

The Church: Growth

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[0 : 0 0] So that's Ephesians chapter 4 and we're going to be reading from verse 4. And we read, this is from Paul.

There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

But grace was given to each one of you, one of us, according to the measure of Christ's gift. 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 by that he also descended into the lower regions of the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens that he might fill all things.

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds, the 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.

[1 : 0 8] To mature manhood, to the measure of the statute 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 and defeatful 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. Amen. This is God's word. Thanks very much, Angus.

Great, let's have a look at these verses together from Ephesians. If you've got your Bible in front of you, it'd be worth keeping that passage open as we look through it together. As we said, we're working through this series on the Bible's teaching on the church.

And this morning we're looking at the idea of growth. What does it mean to be a growing church? It's actually one of our values as a church looking to be a growing community.

[2 : 1 7] And I hope this morning gives us a chance to get stuck into what that means, but also how that happens as well. So let's have a look at that together. We like to see things grow, don't we?

We think particularly of children and those kind of charts you have on the wall where you draw a line and then you measure how tall they are compared to how tall they were. Or as young people are growing up, we have those kind of milestones that you keep track of.

You know, they're crawling, then they're walking, then they're talking, and they just get more and more kind of inconvenient as they get older. But no, all of these kind of stages and steps that children go through is good and is natural.

And actually there's kind of cause for concern if those stages of growth don't happen. Well, this passage is saying that just as we expect children to grow, to develop physically, so we as God's people should expect to grow spiritually, to grow in him, that actually we have to keep on growing, that we don't hit kind of full height and stop there.

But the church is a place where God's people are constantly growing. That's what this passage is about. That's what we want to be about as a church. That's what we're looking at this morning.

[3 : 34] We're going to do things very kind of slightly differently in that we're going to start at the end. We're going to look at, you know, kind of what is the goal? What is this growth that we're talking about? And then we'll return to the start of this passage, and we'll work our way through three particular steps that Paul gives as to how this growth happens in the church.

What's God's plan for the growth of his people? So as we said, let's kind of start at the end. What is the goal in this passage? Where are we heading?

Well, as we've just been saying, the goal is growth. Growth is the goal. The end of verse 16, the end of the passage, Paul is speaking here about the church. He says, when each part is working properly, it makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Verse 15, just before that, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head into Christ. So this is a passage all about growth. God expects his people to grow.

God expects his church to grow. What does it mean by that growth? You see here, we're not talking about numerical growth. That's often what people are referring to, isn't it, when they speak about a growing church, whether there's more people here this week than there were last week.

[4 : 53] That's a fairly kind of easy thing to measure, and that's a great thing to happen. But this passage isn't speaking about the quantity of people in a relationship with God.

It's speaking about the quality of people's relationship with God. And we can trace that as we look through the passage. There's this language of people growing up.

Verse 12 into 13, building up the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God.

Verse 15 again goes on to say, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. And we're to grow in every way into Christ, Paul says.

That means growing in our knowledge of Christ. That means growing in our faith in Christ. It means growing in our love for Christ. It's contrasted in verse 14, where it says, 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.

[6 : 00] That actually, we're to grow up in order to know what is true, in order to know what to listen to and what to reject. That we'd be able to separate when people are speaking rightly about God and about Christ and what it means to live for him versus things which are unhelpful.

Things that don't line up with the Bible's picture. Ultimately, things which are untrue. To grow means that rather than being preoccupied or shaken by these things which aren't right, we're instead able to hold on to what we know to be true and to continue together living as God's people and doing that more and more.

So there's the goal, the growth, that growth in every way into Christ. That is the goal. And just before we see how that happens, I think it's important for us to think, first of all, whether individually and whether as a church, do we actually want that to happen?

It's good to ask that question. Think for ourselves. Are we eager to grow? My wife used to get a good food magazine. I don't know if anyone's ever read that. I'm not much of a cook, but I do like to eat.

And this magazine would have incredible pictures of a roast lamb or pork and crackling. Something like that would draw you in. And as someone with no cooking skills whatsoever, I'd find myself reading these kind of lists of ingredients and this method full of words that I didn't kind of understand.

[7 : 32] But it'd be fascinating. I'd really look at it. I'd want to know more. There'd be other times when it would have like a cauliflower as ingredient of the month or something. It would have a picture of a cauliflower, but whatever you did to a cauliflower, it's hard to make it look good.

