

## REAL CHURCH GROWTH EPHESIANS 4:15-16

I would like to begin by asking you to picture, in your mind's eye, a *growing* church. What does a *growing* church look like to you?

I'm going to guess that, for some of us, our perception of a growing church is simple *math*. A growing church is one that is multiplying in numbers. A growing church is one that is attracting more and more people so that it eventually becomes necessary to have multiple services or build a bigger building.

That is a *natural* perception of church growth because it corresponds with our perceptions of growth in other things. A growing business is one that progressively has more customers and more sales; a growing economy means more jobs and more revenue; a growing family means more kids. So, it's quite natural that we would equate a growing church with addition and multiplication.

It's also quite natural that we would equate numerical church growth with *success*, just like we do in business or with the economy, and that we would equate *explosive* numerical church growth with *spectacular* success.

As a young pastor I went to a pastors' conference in Texas that was hosted by a Baptist church with several thousand members. The moment we arrived at the conference we were quickly divided into groups for a guided tour of the church's campus—a tour that took an hour and a half to complete because it was so large. It had two pool rooms—one with a gigantic swimming pool, and one that had a dozen or more pool tables. It had three full-service restaurants, a gym that had three full-sized basketball courts and an elevated indoor track. There was an exercise workout room, four racquetball courts, an eight-lane bowling alley, a bookstore, a large Christian school, and, a sanctuary that boasted a choir loft for four hundred voices and the largest collection of stained glass in the world.

I recall at the time wondering why our hosts' first order of business was to take their five thousand guests on a tour of their magnificent facility. Perhaps I was being cynical, but I couldn't help but wonder if it was because they were trying to show us what it looked like to have a really *successful* church, or to be a really *successful* pastor. Was it supposed to inspire us? Was it supposed to encourage us?

When we finished that tour, I felt deflated. I felt insignificant and incredibly small. As we rode back to the hotel on our shuttle bus, a guy sitting next to me asked, "So...how big is your church?"

I looked at him kind of sheepishly and said, "Oh, it's really small. We have about a hundred and fifty."

He replied, "How do you think I feel? I pastor a church of seventy-five."

There is nothing wrong with big churches and nice buildings, just as long as we understand that bigness and niceness doesn't *define* what it means to be a successful church, and it doesn't *necessarily* define what it means to be a growing church either. Because according to the Bible, *God's* perception of church growth is *not* mathematical. It may *include* numerical growth. But God defines growth in an altogether different way.

I don't know anybody that measures the success of a football team by its stadium, by its training facility, by how many famous people are loitering on the sidelines, by how neat and tidy the huddle is, or by how well the quarterback calls the plays.

No, we measure the success of a football team by how well the team moves the

football down the field. By how well they work together to defend their territory, and by how many points they score against the opposition. Sure, the stadium and the training facility and the huddle are important—they may even be necessary, but they're only a means to an end.

For a long time, it seems, the focus of a good many churches has been the stadium, or the spectators, or the huddle. We've focused on how many people come into the building to watch the game, how well the pastor calls the plays; how many notable and talented players the team has. There's just one problem. In many churches the ball is not being moved; very little ground is being gained, and few points are being scored.

It's because God never intended the church to focus on those things. When it does, it may indeed succeed in acquiring an image of success; but it will never be very effective, and it will never fulfill the purpose God intended.

This morning we're going to study a passage in which Paul states Jesus' purpose and vision for His church, but it also states His definition of church growth. It's **Eph. 4:11-13**. *“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of 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.”*

This summarizes Jesus' vision for His church. He wants us to become **mature**, and maturity is defined as *everybody in the church being engaged, being equipped, working together, and functioning in their particular roles as the Body of Christ*. Jesus' goal for every local church is that it be a fully functional, fully developed body so that the work He wants to do in this world through it might be most effective.

The results of that maturity are identified in **verses 14-16**. *“...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. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 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” (ESV).*

These verses describe what a mature church looks like. First, it is comprised of spiritual grown-ups, not children. Nothing wrong with children, but children aren't meant to stay children; they're meant to grow up and become adults. And if they don't, something's wrong.

And Paul says the reason it is so important not to remain *spiritual* children is because spiritual children are vulnerable to deception and error. Spiritual children are easily deceived, and their faith can be shipwrecked.

Paul says that *one of the ways we know that we are mature and fully grown in the Lord is that we are anchored in the truth*. We have a firm grasp of what God says in His Word, and we can interpret all of life in the light of that truth. And that knowledge of the truth makes us stable and steadfast and immovable, even when we encounter the inevitable storms of life.

