

Unity in the Body of Christ

How Christ Grows His Church

Ephesians 4:7-14

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How Christ Grows His Church

Scripture

We are currently in a series of sermons in Ephesians 4:1-16 that I am calling, “Unity in the Body of Christ.”

In this section of Scripture, the Apostle Paul has been teaching the church to maintain unity, to use their spiritual gifts, and to grow in spiritual maturity. In other words, he has been teaching them how Christ grows his church.

Let’s read about how Christ grows his church in Ephesians 4:7-14:

⁷ But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. ⁸ Therefore it says,

**“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men.”**

⁹ (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) 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. (Ephesians 4:7-14)

Introduction

My grandson recently celebrated his first birthday. He is the cutest, sweetest, cuddliest, happiest, smartest, brightest, and handsomest baby I have ever seen. And, as a pastor who knows the Scripture text that “God does not show favoritism” (Romans 2:11, *NIV*), I am of course not biased! As a grandparent, I love my grandson. I love him dearly.

But, cute as he is, I don’t want him to stay a baby. I want to see him grow to become a toddler, and then a little boy, and then a teenager (or, perhaps he could skip this stage altogether!), and then a young man, and finally a mature man. Frankly, I imagine what he might be like as a mature man. In fact, I pray daily that he would grow to know, love, worship, and serve the Lord all the days of his life.

In much the same way, the Apostle Paul wants these young Christians in Ephesus to do the same thing. He wants them to grow up to spiritual maturity. He wants to help the Ephesian church understand how Christ grows his church.

Lesson

Ephesians 4:7-14 teaches us how Christ grows his church. Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Foundation for Church Growth Is Gifted Membership (4:7-10)
2. The Essential for Church Growth Is Gifted Leadership (4:11)
3. The Means of Church Growth Is Ministry (4:12a)
4. The Goal of Church Growth Is Maturity (4:12b-14)

I. The Foundation for Church Growth Is Gifted Membership (4:7-10)

First, the foundation for church growth is gifted membership.

I don't want to spend much time on this point because we looked at it in depth last time. Paul said in verse 7, **“But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.”** The word **“grace”** in this verse does not refer to “saving grace” but rather to “service grace.” That is, every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ has been given a spiritual gift by the Lord Jesus Christ for the purpose of being used in the church. Commentator Kent Hughes summarizes the message of this by saying that “all of us (no exceptions!) have a serving grace which has been given to us by Christ in perfect measure. We all have a special part to perform.”¹ My questions to you are these: *Do you know what your special part is? And, are you using the spiritual gift given to you by Christ in serving him in his church?*

Not only do each one of us who are born-again believers in the Lord Jesus Christ have a spiritual gift, but our spiritual gifts have a spectacular origin, as Paul said in verses 8-10, **“Therefore it says, ‘When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.’ (In saying, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)”** Not to restate extensively what I said last time, these verses simply refer to Christ's humiliation and exaltation. As part of his exaltation, he gave spiritual gifts to believers who are to carry on his ministry

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 129–131.

on earth until he returns again at his Second Coming. As Kent Hughes said, “The gifts and enabling grace which we have, have been given to us as Christ apportioned them. They came from the conquering King. They are given with great expectation on his part, for he expects us to use them to bring power and victory in the church.”²

In preparing for this message I read somewhere that our first concern should not be for all the empty chairs in the worship service. Rather, our first concern should be for all the filled chairs. The author was saying that our first concern must be to mobilize every believer to use his or her spiritual gift in service to Christ and his church. When every believer is fulfilling his or her role in Christ’s church, and is active in ministry, *then* we can begin seeing the empty chairs being filled.

How do you know what your spiritual gift is so that you can use it in service to Christ and his church? James Montgomery Boice has several helpful suggestions:

First, you can *begin by studying what the Bible has to say about spiritual gifts*. The Bible is God’s primary provision for spiritual growth and sanctification. It is in the Bible that God speaks to us. Without a knowledge of what God’s Word explicitly teaches in this area we can easily be led to desire experiences which are not his will for us or begin to think of spiritual gifts in secular terms....

