

# **A Biblical Pattern for Church Growth**

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**A Study of Ephesians 4:1-16**

by Earl Lavender

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## *Dedication*

To my wonderful brethren of the congregations which meet in Centerville, TN and Highland, IL, with deep gratitude for their patience and love.

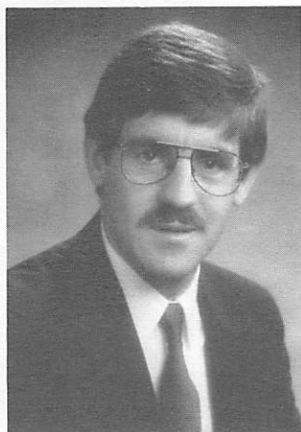
## *Special thanks to...*

Rebecca, my wonderful wife. She tirelessly read, edited and, most importantly, encouraged. Besides my Lord, she is the greatest gift God could have possibly given me.

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## EARL LAVENDER



Earl was born July 15, 1954 in Trieste, Italy while his parents, David and Edith Lavender, were missionaries there.

He graduated from David Lipscomb College with a B.A. in education in 1977 and married the former Rebecca Nance on July 4, 1976. Rebecca and Earl have three children: Rachel (12); Beth (10); and David (7).

While finishing his senior year at DLC, Earl began working with the Centerville, TN church of Christ as associate minister in anticipation of being sent with his family to Italy to establish a congregation in Cervignano (northeastern corner). His book, *A Return to Christ-Centered Missions* (J.C. Choate Publications, 1985) chronicles this work.

Arriving in the fall of 1978, the Lavenders worked with the church in Cervignano, Italy until the spring of 1984. Returning to Centerville, Earl taught in the Bible faculty at DLC as missionary-in-residence for two years. He also completed his work for an M.A. in Biblical Studies at David Lipscomb.

In the fall of 1986 the Centerville congregation again sent the Lavenders out to plant a church — this time in Highland, IL, a community of 10,000 people located just 35 miles east of St. Louis. The congregation has been blessed with growth and has built its own 8,000 sq. ft. facility. There are presently about 150 members and, with an abundance of blessings from the Lord, the congregation continues to grow.

Earl has continued his studies, and is presently a candidate for a doctoral degree in Historical Theology at St. Louis University, specializing in Patristics and the History of New Testament Hermeneutics. He has also been teaching for the past year in the Department of Theological Studies as adjunct instructor. If all goes as planned, he will receive his Ph. D. in the fall of 1990.

# **Statements Concerning A Biblical Pattern for Church Growth**

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I want to highly recommend this writing to Christian people everywhere. While it is true that we are in the process of continual restoration of the Lord's church, there are certain biblical principles that stand out vividly which must be adhered to in every generation of God's people.

History reveals that men have departed from God, sometimes on a gradual basis, sometimes in one generation. Must we be as the Israelites of old who desired so much to be like the nations round about them?

Read this book carefully, back off and look at where we stand as God's people today. Then evaluate how you can help brethren to see the need of evangelizing the world, and of supporting men who realize their God-assigned task. Many preachers today really want to spend much more time teaching the will of God to lost souls than we allow them. May God bless them in the fulfillment of their desires. Let us help them become specialized evangelists instead of preachers who are professionalists by men's standards.

David E. Lavender  
Former missionary  
Founder of "Project Italy"  
Nashville, TN  
November 19, 1989

I was thrilled when I read this manuscript! It is my prayer that Christians everywhere will read the book with an open heart. It is also my prayer that we will renew our efforts to take the Good News to every creature!

Kenny Grubb  
Columbus, IN  
Evangelist/missionary

From Paul's letter to the Ephesians, Earl has done an outstanding job in illustrating *how* the 20th century church can grow, by placing responsibility for this growth on the leadership — shepherds and ministers. Topics on growth are frankly discussed. Honest, seeking church leaders can surely benefit from this material. It is time for us to come out of the closet of traditionalism and face the problems and needs of our society, exploring new methods that can aid in reaching the lost. I believe this book will assist us, and I therefore recommend it to you.

Jerry Cantrell  
Cocoa, FL  
Specialist in church growth  
seminars:  
“Spiritual Awakening  
Seminars”

## **Introduction**

I have often said that the church today is faced with an emergency. It is one of our own making. We have created our own system of doing things, with the church being reduced to little more than a club engaged in social programs. Many among us evidently thought that by pulling in, thinking only of ourselves, and developing an elite professionalism, these things would be enough to sustain us. But this attitude has put us on hold, with no growth, and have left the majority feeling spiritually empty. Others have reacted by turning on their own brethren with a viciousness seldom seen in the world.

What is the solution to the problem? Obviously, we must return to God's word, to the true pattern for the church, its mission, and its growth. Unless we soon see revival among the Lord's people, someone may have to take the lead in a new restoration effort in the not too distant future, if the church is to survive here.

This is not to say that the Lord's church faces extinction. As long as the world stands, the church will be here; on that, we have Christ's promise. Of course we have no way of knowing how few Christians must be in the world before the Lord returns. But even though the church may be present in sufficient numbers to keep the world turning, the church may be passive, immobile, and lifeless in comparison to what it should be. This is why revival and restoration must be forthcoming if we are to be motivated to do the work the Lord gave us to do.

I am impressed with what Bro. Lavender has said in his book. He is not angry at the church. He doesn't have a hobby



to promote. He is not trying to preach a new doctrine. Rather, he comes across as one who loves the Lord and his church, but he is concerned because he sees that the church is not growing. Most of its members are not involved. They are not preaching and teaching the gospel. Even most preachers are not preaching the gospel. So what can be done? Bro. Lavender shows God's plan for growth from Ephesians 4:1-16 and proceeds to discuss that portion of scripture, phrase by phrase. When the pattern is followed, scriptural growth will be the result.

Let me encourage you to study this book very carefully. If you find any problem with it, read it again, and perhaps again. When you see what is happening in the church today, and when you come face to face with the problems that have brought it to this point, then you can more easily see and understand the message of this book.

J. C. Choate  
Winona, MS  
February 1, 1990

## Preface

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May it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14).

I am a preacher of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I am one of those blessed individuals who, if given the chance, would not trade places with anyone in the world. I love my work, I have a wonderful family, I have worked with the same supporting congregation for twelve years, and I deeply love and admire the elders who direct my work.

I love the church. The attitude with which I write this work is very positive. I have no axe to grind. My only desire is to be the best servant of my Lord that He can possibly make me to be.

One of the wonderful aspects of being a part of the movement to restore New Testament Christianity is that we are not bound to any particular methodologies or traditional forms. If, indeed, we are striving to restore the church as it was when it began, we must constantly re-evaluate the patterns and methods we use to see if they are helping accomplish the purpose the Lord has for His church. As we examine our methods periodically, we may find some are actually hindering its growth. We must be careful not to find ourselves snared by what has trapped so many religious organizations — accepting traditional form as binding pattern.

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## *A Biblical Pattern for Church Growth*

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I challenge you to be open-minded concerning the contents of this work. I am writing this because I believe the church has been hindered in its growth by the acceptance of a pattern of leadership that has not come from the Scriptures, but from our religious contemporaries.

It is time to carefully consider how this particular structure has affected the church. Is it possible that it has contributed to the disturbingly stagnant state of many congregations in our day and time? Our growth rate is no longer what it once was, and nowhere near what it should be.

In too many communities the church has opted for a comfortable, socially accepted co-existence with other faiths. Some have fallen into the trap of an unspoken agreement with their church "neighbors": they don't steal each other's "sheep."

What has brought about such a state of apathy toward the true mission of the church, which is the open proclamation of the Word for the purpose of saving the lost? The objective of this study is to consider a possible cause of the present state of non-growth of the church in general, and to look to the Scriptures for the pattern which not only allowed the early church to grow but was the cause of its growth!

You may object to some of the thoughts presented in this work. All I ask is that you consider them with an open mind and an open Bible. May we always keep in mind that the Scriptures themselves should be read with an open heart and a desire to learn more about the will of God. The Bible should be read with the excitement of an adventurer seeking great treasure.

I've heard it said that too often we study the Bible much as a museum guard would watch over the treasures placed under his care. We put the Truth under glass and stand back with our

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guns drawn making sure no one disturbs or steals it. We tend to be closed-minded about fresh approaches to old problems.

The real difficulty with the “museum-guard” mentality is that we do not own the Truth. We are Truth seekers! I pray you will consider the reading of this book as a portion of your quest for a better understanding of the fascinating Truth of Scripture. Judge this work by Scripture. This is the test under which all humankind’s works will stand or fall. Do as our brethren of Berea did (Acts 17:11): search the Scriptures to see if these things are so.

What I write, I offer in love and in the hope that it will help the body of Christ to grow “to the measure of the stature that belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). Amen.

## I. Growth: The Foundation

### The Indispensable Base: Unity (Ephesians 4:1-6)

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I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

Though I spend much time reflecting on the hours leading up to the death of my Savior, it is beyond me to grasp the depth of love that caused Jesus, fully aware of the agony He would suffer, to choose to die for me. I vividly picture Jesus in the garden the night before His death, pleading with God to let the coming cup of indescribable pain pass if there might be another way to save me from my sins.

Can you imagine the pain our Father must have felt as His perfect Son pleaded for deliverance? Jesus then prayed those words that should forever be on our hearts, for they remind us of the price paid for the forgiveness of our sins: "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Thy will be done" (Luke 26:42).

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Jesus understood completely what He faced and what He was doing. Though He had been perfect in His obedience to God, He would bear the sins of the world on the cross. It was the only way to give humankind the hope of being reconciled to God. Jesus knew He would have to suffer the ultimate pain, one which He had never suffered in all of eternity: while on the cross He would be separated from His Father. But because of the joy of knowing His death would free you and me from our hopeless bondage to sin and death, He was able to endure the cross (Heb 12:2).

Returning to the night before His death, after Jesus accepted the fact that He had to die in order to accomplish His Father's will, He continued His prayer, turning His attention to the needs of His disciples. He would willingly die, but He knew His followers would be devastated.

He had clearly explained to the disciples on numerous occasions that He would be delivered into the hands of the chief priests and be killed, but they refused to understand. They refused to let go of their idea that Jesus Messiah had come to establish an earthly kingdom — to re-establish the glory of the Davidic throne. They were concerned with what they wanted, not with what the Father had provided.

Yet, in a beautiful manifestation of Jesus' love for them, His last request was on their behalf and ours as well (Jn 17). He prayed that we might be sanctified in God's truth so that we would be *one*, just as He and His Father are one.

This unity was not just so His followers would enjoy each other's spiritual fellowship. It had a far greater purpose.

And the glory which Thou hast given Me I have given to them; that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, that

the world may know that Thou didst send Me, and didst love them, even as Thou didst love Me. (Jn 17:22, 23)

Jesus prayed that His church might have unity *so that the world would know what He had done for them and as a result believe in Him!*

The effect of this initial unity was dramatically manifested as the apostles set out to preach the Good News of Jesus to a lost world! After witnessing the risen Lord and being empowered by the Holy Spirit, the disciples spread the Gospel like wildfire, starting in Jerusalem and sweeping through Judea and Palestine. The church continued to grow north around the Mediterranean coast — Antioch, Lystra, Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, and Rome!