Paul goes on in **verse 15** to identify the second manifestation of maturity. He says, *“Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...”*

This is the goal of the Christian life: *to grow up in every way into Christ*. The goal of the Christian life is not to bide our time until Jesus comes, or try to stay out of trouble. The goal of the Christian life is not to go to church, or to be busy in the church, or to be an expert

on the Bible, or to be a terrific theologian. The goal is to progressively *grow into Christ*.

Growing into Christ means that we are increasingly becoming like Him. In one of his other letters Paul said it this way: “...*We are being transformed into the likeness of Jesus with ever increasing glory...*” (2 Cor. 3:18). And he told the Galatians that the goal of his ministry was that Christ would be formed in them (Gal. 4:19). In Ephesians 4 Paul says that one of the manifestations of maturity is that Christ will be formed in us in “every way.” “Every way” means in our thinking, our desires, our perspectives, our priorities, our attitudes, our responses, our behavior, our character, our treatment of others.

That is the goal of the Christian life. Which means that we are (or we *ought* to be) in a constant state of change. We ought not to be the same persons we were five years ago, two years ago, even six months ago. If we are progressively being conformed to the image of Christ it means we are getting better. We are becoming less self-centered and more concerned about others; we are becoming less greedy and more generous. We are becoming less critical and more gracious. We are becoming more authentic and more gentle and more humble and more helpful. We're becoming better spouses, better parents, better sons and daughters, better friends, better neighbors, better employers or employees, and better citizens.

Do you know what that means for those of us who are in our fifties and sixties and seventies and even eighties? It means that our *best* years are still ahead of us. Maybe not our most productive years or our most active years or our most enjoyable years or our most mentally sharp years. But it means that with each passing year Christ's character is more accurately displayed in us, and it is evident to those around us.

Is that happening to you? Are you more like Him today than you were a year ago, or six months ago?

Is it happening to us as a church? Are we more accurately expressing Jesus than we were a year ago or six months ago?

That's the test of real church growth. It's not how much of the Bible we know or how many people are coming to our church or how many great programs we have or how many missionaries we support. It's about Jesus being formed in us more completely, and Jesus being expressed through us more accurately.

So how do we know if that is happening? We are told in **verse 15**. “...*Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...*”

The word translated “speaking the truth” is actually one word, a verb, so if we were to translate it literally, it would be “truthing”. It is almost impossible to adequately express its meaning in English, but it certainly means more than just *speaking* the truth. It has the idea of *being* true; not true in the sense of being “right” or even being theologically correct, but true in the sense of being *authentic*.

A truthful person, then, is someone who doesn't put on a mask and pretend to be someone he/she isn't. A truthful person is someone who doesn't have a hidden agenda or an ulterior motive. A truthful person is a genuine person.

But this verb “truth” also describes a person who is loyal and faithful. It describes someone who hangs in there with another person through thick and thin, for better or worse.

This kind of relational *truthfulness* is a wonderful quality all by itself. But what makes it even better—what makes it even more *potent* is that it is exercised and demonstrated in *love*. That simply means that “truthing” is, in no way, self-serving. It is always for the benefit of the person to whom it is directed. It also means that “truthing” doesn't have an edge to it.

Yes, it sees people and circumstances for what they really are, even if they are the result of foolishness or sin, but it's not condemning or demeaning or impatient or rude.

Instead, this “truthing in love” seeks to encourage and comfort and heal and help. Yes, it may mean calling sin, sin. It may involve challenging a person to repent. But it may mean saying nothing at all—just being there, just listening, or hanging out, or helping to clean up the mess the person has made.

But be assured of this, as we do this with each other we will change, because according to verse 15 “*truthing in love*” is a manifestation of growing into Christ. And if you want to know what this looks like, read the Gospels and pay attention to how Jesus interacted with people. Do you remember Jesus with the woman at the well—the scandalous Samaritan woman who'd been married five times and was presently living with a man outside of marriage? Do you remember how He engaged her? Do you remember what Jesus did when He happened upon a woman who was caught in adultery, surrounded by a group of self-righteous men who wanted to stone her to death? And what about Nicodemus? And Zacchaeus?

And how about Peter? A few days after Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead, the disciples were out fishing on the Sea of Galilee. As they were coming into shore early in the morning, they saw Jesus on the beach making breakfast for them. After breakfast He took Peter aside. This was, presumably, their first private conversation since before Jesus had died, so they had not yet acknowledged or addressed Peter's failures—when he fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus needed companionship, when he hightailed it and ran like a scared rabbit when Jesus was arrested, and when he denied knowing Jesus three times later that night.