It would be kind of uninterested. You'd flick past that page without really digging in in much detail. I didn't care what you'd done to that cauliflower. And the point is this. Unless we're eager for something, unless we're kind of hungry after something, unless it's something that we want, then more often than not, we don't really care about how to get it.

And I think that's a real challenge for us then as we think in this passage about spiritual growth. Actually, is this something we're pursuing? Is this something that we are really hungry for?

You know, like we're saying about the growth of a young child, well, is this something that we're worried about if we don't see in our lives? Now, all of us have so much stuff that we are pursuing, stuff that is our focus, whether it's, you know, the next set of exams, the next step up the career ladder, the next room to be decorated, the next job to be done, the next stage for our children to get to.

And it's good to ask, where does our spiritual growth fit in with those things? You know, in terms of urgency, in terms of importance, in terms of desire, in terms of how much we talk about it or think about it.

[8 : 59] We want to be people who above everything else would have that goal of growing in every way into the fullness of Christ because that is the very best thing there is. And that is the thing that we are designed for.

And that we would know him, love him, trust him, live for him more today than we did this time last year, more next year than we do today. That growth, not just standing still, is part of God's pattern for his church.

And this morning, if you're here and you're not a Christian, as always, we are so pleased that you are here. And maybe your starting point is kind of a few steps further back. You know, you might be very sceptical about the Bible.

You might have all sorts of kind of questions or things you're really unsure of. I'd encourage you, as I'd encourage all of us, that nothing is more important than looking to grow in this way and coming to know and coming to grasp who Jesus is and what he offers, to grow in that.

And so there's the goal. There's a bit of what it means. We're not wanting to stand still. We're not wanting to remain as children, kind of buffeted here and there, but rather we want to grow in our relationship with God.

[10 : 12] Well, as we now go back to the start of the section, we see how does that growth happen? And I think, as I said, Paul really lays out three particular steps for us. So we'll have a look at those.

And I hope, actually, if you've been here or if you've been able to kind of catch up online over the last few weeks as we've been going through these series, you'll notice that there's some overlap here. I think that's a really good thing.

In some ways, this morning kind of pulls together some of the different threads that we've been looking at over the last few weeks as we think about how, as God's people, we grow.

So let's have a look at those three steps. And the first is this, that we grow as a church united by the gospel. We grow as a church united by the gospel.

We began our reading in verse four where it says, there is one body, one spirit, just as you are called to the one hope that belongs to your faith. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

[11 : 14] You hear that, don't you? One, one, one, one. Paul begins this section about growth by reminding the church that they are united, that they are one. This is a huge theme through the book of Ephesians.

It's something that we've touched on a couple of times in this kind of series on the church, that the church isn't just somewhere where we kind of think, we know we all quite like Jesus, so let's get together and hang out on a Sunday.

Nor is it a place where we sort of manufacture some kind of unity that we kind of well of within us. know that the church is a people that God has united.

It's not a meeting, not a building, it is a community united by the gospel with Jesus as the foundation, a community that God has brought together. And the point here is that spiritual growth is something that happens in that gospel community.

It's something that happens together. We grow together as a church community. The body builds itself up, Paul says that. It's not just individuals becoming more like Jesus, it's the church as a whole becoming more like Jesus.

[12 : 30] And in some ways I think of here, kind of Paul's picture, almost a little bit like a professional sports team. You know, how do teams get better? How are Arsenal doing so well at the moment or whatever it is?

It's not that, how on earth does that happen? It's not that they've just kind of sent all their players off to practice individually, work on their skills, work on their fitness, and they'll all just get better. And then they just come back together on match day.

And suddenly they're this great team who perform really well. I know that the improvement, that the growth that we're speaking about, it comes as day after day, these players come together, as they train together, as they work together, they grow together.

In a similar way, as the church lives out, being this community that God has made us, that's how we grow together.

As for us, the outworking of this, that we grow together, would be that if we're serious, as we were saying earlier, if we're serious about growing in our faith, if that is something that is important to us, then we need to be serious about the church.

[13 : 35] In some ways that's a challenge, because it's so easy for all of us to put things ahead of the church. It's so easy for church to slide down our list of priorities. But I think also, it's great to think of that as what an encouragement that is.

Because actually being part of a church is something that's available for all of us. Or perhaps a more accurate way of saying that is that we are all part of the church. We are part of that through Jesus.

We have the opportunity to live that out. So often it can be easy to think, you know, if I could just go away on a, you know, I don't know what kind of takes your fancy, a pilgrimage, or a retreat, or do a theology degree, or take a week at a Christian conference.

