work to do. It is not up to the pastor to disciple every person who comes in the door. It is not up to the deacons to meet every need found in the church. It is the saints, you, the body of Christ who are called to work within the ministry and fulfill it.

Our progress as a church will depend upon the gifted leaders, he has given a church to equip, and the saints of the church to serve. Together all of God’s people, no matter their role, will be built up... into what? What purpose are we aiming at?

## Two – Purpose

Read Ephesians 4:13-15

We keep building until unity and knowledge of Jesus make us into the mature body of believers, the fullness of Christ, who is the model or measure of what it means to be fully grown. Paul described his ministry in a similar way. **Read Colossians 1:28.** There is that complete word I was telling you was coming. The equipping will continue until the church is unified in its knowledge of Jesus and then mature in Christ Jesus.

You look at the life of Jesus and you see maturity. He spoke with more authority than the scribes. He lived with more discipline to prayer and obedience of his Father than we can imagine. He set his whole life toward sacrifice, not for the healthy but the sick. Not for the religious, but the sinner. He showcased the perfect life and relationships with his disciples that we are called to mature into. And verse 13 makes clear, maturity comes with unity and knowledge.

Unity is hard to find. Even within just two people, unity of purpose and agreement can be difficult. I have sometimes an overwhelming desire to be right. Anyone else? So how does the church find unity? It is when we submit to a greater authority. It is not as if unity in the church can come about if everyone agrees with the pastor. That isn’t unity, that is domineering. Unity is when the saints of every role, submit to the truth of Scripture and submit to its authority as distributed to the roles we have been called. There may be a time when you disagree with a pastor or deacon. But that pastor or deacon will have to submit what they desire to the Word of God and so will you. This is what will bring about unity.

Knowledge of Christ is the second purpose in maturity. This is not saving knowledge per se, but it of course contains that. This is the lifelong process of plumbing the depths of God and his revelation about himself. It is not a small checklist or a surface level knowledge of his existence. It is a deeper and deeper love and joy in “counting everything as loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

Now take a minute to notice the contrast between the negative example and the positive example of the final purpose of growth in verses 14 and 15.

In the negative we will not be a building on a foundation, but a boat on the waves of the world. Being tossed by our lack of foundation and carried any

direction the wind might choose. Whatever current trend or scheme of men, which are hard to discern at first glance, can keep you floating and drifting instead of founded and growing.

In the positive, the truth will be spoken in a loving way which means we will grow up into the image of Christ. WHO is the head of the body we are in. It is not growing up without an aim, growing in any way, making progress in whatever way the wind takes you, but true growth is being conformed, as Romans 8:29 says, into the image of the Son, into Christ.

Now there is a challenge in trying to pin down what “speaking the truth in love” actually looks like. Some want the truth to be softened by love. As if to say the truth without infinite amounts of nuance or softening might make us unloving. Or the opposite might be a brash and abrasive truthfulness without care of the result. A type of lobbing truth bombs to enjoy the explosion and pain of your opponents.

Speaking the truth in love is not either softening or hardening the truth. Instead, it is holding both together. Love without truth isn't love. In the same way, truth without love isn't truth. If you boldly declare that homosexuality is a sin, but do not offer the love of the gospel of truth, you have told the truth without the love that frees them from the sin they are trapped in. In trying to be truthful you are not loving.

If you call someone to follow Jesus but do not tell them to leave their addiction to gambling and love of money behind, you may be giving them the love of the gospel but you have not shared with them the truth of what they are set free from. In trying to be loving you are not being truthful.

God's good gifts are not independent. They are gloriously intertwined because they all are found in God's character and perfectly displayed in Jesus, the God-Man. We speak the truth in love by professing Christ in all that confronts and all that comforts. In John 8, Christ told the woman caught in adultery both: Your sins are forgiven AND go and sin no more.

May our growth as a church produce the same mixture of God's character, not diluting one for the other, but both full throttle into maturity.

These good gifts of progress through being equipped, with the purpose of unity and knowledge both spring from Christ who is the Power behind it all.

