

Grow: Growing Up in Every Way

Ephesians 4:15-16

A simple Google search on world hunger will show you that among the nations of the world where malnutrition is the worst, the country of Guatemala ranks close to the top. In fact, it has the most chronically malnourished children in the Western Hemisphere.

U.S. Aid, “Frontlines,” November/December 2011 - *“Guatemala’s crisis has been the subject of international press in the last couple of years—finally, the world is learning that one out of every two Guatemalan children younger than 5 years old is chronically malnourished. The national data mask an even worse situation among indigenous populations (mostly Maya people) where malnutrition stunts the growth of 65.9 percent of indigenous children ages 3 months to 59 months, compared with only 36.9 percent among non-indigenous children.”*

ABC News, “Severe Stunting: Twelve Years Old Going on Five,” December 14, 2010 - *“Amidst the lush landscape and breathtaking natural beauty of Guatemala, more than half the population lives below the poverty line and suffers from chronic malnutrition. In fact, Guatemala has the highest rate of malnutrition in the Western Hemisphere: 50 percent of the population is stunted and, in rural Mayan villages, that figure gets as high as 80 percent. The main cause of stunted growth, experts say, is lack of vital nutrients during the first thousand days of life, that critical period of development from conception to age 2...”**In a family that’s extremely impoverished, you will see very extreme cases of chronic stunting where children who are twelve years old, look that they’re -- as if they were four or five.”*

Such news is heart wrenching to us when we hear of our fellow human beings in the world in such distress, and we ought to do everything that we can to be involved in helping to meet need.

I want to make the parallel argument that many spiritual children in the body of Christ are stunted in their growth. Much in the same way, just as a lack of nutrition early on in the life of a child will stunt his or her growth, so also will a lack of spiritual nutrition stunt

the growth of a believer. Far too many in the body of Christ who ought to be spiritually mature still look and act like small children.

Hebrews 5:12-14 - “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.”

Growth is comprehensive, meaning that when a body is healthy and getting the right nutrients, every part of that body grows and develops. Paul tells the Ephesian church that spiritual growth is comprehensive. It is the will of God that the whole body of Christ grow up in every way into Him who is the head.

This passage comes in context with Paul’s words about the gifted men that God has given the church for the purpose of equipping the church to be actively involved in ministry.

The goal of equipping and ministry involvement is mature manhood, the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. This is so that we are no longer children in the faith but spiritually mature, self-reproducing disciples of Christ who live lives centered around the mission of God to make disciples.

According to what Paul writes in these verses and throughout the remainder of the letter, growing up in every way involves several components.

1. CLOSER in relationship with Christ

“Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ.”

Paul has already said in verse 13 that the goal in the Christian life is that “we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.”

The knowledge he is speaking of is not mere intellectual knowledge, but deep and experiential intimate knowledge. It is not simply knowing about Christ; it is knowing Christ.

How does a believer grow in the knowledge of God? Through the careful and consistent practice of spiritual disciplines.

1 Timothy 4:7 - "Train yourself for godliness."

"Train" - word is 'gymnazo' and means to exercise naked

Very often in Greek culture, athletes who were training for some contest would rigorously discipline themselves and train without wearing any clothes so as to ensure they were free from hindrance.

Spiritually, the idea that is being conveyed is that I strip myself of all that would hinder me from pursuing uncompromising obedience to Christ. It also means that I embrace discipline.

Donald Whitney - *"God uses three primary catalysts for changing us and conforming us to Christlikeness, but only one is largely under our control. One catalyst the Lord uses to change us is people. As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another (Proverbs 27:17). Sometimes God uses our friends to sharpen us more into Christlike living, and sometimes He uses our enemies to file away our rough, ungodly edges. Parents, children, spouses, coworkers, teachers, neighbors, pastors--God changes us through these people. Another change agent God uses in our lives is circumstances. The classic text for this is Romans 8:28: For we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose. Financial pressures, physical conditions, even the weather are used in the hands of Divine Providence to stimulate His elect toward holiness. Then there is the catalyst of the Spiritual Disciplines. This catalyst differs from the first two in that when He uses the disciplines, God works from the inside out."*

Growth in godliness does not happen apart from the regular practice of disciplines.

Before I mention some of these, let me once more emphasize that we pursue growth in our lives through practicing spiritual discipline, not to be accepted, but because we have been accepted. It is grace that frees us to pursue discipline.

