

How does a church grow?

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- [0 : 0 0] If you've got your Bible, it'd be worth keeping it open in front of you as we look through those verses. Every year on our daughter Emily's birthday, we ask her a few questions and write down the answers.
- And the idea is we're supposed to kind of see how she's kind of developing, what changes year on year. They're not particularly deep so far. I'll give you a quick insight. One of the questions, what would you like to be when you grow up?
- Age two, we didn't really get a kind of a coherent answer. We were a bit worried about her future prospects at that time. Age three, Emily said when she grows up she'd like to be a cow.
- At least we got an answer at that time. Last year, age four, she decided she wanted to be an artist when she grows up. So I think that's probably a better aim than a cow. We've got progress, although if she's inherited my artistic ability, she might want to think again before she gets much older.
- But we expect people to grow, don't we? We expect people to develop, to mature. Or if you're aiming to be a cow age three, that's probably okay. If that's still your plan age 23, questions might start being raised.
- [1 : 0 6] But throughout our lives, however old we are, we're growing, we're developing, we're learning, we're maturing. I'm sure that all of us can look back at stages in the past where we kind of cringe at those times where we thought that we knew all there was to know.
- We thought we kind of had it sorted. You know, we were 18 years old and nobody could teach us anything. Well, with the benefit of hindsight, we realized that that was not the case. And the idea of kind of lifelong learning or continual professional development or taking on new challenges, new skills, perhaps even a new career are more parts of life which are recognized and which are encouraged in us.
- And the Bible says that the church should be just the same. That as a church that we shouldn't be standing still thinking that we've got it all sorted, that we know all there is to know.
- And so one of our values as a church is to be a growing community. And we said before, that doesn't simply mean in terms of size, although we're always keen to welcome new people in.
- But it means as well as that in terms of deepening our relationship, deepening our knowledge, deepening our love for God. And the great thing, I think, about that goal that the Bible gives us that we're striving after as a church, the great thing is that it's something that is true for all of us.
- [2 : 3 0] And so wherever you are this morning in terms of your relationship with God or even if you have that relationship with God, perhaps that's something you're still wondering about, something you're asking questions about, maybe even something you're slightly skeptical about.

Or maybe you're kind of a mature Christian. Maybe you're someone who knows their Bible really well. Maybe you're someone who's been following Jesus for a long time. But the great news of the Bible is that wherever we find ourselves on that scale, that we're always able to grow, to move on, to develop.

This is a process that never comes to an end. We do that as individuals. We do that together as a church. And really what this passage is all about, it looks at what does that look like?

And how does that happen? What does a mature church look like? What tools are we given in order to grow further? I hope in these verses that we'll get some answers to those questions as we look through them together.

But first, a quick recap before we dive straight in. I mentioned this just before. Ephesians is a letter which kind of splits into roughly two halves. And the first half that we came to the end of last week is in some ways Paul kind of laying down the facts, the truths of the gospel and what the church is.

[3 : 49] So Paul has reminded us, chapter one, of the great blessings that are found in Christ. That in him we have redemption, the forgiveness of our sins.

And he's prayed that the church would know that more. Chapter two, he's spoken about the great unity that we have through Christ. That vertical unity with God, that horizontal unity with one another, that the gospel brings people together.

And then verse three, the great purpose of the church. That this community brought together by the gospel is something that is special, something that has real value.

Not because of anything that we do, but because it demonstrates God's wisdom. The church, remember, we were saying last week is kind of God's sort of cosmic showstopper, demonstrating to all creation his power and his wisdom and his victory.

And then you might remember the last section of chapter three from last week, Paul's prayer that we would be able to live out these great truths. That God would enable us to reflect him more and more.

[5 : 00] And so that's kind of a quick recap of the first half of the book. The second half then is based on that foundation and I suppose expands on what does that look like? How does that work itself out in really practical ways?