In Romans 15:23, 24 Paul stated his desire to go to Spain because there was “no further place” for him to preach in closer regions! In the meantime the Gospel was spreading east through Mesopotamia and south through the deserts of Egypt and to regions beyond!

Many theories have been proposed to account for this amazing initial growth of the church: the first Christians were blessed with miraculous powers; they had actually seen the risen Lord; the time was right; they had the apostles to help them and so on. Most theories are offered as excuses to explain why we are no longer growing as they grew.

While it is clear that many factors influenced the startling rate of growth in the early church, I would like to propose two major reasons the church grew then and is not growing now. The first we have already observed; the body of Christ was united in doctrine and purpose. Tragically, the church today is not united on either. The price of the countless divisions in the Christian faith is that the world does not know Jesus Christ!

Can you imagine what a force it would be if all who call themselves Christians in the world today were truly united in faith and practice? Satan has won a great victory by causing the division of the Christian faith into innumerable denominations and sects. Even among the churches of Christ we suffer greatly from a lack of unity.

The second major reason the early church grew is that all Christians *knew* the Gospel and actively taught it. We are not growing because we, as a people, do not know the Word of God as we should. We are familiar with it; we fiercely defend favorite passages, but for the most part we, as members of the Lord's body, are not workmen approved before God who can rightly divide His Word.

The first century church was composed of a united people sanctified in the truth of God's will. They knew the Gospel story and it burned in their hearts! They could not hold it in. *Every* Christian was involved in spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ.

If we want to restore a growing church we must search for that unity which comes from being sanctified in the Word and prepare every member of the body of Christ to be active evangelists in their daily lives! This is precisely what Paul teaches in the fourth chapter of Ephesians.

The first three chapters deal with all the blessings we have because we are "in Christ." Read chapter one and list the countless gifts we have "in Him." Paul challenges us to realize what a tremendous heritage we have in Christ. Ephesians 4:1 is the transition verse in the epistle, "Therefore, I entreat you to walk..." Because of the great blessings we have in Christ, we have the responsibility of manifesting Him in our daily lives.



How is Christ to be seen in His people? Paul urges, "Walk in a manner worthy of the calling... being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:1-3). If we are truly *in Christ*, we will show it by being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit. Why? In order that the world will believe in Jesus Christ!

Paul then emphasizes the foundation of unity upon which the church is built by calling attention to what is often referred to as "the seven ones." Everything about the Christian faith was one from the beginning. Paul explains:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. (4:4-6)

Though it is a very beneficial study, we will not consider each of the "ones" separately. For our purpose, it will suffice to know that Paul is using the oneness of God and His plan of salvation for humankind as the basis of his argument that the church *must be united*. There is one God, one Lord, one Spirit, one faith, one baptism, one hope, therefore, there can only be one body!

Only in unity can we consistently live *in Christ*. He has always intended for His church to be one. And He has given gifts to maintain this unity of the Spirit.

Sadly, we have not used His gifts for their intended purpose. In too many cases the very blessings given by Christ to preserve the unity of the Spirit have been misused and have instead caused divisions.

Something has to change or the world will never know Him.

## Christ's Gifts to Maintain Unity (Ephesians 4:7-10)

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But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, "When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men." (Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)

Ephesians 4:3-6 makes a powerful statement in emphasizing the unity of God and His plan for the church. This unity does not mean sameness; it is unity in diversity. The parts in the body of Christ are many, and each have different abilities. There is one body, "But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift" (v. 7).

How can the principle of unity be maintained when the body of Christ is made up of so many parts, each with different Christ-given attributes? Paul tells us that unity is to be preserved through the gift of leadership given to the church by our Lord.

Some believe that the gifts mentioned in verses seven and eleven are supernatural gifts given by the Holy Spirit only to those of the apostolic age, similar to those listed in

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1 Corinthians 12 (*charísmata*). According to this understanding, the gifts ended when the unity of faith mentioned in the thirteenth verse was attained. The completed Bible is considered to be this “attained unity”. However, there are significant differences between the *charísmata* and the gifts of Ephesians 4:7 and 11.

The gifts (*dokein* and its cognates *doma* and *dōreá*) of 4:7 are given for a specific purpose to every member individually. Those mentioned in 4:11 are given to the entire church as a corporate entity. Notice all are given by Jesus and not the Holy Spirit.

In verse seven Paul proclaims that our Lord Jesus, through His wonderful grace, gives to every member the ability to make a unique and profitable contribution to the church. Each believer has received strength to fulfill his special role within the body (see 1:19; 3:16-19; Col 1:29 et. al.). Furthermore, according to verse eleven, Christ provides gifted leaders to help the individual members utilize their abilities to build up the body as a whole.

Certainly the apostles and prophets, whose functions (offices) in the church were foundational, were men given miraculous powers by God through the Spirit. This will be discussed further in the following chapter. However, there is no reason to believe the leadership positions of evangelists and teaching pastors, which were to continue beyond the apostolic age, demanded miraculous gifts (*charísmata*).

Evangelists and teaching pastors are positions in the church that without doubt require wisdom from God — a gift we should all continually request (James 1:5). It is important to understand that God-given gifts do not have to be supernatural

or miraculous in order to be gifts for a specific purpose. God was and is the giver of *every* good and perfect gift (James 1:17).

In my doctoral studies, I have met many leaders of various faiths. Most do not accept the Bible as the authoritative Word of God. One of the main reasons they reject "plenary inspiration" is the lack of agreement between those who do believe the Scriptures are the inspired Word of God (remember the prayer for unity in John 17?). Quite often hear, "who can understand it?" or "how could anyone possibly interpret the Bible with confidence?"

What causes such diversity of doctrine among those who accept the Bible as the authoritative standard for Truth? Most variant interpretations are the result of predetermined hermeneutical principles brought to the Scriptures from one's religious tradition. For example, if one is strongly Calvinistic, even if he believes the Bible is the inspired Word he has great difficulty understanding the verses which contradict the doctrine of unconditional election (such as the "whosoever will" passages). The Scriptures must be twisted to fit the doctrine. Others use the Scriptures attempting to prove an extra-biblical apostolic succession; Romans chapter six makes little sense to one insisting that the sprinkling of infants constitutes baptism. I could go on and on.

The point is that those who go to the Scriptures with a teaching they want to defend firmly fixed in their minds, will not let the Scriptures interpret themselves. Instead, they force the text to agree with their doctrinal position. Various conflicting interpretations of the same verse is the result. That verse, in and of itself, is most likely very clear when studied in context.

One of the greatest aspects and blessings of the Restoration plea is allowing the Word of God to teach us the Truth. We have willingly rejected all traditional ties, interpretations, and doctrines in the hope of permitting God's own revelation to guide us to the doctrinal purity of the early church. We sincerely desire to study with open minds and hearts (2 Cor 3:18). We earnestly seek for those things which are pleasing to our loving Father (Eph 5:8-10).

However, we must admit that in some cases we too have approached Scripture with a predetermined interpretive principle. It has affected in a major way the manner in which we understand and apply Scripture. Take, for example, our attitude toward spiritual gifts. We agree that the miraculous spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit such as direct revelation (prophecy), speaking in tongues, and healing were not given beyond the apostolic age. Their purpose was fulfilled when the Truth of the Scriptures was confirmed by these signs and wonders (Mark 16:20; Heb 2:1-4; John 20:31). However, we must not deny the work of the Spirit in our lives just because we understand the *charismata* have ceased!

Unfortunately, perhaps partially as a reaction against the present day continuance of these special gifts, some deny any personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit in Christians today. This, my friends and brethren, is a dangerous interpretive bias.

It forces the twisting of Scripture in order to explain away the many passages that teach God's Spirit is given to us at baptism, dwells in us individually, and helps us be more like Christ in our daily lives (cf. 1 Peter 1:1,2; 1 Thess 4:1-8; 2 Cor 6:19,20).

Are we so afraid of spiritual gifts that we will refuse the strength and power God continues to give through His Spirit?

Will we spurn the power working in us for which Paul praises God in Ephesians 3:20 - 21?

Let me say again that I believe the miraculous gifts have ceased. They are no longer necessary, just as the physical presence of Christ Jesus is no longer necessary. However, I confidently affirm that God still works actively through His people. He continues to give us gifts of strength and wisdom if we will just ask (note the prayer of Paul in Col 1:9-12). He gives us His Spirit who leads us to become more like Jesus everyday.

Of course, if we are to be strengthened and led by the Spirit, we must be fed by the Spirit. This spiritual nourishment comes through a constant and thorough study of the Scriptures. The Spirit always works in conjunction with the Word; He will not go beyond it or contradict it in any way. After all, He inspired the writers of Scripture; it is His work. The only way the Spirit can lead and strengthen us is if we will give ourselves as individuals to a continual study of Scripture. We greatly limit what the Spirit can do in our lives when we lack the thorough knowledge of the Bible that we should possess as servants of God.

The point of this discussion is to suggest that the gift to work effectively within the body of Christ did not end with the apostolic age. We still need Christ's help (gift) and guidance to reach our potential within His church. And part of that continuing gift is the leadership He provides through evangelists and teaching pastors. He will still to this day bless the leadership of His church if they will acknowledge their need for His help and ask for it.

If you remain convinced the gifts mentioned in Ephesians 4 belong to the *charismata*, it still will not affect the value of

this study for you. It will affect your effectiveness in the work you strive to do for the Lord. You will depend on your strength instead of His — and I believe we will admit His resources for strength are endless while we all tire in a hurry! But regardless of your understanding of these “gifts”, we all agree that the leaders of the first century church functioned with the special and direct guidance of the Holy Spirit. Therefore they show us exactly what the Spirit intended for them and for us to accomplish through leadership positions in the church. Apart from the discussion of “gifts”, the biblical pattern for church growth is clearly seen in this verse.

In Ephesians 4:8, Paul explains the manner in which Christ gives gifts to the church with a very descriptive illustration. He draws the picture of a king triumphantly returning from battle, celebrating his victory with a procession. Paul quotes Psalm 68:18, which refers to a king’s victory celebration — perhaps David.

The Old Testament passage is slightly different from Paul’s quotation of it. The king in the Psalm led a host of his captives as a sign of victory, and as the procession moved through the crowd, the king *received* gifts from men in homage.

Paul uses the passage to illustrate the victory of Christ, but he makes it clear that His kingship is different. In Christ’s triumphant ascension, He led captive His vanquished foes of sin and death — and as if that were not enough, our Lord *gave* gifts to us!

The absolute glory of Christ’s ascension is emphasized in the passage. One can only grasp it by realizing what Jesus did in order to obtain the victory. In verses nine and ten Paul tells us that Jesus had to descend to the tomb, but death could not hold Him! After having born all our sins on the cross, He broke

the bonds of sin and death and ascended triumphantly to the throne of God that He might fill all things. He overcame the spatial limits of His existence in the flesh and is now with His people everywhere at all times.

Christ has chosen to share His victory by giving us special gifts. He does so to assure that every member of His kingdom will grow into His image so that the church will continue the victorious march over sin and death!

Christ Jesus, then, has given each member the strength to perform their specific function within the body. To insure that every Christian reaches his potential and that all will work together in unity, the Lord has given the church special gifts — Christ-like leaders. These gifts, when properly used, will lead to growth and true unity. In the next few chapters, we will consider how Christ Jesus intended for leaders to be used.