Though not an exhaustive list, some of the most important disciplines we should practice to grow in our knowledge of God are:

- Careful study of God's Word
- Prayer and Fasting
- Discipling relationship with a mature believer

2. CONNECTED with fellow believers

"...from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped."

The close, tight-knit relationship of the body is the result of Christ's life and power. The Head supplies life to the body and holds the body together.

Paul used two participles to describe how the body is connected to the Head and how each member is connected together.

"Joined" - *was used in classical Greek for the "cable" which holds the ship or the "halter" which ties the horse to the stall; used to describe a "bond" in the NT*

"Held Together" - *to cause to walk together; to unite*

These participles are in the present tense, indicating an ongoing process that is taking place in the healthy, growing body.

Kenneth Wuest - *"The life of the Head flowing through the bands of supply, is constantly joining together and causing to grow together the individual members, this process being controlled or dominated by the operative energy put forth, the volume or strength of this operative energy coming from the Head of the Body, being determined by the capacity of each part to hold and allow to operate in him or her. That is, the*

degree to which this life of the Head flowing through the members operates, joining the members of the Body more closely together into a more compact organic union, is determined by the individual saint's fellowship with the Lord and with his fellow saints. This more compactly built Body will show in the closer ties of Christian love and brotherhood as exhibited by the saints in their Christian experience.”

Christian growth is the result of closer communion with Jesus and closer communion with His body, the church.

The church of Jesus Christ is held together by the common bond that we share, a relationship called ‘koinonia’ in the original language. It is a relationship that describes our common life in Christ.

Growth demands that we grow close to Jesus and one another.

Acts 2:44 - “And all who believer were together and had all things in common.”

They worshiped corporately together in the temple courts and they met together from house to house. They were a faith family, a community of worshipers who were devoted to Jesus Christ and to one another.

The Christian Post, “Justin Bieber: I Don’t Have to Go to Church,” (January 2012)

- “With more to say about his faith, Bieber, who is currently recording his next album Believe, told V Magazine, according to the New York Post, “A lot of people who are religious, I think they get lost. They go to church just to go to church...I’m not trying to disrespect them ... but for me, I focus more on praying and talking to Him. I don’t have to go to church.”

Far too many people have this kind of mentality in the way that they approach the church. They view the church as optional rather than essential.

Part of the problem is the consumerist mindset that we have unintentionally cultivated through the way that we have done church. We have pandered to preferences and people-pleasing so much that we have created a monster of epic proportions that views the church as nothing more than a Sunday morning event.

Elton Trueblood - *“Cheap Christianity can usually pull a pretty good attendance on Sunday morning. It is cheap whenever the people think of themselves as spectators at a performance.”*

This kind of mentality results in a loose affiliation rather than a devoted participation. It is shallow and totally unlike the fellowship of the early church.

3. COMPLETE through serving others

“...when each part is working properly.”

The context shows that the participles, “joined” and held together,” are designed to strongly emphasize the interplay of the different ministries and tasks within the body: “from whom the whole body—as one which is fitted and held together by each link which serves to support it—corresponding to the activity appropriate to each part achieves growth of the body to the building up of itself in love.”

Believers have not been equipped to stagnate but to serve. We have not been gifted to be complacent in ministry, but rather to be committed to ministry. We not been saved to be indifferent to service but to be involved in service.

It is impossible to grow spiritually mature apart from serving others and being involved in ministry.

Just like anything else, the motive of the heart is perhaps more important to God than the act of service itself. Serving can sometimes be done from a wrong motive, from a self-righteous motive rather than Christ-honoring motive.

Richard Foster, “Celebration of Discipline”

“Self-righteous service comes through human effort. True service comes from a relationship with the divine Other deep inside.

Self-righteous service is impressed with the “big deal.” True service finds it almost impossible to distinguish the small from the large service.

Self-righteous service requires external rewards. True service rests contented in hiddenness.

Self-righteous service is highly concerned about results. True service is free of the need to calculate results.

Self-righteous service picks and chooses whom to serve. True service is indiscriminate in its ministry.

Self-righteous service is affected by moods and whims. True service ministers simply and faithfully because there is a need.

Self-righteous service is temporary. True service is a life-style.

Self-righteous service is without sensitivity. It insists on meeting the need even when to do so would be destructive. True service can withhold the service as freely as perform it.