You know, if I had the space to do those things, well, then I'd grow in my faith. And I think those could be really good things, some of them. And they might be really beneficial. And yet the vast majority of us probably look at our lives and we think, well, where are we going to fit that in?

You know, we have families, or jobs, or commitments, or responsibilities, whatever it might be. These things that we sometimes think might be the kind of, the key or the shortcut to growth can seem slightly unreachable for us.

[14 : 50] Well, the great encouragement here is that in God's planet, it's simply the local church. It is the church united by the gospel. A church made up of various different and, you know, if we're honest, fairly average people.

Some who will be very like you. Some who will be very different to you. But that is kind of the bread and butter, as it were, of where this growth happens. And that is something that we are all part of.

We are united by the gospel. That is something that all of us are able to commit to. Again, if you're not yet a Christian, or if you're not really sure, or for the many people that we would know who would be in that category, the church is such a great place to find out more.

It would be a real shame if people had the idea that, you know, you have to become a Christian and then you come to church to start growing. We want to be really clear, and this has always been our goal from the beginning of this church, to be a church that whatever stage people are at, whatever their starting point might be, that you, that they are welcomed into a community here where we're able to grow toward Jesus together.

And so the first step in this growth is a church united by the gospel. Let's carry on. And the second step we see here is a church listening to the gospel.

[16 : 19] A church listening to the gospel. That makes sense, doesn't it? If it's the gospel that unites us, if that's the foundation of the church, or we don't want to take that gospel for granted, we want to keep on listening and hearing that gospel.

And verse 7, Paul moves from focusing on the unity, the kind of the oneness of the church, to speaking about the gifts that God has given his church. He quotes from Psalm 68, and there's another kind of slightly complicated bits which we can just kind of move over.

But if you want to chat about those more afterwards, do come and find me. But really the picture is someone returning victoriously from battle and kind of graciously handing out gifts, graciously handing out kind of the spoils of war to their people.

And what are the gifts which God gives to his church? Well, we read in verse 11, and he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.

Why does Paul highlight these particular gifts? It's not kind of an exclusive list of all the gifts that God gives to his church. Well, Paul picks these ones in particular here because they're all what we might call the kind of word-based gifts.

[17 : 36] They're all people whose task is centered on God's word and the gospel that it contains, the gospel that it proclaims. The apostles and the prophets are the people who wrote the Bible.

The apostles, those after Jesus, the prophets, those before Jesus. Paul says back in chapter 2 of Ephesians that they are the foundation of the church, that they're gospel message, that the word of scripture, they are the eternal, unchanging bedrock upon which this community of God's people, the church is built.

And so really, I think, we can think of those roles as kind of fulfilled. We don't get prophets or apostles in that sense anymore. Paul describes himself elsewhere as the last apostle.

And yet their work, their ministry, the gift they are to the church is not over. It continues as we have their words inspired by God in the Bible.

We're not at any disadvantage because the apostles and prophets are no longer among us. They continue to be given to us by God in his word in that way.

[18 : 46] And one key way that happens is then through, as we carry on through this list, the evangelists and the shepherds and teachers who Paul then mentions. The shepherds and teachers there is probably meaning kind of one role.

People have different ideas on that. It probably means the evangelists and the shepherd teachers. It certainly fits a lot with what we were speaking about last week that the leaders of the church, elders who are to shepherd the flock of God by teaching God's word.

Again, you see how these things all fit together. These are the people that God has gifted to his church to teach his word. And maybe you've received a gift before that kind of has a message behind it.

Maybe I've mentioned this before, but I once got an electric screwdriver for Christmas from my dad. I hadn't requested that. I think it was his way of saying, it's time for you to put up your own shelves now.

You're 30 years old. You're going to need this. And he was completely right and that was fair enough. In a way, that's a bit like when God gives a gift to his church. He knows what we need.

[19 : 53] And so he gives the church what it needs. He gives us what we need to grow. He gives the church these word-based gifts. As we said, they're not the only gifts, but they're Paul's focus here.

The prophets and the apostles' writings in the Bible, the evangelists and pastor teachers to teach the Bible, to apply the Bible, to bring the Bible to bear on various different areas of life.

Paul says that's what God has given us because that's what we need to grow. Growth happens in the church. It doesn't just kind of automatically happen in a church community.

It's in a church which is listening to the gospel. It's in a church which is making use of these gifts that God has given to his church. And that is why we talk about, again, in our values, the centrality of the Bible, that we want to keep the Bible at the heart of everything that we do because the Bible is all about Jesus.