## **II. Growth: God's Purpose for Leadership**

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### **Apostles and Prophets (Ephesians 4:11)**

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And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers.

The triumphant Christ's first gifts to the church are apostles and prophets. It is significant that He is not giving the gift of apostleship or the gift of prophecy. As we have seen, Paul is not speaking of the special gifts given by the Spirit that are mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11. The gifts from Christ in Ephesians 4:11 are the individuals who have the ability to exercise these leadership ministries.

Those who disregard the present day application of this passage because they believe it to be a message only for the Spirit-filled church of the first century have missed the biblical pattern for church growth and the very key to preserving the unity of the Spirit.

While the office of apostle and prophet was not perpetuated beyond the apostolic age, they continue to bless today's church. Paul explained their importance to the church earlier in the epistle. He writes in Ephesians 2:20 that the apostles and prophets are the foundation upon which the church is built. All the apostles' and prophets' guidance and teachings came from

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the cornerstone, Jesus Christ — the only head of the church (Eph 1:22, 23). Paul describes the church as a living building growing into a temple, a dwelling for God.

We know who the apostles were and what they did. They were those chosen by Christ Jesus to be His followers. They were eye-witnesses of the events of His earthly ministry. Prepared by the teachings of Jesus, they were given a special commission to reveal the will of God to the world.

The prophets mentioned here are not those of the Old Testament, but Christian prophets. They received direct revelation of the Truth from God. The gift of prophecy is identified as one of the foundation ministries of the church (1 Cor 12:28). 1 Corinthians 14 makes it clear that the prophets primary responsibility was to declare the divinely revealed will of God.

Too often we attach the idea of foretelling the future with “prophecy”. While at times God allowed such to be done to confirm the divine nature of their revelation, this was not their principle task.

As the teachings of Scripture dominate our worship and study today, the Christian prophets provided the same truth by edifying the church with God’s will as it was revealed to them. Since the New Testament had not yet been compiled, God chose to proclaim His will through them.

It is interesting to note that even with the gift of divine revelation, the prophets’ teachings were subject to the other prophets (1 Cor 14:32) and to the apostolic writings (14:37). As today we search the Scriptures to determine if one is teaching the truth, so the prophets were subject to the test of God’s will revealed through others.

The great importance of apostles and prophets to the church is explained in Ephesians 3:5. God revealed the mystery of Christ through them. C. H. Dod writes in his work, *The Johanne Epistles*:

The church is built upon the twofold foundation of apostles and prophets..., the apostles representing the authority of primary witnesses to the Gospel facts, while prophets represent the living guidance of the Spirit by which the facts were apprehended in ever fuller meaning and scope. (p. 105)

The work of the apostles and prophets continues to be a tremendous blessing for the church today. Through their inspired writings we have access to the mystery of God revealed in Christ. What the Holy Spirit revealed through them continues to be the foundation upon which the church is built.

We have no need for further revelations, because foundations need to be laid only once. The church is to continue to grow on the foundation of the apostles and prophets as revealed in the Scriptures.

The importance of the apostles and prophets in today's church may seem to be a rather insignificant observation to those who have always accepted the Bible as the authoritative Word of God. But when you consider that very few in the religious world are willing to acknowledge the Scriptures as the authoritative foundation upon which the church must still be built, one understands the great value of this gift from Jesus Christ.

The only hope for Christian unity and real growth is to use these gifts as Christ intended. Our Lord never wrote a book, but the apostles and prophets did. Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, guided them to reveal all we need to be complete in Him. It is this truth that Jesus prayed that we might be sanctified, in order for us to be one (John 17).

Without the gift of the apostles and prophets we would have no way to preserve the unity of the Spirit or expand the borders of the kingdom. We can never thank our victorious Savior enough for the gift of the apostles and prophets, who provide us with the foundational teachings upon which we continue to build the church.

## Evangelists

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The work of an evangelist was crucial in the early church. Evangelists spent their lives planting the seed of God's word in the hearts of people everywhere. They started new congregations and led them until qualified teaching pastors were appointed (see the following chapter).

Much attention has been given to the rarity of the word "evangelist" in the New Testament. It does not appear in the list of ministries of 1 Corinthians 12 and is found in only two other places in the Bible (2 Tim 4:5 and Acts 21:8). However, the verb form "to evangelize" or "preach the Gospel" appears frequently (fifty-five times in the New Testament).

The beauty of proclaiming the Gospel is spoken of in Romans 10:15, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things." The verse describes one "sent to preach." The work of an evangelist is to proclaim the Gospel to the lost, which is the primary responsibility of all Christians (cf. Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8).

As previously stated, apostles and prophets served during the foundational period of the church and were not perpetuated beyond that era. However, evangelists and teaching pastors were intended to be permanent leadership ministries in the church. Do we have "evangelists" in the church today? Do we have those with "beautiful feet" in the Lord's sight?

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If we consider the work of an evangelist as identified in the Scriptures, we have far too few. One might ask, “But we have many preachers — how can you say we have few evangelists?” The problem is that in today’s church, “preacher” and “evangelist” are not often synonymous. As Jack Lewis points out:

The modern preacher who devotes his energies to church administration, to counseling, to preaching sermons to people, most of whom have already obeyed the Gospel, has no close parallel in the church of the first century (*Leadership Questions Confronting the Church.*, 49).

This is not to say that having “located preachers” is wrong. But consider how little the average modern day preacher resembles the evangelists of the early church. This brings us to the heart of the matter. I am convinced that one of the main reasons the church is not growing numerically or spiritually as it should is that many congregations spend a great amount of their resources supporting one man who is filling a leadership position that did not exist in the New Testament church. Most of our preachers never get the chance to preach, if we define “preach” as do the Scriptures. Instead, they are called on to fulfill pastoral responsibilities.

Though we refuse to call our preachers “pastors” (ironically we do so with pride for our adherence to the New Testament pattern), in many cases that is exactly what we expect them to be. I have talked to many preachers who have expressed their frustration with such demands. Some are now used car and insurance salesmen as a result. When I hear what they had to do to meet their congregation’s expectations, I marvel that they made it as long as they did! They were (and are) expected to fill the pulpit, visit the sick and shut-ins, counsel the troubled, guide the flock — giving special attention to the youth, give funeral messages, perform marriages, be on call around the

clock, and if there is any time left they are to lead some kind of personal work program.

Just because we call a man a “preacher” does not make him a preacher. What makes one an evangelist or preacher is that his primary responsibility is the proclamation of the word of God *to the lost!* If we expect him to do the work of a pastor (elder), he is a pastor whether we call him one or not. How far we have strayed from the biblical pattern of leadership when we require a young man just out of college to assume pastoring responsibilities! The burden is too great for one who is relatively young in the faith, without the benefit of wisdom that only years of godly living can produce (see the warning in 1 Tim. 3:6).

I certainly do not wish to offend in any way the countless good men who have given their lives to the Lord as “preachers.” I would never want to take away the value of what they have done in teaching Christians more about our Savior and how to live the Christian life. But as I intently study the Scriptures looking for the pattern of leadership in the early church that caused its tremendous growth, I find no trace of the position of “pulpit-preacher.”

The very title “pulpit-preacher” indicates why the church is not reaching the lost as God would desire. How can one “preach” the gospel message from a pulpit inside a building during the worship assembly of the saved?

Consider with me the meaning of “preach” given in the Scriptures. Two main words in the Greek which are translated “to preach” are *kerusso* (to announce as a herald) and *euan-gelizethai* (to proclaim the Good News). The primary meaning of both in context is to announce the Good News of Jesus to those who have not heard it before.

In his commentary on Ephesians, F. F. Bruce explains the work of the evangelists in the early church:

It is conceivable that evangelists were not included among the ministries set by God "in the church" in 1 Cor. 12:28 because, strictly speaking, they do not exercise their special ministry in the church but outside, in the world. The church is the community of those who have heard the preaching of the gospel and responded to it in faith; they do not need to be evangelized further. The gospel is preached to unbelievers, in order that they may be brought to faith in Christ and so be incorporated in the believing community (*The Epistle to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, 1984. 347).

The early church did their preaching outside the worship assembly. That which we call "preaching" done today from the pulpit, would be identified in the Scriptures as teaching or expounding on the Word. While this is essential to the life of the church, it does not fulfill our responsibility to preach the Good News to the unsaved! Just because we have a "preacher" does not mean the word is actually "preached."

As has been previously pointed out, the evangelists of the early church spent most of their energies proclaiming the word of God to the unforgiven. After the lost were converted to Christ their knowledge of the truth was deepened through teaching that was the responsibility of teaching pastors (elders). While evangelists also took part in this type of teaching, especially if the church had not yet appointed elders, it was not their primary responsibility. They most certainly did not spend several days each week in their studies preparing for two sermons to be presented in the presence of the saved during Sunday worship services. The very nature of their ministry insisted they preach the Good News to those without a Savior.



Let us return to our question, "How can one preach the gospel message from a pulpit inside a building during the worship assembly of the church?" "Pulpit preaching" can be done one of two ways, neither of which is patterned after Scripture and both have contributed to the church's lack of growth.

The first is that men actually preach the Good News from the pulpit. Anytime someone attending a worship service is recognized as a visitor by the preacher, his sermon is modified to encourage that individual to respond to the invitation at the end of his lesson. The "five-steps" of salvation are preached time and time again. Sermons are specifically designed to climax in an emotional appeal that will cause one to obey the Gospel.

The problem with such preaching from our pulpits is that it misses the point of Christian worship. There is no verse which authorizes the use of our worship to God as a "salvation service." Note that I am not referring to "Gospel meetings," but to sermons directed toward the unsaved that are presented during our worship to God. The idea of extending the invitation to obey the Gospel at the end of every sermon has its roots in the evangelical tent meetings of years gone by, not Scripture.

This approach to preaching risks making the church building the place of salvation. It turns the period we have set aside for worship into our main evangelistic method. We are encouraged to bring our friends to church where the Gospel message is proclaimed. Perhaps they will respond to the invitation, and even if they do not, in our minds our responsibility for teaching them is fulfilled.

When pulpit preaching is mainly evangelistic, worship in and of itself is seen to meet every minimum spiritual require-

ment. The church is confined to a building — after all, that is where the message of salvation is proclaimed; that is where one responds to the invitation song; that is even where one is baptized. The work of the church is neatly packaged in three “appointed” times during the week.

Would the first century Christians recognize such a worship assembly? They met to worship God, to gather around the Lord’s table, and to celebrate their blessings in Christ together. 1 Corinthians 14 makes it clear that in worship they were to be edified and instructed by the divine word of God as revealed through the prophets. It was inappropriate to speak in tongues without an interpreter, for speaking in tongues was a sign to the nonbeliever, and worship was for the purpose of edifying and strengthening the Christian.

To sum it up, the early church met to worship and be strengthened in order to go out and truly preach the word. They did not go out and try to bring people “to church” to hear “their preacher.” A congregation that encourages their preacher to use his sermons to try to make the unbelievers in the audience respond has misunderstood the purpose of worship.

The unbelievers seldom understand the message is meant for them. I have yet to meet the person that was converted by one sermon. The members go home unedified, because they have heard the same message so many times it has lost its meaning.