Second, *you must pray*....

Third, *you can make a sober assessment of your spiritual strengths and abilities*. If we do not do this on the basis of a careful study of the Word of God and through prayer, we will be misled. But if we have first sought the wisdom and mind of God, we can then go back and look at ourselves through spiritual eyes.

² R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, 132.

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We can ask: What do I like to do? This is not a sure guide to what our gifts are, but it is one indication since God's leading is always toward that for which he has prepared us and which we therefore naturally find enjoyable and satisfying....

Another question we can ask is: What am I good at?.... If God is blessing—if you are seeing spiritual fruit from your efforts—you are probably on the right track and should pursue it even more vigorously....

The fourth and final thing you can do is *seek the wisdom of other Christians where your gifts are concerned*.... Others are almost always more objective about ourselves than we are.³

So, the foundation for church growth is gifted membership.

II. The Essential for Church Growth Is Gifted Leadership (4:11)

Second, the essential for church growth is gifted leadership.

Paul said in verse 11, **“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.”** Paul said that Christ gave a number of gifted leaders to grow his church.

From our study of Ephesians 3 we learned that **the apostles** and **the prophets** are Christ's *foundational* gifts to his New Testament church. Paul said in Ephesians 3:20a that Christ's church is “...built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.” Commentator John Stott says, “Since apostles and prophets were both groups with a teaching role, it seems clear that what constitutes the church's foundation is neither their

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1988), 143–144.

person nor their office but their instruction.”⁴ Their instruction led to the written Word of God. So, Kent Hughes notes, “The apostles and the prophets were given to the church to get her established, but now their role is assumed by the canonical writings of the New Testament. The apostles and prophets with their unique endowments did not extend beyond the apostolic age.”⁵ Commentator F. F. Bruce says, “The apostles as an order of the ministry of the church, were not perpetuated beyond the apostolic age, but the various functions they discharged did not lapse with their departure, but continued to be performed by others—notably the evangelists and pastors and teachers.”⁶

Having laid the foundation with the apostles and prophets, Christ continues to grow his church today with two kinds of gifted leaders: **the evangelists**, and **the shepherds and teachers**.

The one kind of gifted leader that Christ uses to grow his church today are **the evangelists**. “The work of the evangelist,” John MacArthur writes, “is to preach and explain the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ to those who have not yet believed. He is a proclaimer of salvation by grace through faith in the Son of God.”⁷ And Kent Hughes says, “Today ‘evangelists’ are the *obstetricians* of the church—those gifted in bringing new births.... All who are gifted in making the gospel plain and relevant to the lost or helping fearful people share their faith, evangelists! What marvelous gifts to the church!”⁸

⁴ John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 106–107.

⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, 133.

⁶ Quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, 133.

⁷ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Ephesians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 143.

⁸ R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, 133.

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The other kind of gifted leader that Christ uses to grow his church today are **the shepherds and teachers**. Most commentators today take this to refer to one leader rather than two leaders. The reason is due to the construction in the Greek text. So, Christ continues to grow his church today through shepherd/teachers, also known as pastor/teachers. “As the apostolic era came to a close,” writes John MacArthur, “the office of pastor-teacher emerged as the highest level of local church leadership. Thus it carried a great amount of responsibility. Elders were charged with the care and feeding, as well as the spiritual guidance, of the entire church.”⁹ And Kent Hughes says, “A pastor/teacher is to make feeding the sheep a top priority—as Christ three times charged Peter to do (John 21:15–17).”¹⁰

We have learned that the foundation for church growth is gifted membership, and that an essential element for church growth is gifted leadership. Notably, gifted leadership is made up of gifted teachers. John Stott put it this way, “Looking back, we observe that all five gifts relate in some way to the ministry of teaching. Although there are neither apostles nor prophets in the original sense today, there are evangelists to preach the gospel, pastors to tend the flock, and teachers to expound the word. Indeed, they are urgently needed. Nothing is more necessary for the building up of God’s church in every age than an ample supply of God-gifted teachers.”¹¹

So, first, the foundation for church growth is gifted membership. Second, the essential for church growth is gifted leadership.

