

Intro:

Last week we had a blessed afternoon service discussing something that is near to my heart concerning the local church: '*It's a Body*'.

We began with '*It's not your church*' and also looked at '*It's a Building*'.

The concept of the church as the body of Christ is extremely important. Of all the metaphors concerning the church in the New Testament, it is perhaps the one that best sums up the kind of relationships we are called to build in the local church. It also points to relationships we should be able to have with Christians outside our local church, from any place in the world.

Since this metaphor is so important, I want to spend some more time thinking about it with you today, but with a slightly different emphasis.

Here is our title:

It's a Growing Body

And our sub-title:

it grows into the head by the ministry of the parts

In other words, last week we were looking at the church as a whole, now we are going to look at the church *in process and in progress*.

Many people have negative attitudes towards the church because of certain experiences they had in the past. They perceive that they have been mistreated in some way by someone in some church and they equate that experience with everyone in every church.

And, quite frankly, they might not be wrong in their initial perception at least. They might well have been done wrong by someone in some church.

Even more than that, it is possible that some think they have been done wrong by an experience in our church, and they may not be entirely wrong.

Why is that?

Because the body of Christ, at any given moment in time, is a *growing body*, and with growth there are growing pains.

Some people become embittered when others don't match their expectations. It would be far better for them and for the church if instead they yielded up their expectations to God's Word and sought to be an asset in the spiritual growth of the church.

Lets read Eph 4.11-16

Proposition: The orientation of a local church ministry must be in cooperation with God's plan for the growth of the body.

I. The instruments of growth (11-12)

A. God's gifts to the body for growth (11)

1. The gifts are men in positions of authority [not women] {read bracket at end of point}
 - a. Apostles for the foundation of the church
 - b. Prophets for the instruction of the church
 - c. Evangelists for the increase of the church
 - d. Pastor/teachers for the shepherding of the church

{note bracket here} The nouns are all masculine nouns; the Biblical record only knows male leadership; the Biblical imperatives strictly forbid female authority in the body.

This is not to say that women do not exercise spiritual gifts in the church – they do. But they are not given to the church in the offices of the body.

2. The gifts are given for one primary function: growth [*i.e.*, equipping the saints, 12a]
 - a. Word means 'equipping, training, completing, ordering'
 - b. Achieved by pouring one life into another (2 Cor 13.9)

Apostle's lives were 'poured out' in the foundation of the church: 2 Cor 11.23-33.

The authority of the body's leadership is found in their self-sacrifice for the life of the body.

B. God's involvement of the saints in sustaining growth (12)

1. The equipping of the saints is 'unto...'
2. Unto the work of deaconing [*i.e.*, service]
3. Unto the building up of the body of Christ

The primary instruments of growth are the saints – trained saints, but the saints.

- Apostles and prophets train through the inspired word
- Evangelists and pastors train through the spoken word and lived example

The work and building are the function of the saints, men and women, trained, exercising spiritual gifts within the body, for the body.

II. The orientation of growth (13)

- A. The unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God [orthodoxy]
- B. To a mature man [orthopathy (according to some) – the self-controlled maturity of the Spirit-led life]
- C. To the measure of the stature [of] the fullness of Christ [ultimate goal, encompassing all in all: measuring up to Christ]

“God is not trying to produce successful Christian business people who can impress the world with their money and influence. He is not trying to fashion successful church leaders who can influence people with their organizational and administrative skills. Nor is He trying to fashion great orators who can move people with persuasive words. He wants to reproduce in His followers the character of His son—His love, His kindness, His compassion, His holiness, His humility, His unselfishness, His servant attitude, His willingness to suffer wrongfully, His ability to forgive, and so much more that characterized His life on earth.”¹

III. The ebb and flow of growth (14)

- A. The pattern of spiritual progress (see 1 Jn 2.12-14, 1 Cor 3.1, 1 Pt 2.2)
- B. The changing fads of humanity ‘every wind of doctrine’

¹ Richard L. Strauss, “Like Christ: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:13,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143:571 (July-September 1986):264, quoted in Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003). Eph 4:13.

C. The fickle and easily deceived human heart

The process of growth involves different people on different planes.

- The immature can frustrate the more mature. [And vicey versey.]
- Progress can be fitful, here a step forward, there a step back.

The process demands patient leadership and faithful work.

IV. The success of growth

A. A function of the love in the body of Christ

1. The love of Christ
2. The love of the saints

B. A union of the body in effectiveness: part joining with part, fitted and compacted together, making increase

“Confounded by Coffee”²

This is the headline of today's article on NASA's site. I get a regular daily e-mail from the site, mainly in the hope of illustrations for sermons. Today's article 'stirred' my thoughts!

The article explains some of the physics behind the difference between that hard vacuum packed brick of coffee that you buy at the store and the soft, pliable open bag you have once you break the seal. Each coffee grain is jagged and irregular in its shape. The pressure of the atmosphere squeezes in on all sides when the grounds are 'under seal'. Their irregular shapes interlock and resist being broken apart as long as the pressure is maintained. As soon as the vacuum seal is broken, the pressure has an outlet and the grains are free to tumble in whatever direction they like.

² http://science.nasa.gov/headlines/y2002/04dec_mgm2.htm?list768650

Isn't this like the pressure of accountability one finds in a local church? Christians who submit themselves to the authority of a local church find themselves 'interlocking', replicating the form and function that Christ intended. Those who will not submit to the accountability of the local church find themselves drifting, led first by this whim, then that, never stabilizing spiritually.

Some pressure is good in our lives, the pressure of accountability to a God-honouring local church is one of them.

In the end, the body will produce the growth Christ intends, because the body is Christ's body.

Conclusion:

Proposition: The orientation of a local church ministry must be in cooperation with God's plan for the growth of the body.

We have a growing body here. We need to be heading in the same direction (Christ) using the means God ordained in order to cooperate with God's plan.