

Growing Up Godly

Ephesians 4:14-16 September 20, 2023

Ephesians 4:14-16 - ¹⁴Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into him who is the head—Christ. ¹⁶From him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building itself up in love by the proper working of each individual part.

Grow up! Usually, those words, come in angry or cynical tones. J.M. Barrie called growing up a “barbarous business, full of inconvenience and pimples.” If you’re at least my age you remember the happy song: “I don’t wanna grow up, ‘cuz maybe if I did, I couldn’t be a Toys-R-Us kid.”

In some ways, it seems the modern Church has decided to not grow up. The pervading style and substance of the wider Church culture is elementary, even frivolous at times - desperately youthful.

But God’s plan for us doesn’t stop at spiritual childhood. Paul says that we *must* grow into spiritual adulthood - we must advance to maturity, leaving childishness behind. It is essential for your spiritual safety and success. But also, the Lord tells us through His servant Paul that your maturity is vital not only for *you*, but for the person sitting *next* to you.

A church is healthy when individual members are growing *together* in love, truth, and application of their gifts. As they do, their lives become infused and intertwined in such a way that they strengthen and support one another and become together what a Christian cannot be alone.

Ephesians 4:14 - ¹⁴Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit.

Just above this verse, Paul explained how, in the Church, God provides what we need to grow in our faith and knowledge of Jesus Christ and be equipped for the work of ministry.

As we apprehend what the Lord wants to do and present ourselves in cooperation, we mature. That’s how it works for every Christian. Paul includes himself here. “Then we will no longer be little children.” He didn’t class himself differently than the rest of us.

Now, you might raise your hand and say, “Aren’t we *supposed* to be like children? Didn’t Jesus say, ‘whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.’?” He did.¹

¹ Luke 18:17

Ray Stedman reminds us that there is a difference between being *childish* and *childlike*.² John Stott clarifies the difference. We need to be *like* children in humility and innocence but *not* in ignorance and instability.³

It's childish ignorance and instability that Paul has in mind. It's dangerous for us to stay spiritually childish - to be spiritually ignorant and unstable and gullible - because of the wind and the waves and the adversaries we face.

Paul begins with a picture of a ship at sea. The voyage is hard and long. In life, we sail into the unknown, trusting the heading and equipment our Father supplies. But there are troubles that slam against us on the way. If we're not prepared for them, if we're not spiritually strong and resilient, we'll be blown off course. The term Paul uses for blown around means to be spun like a top.⁴

At our extended family gatherings, we have a little one year old niece. She recently started walking. So now, she likes to traverse the living room. But it's not terribly safe for her. We've got to cover up the corners of furniture with our hands. The smallest things will send her tumbling down. A sock on the rug or, sometimes, even someone just walking by her. When it's time bring out the birthday cake with flickering candles, we don't hand it to our niece to carry. It would be a disaster.

There are regular waves in life and *rogue* waves that come out of nowhere. We can't avoid them, so we need to be ready for them. In Disney's *Moana*, you may recall that Moana first tried to head out beyond the reef in her *little* boat. It wasn't strong enough and she was immediately capsized. She needed a stronger ship that could handle the voyage.

God's desire is that we grow in strength and capacity and equipment. That we be men and women who are sea-worthy and ready for the crossing, ready to be laden with spiritual freight.

After the waves, Paul warns us of winds of teaching. Throughout Church history there has been wind after wind of false teaching. The early Church had to grapple with the blowing of Gnosticism and the teachings of the Nicolaitans. There were those who demanded all Christians follow the Mosaic law. There have been many other false teachings that sweep in and blow saints off course.

It's not just out-and-out false teachings that can cause a problem. Sometimes there are "gusts of doctrine"⁵ that hit the Church. Sometimes you can identify those by what books are super popular among Christians. In some cases, Believers can be blown around by a hyper-focus on some specific doctrine and become unbalanced in their walk with the Lord.