Even after Jesus' resurrection Peter had to be feeling self-conscious. He had to be feeling guilt and shame for what he had done. But on this walk, during their conversation, Jesus didn't rebuke or condemn him for his failure. He didn't even mention it, though you can infer from reading the passage that it was on both of their minds. Instead, Jesus was gracious. He was direct, but He was kind. He spoke the truth, but He did so in love.

And in so doing Peter was transformed. Because he was reconciled to Jesus. He was restored and reinstated to the position of leadership that Jesus intended him to have. And it happened in such a gentle and gracious and constructive way.

And that is precisely how God intends for us to relate to each other, and with the same results. That is how we grow and become fully mature in the Lord. In fact, I would go as far as to say that we cannot grow and become fully mature in the Lord unless we are *truthing in love*. We've got to interact with each other in this way if Christ is going to be formed in us. It can't happen by merely going to church and being a spectator, or by listening to fabulous sermons throughout the week, or having a personal quiet time in the Word and prayer each day.

We grow and change and become like Jesus as we authentically and lovingly interact with each other, because when we interact with each other we are indirectly interacting with Christ Himself, and it is Christ Himself who causes us to grow. Look at **verse 16**. “...*We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 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*” (ESV)

Real church growth occurs as individual body parts (each one of us) take their rightful places in relation to all the other body parts who comprise the body of Christ in a particular

locality. Real growth cannot occur in isolation. It cannot occur merely in our own personal, private spiritual journeys. Real growth, substantial growth, growth into Christ likeness occurs as we are connected to each other. So as we interact with each other, as we encounter Christ in each other, as we function together, and as we, together, submit to and follow our head, the Lord Jesus, we become more and more like Jesus, and He is expressed more accurately and authentically.

This past week I've had at least a dozen opportunities to witness someone *truthing in love* either to me or in my presence, all of which have served to build me up and express Christ to me and perhaps form Christ *in* me.

One of them occurred when a brother came over to my house one evening, of his own volition, and used his expertise to help me with a project I was doing (actually, he did it and I watched). During those 2 ½ hours we were together the things he shared with me about what God was doing in his life and family were so precious and so exciting I had a hard time going to sleep that night.

The very next evening a family from Washington stopped by our house on their way to their holiday destination, and for an hour we got to catch up with all the things God has been doing in our lives. It wasn't chit chat; it wasn't just polite conversation. It was genuine fellowship that included substantial encouragement and confession of sin and other forms of truthing in love. And, once again, I was deeply impacted.

I come back to the question: How would you describe a growing church? It's more than just math. *A growing church is one where people are so connected to one another, and so connected to Jesus that His life and His love are flowing into them and then being expressed through them to one another.*

On the way home from that pastors' conference in Texas I happened to sit next to the man who had organized the whole event. I was eager to ask him some questions, but I could tell he didn't really feel like talking. He looked dejected. But he did respond to my question when I asked how he thought the conference went. He just shook his head and said they had already determined they would never do it again. He said that he and the other organizers had discovered, after it was too late, that the hosting church had an agenda—they wanted to use this conference to showcase their spectacular church.

I cannot and I should not make a judgment about the spiritual maturity of that church. I have no idea what that church is really like. But I will say that true success in a church has nothing whatsoever to do with a building, and it may not even have to do with the number of people who fill the building. True success is commensurate with how well the Lord Jesus Christ is encountered and how accurately He is expressed through the people of that church to each other, to the community, and to the world.

## REAL CHURCH GROWTH EPHESIANS 4:15-16

**MAIN IDEA:** CHURCH GROWTH COMES FROM BEING LOVINGLY CONNECTED TO CHRIST (OUR HEAD) AND EACH OTHER (MEMBERS OF CHRIST'S BODY)

### PERCEPTIONS OF A GROWING CHURCH

#### WHAT A MATURE CHURCH LOOKS LIKE (14-16)

SPIRITUAL GROWN-UPS (14)

GROWING UP INTO CHRIST (15)

THE MEANING OF "INTO"

"IN EVERY WAY"

"SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE"

#### THE DYNAMICS OF CHURCH GROWTH (16)

THE SOURCE OF GROWTH

THE CAUSE OF GROWTH

THE CATALYST OF GROWTH

### APPLICATION