The second way that “preaching” is done from the pulpit is more prevalent. It occurs in thousands of assemblies every Sunday. A well-prepared, godly man stands and boldly proclaims a wonderful, edifying message from the Word of God that causes all present to grow spiritually. This is wonderful.

However, it is not preaching in light of the biblical definition. It is teaching. We need it. But the world outside our assemblies desperately needs preaching in the true sense of the word! One who stands before the saved and clearly expounds upon the word of God is a teacher, not an evangelist.

Many congregations take great pride in the wonderful preacher who fills the pulpit. But the work of the church does not end there. The Gospel must be announced to the unsaved or we are not the church that Jesus Christ purchased with His blood! As Jack Lewis explains:

The distinction which is standard among us, between the local preacher and the evangelist who travels, is a distinction unknown to the N.T. and one which has come into our thought through denominational influences. The fundamental idea in the N.T. in preaching is the telling of the news to people who had not heard it before — what we call evangelization. It has nothing to do with the delivery of sermons to the converted (op. cit., 58).

Christ intended for His church to have true evangelists. If not for their work, the church would die. In many towns, the church has died because they never had a true evangelist working with them.

F. F. Bruce writes, “The evangelists given by the ascended Christ continued to exercise the gospel-preaching aspect of the apostolic ministry, so that the church might grow in succeeding generations by the adhesion of new believers.” (op. cit. 347)

Can you imagine what an impact we would make on the world if we would send out all of our talented preachers to establish new congregations? What effect might they have if they spent their entire energies teaching the lost or training others to do so? Christ has given us a great and special gift.

*A Biblical Pattern for Church Growth*

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May God give us the wisdom to use evangelists to accomplish that for which they were intended.

## Teaching Pastors

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Paul identifies the final gift given by the victorious Christ to His church as “pastors and teachers.” Most scholars of Scripture agree that since pastors and teachers are linked together by the same article in the Greek, they should be recognized as descriptions of the same ministry — teaching pastors. Those serving in such a way are also identified in Scripture as “elders” (*presbyteroi*) and “bishops” (*episkopoi*).

It is not the intent of this study to consider the full realm of the work of elders in the church. We will consider the elders’ responsibilities in light of the words used in this verse, that is, teaching pastors.

“Pastor” (*poimen*) is the Latin word for “shepherd.” The metaphor of the elder as a shepherd is particularly meaningful. It is important that one not carry a metaphor beyond the biblical application, but the idea of the elder being a shepherd is particularly valuable in understanding his leadership role in the church. The passage that best describes the elder’s shepherding is 1 Peter 5:1-4:

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to

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the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

Obviously the shepherds are to care for the flock. Such care demands they lead the sheep to pastures where abundant spiritual food is available. They are to be an example of Christian excellence in all that they do. Most of all, they are to emulate the pastoring of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

The idea of feeding the flock is of primary importance since Paul describes the shepherds in Ephesians 4:11 as “teachers” (*didaskaloi*). In 1 Timothy 3:2 Paul insists that an elder be “able to teach.” Writing to Titus (1:9) Paul expounds on the importance of this attribute, describing a qualified elder as one “holding fast the faithful Word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.”

The pastors’ or elders’ main responsibility then is to care for the flock by providing the spiritual nourishment and guidance each member needs. The direct application of this principle will be seen in the following chapter. In the early church, as evangelists would reach the lost with the Gospel, the new believers were incorporated into the church. However, they needed further attention and care. They were spiritual infants demanding nourishment and attentive shepherding. This spiritual nourishment given through teaching was and is an essential part of an elder’s shepherding responsibilities.

In general, though not always, the preaching to the lost (*kerygma*) was done by the evangelists. Significantly, the elders did most of the teaching (*didache*) within the congregation (see C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*. 1,2; and J.H. MacDonald, *Kerygma and Didache*. for the full development of this distinction).

This arrangement would certainly be supported by Paul's words in 1 Timothy 5:17, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching." The word for preaching here is *logos* which Paul uses in reference to his preaching of the Gospel (cf. 1 Cor 1:17, 18). It is used to describe individuals who have the ability to speak and proclaim a message before others. The content of their message (in 1 Timothy 5:17) is "the teaching" (*didaskalia*). Paul is informing us that elders who teach the Scriptures before the congregation are worthy of financial support. What these elders were engaged in is what we refer to as "pulpit preaching."

Common sense confirms the value of such a framework of teaching. Of all the presentations of Bible messages I have heard, the most beneficial and meaningful were proclaimed by mature men who had lived for the Lord many years and could reflect on the wisdom of God's word from experience. Though they called themselves preachers, in the early church they would have been among those recognized as "teaching pastors".

Those who are young have the energy that is required to go out and preach the word to unbelievers. It is true that evangelists are to be involved in reproofing, rebuking, and exhorting fellow Christians with great patience and instruction (2 Tim 4:1-4). Yet until they are qualified to be teaching pastors they would be of greater value to the church if they would do the work of an evangelist — aiming their preaching efforts on the lost, outside our church buildings (2 Tim 4:5).

Am I "anti-located preacher?" Certainly not! But let wise, godly elders be financially supported to teach and edify the saints, while our preachers be given the responsibility to reach out to those in the community. Better yet, let us send our

evangelists out to preach the word and establish new congregations. This is the growth pattern we find in the leadership of the first century church.

Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things" (Romans 10:13-15).

Elders — teach, admonish, and nourish the saints. Preachers, proclaim the Good News to those who need it desperately — the lost.

Let me add one more thought. Many elders would struggle under the load of assuming more teaching responsibilities, for in many cases they are already overworked. However, for the most part, such a work load is caused by elders unwilling to use deacons as they should. Deacons should be given real responsibilities, especially in the material workings of the church, which would allow the elders to shepherd. "Deacon" was not intended to be a title, but a specific ministry of service.

God never intended for elders to be a board of directors, making every decision for the church. His plan calls for them to shepherd, teach, guard against false doctrine, and lead by example. God provided deacons to assist the elders in expediting the work of the church. Deacons should be entrusted with specific ministries in the work of the church.

Most successful elderships with whom I am familiar assign deacons to lead the congregation's ministry committees. The elders are available for consultation, but do not expect to be included in the everyday decisions of the committee. As long as that committee functions within its requested budget and fulfills its responsibilities, the elders do not intervene. The



deacons are trusted. They are valued. Their talents are utilized. They free the elders to do the work God has given them.

Much more could be said, and I encourage you to study the matter further. My prayer is that elders all over the world will carefully analyze their role within the workings of the church. Priorities must be set. The church needs teaching shepherds.

## The Purpose of Leadership

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And He gave some as apostles, some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.

If I were given the opportunity to present to the entire church one verse to apply from the Scriptures, it would be Ephesians 4:12. I do not regard it as the most important, but perhaps it is one of the most needed in our day and time. We already know the Gospel message: the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We know much of the New Testament teachings concerning the Christian life. I believe this verse is tremendously important because we seem to have lost sight of God's purpose for the leadership of His church.

Ephesians provides decisive information on this subject because it was written in a time of transition. Paul was preparing the church for a time when the apostles and prophets would no longer be available for guidance as the source of revealed truth. They had accomplished their task of laying the doctrinal foundation and their time on earth would soon pass.

The church would not be left without leadership, however. Gifted evangelists and teaching pastors would continue to lead the church until the return of the Lord. Paul wants the members to recognize their congregational leadership as directed by Christ. They were to be regarded as gifts given by Christ to His church.

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Certainly we would all agree that Christ intends for godly, qualified men serving as evangelists and teaching pastors to lead the church today. But what is their purpose? Are they to lead the work of the church? Are they to do the work for the church? Or should they rule over the church as lords of God's heritage?

In many cases, congregations have accepted a form of leadership that, at least verbally, we denounce. I am referring to leaders assuming the role of clergymen, while the rest are treated as laity (common man). This form of church government developed in the latter second and early third centuries. Before that time, the Biblical pattern found in 1 Peter 2:5 was evident: "You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

Though the members had different responsibilities and functions within the body, all belonged to the priesthood. There was no trace of the existence of a clergy/laity distinction or separation.

Of interest is the fact that the word "clergy" comes from the Greek word *kleros*, which means "lot" or "portion." It is significant to note that this word is used in 1 Peter 5:3 to describe the *members* who were under the care of the elders. According to the Scriptures the "lot" or "portion" separated for Christ is the entire church.

The division between the clergy and laity continued to deepen from the late second century to the time of Constantinian peace when Christianity was recognized by the Roman empire c. 312. Many church historians suggest that the clergy/laity division was finalized at this point.

When the tension between the church and the world ceased and the empire no longer persecuted Christians, it was thought to be necessary to set aside a special class who would take care of the spiritual realm of society. Hence, the clergy gradually developed. Everyone else, or the laity, so deeply involved in the pursuit of material things, would support the clergy. This “second class” laity would have no obligation to perform spiritual tasks. Such matters would be expedited for them by the clergy.

The famous distinction of the *duo genera christianorum* was finalized. Worship had developed into a liturgy directed exclusively by the clergy, with the laity reduced to the role of mere spectators.

One of the pleas of the Restoration movement was and is to remove any such distinction. It is for this reason that we do not ordain ministers. But once again, it is not the words we use that define our organizational patterns. A dog does not cease to be a dog just because we choose to call him a horse.

What would one call a church leadership pattern that distinguishes one group in the congregation as leaders who do the work *of* and *for* the church while the majority are reduced to pew-warming spectators who need only attend worship services to be regarded as faithful? That is a clergy/laity model of leadership whether we ordain ministers or not.

The Word of God is clear; there is to be no such distinction in the church of our Lord! We are all priests (1 Peter 2:5), and though we have various responsibilities and functions in the body, there is no distinction in spiritual value (Gal. 3:27-29). We are all to be able to teach (cf. 2 Tm. 2:24, 25; 1 Peter 3:15; Heb. 5:12). We are all to be able to preach the Word with our lives regardless of what we do for a living. All are transformed

from this world into the Kingdom of God's Son (Col. 1:13,14; Romans 12:2).

I could go on for pages, but it is evident that Christ did not intend for His church to be divided into spiritual leaders and non-spiritual spectators.

Why has this separation of clergy and laity developed in the Lord's church? Because in many cases, the leadership of the church has lost sight of its purpose. Ephesians 4:12 clearly states they are to *equip* the saints for the work of service.

At times it seems that the elders of some congregations understand their primary responsibility to be that of maintaining a religious organization, a type of worship society. The group meets three times a week, "grows" only when a member's child is baptized, holds Gospel meetings twice a year, supports a "preacher," but never really announces the Good News to those around them. Gospel meetings rarely attract or convert non-members. When enough of the members die so they can no longer support a preacher, the church closes its doors. This has happened over and over again. In a recent mail out to congregations in our area, several were returned with the message stamped on the envelope: "Disbanded. No forwarding address."

Is growth not one of the identifying marks of the New Testament church? How can we pick through Acts and the Epistles for identifying marks of the Spirit-led church and not see the importance of true growth?

We will openly extend fellowship to congregations that are stagnant or dying, but if one is growing, alarms sound! There is suspicion that they are in some way violating Scripture. Isn't it tragic that we are so unaccustomed to growth that it is viewed as an abnormality?

The purpose of the leadership of the church is not to maintain a worship society. The leadership must accept the responsibility of equipping every member to use his/her talents in the best possible way within the unified body in order that the church will grow to the glory of God!