At those family gatherings I mentioned, we also have a four year old nephew named Charlie. I *love* talking to Charlie because he will believe anything I say. He's gets excited about the birthday cake coming out and I tell him it's a *broccoli* cake. I see the concern wash over his face. Right now I'm

² Ray Stedman *On Growing Up (Ephesians 4:13-16)*

³ John Stott *The Message Of Ephesians*

⁴ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary Volume 11: Ephesians Through Philemon*

⁵ Markus Barth *Ephesians 4-6: Introduction, Translation, And Commentary*

trying to convince Charlie that his elementary school needs to develop a call for their mascot. They're the *Owls*, so I keep talking to him about how he needs to tell his teacher that they should have the students call out, "*Mighty Owls! HOO HOO!*"

On the spiritual level, these things can be very serious. One commentator notes, "*There are ideas and modes of life [that lead] to shipwreck.*"⁶ Paul certainly thought so. *And* there are adversaries actively trying to take advantage of people. Cunning, cheating, deceivers. Paul had warned the Ephesian elders to be on guard against these types in Acts 20, and it seems they took it to heart.

Decades later, when Jesus wrote *another* letter to this church, He said, "You guys have done a *great* job testing those who claim to be apostles and are not."

False doctrine stunts growth.⁷ And we cannot afford to be stunted. Waves and wars are coming. Later in Ephesians Paul is going to talk to us about putting on armor and joining the fight against evil forces in the heavens. Toddlers can't wear armor or swing a sword. Remember that bleak moment in *The Two Towers* where they have to outfit the young boys for the fight against the terrible armies of darkness? Paul says, "We need to leave spiritual childhood behind." We need to grow up.

Of course, you can't *make* yourself grow. *God* is the One Who will accomplish this work, but we submit to it. We present ourselves for it. We participate in it. How? Here's some shoe leather for us:

Ephesians 4:15 - ¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into him who is the head—Christ.

Paul says, "*Let us grow.*" It's about *being* more than *doing*. There *are* things to do, but the message of Ephesians is primarily about what God has done, is doing, and is still going to do in our lives, not what we have to do to be "good Christians." To the Philippians, Paul would write, "Let the mind of Christ be in you." *Let it happen.* Don't resist the work of the Spirit. Don't distract yourself from God's leading and prompting. Don't drift toward temptations or traps along the way.

John Mackay writes, "*The secret of Christian thought and life consists in the constant maintenance of closeness to Jesus Christ.*"⁸ If we are close to Jesus, then He is able to do all these things He wants to do. *He* grows us. *He* equips us. *He* directs and sends us. *He* roots us. *He* assigns us. It all happens as we walk with Him. As we align our attitudes and actions and articulations with Christ, He grows us. Not the Christ of our own imagination, but the Christ revealed in the Living Word of God. Jesus said He came in the volume of the Book.⁹

⁶ Thomas Neufeld *Ephesians*

⁷ *The NET Bible First Edition Notes*

⁸ John A. Mackay *God's Order: The Ephesian Letter And This Present Time*

⁹ Hebrews 10:7

Paul does give a practical directive for us to cooperate with the Lord. He says, “speaking the truth in love.” Scholars tell us the words literally say, “Truthing in love, let us grow...”¹⁰ It involves verbal testimony, but it also means that we *cherish* the truth,¹¹ dealing truly,¹² and *incarnating* truth.¹³ Think of how Jesus is God Incarnate. Here we’re called to a life of *truth* incarnate. God’s truth.

If the term didn’t have so much baggage, we could say we are “truthers.” We live it out. We speak it. We cherish it. But, notice here: God’s truth is never to be used as a cudgel to attack people. Think of every political YouTube video whose title is “Liberal college student *DESTROYED*.” Or, “watch this person get *WRECKED* for their beliefs.” That approach isn’t helpful and it isn’t Godly. It feels good to our sinful hearts - that’s why our culture is saturated with hatred and disputes and altercations. Everyone wants to *destroy* everyone else. But, as one author notes, that kind of adversarial truth flatters our own pride. It’s a truth gone mad.¹⁴ It does not unite, it divides. It does not build up, it tears down. It does not include, it excludes. Our culture *loves* that approach to truth.