Self-righteous service fractures community. True service, on the other hand, builds community.

John Maxwell tells the story of how during World War II, England needed to increase its production of coal. Winston Churchill called together labor leaders to enlist their support. At the end of his presentation he asked them to picture in their minds a parade which he knew would be held in Picadilly Circus after the war.

First, he said, would come the sailors who had kept the vital sea lanes open. Then would come the soldiers who had come home from Dunkirk and then gone on to defeat Rommel in Africa. Then would come the pilots who had driven the Luftwaffe from the sky.

Last of all, he said, would come a long line of sweat-stained, soot-streaked men in miner's caps. Someone would cry from the crowd, 'And where were you during the critical days of our struggle?' And from ten thousand throats would come the answer, 'We were deep in the earth with our faces to the coal.'"

Not all service in the church is prominent and glamorous. But it is often the people with their “faces to the coal” who help the church accomplish its mission.

Warren Wiersbe - *“We realize that, as members of the one body and a local body, we belong to each other, we affect each other, and we need each other. Each believer, no matter how insignificant he may appear, has a ministry to other believers. The body grows as the individual members grow, and they grow as they feed on the Word and minister to each other.”*

4. CONSISTENT in sharing the gospel

“...makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

The body of Christ grows and multiplies as members are faithful to share the gospel with unbelievers. Conversion growth is always characteristic of a healthy church.

“Builds” - *used to describe the construction of houses; the idea is that of edification*

Paul uses this same metaphor of building elsewhere.

1 Corinthians 3:9 - **“For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building.”**

Jesus Christ is building His church brick by brick, person by person, and He does so through believers who are equipped and who embrace His mission.

The gospel is what builds the church.

Acts 20:32 - **“And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”**

1 Thessalonians 5:11 - **“Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.”**

The point is that the individual member helps to edify the body by receiving for himself the exhortation of the gospel and then passing it on to others. This is the kind of growth and fruitfulness that we ought to be looking for.

Notice that Paul says this only takes place “when each part is working properly.”

The body is so very diverse and made up of many different parts. There is one part of the body that we tend to overlook, and yet it perhaps is the most important part. Your physical body will be no healthier than your cardiovascular system. Your heart is what pumps blood throughout the rest of your body.

What is the cardiovascular system of the body of Christ?

I believe that the answer to that question is our involvement in the mission of God for the glory of God. This is to be the heartbeat of the church.

We often measure greatness with the wrong metric. Our assumption is that attendance and “wow factor” are the measures of success. The true metric ought to be spiritually mature disciples who actively and consistently participate in the mission of God.

Instead of asking, “How many people show up,” we ought to be asking, “What are those who are showing up becoming?” How are they being transformed to live on mission with Christ? Are they involved in the mission, or has the Great Commission become the Great Omission in their life?

The church exists for mission like fire exists by oxygen. If you remove oxygen, fire will die. If you decentralize mission from the life of the church, the church will die.

The last words of Jesus form the mission statement for His church:

John 20:21 - “As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you.”

Mark 16:15-16 - “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”

Luke 24:47-48 - “Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”

Acts 1:8 - “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

A summary statement of these passages could be stated in this way: “Go and preach the gospel all over the world to every person. Go in the power of the Holy Spirit. Tell them what you have witnessed firsthand. Begin at home, tell your neighbors, and work your way to remaining world from there.”

But what are the blueprints that we are to follow? Matthew’s text gives us the Master’s plan as well as His commission:

Matthew 28:18-20 - “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The plan involves these three key elements:

- Going where people are
- Baptizing those who believe
- Teaching them to obey

The church does not exist for you; you exist for the church and the church exists for the mission of God. The question that we had better be about answering is how can we best mobilize the saints of God to be on mission with God?

Maturity will not be realized in your life until you are consistently and intentionally sharing your faith with those around you.

Far too many believers are spiritually sterile, meaning that they do not take the gospel forward to others. They have never introduced another person to faith in Jesus Christ. The goal of being built up in the faith is living a life that is centered around the mission of making disciples. This is God's plan for church growth.

Instead of being a bunch of spiritually malnourished children, let's grow up in every way into Jesus Christ. We ought to grow:

- Closer in our relationship to Christ
- Connected in our relationships with one another
- Complete through serving others
- Consistent in sharing the gospel with unbelievers