Can a lifeless, non-growing church truly worship God in Christ? Are there ever enough members in a congregation that we can praise God and say, "This is enough"? The very thought of worshiping our wonderful God ought to inspire us to proclaim the Word in order that more and more people may lift their hearts to praise the Giver of Salvation! Why is this not happening? Could it be because we are generally not equipped to do the work of God?

I have been given the opportunity to present several personal work workshops. I have found that the most common reason people do not attempt to teach their friends and neighbors about Christ is that they feel their knowledge of the Scripture is inadequate. These are people who have been members of the church for twenty and thirty years. Why is this?

The real tragedy is that some elders and preachers with whom I have discussed this do not seem to be overly concerned about the average member's ignorance in such vital areas. It is often explained as "one of those things you have to live with." No! May it never be! It is an unacceptable condition for the church to be in. If we, as church leaders, are not equipping those in our congregations to use their talents to the glory of the Lord, we are not fulfilling our God-given responsibilities.

The word "equipping" (*katartismos*) means to place someone or something in proper working order. The task given by God to leaders in the church is to bring every member to a

condition of excellent spiritual fitness. The result is that they are able to use their unique abilities to the benefit of the whole body and the world around them. Through them Christ's body becomes active and effective to all with whom they come into contact.

While in high school, I was privileged to attend an awards banquet for a university's football program. The team was a perennial power, and several All-Americans were to be recognized. The center of attention was a huge trophy in the middle of the awards table with the inscription, "Most Valuable Team Member." The tension built as the rest of the awards were given.

As the climax of the ceremony drew near, several of the more talented players moved their chairs away from their tables, certain the largest trophy had their name on it. But the coach called a name I had never before heard, and I knew the team well!

There was a moment of silence, then the entire team erupted in cheers! A short, very unathletic looking young man was literally passed overhead from player to player all the way to the awards table. Who was this unknown individual who had obviously won the hearts of all the members of the team? He was the equipment manager!

The coach went to great lengths to explain that for four years this young man had labored at equipping (that's the word he used!) the players. One could come running off the field with a broken piece of equipment, and this manager knew each player so well he could have a replacement part of the correct size immediately. The player was back on the field after missing just one play. The young man never played in a game,

but he was the one most valuable contributor to the success of the entire team.

Men in leadership positions in the church ought to see themselves as equipment managers and never as starring, big name quarterbacks. I fear some congregations function much like a professional sports franchise. They have a star quarterback who performs every Sunday. The members watch from the stands. They pay their admission when the basket is passed. Most of the money goes to pay the players' salaries. Anyone who does anything in any way for the team is paid.

If the members become dissatisfied with a performer, they release him, hold try-outs, and sign another one to a large contract. The real problem is that many of the spectators leave their Christianity at the "stadium." After all, that's where the game is played.

You may know of congregations that have "put the game on hold" when their preacher resigned. Until a replacement could be found, the church hibernated. Are those churches built on Christ or on the man filling the pulpit?

Churches are often identified by who preaches there rather than by their love for the Lord. Members are known as liberal or conservative by the name on the preacher's mailbox. I recently had a young man interested in preaching ask, "How do you get to the 'big time?'" referring to large congregations paying high salaries. The "big name preacher syndrome" has affected us all in some way or another.

Jesus, the perfect minister, did not serve in this way. He rejected fame, insisted that all glory be given to His Father, and He willingly died on the cross. Death was His salary. But in dying He equipped us with that which we desperately need the most — the cleansing of His blood. Jesus was an equipper.



## *A Biblical Pattern for Church Growth*

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We very much need Christ-like equippers in the church today who will stand ready to meet our every spiritual need. We need them to help us all run the race of life (Hebrews 12:1,2) using our abilities to the Lord's glory. We need elders and evangelists who regard themselves as equipment managers who will do all they can to prepare every member to preach the Word in everything they do. Preachers of the Gospel and elders ought to be the most humble of servants, for they have spent the most time studying how Jesus walked on the earth.

The leadership pattern of a congregation is decisive in determining whether or not it will grow. Which is better strategy: to have one mighty warrior who can fight, or to use the great warrior to equip one hundred soldiers for battle? The answer is as obvious as God's plan is beautiful. We must have equippers as leaders. This is the biblical pattern for growth.

Those in the leadership of the church who jealously guard their pulpits and see themselves as star quarterbacks (complete with a set of statistics!) are in the wrong game.

You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45).

Let me say again that Jesus was an equipper. The price He paid to meet our needs is beyond comprehension. But hopefully it will inspire us to follow His example and find greatness in meeting the needs and equipping to the fullest the great army of God.

### III. Growth: The Healthy Body

## The Building Up of the Body (Ephesians 4:12)

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...for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.

In what way is the leadership to equip the saints? After all, “equip” is a rather general word. Verse 12 explains what each member is to be equipped to do, and the following verse identifies the goal toward which the “equipped” church is to strive.

The second and third prepositional phrases in verse 12 (“for the work of service” and “to the building up of the body of Christ”) are dependent on the first (“for the equipping of the saints”), as is indicated by the use of different prepositions. Thus, all members are to be equipped for their diverse works of serving God and their fellow man in order to “build up” the body of Christ.

This is the key to the growth of the family of God. If the church is to grow, leaders must prepare *every* member to serve Jesus Christ to his full potential according to his abilities and the body of Christ will be built up! This verse stands against the modern idea of expanding the borders of the Kingdom by

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carefully selecting and hiring multiple ministers to perform the multifarious work of the church.

There are congregations who have multiple “ministers” who perform specialized tasks and are able to accomplish much. But think how much more could be done if we would equip every member to be a specialized minister! As leaders, our primary responsibility is not to do the ministry, but to prepare all members to be ministers.

The word “ministry” (*diakonia*), though at times used to designate a specific task (see Col. 4:17), here includes all activities that strengthen the church. All members are expected to use their attributes in the ministry or service of the church. If all are not serving the Lord within their circle of family, friends, and associates; the body of Christ is crippled and cannot function to its potential.

“Building up” (*oikodomen*) is to be understood in two ways. First, it signifies adding or building onto a structure, or growing in numbers. Secondly, it implies adding to the strength of the existing structure, or growing in spiritual strength. We tend to focus on one aspect and ignore the other. I have heard said, “Since we are really striving to grow stronger spiritually, we are putting aside the assimilation of new members for a time.” Or some have worked so diligently on an evangelistic effort, they’ve totally ignored their own spiritual growth and suffered greatly as a result.

The Lord demands His church be “built up” in both ways. We must work constantly at reaching the lost with the Gospel and provide an environment that will also allow the members to mature spiritually.

There is only one way this can be done. Leaders, equip each member to serve, using in the best possible way each one's gifts or talents to the benefit of the growing body.

I realize these are not startling new revelations. We have recognized these principles for a long time. But we can do a better job of putting them into practice.

I am greatly encouraged by elderships with whom I am acquainted who take the time and effort to sit down with every new member and determine how they can best shepherd that individual. They suggest the recently immersed attend a "new converts" class that meets for a given period of time. The elders carefully note the abilities of that individual and discuss openly with him or her what he or she might do to assist in the growth of the church.

That is wonderful! It is biblical. But it takes a lot of hard work and demands innovative thinking.

Not long ago, I was talking with some elders of a dying congregation who were impressed by the positive attitude and amount of work being done by the members of the congregation where I was serving as an evangelist. These elders tried to involve everyone in the work of the church, but they had so limited the service roles available that very few had the ability or willingness to fill them. One could teach a children's class, help with a day school, or take care of the grounds. That was the extent of the possibilities to serve the Lord in that congregation.

The ways in which we can serve the Lord are as diverse as the different abilities each member possesses. We must open our minds and find something each member can do to use his/her talents in the Lord's work. Instead, too often we

identify a few tasks and force a member to do a job of which he is not capable or which makes little use of his special talents.

The involvement rate in the congregation where I work is almost one hundred percent. The members are not told how they must serve to be counted as active; they decide how they can best serve the Lord with their abilities. Each chooses, according to his or her talents, an appropriate ministry committee with which to work, and becomes an active part of the decision making process. My concern as a leader is to prepare them spiritually so they are prepared to reach out to the lost in all that they do.

I am a runner. At the time of this writing, I have run over 36,000 miles. Those miles represent a lot of worn out running shoes — just ask my wife! When I first started competing for my high school cross-country team, I worked hard at building up my leg strength. After all, you run with your legs, right? But I found later in my career that if I wanted to excel, my whole body would have to be trained. My arm strength is as important as that of my legs. Any body fat not needed will slow me down. In short, if I want to realize my potential as a distance runner, a goal I'm still working toward, I will have to achieve "total-fitness." Only then will I run as I am fully capable.

Training is not fun, but it is essential. Equipping every muscle with the strength it needs is tedious. But the world-record holders know what happens when the effort is put forth. Gold medals are for those who put the time and effort into an extremely difficult training process over a long period of time. But they reach the plane of "total-fitness."

Brethren, don't miss this point. Total fitness is the key to church growth. We'll be amplifying this concept throughout the remainder of the study.

A rate of growth that will glorify God can be reached if the leaders of the church accept the responsibility of fully equipping *every* member to serve the Lord to their potential. Then and only then will the body be built up, both numerically and spiritually. Instead of a crippled body with a few extremely well developed muscles, there will be an active, well-trained, dynamic body that will be able to reach the lost in countless ways.

## The Key to Unity— Total Fitness (Ephesians 4:13)

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...until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

Low expectation is one of the undeniable obstacles to significant growth in the church today. Where little is expected, little is achieved.

Is the congregation you are attending working toward a goal? Have you established a plan that challenges you to grow? Do you have a sense of expectancy concerning the work of the church?

God does. And Paul very clearly understands what our Lord God wills to accomplish in and through the body of Christ. That is the goal set before us in verse 13.

Each member is to use his talents for the benefit and the building up of the body of Christ. But how can we know if the body is really being built up as God desires? After all, we can have a church that is very busy with everyone involved in entertaining themselves. This is not the “building up” God desires.

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We must work toward the three-fold objective of verse 13. It is a standard of perfection that will not be reached until Christ returns. But if the church is to please God, the leaders must make certain the congregation is striving toward these objectives.

The goal of a Christian is to be like Christ. Though he will never become perfect, if he does not strive toward that goal, he will never see the Lord (Heb 12:14). So it is with the church. Even if its goal is unattainable, all our efforts must be spent in pursuing it.

“Until” (*mechri*) in verse 13 indicates the space or time leading up to a certain event, here identified as the attainment of three things. “Attain” (*katantao*) is used nine times in Acts to identify the arrival of a traveler to his destination.

It is used in the same way in this passage. We are given a picture of the church traveling until a threefold destination is reached: to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God; to a mature man; and to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. Each of these phrases is introduced by the preposition “to” indicating they are closely related to each other.

We are identifying that goal toward which the church must be growing. There is no room for compromise here. If the church is to be the body of Christ, it must strive toward the attainment of the unity of faith, coming from a knowledge of the Son of God, which will cause us to develop into full maturity.

Consider with me each of the various aspects of the goal of the church.



***The Unity of the Faith  
and the Knowledge of the Son of God***

Earlier (4:5) Paul affirmed there is only “one” faith. That faith can either be a body of truth (Jude 3) or an attitude of trust. In verse 13 “faith” identifies the totality of Christian doctrine and practice.