And as I've said, this week we're going to be thinking about growing in this way that Paul has prayed that we would grow. And what does a growing church, growing from this foundation of the gospel that Paul's outlined, what does that look like?

How does that happen? And I think Paul kind of gives three stages in his kind of answer here. The three stages that build one on top of the other. And the first one, number one, is this.

It is living in unity. Living in unity. Let me read again the first three verses of that chapter. Have a look if you like. I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called.

With all humility and gentleness. With patience. Bearing with one another in love. Eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

[6 : 06] This idea of unity is one that we've seen a number of times already in this letter. It's a massive emphasis in the letter to the Ephesians. What does a mature and growing church look like?

Well, there might be many things. But one thing which is certain, one thing that is non-negotiable, is that it's a united church. It's people pulling together in the same direction.

And so how does the church do that? Well, real unity is only possible with these characteristics that Paul lays out. Humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love.

And as he writes these down, they perhaps help us to see how the idea of unity in the church is perhaps different from the unity outside the church.

And so it would be wrong to say that the church is the only place where people are united. If you go to a football match, you'll see plenty of people united, plenty of people kind of hugging strangers that they'd never met before.

[7 : 0 6] But the amazing thing about the church is that this unity is different because it's not based on how others act towards us, but it's through the attitude that we have toward other people.

And so the idea of the church is that it's not united because it is full of such lovely people who'd never get on our nerves. The idea here is, Paul says, we need patience.

And we need to be able to bear with one another in love. The reason that those things are needed is because we're people who make mistakes, people who do kind of annoy one another. And there will be times, obviously, it's not what we're aiming for, but there will be times in this church where people will get on your nerves, will do things that you're not keen on, where we won't love each other as we should do.

And we hope those things won't happen, but at some point we will lay each other down. And the challenge is then, how do we respond to that? Are there reasons for us to say, well, I'm just going to avoid that person now, they're not kind of part of my gang?

Are there reasons for us to sort of hold a grudge inside ourselves? Well, Paul says, no, actually, these are the opportunities to put into practice the difference that the gospel makes in us.

[8 : 1 8] Paul says this unity that we have, that we strive after, isn't based on how people act towards us, but on our attitude toward other people. And that's what makes it, I suppose we could call it, a supernatural unity.

That's what sets the church apart from the rest of the world. And so the world will tell you, you know, if someone has spoken this way to me, well, then too right, I'm going to speak this way back to them. You know, if these people have wronged me, well, then I'm going to get my own back in this way or this way or that way.

If that person has let me down, well, then it's my right to make sure that everybody knows about it and that that person's name is kind of dragged through the mud. You know, all of those things are, in some ways, fair responses.

All of those things are perhaps how the world would say, yeah, you know, you've not done anything wrong. You're within your rights to do that. And yet Paul says that's not how the church is to operate. Why not? How not?

Well, it's because the unity within the church is based on the gospel. Therefore, Paul begins this whole chapter. Therefore, i.e., in light of all of these incredible truths about the gospel that have just been laid out in chapters 1 to 3, therefore, walk in this unity.

[9 : 3 1] In the gospel, we see Jesus coming from heaven to rescuers. God himself stepping down, laying aside his majesty, even to the point of going to a cross and dying.

The ultimate in humility. And so as a church, we're moved to show humility to those around us. In the gospel, we recognize that we don't get treated as we deserve, but instead God shows us incredible grace.

He shows us incredible mercy. And so we're able to show gentleness to those around us, even when we want to say, oh, you know, put yourself together. That is not what God said to us.

In the gospel, we find forgiveness through Jesus. Not just as a one-off, but every day, constantly coming back to God, saying, look, this is how I've messed up this time.

Will you forgive me? And constantly assured that, yes, he does forgive. And when we grasp that that's how he deals with us, well, then we can show patience to others.

[10 : 32] Then we can bear with one another in love, because that is how God has dealt with us. Unity comes as we deal with others in the way that God has first dealt with us.

