

Sermon 13: Ephesians 4:11-16: Growing the Church with the Word: Part 2

OUTLINE

How word gifts grow the church
How other gifts grow the church

INTRODUCTION

'Every member ministry.' Have you ever heard this phrase? This phrase is used to describe a movement in the modern church where every Christian is encouraged to know their gifts and use them in service to God. We welcome such an emphasis as biblical, 1 Cor. 12:7, Eph. 4:16. However, this emphasis has often come at the sacrifice of the formal ministries of the church. If every Christian is a minister then why do we need pastors and preaching? We are in the midst of Eph. 4:11-16 which talks about both leaders and laity, formal gifts and informal gifts, and how the church is grown by God through the working of all the gifts, but each in their place. Church growth has been a buzz phrase in the last half century and many strategies have been announced as to how to do it. Our concern is to answer this question biblically and Eph. 4:11-16 gives us the biblical perspective. Let me outline once again the basic flow of 1-16. Paul has been talking about how we are to maintain the unity God has brought us into by the Gospel, v1-6. However, there is unity but also diversity, this diversity consists of the various gifts that God has given to the church, v7-10. These gifts have a certain shape and purpose. In 11-16 Paul starts off talking about those offices which bring the word of God to the church, the apostle, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers. We spent last week looking at a definition for each of these and how each one is related to the ministry of the word and their authority relationships to each other. Now we move into 12-16. These verses fall into 2 parts, firstly, 12-14 indicate how the word based gifts Paul has mentioned in v11 cause growth to occur. Then in v15-16 under the ministry of the word, we then see how the rest of the parts of the body as they use their gifts also contribute to the growth of the church. The concern we have as we look at these verses is to demonstrate that church growth is outlined in the bible as happening in a particular way, that God by His Spirit works through the word by the official offices of the church, and that this then stimulates all the other parts to contribute and cause growth. Today you will hear many calls for the latest technique to be employed to bring about growth, and many of these movements have some truth in them. For example, we need a revival in discipleship, or a revival in mentoring, or a rediscovery of manhood and womanhood, these are all true, but Eph. 4:11-16 points us to the fundamental place of God's word through the offices of the church stimulating growth.

How word gifts grow the church

V12, 'to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.' Paul began listing the 4 offices that declare the word, in v12 we are told the purposes of those word gifts. Now there is controversy over how to read this verse all because of a comma. Now the original Greek manuscripts of the NT would have all been written in capital letters, with no spaces between the words distinguishing the words, and without our modern punctuation, like semi-colons; quotation marks; exclamation marks etc. So it is the translators that have to provide the punctuation. I want to argue that our modern translations have an error in their punctuation and lack a comma. In the KJV v12 reads as follows, 'for the perfecting of the saints,(comma) for the work of ministry,(comma) for the edifying of the body of Christ.' When put this way, these three purpose clauses all have the same subject, the offices of v11. In other words, God gave the offices of v11 to do three

things, firstly, to equip/perfect the saints; secondly, to do the work of ministry; thirdly, to edify the church. All the modern versions read it differently saying that God gave the offices of v11 to equip the saints, that is the rest of the church, so that they can do the work of ministry so that the body grows. I believe that God has given the other gifts to edify the body, but that is the teaching of v16 not of v12. The narrative behind this new way of seeing v12 goes something like this. The KJV is a Puritan translation of the Bible, and the Puritans were often putting forward their Reformation concerns in their translation. At the time of the Reformation there was a great concern about who the true clergy were and the primacy of preaching being put in its proper place in worship. It is claimed that this biased the translation to emphasize formal ministry and preaching rather than the involvement of all believers. Some modern notions talk about how the Reformation needed to carry through on its teaching of the priesthood of all believers. We respond to this saying that the Reformers did believe in the priesthood of all believers but not the 'clergyhood' of all believers.

Let me reiterate that I am glad that there is an emphasis to get every person involved, in one sense I love the idea of every member ministry but if God gives us the gift of teaching and authority, and this is how He will grow His church then we are robbing ourselves if we fail to recognize and use it.

The second issue to work through is the translation of the word equip, you have already heard the KJV talk about perfect, so what is the right translation here? There are various options and once against context will have to determine the choice. I prefer 'perfect', so score another point for the KJV. With the technical issues out of the way now we can see the three purposes of word ministry, to perfect saints, to do the work of ministry, and to build up the body of Christ.