## Three – Power

Read Ephesians 4:16

All of the body and building metaphors are hitting heavy here in these last two verses with the body even getting down to its joints and parts. The joints for structural movement and the parts or tendons and muscles that flex and give the bones their support. The human body in all its complexity gives us the idea that nothing is without a purpose. Even the gall bladder which my mother and many have had removed when it becomes a problem, is not useless, but can become a liability that it must be done without. The same can be true of a joint that must be fused to prevent pain and continued deterioration. It isn't removed but its function is removed.

Each local church has sick, fused and removed parts of its body. Some are clear when a pastor falls in moral failure, or a treasurer is found laundering funds, or more subtly a Sunday school teacher is slowing starving the children in her care of the gospel when they fail to prepare for years on end. The greatest tragedies are those parts which have stopped working long ago but the body refuses to address them. As if a necrotic and dead finger could just fade away without pain.

Are you getting the picture? The whole body is either held together by Christ or it is doomed to fail. It is either receiving instructions and life from the head which is Jesus Christ or they are dying slowly or quickly but inevitably dead when cut off from the source of life.

Christ is the only way we will be unified and grow. We cannot fit together and build each other up if we are getting energy from each other. We must be each connected and given life by Christ. And all this is done in love. The love of truth, and the love for each other.

## Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, fellow joints and individual parts of the body of Christ, how will you and our church grow this year?

Many of us are familiar and idolize the ministry of John MacArthur. We have received the blessing of his preaching and commentaries and seminary grads. But do you know why his church and ministry became famous?

But John MacArthur explains it in a sermon this way:

*“When I first became pastor of Grace Community Church in 1969, I taught a series on Ephesians, and we spent a great deal of time studying the principle of Ephesians 4:11—that the pastor's duty is to equip the saints, and it is their duty to shoulder the work of the ministry.*

*Our people quickly embraced that simple idea, and it transformed our church in a remarkable way. For one thing, we began to see dramatic growth. Within a matter of months, attendance on Sundays had ballooned to almost 1,000. About that same time, a well-known evangelical magazine asked a reporter to write an article about the growth of our church. He visited our services for several weeks, carefully observed how the ministry functioned, interviewed scores of people, and then wrote an article titled ‘The Church with 900 Ministers.’”*

That article sparked the worldwide awe of God’s work in John MacArthur and Grace Church. Now my goal is not to be John MacArthur in his ministry. My goal is that we would be a church of faithfulness and maybe by God’s grace “The Church with 100 or 200 Ministers”. The goal isn’t more people, it is healthy growth at Bethany so that we can grow exactly into what God has for our ministry together. It won’t be on the back of my talent as humble or great as it will turn out to be. No, I will preach Christ and him crucified so as to equip you with the Gospel in a way that you can then be a minister of this Gospel to each other in unity, to your neighbors in witness and to the world for the Glory of God.

We are going to have some small changes to our ministry this year no doubt. The leadership of Bethany Baptist Church, Pastor Craig and I to the deacons, have been praying and preparing for this next season of ministry so that you will be better equipped. But if you are not engaged, you will not be built up. **We will not be built up.** Your absence will slow the growth of the whole, because we will not be living truly in unity as ONE.

The Puritan John Owen reminds us, “The great business of the church is not our number by addition, but by grace, by growing up in Christ.” (I found that quote after I titled this sermon 😊).

So as much as I challenge you to be a part of our ministry here at Bethany this year, I want you to consider two questions for yourself:

- 1) Am I the type who is tempted to overcommit? Will I be at everything to please others, and not for the Lord? You may need to be selective in leadership but consistent in attendance. Do not miss out on how you will be sharpened and expanded in this next season of ministry. I can’t wait to see what you will do.
- 2) Am I the type who is tempted to coast? Are you content to attend rather than serve and build? You must commit to build up this church body by serving others. It will take more of you. But it will not be you who is the source. Christ is. So, you can come serve, and serve well because without your gifts, we will suffer and slow down the growth we are called to.