Christians are called to truth *in agape*. As far as God is concerned, you cannot separate one from the other. Gospel truth is always motivated by and accomplished in love- a love that always seeks the benefit of others.¹⁵

A growing Christian, a believer who is walking with the Lord and having the Lord develop all the strength and joy and spiritual power that Paul has been talking about, *that* Christian will be someone who loves the truth and cherishes it. They will defend the truth and verbalize it to others. But their *truthing* will always be done in love.

We live in a time where the truth is constantly under attack. Even *basic* truths of reality are being besieged. How should we respond? How can we really *truth in love* when the attacks are so vile and so vicious? We must remember that our goal is not to *destroy* but to *deliver*. God delivered *you* from the lies of sin and Satan. He wants to deliver others *through* you, as you incarnate the truth of the Gospel, as you live it out in word and deed and attitude. That leads to deliverance.

As we grow, we develop into the image of Jesus Christ. Jesus does not need to change, *we* do. He is the perfect Son of God. He is the Head. It is the head where the person is found. The authority, the character, the distinctiveness is sourced from the head. And so, it is *we* who conform to Him.

Ephesians 4:16 - ¹⁶From him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building itself up in love by the proper working of each individual part.

¹⁰ Klyne Snodgrass *Ephesians*

¹¹ Barth

¹² F.F. Bruce *The Epistle To The Ephesians*

¹³ Darrell Bock *Ephesians: An Introduction And Commentary*

¹⁴ Mackay

¹⁵ Frank Thielman *Ephesians*

If you've ever watched a cooking competition show, at some point you've heard one of the chefs say, "It was made with love." Unfortunately while they were mixing in 'love' they forgot salt. But, as God makes us, He makes us with love.

We truth in love. We're built up in love. We are rooted and established in love. If love is lacking in our relationships with other believers or in our perspective on the unsaved, something has become disconnected in our walk with the Lord. We can't properly work if not energized by God's love.

Paul again highlights the importance of each other in the Church. This plan God is accomplishing has an individual aspect, but it simultaneously has an interconnected, communal aspect. God wants *you* to grow, but He also wants to use you to help *others* around you grow.

As we each develop and mature, it helps the rest of the Body of Christ function. Our maturity helps the Body be supported and gain strength and compensate for weaker members and endure difficulties. The goal of Christian maturity is building up, not tearing down. It's so much easier to tear down, but God wants to build us up together.

Have you heard someone talk about *deconstruction*? Most often it refers to evangelical Christians getting rid of the truths they used to believe, getting rid of the church, and then redefining their faith, often in an individualistic sense and, usually, changing the 'truths' they believe to be more in step with the world's culture. *Deconstruction* is not God's goal. Self-centered, isolated Christianity is not God's goal for you. His goal for me you and the person sitting next to you is unified growth, where individually *and* corporately we become more and more like the GodMan, Jesus Christ.

It's an ongoing process. In another letter, Paul said that he hadn't crossed the finish line yet. But knowing that this is the plan helps us stay mindful and careful. *Your* spiritual maturity isn't just about you. It's about the whole Body. Romans 12 tells us, "*we are individually members of one another.*"

But the good news is that the pressure isn't on us. The pressure is on the Lord. It's *His* work. It's *His* project. "From Him," Paul says, the Body is supplied with what it needs to grow. The term Paul uses refers to someone who pays the cost for a chorus at a public festival or to making provisions for an army or an expedition.¹⁶

We are Christ's Body left on earth as a chorus of praise, as an army of light, sent on an expedition to the corners of the earth proclaiming the truth, making disciples and becoming stronger as we go.

I have a part in this unfolding work. So do you. Together we are a new humanity,¹⁷ the "third race."¹⁸ It's time to grow up. God wants each of us and all of us to develop in our understanding, our knowledge of spiritual things, our stability in Christ, our power to endure the winds and the waves. He will do it if we'll let Him. And we'll *all* be the better as each is made better by His work.

¹⁶ Barth

¹⁷ Neufeld

¹⁸ R. Kent Hughes *Ephesians: The Mystery Of The Body Of Christ*