So firstly we see that these offices which bear authority, and who bear the responsibility of bringing the word cause the saints to be brought to perfection/completion/maturity. Can a Christian grow apart from a local church and without elders? Technically yes, but here we are told that God has ordered it that the Christian will flourish when in the local church under officers who are faithfully bringing the word. Some Charismatics might think that Word and Spirit are opposed and that the Spirit replaces the letter of the Word. If you remove the word, you remove the apostles, prophets and evangelists as well as the pastor-teachers. You not only rob yourself of local church teachers but teachers in the universal church and the very bible itself.

Secondly, God has given these offices to do the work of ministry. We no longer have the ministry of the apostles which would have been accompanied with the signs of the apostles, nor prophecy. Nor do we have evangelists as defined as those apostolic representatives like Timothy and Titus. But pastors are still among us and they have been given an office of authority to do the work of ministry. What does this mean? Does it mean that the pastor must do everything in the church? Definitely not! It is referring to particular work that is seen as formal ministry, not the sort of ministry that every Christian gets involved in. For example, the work of preaching the word, administering baptism and the Lord's Supper, oversight over the local church. These words, work and ministry only occur together in one other verse in the NT, 2 Tim. 4:5, in reference to Timothy, 'As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.' It is clear here that Paul uses work and ministry in relation not to describe what every Christian does generally but to describe what Timothy is to do specifically. Some people despise the offices of authority and think their work in word, prayer and the administration of the church as unimportant or optional. Not so, this is a gift God has given to grow the church by.

Thirdly, building up/edifying the body of Christ. The point of office is not to lord it over the church or to build our own little kingdoms but to see the church thrive and be built up. The ministry of the word will build up the individual believer, but through evangelism also collectively.

The next thing Paul does is point them to key ways that these offices of word ministry perfect, minister and edify. V13-14, '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.' Paul tells us that we need these word ministries until we reach full manhood and full unity, this will only happen when Jesus comes again. This indicates that the church and its offices were not only for the time of the apostles but until Christ returns. Some might think that this would argue for the continuing office of the apostle, we respond by saying that their ministry though not their office continues through the Bible. The word is needed to unify us in the faith, to bring us into a fuller knowledge of the Son, reach maturity, and until are no longer like the children we often are carried about by all the false teaching around us. Until Christ comes again this is the function of the word to us.

Now this will be a surprise to some in our day. For how do we attain unity today? The modern practice is to diminish the word and doctrine and downplay the God given model for organizing the church. How do we grow in the knowledge of the Son? Many today will answer that knowing God is all about experiencing God, that we need deeper worship experiences not more word through the God given offices. Maturity in the minds of many today is growing past fundamentalism and Biblicism. Maturity is for many about being led by the Spirit not being fed more by the word through elder doing their job in preaching. I have even heard of people talk about outgrowing church like outgrowing training wheels.

V14 specifies that we need the ministry of the apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers so that we will no longer be childish. Children are naïve and gullible, they lack experience and wisdom so they can be easily misled, many Christians are like this. Children fixate on externals like rich and poor; they divide into cliques like black and white; they tend to be drawn to the sensational and attractive and don't judge on the basis of principle; children are subject to fads and always want to move with what is trending, biased towards the new not the old. Paul recognizes this and sees the provision of God in the word offices of the church. In other words in order to grow up you need the apostolic and prophetic teachings of the word; you need the local church; you need the ministry of the word by your elders, as well as their shepherding and discernment. Your maturity depends upon the proper functioning of these offices. To have the offices without the preaching of the word will leave you immature, to have the word without the benefits of the offices will also leave you lacking, though this would at least be the side to err on.

How other gifts grow the church

V15, 'Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.' Now these words 'speaking the truth in love' get a lot of air time for they capture the perfect balance between truth which is needed to be believed for salvation and spiritual growth, and love which is the best way to administer the truth so that it honors the truth Giver; the nature of the message we preach; and to bring about a more willing listener. To err on either side often destroys the communication process. Each one of us is a person that trends towards privileging the truth or privileging love. Often our personality types and past experiences give us this bias. People who are relational, sensitive, and care

about people will be concerned to see that love is the rule, and err on the side of niceness. But for the analytical person, who cares about truth, they will err on the side of bluntness. Which are you? You must be both. Remember your strength is your weakness, maturity is bring a balance into both. We often apply these verses to things like evangelism, or talking about sensitive subjects like homosexuality or transgenderism, and it is right to do so. However, it is often overlooked as to how Paul originally meant it.