There is only one truth, only one plan of salvation in Christ, and we are to be built up in the pursuit of “being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose” (Phil 2:2). Church leadership must make sure the diverse members are growing toward this “unity of faith.”

Some have questioned why unity is an actual, God-given reality in verse 3 while it seems to be something we are to strive to attain in verse 13. It is important to realize that while the church receives its character from God, it must always be active in growing toward His standard of perfection. God has given us unity in the Spirit, and with His help, we can progress more and more toward the attainment of perfect unity (not that it will ever be reached in this life, but it must be the goal for which we strive).

It is essential to define “unity.” I recently attended an ecumenical dialogue between two major religious bodies. The opening comment was, “We do not intend to discuss our doctrinal differences. We have learned from past discussions that these will never be overcome. Rather, we want to explore in our discussion whether we can fellowship one another in Christ in spite of our obvious differences.”

Is this unity? Is this “being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose?” The unity defined in Ephesians 4 includes every aspect of the Christian faith: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one

faith, one baptism, and one God and Father. If we cannot agree on these things, we will never taste the sweet unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

How can we attain such unity? Take careful notice, for there is only one way. Every member of the body must be equipped with a thorough knowledge of the Son of God. This knowledge must go beyond an intellectual acknowledgment of the historical Jesus. It is a knowledge that leads every individual in the congregation to realize how desperately he needs Jesus Christ as Savior. This true knowledge of Jesus causes all to give their lives to the Lord. Only then is a true unity attainable.

The key to unity is developing an inseparable link between the life of each and every Christian and Jesus Christ Himself. As a consequence, we will all be inseparably tied to one another with the sweet union of a God-given unity. Is this overly simplistic? I do not think so.

I have been privileged to observe elderships who work tirelessly at equipping each saint with a true understanding of Jesus and His love. The members have responded by diligently pursuing a study of all the Scriptures in order to find how they can further please the Lord in every respect.

As we have already considered, the “knowledge” spoken of in verse 13 is more than just intellectual understanding. It is more than “knowing about” the events in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. It is an experiencing of the presence of Christ in one’s life. It is the knowledge of which Paul tells in Philippians 3:8, “I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” He mentions it in Ephesians (3:18, 19) as well:

[So that you] may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

When members come to this kind of an understanding of Christ, they give themselves to the pursuit of being more like Him and strive to find how they can please Him more.

The “apathetic” Christian has been tolerated far too long! Fellow teachers, our instruction must make every member of the body aware of how badly they need a Savior! We will never have unity without the understanding and conviction that He is our only hope! Only then can we join hands and forget our petty worldly conflicts. They disappear in the brightness of the light of our common relationship with the Lord.

My son David and I went to the mall one day when he was almost three years old. He was dutifully holding my hand, but was obviously unhappy with the arrangement. After all, he was nearly three, what need did he have of me?

I decided he needed to learn a lesson. I let go of his hand and he knew he had been set free! He was excited about the prospect of going wherever he wanted. He immediately took off for the toy store window. I intentionally held back a few steps. Suddenly, David discovered all the knees in his immediate field of vision were attached to strangers. In a panic he looked all over for me — then wailed, “Daddy, where are you?” I ran over and pulled him into my arms. Needless to say, David’s attitude changed — for the rest of our outing together he would hardly let me put him down. He had lost his thirst for freedom.

What made the difference in his attitude? He came to realize he had great need of his father. I certainly had no

intention of being cruel, but I did want him to learn he still needed guidance — three years old or not!

Too many who call themselves Christians go through their spiritual lives like my young son. They are never really convinced they need Jesus, but they “hold His hand” because they know it is expected of them. They fail to develop the relationship of dependence on Him as Savior. Paradoxically, it is understanding our desperate need for His salvation that truly sets us free from the troubles of this world.

When the leadership of the church prepares each one of us to understand how desperately we need a Savior, we will firmly hold each others’ hands and grow more and more united every day! Unity of the faith comes from the foundation of every member of the body having a true understanding (knowledge) of the value and teachings of the Son of God.

***To a Mature Man,  
to the Measure of the Stature of Christ***

The body of Christ must grow toward maturity. I have spoken to many preachers whose frustrations are very similar to those of the Hebrew writer (5:12), “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God.” How does the body mature? Again the key is *all* members.

The maturing of the body of Christ can only come through the maturing of its individual members. Throughout the New Testament the church is often addressed as a group. But when specific teachings are given, a “representative singular” is often chosen (singular “you”) to emphasize the fact that every member must accept the teaching in order for it to be manifested in the body as a whole.

We will begin to grow toward spiritual maturity only when we accept the responsibility to make sure every member is becoming more Christ-like every day. The standard set for the body is none other than to be mature as Christ was mature; “to the measure of the standard which belongs to the fullness of Christ.”

As individuals we will fail to reach that standard, but as a corporate body, we should be able to come much closer to manifesting the complete embodiment of Christ. This is what God expects His church to do! This is our goal. The corporate Christ (the church) cannot be content to fall short of the perfection of the personal Christ.

What a lofty goal we have been given! How different it is from the common church goal of maintaining a worship schedule. The church is to be a dynamic force that changes the world — but it will be such only when all saints are equipped to grow as a body toward the image of Christ.

What are our ambitions as a church in the world today? We must work toward the image presented in these verses. It is the image of a church whose various parts are all growing together in unity and strength, each contributing to the “building up” of the body to the glory of Christ.

It would be very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve this through a “one-man” pulpit preacher leadership. It requires the complete energies of the church to be spent toward preparing each member to work to his full spiritual potential within the mature body. The body then will work in true unity because each member knows how desperately he needs the head, who is the Savior.

## Combating Disease (Ephesians 4:14)

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As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by the waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming.

Some of the most tragic diseases are those that inhibit normal growth. We have all seen individuals affected by the devastating effects of polio. It is ironic that through our efforts to keep spiritual disease (false teaching) out of the church, we have inflicted the body with a type of “spiritual polio.”

One of the arguments used to defend the “one-preacher” system is that it guards against false doctrine. The preacher is the individual who has been schooled in Greek and knows how to interpret Scripture properly. From the pulpit he carefully spoon-feeds the meaning of Scripture to the members. Elders are very cautious about who speaks from the pulpit, lest the congregation be led astray.

This strategy used to combat false doctrine has caused much of the body of Christ to die or become ineffective. Not long ago, I spoke with a visiting elder who made it clear he did not approve of many men preaching from the pulpit, as is the case where I worship. In fact, he explained that anyone teaching in any capacity in “his” congregation had to agree with the eldership concerning a list of thirty-some positions they held.

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Some were important, others were not. He admitted some were just opinions, but felt the elders had the authority to insist on conformity from those under their “rule.”

He believed it was much safer for only one individual to preach. The elders determined the congregation’s needs and the preacher, under their direct guidance, responded by firing topical sermon after topical sermon, usually defending the positions of the eldership. Unfortunately, seldom does this type of sermon deal with Christian principles that equip members to be more Christ-like. They are “position” sermons, using — or abusing — countless references that prove the elders’ opinions are Scripture-based.

What need is there to grow in such a setting? Instead of being challenged and utilized, everything is taken care of for you. You don’t even have to discern between right and wrong; all is determined for you. The only thing one needs to do to be considered faithful is come for a spoon-feeding two or three time a week.

Such a congregation cannot grow spiritually or numerically. Attendance might increase because the preacher is a talented speaker, but there will be no significant growth. Furthermore, the members remain spiritual babies. There will most likely be constant backbiting, gossiping, and jealousy among the members. Spiritual immaturity is evident.

Paul tells us that if we will equip each member with the full knowledge of the Son of God and use each member’s talents to build the body up, we will have true unity. The church will be mature and will be a visible embodiment of Christ. And the result will be that we no longer be spiritual children!

As the members are utilized, they grow in knowledge and maturity. It is the process Paul so beautifully describes in Colossians 1:9-12:

For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

The more one is used in the body, the greater his knowledge of God will be. He grows in his understanding of how to please God in every respect. He attains steadfastness and spiritual maturity. But where members are not utilized and are not equipped, they remain infants.

It is no surprise to me that many preachers are not active in evangelism. If your boss insisted you baby-sit five hundred infants, would you go out and try to find more? I know of preachers who spend more of their time trying to settle disputes between members than anything else. What possibility is there to manifest the love of Christ to the world when we have not yet learned to love one another? The body cannot grow until we strive for the maturity of each part.

We cannot be spiritual infants (unless we are newly born) and be pleasing to God. We must grow toward maturity. This is not an option (Heb. 12:14). God demands spiritual growth and maturity. Without it, He cannot use us to His glory.

What is spiritual infancy? Paul gives us a descriptive definition in his first letter to the Corinthians (3:1,2):



And I brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of the flesh, as to babes in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly and are you not walking like mere men?

Spiritual infancy is manifested whenever there is inter-congregational strife. When Christians act just like those in the world and have the same interpersonal relationship problems, they are still spiritual babies.

The Hebrew (5:14) writer gives us another identifying mark of spiritual infancy; on his own, the infant Christian is not able to discern between good and evil. So he still needs milk and cannot grow without it. He has to be bottle-fed. As one matures, he learn to feed himself.

The church will be subject to every problem the world faces as long as the majority of our members are spiritually immature. Until we equip them to make their own decisions based on a thorough understanding of the Scriptures, we will be subject to apostasy from every side.

I have seen the danger of perpetual spiritual infancy on the mission field. My family and I planted and worked with a congregation in Italy for six years. Many missionaries or evangelists I knew took on the “watch-dog” mentality. They fiercely guarded their “flock.” They handled any doctrinal problem, did all the teaching, and for years all seemed to go well.

But then the time came for the missionary to go home. The flock was unprotected against the wolves that soon arrived on the scene. Most of the good work done by the faithful preachers was destroyed in just a few years.

We are not doing our brother and sisters any favors by fighting their doctrinal battles for them. Christians, all Christians, must be able to discern right from wrong on the basis of Scriptural principles. Each should be a teacher — that is, able to teach another individual the Gospel message. Each must have his faith firmly ground in the truth.

David Chadwell, in his excellent study *Beware of the Leaven of the Pharisees*, profoundly explores some of the same problems with which I am struggling. When we preach “positions” in the place of “principles”, we fall prey to a modern-day Phariseeism. This is David’s proposed solution (p. 109):

The key is enlightened, understanding individuals. These individuals will substitute understanding for condemnation, listening for confrontation, and respect for arrogance disguised as zeal. These individuals will be believers rather than conformists who mistake conformity for faith.

Amen! I would make David Chadwell’s book required reading for the church if I could. It is a painful study, for it convicts us all of wrong attitudes we hold concerning truth. But it is needed discipline.

To turn the present situation around, we must develop leaders who will give themselves totally to making every member spiritually enlightened individuals. Then and only then will we cease being children who spiritually are like rudderless boats. They weave, bob, and swirl around in the waves with no direction or purpose. And they fall prey to the first “wind of doctrine” that blows their way.

How do we combat the spiritual disease of false doctrine? How can we have a body that is not prey to unsound teaching? We must give every part of the body the powerful antidote to all spiritual diseases — maturity based on the standard of Christ. Spiritual maturity brings with it the capacity to confront

*A Biblical Pattern for Church Growth*

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all forms of teaching. It accepts that which is truth and rejects that which is false.