And so there are, as we said, kind of two halves of Ephesians. You might call it kind of the doctrine in the first half and the practice in the second. You might call it the truths and the way of life. But we see straight away here that these two halves can't be separated.

We can't just kind of parachute in and begin at chapter 4 and say, let's get to the practical stuff. No, a growing church is a church that is growing in unity precisely because it knows that unity that God has made possible through his incredible grace to us.

So the growing church is living in unity. Just one more quick thing before we move on. When I was at university, after the first year of university, people tended to move into houses with their best friends, so people would get little groups and they'd move here, there, and everywhere.

And it was quite exciting, the idea of getting to choose to live with your best mates. And life was just going to be this endless joy of take-away kebabs and playing FIFA on the PlayStation. And it was kind of like heaven on earth.

[11 : 44] What could be better? And yet, actually, it was amazing to see, over a couple of years, how many of those houses didn't stay together for that long? Or how many of those houses had kind of falling outs or kind of a bit of a frosty atmosphere or kind of all-out warfare occurred?

You know, why did that happen between people who'd been such good friends, who'd chosen to live together? I think the reason is this. It is far easier to be friends with someone now and then, to meet a friend, to go and watch a football game, to go for a night out, to go for a drink.

That is far easier than it is to live together, than it is to share a kitchen together, than it is to constantly be in each other's kind of space and in each other's faces.

Suddenly, the opportunities for falling out kind of ramps up incredibly. I'd be pleased to know I'm not suggesting we should all move in together. I think that would be a bit much. But I do hope that as a church, we would be moving towards this idea of being in each other's lives enough to annoy each other, if that makes sense.

That actually, we would be close enough to tread on each other's toes. That we wouldn't just see each other at our best, but we'd also see each other at our worst. We'd see weaknesses as well as strengths.

[12 : 59] It probably doesn't take an awful amount of humility, or patience, or gentleness, or bearing with one another in love to sit next to each other for an hour and a half on a Sunday morning to have a coffee together.

But the kind of supernatural unity, the kind of gospel unity, that is the mark of the growing church, it comes into play as we grow together day by day, as we're involved in each other's lives, in kind of personal ways, in difficult situations.

And I can't stand here and prescribe what that looks like for people, but it is a question I just want to kind of leave there, I suppose. Are we close enough to one another? Do we see each other enough?

Are we there in good times and bad times so that we're required to demonstrate this humility, this gentleness, this patience, this love that we can't just muster up within ourselves, but which flows from the gospel, which Jesus has first shown us, and that enables us to be living in unity?

So there we go, that's number one, living in unity. Paul then builds on this, he moves on, and his next point is that the growing gospel church has ministry in diversity. And so we've seen before how this unity, which Ephesians speaks about, is not uniformity.

[14 : 17] It's not, well, you know, we're all kind of the same here, so let's just hang out together anyway. It's actually quite the opposite of that. The whole point of the book is that it's unity in diversity. It's radically different people being brought together on the same ground, that trust in Jesus.

And what Paul's doing here is he's highlighting the different gifts that God has given to different people in the church. And his point really is twofold. Firstly, that everyone is gifted in the church.

And then secondly, that there is a whole range of different gifts within the church. Verse seven, grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

Verse eight then goes on to speak, it's slightly confusing, it's speaking about the ascension, that as Christ returned to heaven, as Jesus returned to heaven after the resurrection, that he gave gifts, different gifts to different people, but gifts to everyone.

And he's not talking about, you know, a new car, a new jacket, a new phone. No, it's speaking about what we call spiritual gifts, which are really simply sort of God-given abilities, God-given callings, God-given giftedness in different areas.

[15 : 27] Paul says that these are all things that we have, but they're diverse, they're different for different people. And I want to think of it, I suppose, a bit like an orchestra. So an orchestra is all one.

To be any good, they have to all be united, playing along with one another. Yeah, it would be pretty naff orchestra if it was just like 50 people belting it out on the trumpet. It would be loud, but it would miss out on some of what makes, you know, that music so incredible, so powerful, so beautiful.