⁹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Ephesians*, 147.

¹⁰ R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, 133.

¹¹ John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, 164.

III. The Means of Church Growth Is Ministry (4:12a)

Third, the means of church growth is ministry.

In verse 12a Paul stated why Christ gave gifted leadership to the church: **“to equip the saints for the work of ministry.”** This is an extremely important text for understanding how Christ grows his church. Christ grows his church by having the gifted leadership **equip the saints for the work of ministry.** John Stott notes, “Here is incontrovertible evidence that the New Testament envisages ministry not as the prerogative of a clerical élite but as the privileged calling of all the people of God.”¹² Stott continues:

The New Testament concept of the pastor is not of a person who jealously guards all ministry in his own hands, and successfully squashes all lay initiatives, but of one who helps and encourages all God’s people to discover, develop and exercise their gifts. His teaching and training are directed to this end, to enable the people of God to be a servant people, ministering actively but humbly according to their gifts in a world of alienation and pain. Thus, instead of monopolizing all ministry himself, he actually multiplies ministries.

What model of the church, then, should we keep in our minds? The traditional model is that of the pyramid, with the pastor perched precariously on its pinnacle, like a little pope in his own church, while the laity are arrayed beneath him in serried ranks of inferiority. It is a totally unbiblical image, because the New Testament envisages not a single pastor with a docile flock but both a plural oversight and an every-member ministry. Not much better is the model of the bus, in which the pastor does all the driving while the congregation are the passengers slumbering in peaceful security behind him. Quite

¹² John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, 167.

different from either the pyramid or the bus is the biblical model of the body. The church is the body of Christ, every member of which has a distinctive function. Although the body metaphor can certainly accommodate the concept of a distinct pastorate (in terms of one ministry—and a very important one—among many), there is simply no room in it either for a hierarchy or for that kind of bossy clericalism which concentrates all ministry in the hands of one man and denies the people of God their own rightful ministries.

I saw the principle of the every-member ministry well illustrated when I visited St Paul's Church, Darien, Connecticut, a few years ago. It is an American Episcopal church, which has been influenced by the charismatic movement. On the front cover of their Sunday bulletin I read the name of the Rector, the Reverend Everett Fullam, then the names of the Associate Rector and of the Assistant to the Rector. Next came the following line: "Ministers: the entire congregation." It was startling, but undeniably biblical.

So Christ's immediate purpose in the giving of pastors and teachers to his church is through their ministry of the word to equip all his people for their varied ministries.¹³

So, how does Christ grow his church? First, he gives spiritual gifts to each one of his people. Then, second, he gives gifted leaders to his church. And third, these gifted leaders then equip his people for their different ministries.

IV. The Goal of Church Growth Is Maturity (4:12b-14)

And fourth, the goal of church growth is maturity.

In verses 12b-14, Paul said that Christ grows his church by giving gifted members and gifted leaders who each exercise

¹³ John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, 167–168.

their gifts so that they are active in ministry **“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, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 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.”** In a word, Christ’s goal for his church is *maturity*.

Children are invariably gullible. A friend of mine posted on Facebook a photo of each of his young sons sitting in front of their washing machine playing video games. He wrote, “I told my kids that Wi-Fi comes from the washing machine. They looked at me sideways and then tried it and found a better signal. So now they sit here to play games.” In a separate paragraph, he added, “Incidentally, our router is in the laundry room, but I’m going to see how long I can keep the ruse up.”

In a similar way, young Christians are gullible. But Christ’s goal is for Christians in his church to grow to maturity.

So, first, the foundation for church growth is gifted membership. Second, the essential for church growth is gifted leadership. Third, the means of church growth is ministry. And, fourth, goal of church growth is maturity.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the concept of church growth in Ephesians 4:7-14, let us each be active in ministry in order to grow into maturity.

As part of our commitment to shepherd the congregation well, our church officers will help each member discover and use his or her spiritual gift to get involved in ministry, and thereby to mature in Christ. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons.
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