## The Image of the Son (Ephesians 4:15)

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...Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ.

In contrast to the spiritually immature, who are like small rudderless boats aimlessly weaving and bobbing in the waves, the mature Christian is depicted as one with a strong sense of direction — he “speaks the truth in love.” Here Paul points out the two most important visible characteristics of the mature Christian’s life.

The first is he “speaks the truth” (*aletheuo*). The Greek word is not easily translated. More is implied than simply speaking the truth of God’s word. “Truthing it” might be the best way to express the full meaning of the word. It is not enough to just speak the truth, it must be an integral part of one’s daily life. The mature Christian “truths it” in everything he does. He is so utterly genuine and sincere in his belief in the superiority of the way of life taught by Jesus Christ that he literally lives the truth.

The other visible characteristic of a mature Christian is that his “truthing it” is always done in the context of genuine love. One who is truly Christian must be motivated by love in everything he does. This love (*agape*) is that which seeks to give what others need most. This is the characteristic by which the world will identify us as disciples of Christ.

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The complete description of a mature Christian's life is living the truth in love. There must be a balance of these two characteristics. Too often we overemphasize truth at the expense of love. We develop a list of laws that must be followed if one is to call himself a Christian. We attack those who disagree with us. If the truth were spoken in love, we would react in a different way. Note the attitude Peter urges us to have in 1 Peter 3:15:

But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence.

For the truth to be truth, it must be spoken and lived in love. I am afraid that at times we make truth ugly and burdensome because we separate it from love.

The apostle Paul serves as a wonderful example of the attitude we should have when presenting the Gospel, even to hostile audiences. Consider his situation in Athens recorded in Acts 17. He was openly ridiculed and jeered in the marketplace for his teaching. He was taken before the Areopagus, most likely to be made a spectacle of. The Scriptures tell us he deeply provoked at the rampant idolatry of the city. If there was ever an appropriate time for a "hell-fire and brimstone" sermon, this was it. Yet, because Paul was motivated by love for the souls of all, he began with a very positive statement concerning the Athenian religious climate. His message definitely and clearly demonstrated the inappropriateness and fallacy of worshiping idols. But his message dealt with the uncomprehensible greatness of God, of whom no likeness could be made from earthly materials. Paul was more interested in winning souls than in winning arguments. Read his comments in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. Paul was so moved he

absolutely had to preach the Gospel. But because he was primarily motivated by the love of Christ, he did everything possible to present the truth in such a way that one would obey it.

Another problem in this respect is caused by those who reject the absolute content of truth in the name of love. Doctrine is always secondary to love, which they insist covers any “misunderstanding or misapplication” of biblical teaching. This attitude actually diminishes the meaning of the death of Christ. Because of the unfathomable love of God and His Only Son, our unpayable debt of sin was forgiven. This unbelievable sacrifice was God’s plan from before the beginning of creation (Eph 1:4). It is the ultimate manifestation of love (1 John 3:16).

In dying for us, Jesus Christ established the only way to God through Him. This new way is what we find in following the teachings or doctrines of the New Testament. To downplay the importance of doctrine is ultimately to reject the sacrifice of our Lord.

1 John presents a beautiful balance of truth and love. John declares that “God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1:5). Later, he tells us “God is love” (4:8). How are His perfectness and love brought together? Through Jesus Christ (see John 1:17), who as the propitiation for us, removes the wrath of God toward our sinfulness (1 John 4:10). Do we dare think for one moment there is another way it could be done? Does not the prayer of Jesus in the garden convince us that His blood is our only hope for forgiveness? Do we not understand that the love of God is found in His commandments? John states it clearly (1 John 5:3), “for this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments, and His commandments are not burdensome.”

God has given us the content of truth to lead us to Christ so that He might save us from our sins. Then as a continued expression of His love, He has given us the path to abundant life through the observance of His commands. He created us, He knows what we need to enjoy an abundant spiritual life in Christ Jesus.

When we deny the importance of following the examples and teachings of the New Testament, we are manifesting a basic mistrust in the wisdom of God. God revealed His will in love, we accept it and live it in love.

John makes it clear that truth is never to be disassociated from love, for the commands of God are the expression of His love. Ultimately, we not only reject God's wisdom when we downplay the importance of adherence to doctrine, we reject His love. On the other hand, those who reject love in favor of a strict observance of a list of commands in order to be justified before God have understood nothing of His love and grace. The balance of love and truth is one of the most important aspects of a mature Christian's understanding of God's will.

In this one verse (Eph 4:15) Paul has identified the unsurpassable evangelistic methodology. Leaders, when we accept the responsibility to help every member mature in Christ so that all are consistently "truthing it" in love, the church cannot help but grow!

As Christians strive toward the standard of Christ in every aspect of their lives, evangelism is removed from the "program" arena; it becomes a part of everyone's daily life. Then and only then will the church, represented by every one of its members, become a dynamic force in the community.

"Living and speaking the truth in love" is just another way of saying "living like Christ." That is what Paul says in the

latter part of this verse, “we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ.” The challenge of Christianity is that we should all be able to say with Paul, “Be imitators of me as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1).

This challenge is not given to leaders alone. It is the standard by which we all must live in Christ. If we are not being adequately stimulated and equipped to so live, the church is failing in its purpose and mission.

Someone might ask, “What do you mean by mission? I thought you said the proclamation of the Gospel was the mission of the church.” That is correct. But we must understand that our evangelistic responsibility is not satisfied because the church we attend supports a missionary. We must teach against the mentality of delegating our Christian responsibilities to “paid workers” when we drop our offering into the basket.

Certainly churches are to support missionaries. In fact, we need to do much more in this area than we are presently doing. But if tomorrow could send ten new families to every nation in the world, it still would not take away from our individual responsibility to teach those we come in contact with every day! The evangelistic mission is not fulfilled by supporting a missionary across the seas. When we understand the church’s responsibility to prepare every member to evangelize those they come in contact with daily — then we will begin to see real growth, spiritually and numerically.

We often stress church attendance without really giving a reason except that is what God expects us to do. If we would see the assembly as a time to celebrate our relationship with the Lord and worship Him, and as a time to edify one another to

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go out and live more like Christ in the coming week — attendance would not be a problem.

We cite Hebrews 10:25 as the reason for attendance, without studying the context. What a sermon it is for all of us! The Hebrew writer explains the wonder of our new relationship with God because of Christ. As a result, we should draw near to God and live pure lives, stimulating one another to active goodness or Christ-likeness! This is why we must not forsake the assembly — we need to be encouraged and stimulated into being more like Christ.

The church is a wonderful influence on the community when it is striving to grow up in all aspects into the image of the Son of God. The beauty and wisdom of God's plan for the church becomes evident. God chose it as the vehicle to demonstrate His "manifold wisdom" (Eph 3:10). When the church functions according to its purpose, that is exactly what it does best!

Christ ascended above the heavens that He might fill all things. No longer spatially limited, He comes alive in every community where the body of Christ meets. As individual Christians, we beg for His help and strength to be more like Him every day. And when we come together — His image comes alive! We see how He lives in the hearts of our brothers and sisters, and as a result we become more like our Lord.

The congregation with which we worship at the time of this writing is very special. I honestly cannot wait until Sunday! I anticipate with eagerness joining our wonderful brethren in worship. I have no trouble visualizing Jesus and His presence, because I see Him in their lives. They encourage me, edify me, and strengthen me.

We gather around His table and commune together with Him, earnestly praying that we will all do better in manifesting a risen Lord with our lives in the coming week. We plead for the strength and wisdom to speak and live the truth in love in a better way.

You ought to hear us sing! I have yet to talk to a visitor following worship that has not mentioned the evident enthusiasm in our singing of praises to God. I am convinced several have been converted because they were first impressed with the sincerity and joy expressed in our worship services.

Evangelism will never be exciting as long as it is just another program of the church. Until it becomes the heart-felt desire of mature, Christ-like individuals, it will continue to fluctuate as new ideas are tried, flourish, and die out.

When God chose in the fullness of time to reveal His plan of salvation, His Word became flesh and dwelled among us. Now we know the way.

If we are going to grow and truly expand the borders of the kingdom of God, the Word must come alive again — in every one of us. The church exists to equip, encourage, and strengthen us. Its real mission is enacted when the final “amen” of our worship is spoken, and we spread out into the world of darkness with our re-energized Christian lights! Every member “speaks the truth and lives the truth in love.” The image of the Son glows, and people of the world see that light shining. Some will be curse us and belittle us, for the light exposes their sinfulness (Eph 5:11). Others will glorify our Father in heaven (Matt 5:16) and will turn to Him.

A healthy, mature body — a maturity manifested through the life of every member — cannot help but grow. We must come to terms with the fact that growth is not a “program” of

the church. It is an identifying characteristic of the living body of Christ Jesus.

## **IV. Growth: Guaranteed!**

### **Every Working Part (Ephesians 4:16)**

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Christ [the head]... from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

I have attended numerous personal work workshops where certain evangelistic methods were proposed with guaranteed numerical results. We need to be careful not to imply that our methods will cause growth. We can only plant the seed of the Word of God in people's hearts and then water the soil (provide an environment conducive to growth).

The Scriptures tell us God alone causes the growth of the seed (1 Cor. 3:6). It is useful to explore new methods in order to find the best way to plant the seed, and we need to study how to better provide an environment conducive to healthy growth. But we must acknowledge that God does the rest.

The only way to have guaranteed results in church growth is to do things God's way. I am convinced the church that equips every member to be active evangelists in their everyday life will grow. How can I be so certain? God promises it through the writings of Paul.

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Verse 16 tells us of a process that “will cause the growth of the body for the building up of itself.” It serves a summary of all we have studied. It also introduces a new thought of great importance to church growth. We, as brothers and sisters in Christ, desperately need one another. There is no such thing as an unimportant member in the body of Christ.

In the first phrase of the verse, Paul states clearly that each part is totally and equally under the control of the head. The human body serves as an excellent example of the illustration. Thankfully, we only have one brain. Can you imagine the confusion that would result if each limb or organ had a separate brain?

The body functions in unity because all messages come from one source. The brain is in total control of the body. It is sad to see those who suffer with nerve damage which impedes the arrival of messages from the brain. The parts of the body cut off from the control center are useless.

And so it is with the church. There is only one head, Jesus Christ. All in the body are under His complete control. However, while Christ provides all the direction and guidance for the body, He chooses to supply the needed nourishment through another source. As the brain controls the body but does not provides nourishment, so Christ controls the church but uses a supplementary source to give spiritual food to His body.

We cannot fully know Christ without our brethren. We are fitted and held together by the supply given by Christ to each member (every joint). “That which every joint supplies” does not originate from the individual members. It comes from Christ living in them. He is the supply source, and He distributes nourishment through every member.

“Every joint” might be translated “every contact”, indicating that each Christian is part of the vital system that provides nourishment to the body! We cannot be properly fortified and strengthened without the spiritual nourishment that each and every member provides.

This is another one of the dangers of the “one-man” pulpit system. With it we are nourished time and time again through the same member. All spiritual food is given from his understanding of the Scriptures. And many times he is spiritually starving because he continually provides nourishment but is seldom allowed to dine at the feet of another teacher.