Paul is talking about 4 offices which all communicate the word, this is the truth aspect of his statement. But each of these offices bears authority in the church, the apostles, prophets, and evangelists are offices of universal authority which are no longer active today; but the pastor-teacher is an authority in the local church and is still present. Authority can be austere, and it is Paul's practice when addressing husbands as the head and authority in the home to talk about loving leadership. This is what I believe Paul is alluding to here. He is saying something like this: rather than being children without parents, or teachers, who are vulnerable and left themselves will flounder, we need the loving impartation of the word from the God given word offices to bring about growth.

Notice in v15 how Paul recognizes that when the leaders are doing their job, namely preaching the truth, but in a way that is not abusive but gently and with patience, the church will grow up in every way, and into Christ. Firstly, notice the words, 'we are to grow up.' Spiritual growth is not an option it is an obligation. Just as a child cannot refuse to grow up, nor should Christians. J. I. Packer talks about Peter Pan Christianity. Peter Pan in the famous children's story is all about the boy we refused to grow up. Christian have you stopped growing? When we were children we couldn't wait to grow up, we would will ourselves to be taller and heavier constantly comparing ourselves with our friends. As a Christian you are to be concerned for growth and the proper place to get it. Secondly, notice that Paul is talking about growth being in the proper place and conditions. He is talking about in the local church, under the preaching ministry of the church, and a ministry that speaks truth in love. I am very grateful for the modern emphasis on discipleship which talks about the various spiritual disciplines that a Christian is to practice in their lives. Bible reading, prayer, etc. Remember that in the first century not everyone could read or have a bible. In fact up until the modern age most people could not read or have access to the scriptures, God gave the church as the main way in which Christians would be fed and grow. We can often forget this and think that the greater growth happens outside the church not through it. Please practice the spiritual disciplines and be diligent in self-feeding, but do not neglect the biblically appointed way to grow. Thirdly, notice that we grow into Christ. This points to several things. We grow to know Him more relationally. We come to know more about Him and this causes us to love Him more and seek His face more. It also means that we grow more like Him, as we behold His face we are changed from one degree of glory into another. It also means that we grow by virtue of our union with Him. The Spirit of Christ unites us to Christ and feeds us upon all of His benefits. Through the means of grace, the Spirit working by the word causes all that is Christ's to become ours. The Spirit using the word being the key instrument in how this happens. It is when we come together as a body, and function properly as a body, that we experience growth as a body. There is individual growth but please appreciate the corporate element Paul is emphasizing here.

V16, '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.' Paul tells us that when we are plugged in, when we are all grafted into the vine, when we are in Christ, Christ provides and feeds His whole body. How does Christ do this? When each part is working properly, this makes the body grow, so technically although Christ is growing the body, He is working through each part so that it builds itself up in love.

Here we see Paul has come full circle. He began this chapter talking about maintaining the unity we have in love. This unity is served by the loving service of all the diverse gifts. Everyone serving does not mean that there is not a proper order. Because God grows His church by the Spirit through the word, the officers play a vital role in sanctifying the church with the word of God; as the rest of the church benefit in growth from this ministry they are enabled to better serve with their own gifts and serve the body, and this stimulates further growth.

This last verse addresses each one of us directly. It asks the questions are you part of the body, are you working properly, are you serving in such a way that you cause the other parts to grow because of your contribution? And just as the teaching gifts are to serve by declaring the truth in love, are you serving in the area of your particular gift in love? It is not only the elders who have to be humble and kind, and gentle and patient, and self-sacrificing and Christlike, we all are to serve the good of the body with the gifts we have been given in love. This will not only keep the peace, it will in fact cause growth.

So how does the church grow? When each part does its part in love, when the officers speak the truth in love, and all the other parts plugged into the church serve in love, the church grows. This is the church growth strategy we are committed to are you plugged in?