The Bible is all about the gospel. That gospel of Jesus' life and death and resurrection that means that we can be forgiven. That gospel that means that we can come to know God, to have a relationship with him.

[21 : 06] That gospel that unites us to one another as God's people, as we've said. And it's also that same gospel that helps us continue to grow. And that same gospel that helps us to continue to grow in every way into Christ.

And so we want to be a church listening to that gospel that God has given us in his word, the Bible, as we gather to listen to it together.

And in some ways, it would be easy to finish there. You know, we grow in church as we listen to the gospel. And we could kind of wrap up this morning by saying, well, you know, so come along, sit down, listen up, and we're sorted.

And absolutely, please do keep on coming along, sitting down and listening. But actually, that is not the end of the story. That's not the end of this passage. If we were to stop there, I think we'd miss something really significant in what Paul is saying about how his people grow, which is this, that growth happens as well as being a church of people listening to the gospel together.

It happens as we are also a church of people speaking the gospel to one another. And so let's finish with that third step, a church speaking the gospel.

[22 : 22] Have a look again at verse 12 there. What are the apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherd, teachers for? It says that they're to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

And you see that kind of chain there, that these word-based gifts equip the members of the church for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, for this growth.

And so it's to equip the saints. The saints is just another word for kind of Christians, for believers. It's just the kind of average people in the church. It's to equip the saints for the work of ministry.

And what is this work of ministry it's talking about? Because often here, we would turn to say, well, we all have kind of different gifts, different areas of service within the church that we're being equipped for.

And that's 100% true. We spoke about that, I think, the week before last when we thought about belonging to the church. We looked at what Paul wrote about in 1 Corinthians, about different parts of the one body, all with different roles, but all united, each one of us needed.

[23 : 26] And that is definitely a biblical truth. And yet actually, I don't think that's what Paul has got in mind just here. Paul has something more specific that he's talking about.

See how it's the work of ministry. That's very definitely kind of a singular thing in the original Greek language. Paul isn't speaking about the various different ways we serve and use our gifts as vitally important as that is.

He has this one specific ministry in mind that we're all to take part in. And that is that ministry of speaking the gospel to one another.

Paul's kind of flow here, his logic, is that the prophets and the apostles spoke so that the evangelists and the pastor teachers could speak so that we all can speak the gospel, speak biblical truth to one another.

And that's how we grow. That's how we mature. Paul's speaking about the same thing down in verse 15 where having listened to the gospel, we're to be people who are speaking the truth in love so that the church grows up.

[24 : 35] Again, another phrase where we often think of speaking the truth in love, we think it's kind of being honest about doing it nicely. Someone says, you like my new jacket and you say, no, but you have such a wonderful personality.

You know, that kind of thing, just generally being nice but while being honest. I'm sure it's a good habit. But again, I don't think that's what Paul means here. Paul has used that word truth once before so far in Ephesians and he's really defined what it means for us.

Back in chapter one, he says, you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. The truth Paul is speaking about here, the truth that we're to speak in love is the gospel truth.

It's speaking that gospel of salvation to one another. Paul is saying that is what will enable us to grow, to mature, to become more like Jesus.

Each one of us speaking that gospel to one another. Each one of us loving each other enough to remind each other of the truth of what Jesus has done and how that affects everything.

[25 : 47] Each one of us loving each other enough to have that kind of, the confidence, the courage to bring God into that conversation. And that's why community is so important. That's why community is where this growth happens because it's where we're able to speak the truth in love to one another.

And it makes sense, doesn't it, that this letter, Ephesians, written to the church in Ephesus, Ephesus was an incredibly unchristian place. It had this enormous temple of the pagan goddess Artemis kind of overshadowed everything you could see.

It was a key city in the Roman Empire. It was a place just saturated in worldly thinking and power and in pagan worship and idolatry.

It was the air that this first small little church in Ephesus would have breathed. It would have felt very much on the margins, very frail, very weak, very small.

Paul doesn't say to that church, you know what you need? You need a 25 minutes sermon each week and that will sort you right out. Then you could go and change the world. No, he's telling them that to keep on going, to be encouraged, to grow, they need to be part of a community united by the gospel, listening to the gospel and speaking the gospel truth to one another every opportunity that they have.

[27 : 18] And the parallels are obvious, aren't they, that we too live in a very un-Christian society. Day by day we are surrounded by a world which has no place for God.