And so the church is like that, it's different people bringing their different gifts together to make something special, to make something that is more than the sum of its parts. Well, how does that work?

Paul gives us a list of gifts in verse 11. He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers. Shepherds and teachers is probably, he's got one thing in mind, kind of shepherd teachers there, that's one job.

And Paul's idea here is not to give an exhaustive list of all of these different gifts. The reason he picks these gifts are that these are gifts to do with God's word. And so the apostles and the prophets, which he speaks about, they're the people who wrote the Bible, the apostles who wrote the New Testament, the prophets who wrote the Old Testament.

[16 : 42] And I think the Bible would say that they're not really kind of roles that we have anymore. We're not adding to the Bible. The Bible is complete. Those are unique roles in the past and they're done. And yet we do still have the evangelists, the shepherd teachers.

They're those who share this word written by the prophets and the apostles with other people. And I think, like most of the gifts, this is something that we all have a responsibility to do to some extent.

But there are particular people given that role. So that's my job. I get paid to be a minister, a shepherd teacher. The idea of being ordained as a minister is to be set apart, not set above, but set apart with that particular role of teaching God's word, the Bible.

Feeding the sheep would be the kind of picture that the Bible often uses. Feeding the sheep with God's word. And yet the thing I think is really cool about this, the thing I really want us to get as a church that's so important is this next bit.

What is the point of these word-based gifts? Why has Jesus given these kind of four roles? What is the point of my job as a minister? Well, verse 12, it goes straight on.

[17 : 53] It is to equip the saints. And remember, the saints, that's not particularly kind of holy people. That's Paul's word for all Christians. It is to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

So this might be kind of news to you that actually you're all ministers. You can go and add that to your CV when you get home. Paul's point is it's the saints. It is the church.

It is all of us who do the work of ministry in all the various different forms that that takes with all the various different gifts that he gives us. And so the growing church has this unity but it has this unity where everyone is active doing the different roles that God has given them.

Equipped to be doing those as we gather together and hear from his word the Bible empowering us to do that. And so some of these things might be things that happen during the time of our meetings together.

And we're definitely at that stage as a church where we do need people to be involved in serving in different areas whether music or children or welcome or other things. Some of these gifts will be things which are to be used outside of the service.

[19 : 04] You know the church is not something that just exists for a couple of hours on a Sunday and then disappears. It's all of us wherever we are using these gifts these abilities these callings that God's given us.

All with the idea of building up the church. With the idea of encouraging one another and also inviting more people in. And so people might say to me you've gone into the ministry and people understand what we mean there but it's so important that actually we remember the Bible says the ministry is done by the saints by the church and the ministry is just one part of that.

I might go back to that picture of the orchestra. I suppose in a way a minister is kind of like the conductor helping the different sections do their parts well. They're not writing any new music.

It's the apostles and prophets who've done that. We have God's word the Bible and yet the idea of the conductor is that they study that music and they communicate it. They pass it on to equip the musicians.

And yet a conductor looks pretty stupid if no one is playing any instruments. He's just a man kind of waving a stick or something. You know it's pointless. It's the same with the church. If we think that the minister does the ministry and this has been a kind of a huge kind of model in Scotland that the minister is going to do all of this stuff.

[20 : 26] If we think that the minister does the ministry or perhaps with a couple of extra kind of keynotes being involved the fact is that that does not work. That does not grow the church. That does not build the church.

The healthy congregation sees it as Paul teaches here that it has ministry and diversity. We've said before that everyone in this church is needy. Everyone has struggles and difficulties but also everyone is needed.

Everyone has gifts to offer. Everyone has a role to play. But everyone is involved being equipped by God's word as they're taught as they're fed and as they're grounded in it.

So there we go. Paul calls the church to be living in unity through the gospel and then to be ministering it in diversity again founded on the gospel that the word of God and his final point is this really kind of the point of all of this is this to be growing in maturity.