Where I am worshiping at the time of this writing, eighteen men take turns presenting sermons. Because they preach only once every three months, they have time to prepare wonderful, heart-felt messages. I have not yet failed to be strengthened by one of their lessons.

If I have my choice, I would present sermons three or four times every Sunday! I love to share the Word of God with my brethren. But I believe the body is better strengthened by nourishment provided by many members rather than just one.

As has been previously discussed, one might object to the concept of Christian interdependency by insisting Paul is speaking of the spiritual gifts such as prophecy. Only when they all spoke what had been revealed to them could they come to a full understanding of God’s will. But Paul is not teaching about the prophets — he is referring to every member of the body. No matter what their gift, they contributed to the life blood of the church.

The principle of our dependence on one another for nourishment remains an essential teaching for us. We have ignored it for too long. Just look through the New Testament

and study the many “one another” passages. Were they, too, only referring to the time of charismatic gifts? With or without gifts, the principle of interdependence must be understood and utilized if we want the church to grow.

The body cannot be fortified as it should be until every member is equipped to do his part in allowing the nourishment he receives from Christ to benefit the body! The hand receives no blood unless it first passes through the arm. Each of us fits in a special place in the body, and each supplies an essential link of nourishment without which the church cannot grow as it should. Again, the supply of nourishment is from the Lord — He is the only source — but it is given through each member.

Paul continues in the verse by proclaiming that for this interdependence to supply what the body needs, each part must function properly. For each part to function properly, it must be equipped to do its job.

In the past I have coached track and field. I am amazed at the skill of high-jumpers and pole-vaulters. They are able to hurl their bodies into the air, twist and bend just at the right moments, and clear a bar set at unbelievable heights. They spend hours training their bodies to move just in the right way. It only takes one part to brush the bar, and all is lost.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to see a group of people working together for the Lord in a similar way? It can only happen when we learn two things. First, Christ is the only source of Truth, which is given to us through Scripture. Secondly, we must depend on each other, acknowledge our need for one another and learn from each other. This can only happen when each part is developed to maturity. If the church is full of individuals who have nothing to share about the teachings of Christ in their lives, the leadership has tragically failed in its task.

One of the real thrills in my life has been learning of Jesus from another Christian's understanding. We each have different perspectives. When we can openly discuss the word of God together, we gain new insights into the wisdom of God. We nourish one another. We love one another. We help one another. We grow, numerically and spiritually. Every joint of the body helps make Christ come alive.

Far too often the church is like a tool box with one screw driver and all kinds and sizes of screws. You have one tool that selects the appropriate fastener. The screw- driver slowly turns the screw, while everyone else just waits to be used. I guess that's fine if all one needs to do is join something together. But such a tool box is really limited in what it can accomplish, even in the hands of a skilled carpenter.

The Lord wants His church to be like one of those Sears complete tool kits — you know, the kind that when spread out takes up a whole page in the catalog. There is a specialized tool for every possible job. That is the way God created us.

We cannot blame God for the ineffectiveness of the church in the world today. He has supplied the pattern, He has given us the leaders. We just have not used anywhere near all the specialized tools He has given us.

Have you ever tried to drive a screw with a pair of scissors? You eventually get the job done, but it is not very effective. I think sometimes we cause God to be in a similar situation. We refuse to be the specialized tool He has made us to be. We tell Him what we want to do. Oh, how the church would grow if each and every one of us would let God be the potter. If we would give ourselves to being the special tools, fully using the talents given by God — just think what the carpenter from Nazareth could build.



Only when we recognize and utilize the wonderful diversity within the body and prepare each to function to his best potential will the body “build itself up in love.” We will be effective in evangelism only when the Gospel message burns in the hearts of every member, so that he will be motivated to use his special place in life to make Christ come alive to those he knows and comes in contact with daily.

Guaranteed growth? It will happen when we accept the pattern that causes the church to work as a body, with each part being of equal importance. When we learn to work only for the glory of Christ and to depend on one another for teaching, support, and strength — the body will grow.

Have you ever smashed a finger or hand in a door? Have you noticed the reaction of the body? Instantaneous! Every part works to heal the hurt of one small member. No committee meetings are held, no accusations are made such as “he shouldn’t have been there.” The body just reacts to heal the hurt. When the church reacts in this way to the hurt of each and every member, it is functioning as Christ desires. It really is under His control. It is *His* body.

Notice one more thing about this wonderful passage. All of this equipping and growing and attaining and maturing are all in one kind of environment — love.

I was given a plant to take to college with me by a sister in the congregation where I grew up. I took special care in watering it regularly. I even fed it plant food. But alas, after a few days it looked ready to return to the soil from whence it came. I called a friend who knew about plants and he asked if I was misting it. I didn’t even know what he meant! After listening to his instructions, I learned to mist my plant, and it recovered. Before I learned to mist it, I fed it the right amount

of water and sunshine, I just hadn't provided the correct environment for growth.

So it is with the church. If we share all the knowledge we have of the Lord and build the self-esteem of each member, unless we do it in love, growth will not occur.

Love is the only environment in which the church can grow. With all the sunshine you could ask for, you can't grow a tree on the sunny side of the moon. There is no oxygen or water. No matter how right the teaching, if love is not all around you, the church will not grow.

What kind of love do we need to provide an environment conducive to growth? An all encompassing love: God's love for humankind; Christ's love for God and His church; our love for God and Christ; our love for one another; our love for the lost; our love for the Truth.

## A Biblical Pattern for Church Growth

We'll never understand the fullness of God's love. His wonderful love is abundantly evident in the beauty of His creation. But how could He love us enough to create us knowing He would have to send His Son to die for our sins? Paul tells us that if we choose to give our lives to Christ in obedience, we were chosen in Him before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4)! God provided a way of salvation for us before the creation. I will never be able to comprehend the depth of God's love.

My sense of inexpressible gratitude causes me to insatiably search the pages of God's Word because I desperately want to do His will. It is the only way I can express my love for my Father and His Son. This is the spirit with which I have written this book.

Brethren, I am deeply disturbed by the present state of congregations that are slowly dying. I have spoken with many individuals who have attended worship for years in stagnant congregations. They tell me the pulpit is used to point out the sins of particular issues in the brotherhood that have absolutely no bearing on them as a congregation. The members come away from church assemblies in worse spiritual condition than when they went. In such cases, something is very wrong.

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On the other hand, I am excited about the congregations today that are growing! They are reaching out into the communities around them in new and innovative ways and are sharing the love of Jesus daily!

What is the difference between the two situations? Almost without exception, it is the attitude of the leaders. The congregations that grow work diligently at strengthening each and every member in their knowledge of Jesus Christ. And they utilize them all to send the Gospel out to the dying world around them!

For far too long we have accepted as an inescapable norm the 80/20, or more accurately, the 90/10 model. That is, 90% of the work of the church is done by 10% of the members. The other 90% are "attenders." They drop a few dollars in the plate once a week. That's about the extent of their "church work."

Is this the church that Jesus purchased with His blood? Is this the church with which God intends to take the message of His Son to the world? Brethren, we cannot sit idly and tolerate such a situation. If our desire is to glorify God, then let's wake up the mighty army of God! He is not pleased and is certainly not glorified by stagnant churches that "come alive" only when the members file into a building for what they perceive as their "duty" of worship.

Worship to God is only acceptable when it is something in which we are involved all the time. I realize there is a time to be set aside for the church to assemble and worship together. But if that group is not made up of people who have offered their lives to God as living sacrifices throughout the week, that worship is meaningless to God (Rom. 12:1,2; cf Isaiah 1).

The Lord knows my heart. He knows that my greatest dream and prayer is to help spark a tremendous evangelistic

revival in the church. But it can only be done by the active involvement of every member of the body. The plea to restore New Testament Christianity is right! But if we don't restore the mission of the church by placing it in the hearts of every member, we have fallen short of our goal by a wide margin. For if we have not restored the church to the point that we are achieving its purpose, we have done nothing at all for God or the world. We are just another worship society.

It is interesting to note how much liberty the Lord has given us in the organization and function of the church. Clearly, each congregation is to be autonomous. We are to have qualified elders shepherding the flock. Qualified deacons are to assist the elders. We are to support evangelists who proclaim the Word to the lost. Beyond that, not a whole lot more organizational information is given.

We are not told which brother is to preside at the Lord's table or what order worship should follow. We have examples and teachings on general acts of worship, but God chose not to give specifics. His wisdom in so doing is seen in the fact that Christian worship can be adapted to every society in the world. There is no ceremonial clothing, no particular setting. Our Lord can be worshiped in an acceptable way by any people in any place!

It is significant to note, however, that much specific information is given in Scripture on what the church is to accomplish. It is to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ to a lost world, openly manifesting the manifold wisdom of God. The church is to edify its members so that each can actively teach those they meet day to day. If these objectives are not primary concerns of a congregation, it needs to take a serious spiritual inventory. It is not accomplishing its reason for being.

I beg you to consider carefully whether our present pattern of “pulpit-preachers” is meeting the objectives God has set for us. Are we, the church achieving God’s purpose? If not, why not?

The time has come for us to ask ourselves if we have true evangelists, a leadership position that is authorized by God. Or do we have a pastorate system borrowed from denominational religion, a system that turns most of the church into laity? Does our present leadership accomplish its God-given responsibility to produce an “every member” ministry to the world?

I anticipate leaving the congregation where I am presently serving as an evangelist within a couple of years. With the Lord’s abundant blessings, my family and I planted this congregation less than three years ago. It has outgrown its need for me. The congregation has begun to discuss what they want to do concerning a full-time worker when I leave. The discussions are exciting!

One fine brother, Ed Broderhausen (I give you his name so I won’t take credit for the idea!) suggested that since the church is to equip every member, we ought to have a full-time education coordinator. Perhaps a full-time elder would fill the role. Ed wants to see us co-ordinate every aspect of our teaching within the congregation so that every member is prepared to be an active evangelist. It seems to me that one spending his time in this way would be a much greater benefit to a congregation than one who feeds the flock for an hour or so per week.

Christ is at the right hand of God. But His body is to be on this earth — living, dynamic, imitating Him in every way. As each member of the body begins to reflect His attributes, His attitudes, His love, His mercy, and His willingness to serve, the world will see Jesus Christ come alive once again!

It takes all of us in the mighty army of God accepting our responsibilities of ministry. If we choose to be leaders, then I pray we will accept the God-given task to be equippers.

The biblical pattern for church growth is very simple. Prepare every member to use his special talents to the full service of the Lord. Let us turn our wonderful evangelists loose so they can boldly proclaim the Word where it is needed. Let us use the knowledge and wisdom of our godly elders to instruct us concerning the Will of our heavenly Father. Let us turn our times of congregational worship into periods of edification and rejoicing! Then attendance will cease to be a “Christian responsibility” and will be transformed into something we will eagerly anticipate for the entire week!

Only when we recognize the value of each member in the body and work toward developing their full potential in His service will the church truly come alive. You can’t revitalize a church by hiring a great orator. It might seem to work for a while, but the excitement will fade. Besides, high attendance numbers doesn’t determine how active a church is. The vital question? “Is this congregation truly growing by converting lost souls to Jesus?”

The church will come alive and will be a dynamic force that will bring lost souls to the Lord when we put Jesus Christ into the heart of each member. Elders, preachers, deacons — this is our task.

Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:20,21)

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