Day by day we are being encouraged to absorb and accept how the world believes, what the world believes, things that there are far more important things than God.

Which is the world that tells us that we need to kind of look out for number one. The world that has almost zero tolerance for the Bible's position on a whole range of issues. So how do we encourage each other in that situation?

How do we keep going? How do we not just hold on or kind of hunker down but how do we grow as a church? Well, the answer is the same, isn't it? It's not a kind of a one-off Bible fix for an hour on a Sunday as if we could kind of get blasted and that will sustain us for the rest of the week.

Please don't misunderstand me, the gathering, this gathering of church together, the preaching of God's word here is such a priority and we should think more of that.

[28 : 25] We should prioritise that more, not less and it does change us as we sit here under the word. But the point is that that is not the end point rather that is the catalyst for us to be speaking that gospel to one another.

That's God's pattern for how we grow as his people, a church united by the gospel, listening to the gospel and speaking the gospel to one another. Let me finish really quickly with a couple of ideas of what this might look like for us as a church here in Harrington.

Number one, this is why we've kind of restarted having the questions up after the service. We'll put those up again today. I don't know if people find those helpful or not. I don't know if people read them or do them or not.

But whatever, the point is we wanted to kind of break down that idea of things being compartmentalised. The service is over and we have a benediction at the end. The shutters come down and we don't need to think about any of that stuff again until 10.45 next Sunday.

No, we want it to be that what we're listening to as we gather together is what shapes what we're speaking about together after the service or as we meet each other in people's homes as we go for coffee or as we gather together throughout the week that we would be speaking gospel truth and love to one another.

[29 : 45] Our second thought would be our community groups or other meetings that we have during the week. We're keen not to be a church that is so kind of heavily meeting driven and yet we are keen to be a church that provides these opportunities for us to get together as a community whether that is community groups whether it's kind of mums and preschoolers whether it's our new daytime Bible study.

Again, the idea here is that the Bible is at the centre of those there's that opportunity to learn from the Bible to hear from the Bible but also then to speak about and encourage each other with what we've heard.

It's a great way to be growing and building each other up as we speak the truth in love to one another. And finally I suppose we'll finish with this most generally in some ways most simply but perhaps also the most difficult this works itself out in simply speaking about Jesus to one another.

Just bringing Jesus bringing the gospel into the conversation. I was on a Zoom conference this week half the people there were from Scotland and half the people there were from America and it was pretty easy to guess where people came from to be fair and I don't know if it's because they were American or if it was just this particular group but they were incredible at bringing Jesus into a conversation.

You know things you've been speaking about they would say well how does Jesus make a difference in that situation? Or they'd say you know what do you need to remember? What do you need to remind yourself about the gospel here in that issue?

[31 : 22] That's such great questions and such an encouraging time and such a time of growth I think for all of us. And the great thing to remember here the kind of challenge but the encouragement for us is that we do not need a Zoom conference with Americans for that to happen.

Remember the bread and butter of where we grow is in the local church community. We just need to get on with that ourselves. You know just need to pick up perhaps a bit of courage and bring Jesus into the conversation just simply perhaps sharing what has encouraged you recently simply perhaps reminding each other of what we've been looking at together or hearing on a Sunday simply encouraging each other to view everything in light of what is the most important thing which is the gospel.

And we want to be a church who are growing into Christ becoming more like Christ trusting him more loving him more living for him more. That great encouragement is that that growth happens in a church united by the gospel listening to the gospel and speaking the gospel to one another.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father we thank you that we have a gospel to share. Heavenly Father we thank you that you have acted in history to rescue your people through Jesus through his life his death and his resurrection.

We thank you that you have revealed that you have recorded that for us in your word the Bible. and we thank you as we gather as your people and as we gather around your word as we sit under your word as we listen to your word we are hearing you speak.

[33 : 08] We pray also that that wouldn't be the end of the story but that we would be speaking that gospel truth to one another. We would be speaking that truth to those of us who know you and to those of us and to those we know who don't yet know you.

And Lord we pray that through that that you would be at work in our lives that you would be growing us and that we would be a church who are a growing community maturing in Christ enabling us to stand firm enabling us to be secure in him and that we might live our whole lives for your glory.

Lord we pray that you would build within us our desire to be people growing in our relationship with you and we pray that you would help us as we look to work out that growth as your people united by the gospel listening to that gospel and speaking that gospel to one another.

And we pray all these things in Jesus name who is the very heart of the gospel. Amen.