And that's the purpose of this whole body whole church ministry. Verse 12 is for building up the body of Christ that's the church until we all attain the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the son of God to mature manhood.

[21 : 37] And we serve each other with the gifts that God has given us so that we'll kind of grow up as children. That's what Paul is encouraging us to do to grow in maturity. He says not to be kind of children anymore but to be developing as we would expect a child to develop.

What does that look like? Paul kind of gives us a picture. I used to do some kayaking and instructing in a previous job on rivers when you'd watch people who didn't really know what they were doing and I often fell into this camp.

They would kind of bounce down the river slightly looking this way and that way a bit of a look of surprise and horror on their face at whatever kind of sprung up next being blown here and there often ending up where they shouldn't be and often ending up their boat the wrong way around which was not much fun and yet when you watch people who really knew what they were doing they had this kind of laser focus on where they wanted to be the right destination and that is where they'd end up.

And that's how Paul describes the church. He says the immature church is like children and it's tossed to and fro by waves carried around by every wind of doctrine by human cunning by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

Paul's point is to say that there is a lot trying to pull us away from the truth of the gospel that is the foundation of the church. The reason Paul has spent so much time laying out the facts in chapters 1 through to 3 is because there are plenty of people who will try and deny those facts.

[23 : 09] There are plenty of people trying to pull the Ephesian church away from those truths and there will be plenty of people trying to pull us away from those truths. And actually some of those will even come from within kind of the wider church.

There will be people claiming to speak for God but who are actually dragging us away from that focus on Jesus the head of the church. Trying to drag us away either from his kind of incredibly exacting and perfect standards.

The kind of people who will say well did God really say that? Does that really still count? Is that not all a bit old fashioned? Although people who will try and drag us away from Jesus' perfect and inexhaustible love and forgiveness.

Well I don't think God would really want people like you or surely what you've done is kind of beyond the remit of the kind of forgiveness that the church is speaking about. None of that is true.

To grow in maturity means staying focused on Jesus the true Jesus the head of the body the Jesus as presented by the Bible. That's what it looks like to grow in maturity.

[24 : 15] How do we do that? Well it's this unity it's this diverse ministry that we share in together. That's the end goal. So we see in verse 15 a kind of really practical example of that.

It's speaking the truth in love. That's something that we're all called to be involved in. Something that can be really difficult to do is it's hard to kind of speak the truth to people.

It's much easier just to kind of nod along and say that's fine but sometimes we need to kind of call people back from temptations or ways of life that we know aren't helpful for them. Sometimes we need to kind of follow up with people and say you know how are you doing I've not seen you around church or involved in stuff for a while.

Sometimes we need to be kind of bold to speak the truth to people who don't know the gospel at all and speak that gospel truth into that situation. The key here isn't it is speaking the truth in love.

Love is the motivation for all that we do. It's not to make ourselves feel good. It's not to kind of talk down on people. It's not to break that unity that we've been talking about but it's to build that unity.

[25 : 21] It's to point each other back to Jesus the head of the church. That's what it looks like to be a mature church. A growing community as we strive to be. Let me just finish with the last verse verse 16 and in some ways I think kind of sums up everything that we've been saying so far.

Let me just kind of work through that. It says it's when the whole body that is the church joined and held together by every joint with which it's equipped. That's these diverse gifts which each one of us is given.

When each part is working properly that's us using these gifts for one another. That is what makes the body grow up so that it builds itself up in love.

The church grows as we come together and serve one another. I really believe if you're not at church if you kind of think I won't bother this week or if you're kind of not connected I do believe that you're missing out that God has people here which he will use to serve you to help you know him better.

More than that the Bible also says that other people are missing out. The Bible says that you might not think that you're much that you might not think that you've got much to offer the Bible says that you are uniquely gifted that you are needed we have these gifts each one of us for building up the church that together we might know God better that together we might be focused on him more and that together we might live as his people day by day.