

Growing in Christ

(Eph 4:7-16)

Christians and churches can either grow, stagnate or die. God desires that we grow. I've preached on growth several times in my ministry here, but I want to particularly focus today on this question - how do we know we are growing closer to Christ? Our God is a wonderful God. There are lots of reasons I could give you, but one of them is that He never does things by halves.

When God rescued us and made us His people, He didn't just say "there you are, you're safe now" but he was a God that made us his people, His family - and He's our Father. And His desire is to give us the best. And on the subject of growth, he wants us to grow both as individuals and as a church, because growing is good for us.

You see, everything grows. If it's alive, it grows. Oaks start as acorns and end up as huge trees, grass starts as small seeds and ends up being a lawn or whatever, eggs become birds unless you change them into your breakfast! People start as babies and end up as adults.

And we all know that when children are growing up we need to protect them. Why? because they lack the understanding because they don't know everything. We stop them playing near the main road because we know the dangers of fast traffic, we make sure their toys are safe to play with. It's part of our responsibility as parents

And when they become teenagers and we continue to give them advice. And what do they do? Take no notice. And what happens? Hopefully they don't come to too much grief and we say "told you so".

Then they get to be adults and they can cope with what life throws at them, they can take out a bank loan, drive a car, buy a drink in a pub or vote for someone. They have the knowledge and experience. They are mature - well, hopefully. The dictionary describes maturity as: *maturity: n 1: the period of time in your life after your physical growth has stopped and you are fully developed [syn: adulthood] 2: state of being mature; full development [syn: matureness] [ant: immaturity] 3: the date on which a financial obligation must be repaid [syn: maturity date, due date]*

It's the same with our Christian lives. In fact you'll know that a term that is often used to describe the time that people accept Jesus into their lives is "born again". We start our lives of a Christians like infants - we are vulnerable, which is why God wants us to grow. Paul said if people are mature: **14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.** I cant begin to tell you about the number of Christians I have known over the years that no longer go to church and don't seem to follow the Lord in any way. They have been discouraged in some way. Maybe it's because of peer pressure - it isn't cool to go to church. maybe it's family commitments, maybe its discouragement from a husband or wife that doesn't know Jesus. Maybe something has happened in their lives that has discouraged them. Whatever it may be, they never had time to grow enough to be able to deal with the discouragement.

So growth is important because it's the way it keeps us spiritually healthy. A growing church is one that is spiritually healthy too.

So how do we grow as Christians and what are the of growing closer to Christ?

Let's look at what God has made us? He's placed us into the body of Christ, His church. There is no such thing as a church-less believer. God intends us to be part of a local expression of His body. here's the relevant verse: we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. **16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.** So how do we grow as a Christian - there it is - we grow as part of a body. We grow together. We grow as we are encouraged by others and encourage others by our example.

Perhaps you're already thinking; who me? I know that there are some of you that think you have very little or even have nothing to offer, but actually, we all have an important role to play in the body and if we are missing, then the body will be sick or suffer because of it.

We know from Romans and 1 Corinthians that we all have gifts given us so that we can play our vital role in the body. It's hinted at in verse 16: *From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*

The truth is that we cannot do without one another. Turn to your neighbour on your right and left and say "I need you and you need me". because you do. If you want to grow as a Christian, those people you just spoke to are going to play an important role in your growth. And the church will grow closer to Christ as a result.

And as we have just read, that whole body, joined by every joint and ligament needs to be fed and encouraged and an essential part of that growing together is by us heeding the ministry of those God has given to teach and lead us in this *to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. and 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*

Billie Hanks *"Jesus didn't give a class on fishing; he said, 'Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.' It was instruction by observation. This principle, so common to life, was the cornerstone of early Christian education because spiritual instruction took place in an environment where relationships were the primary means for gaining personal growth. Love, integrity, truth and even ministry skills were best transmitted in the caring context of a personal friendship. The environment was one of trust and mutual encouragement. Spiritual discipline was first observed then emulated by the original generation of new believers."*

So what are the marks of growth in terms of growing spiritually?

● Service

to prepare God's people for works of service,

A mature Christian is one who serves. A mature church is characterised by service. But just what do we mean by that? Service comes in two ways. Firstly we have committed ourselves to the service of God through faith in Christ. But secondly, as God's people our characteristics as part of the body should be to serve one another. So often we get Christian service confused with service in the church as a building or an organisation. As you know this is one of my biggest rants as a Minister. The biggest error in most traditional denominations today is we see church as a building, not a body. God will not share His honour with idols made of wood and stone. And there is no bigger an idol than our ecclesiastical buildings which we strive to maintain and fill even though we have little hope of doing either.

The church - this church - is a body of people whom God has called to be interdependent so we serve one another and that's characterised by our friendships and our willingness to support one another spiritually and practically. You see the measure of that when people become ill or incapacitated, who desperately need help or in a difficult mess - who rallies around them? How well do we actually know one another? How much do we desire to see our number added to because we want to help them, to know them, to desire them to come to Christ, to find forgiveness, life hope? How often do we spend time with God together? The quality of our friendship, fellowship and love is a mark of maturity - and it's that maturity which will make us magnetically attracted to others and which builds church. How much we grow as a church is a mark of our maturity as a fellowship.

● Unity

until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God

The second mark of spiritual growth is unity. It's not the kind of denominational unity of the sort that's embodied by ecumenism or by other similar types of thing, but a real unity of vision of purpose in the church, and an understanding of what Jesus wants for His church here. I think that knowledge of the Son of God here, is not head knowledge, but a real understanding of the mind and

will of the Son, which only comes through the church seeking and understanding His will together as they pray. That's even more important as you as a church seek your future without a Pastor. Your Leader, Jesus Christ, is still here but you must spend time with Him to discern His will both as individuals, and particularly as a church. This was discussed in the recent Church Meeting and I'd fully endorse what was said by those wise people at the meeting who advocated seeking God's face. Let me remind you that there are already home groups and a prayer meeting. Make use of them wisely!

Unity is founded by spending time in the presence of God. The strength of your corporate prayer life as a church will determine your spiritual (and other) growth and health in the coming years. It's not an optional extra. It's not something for the few keenies. It's for all of you. And quite frankly, the shape of this church will be determined by the quality of the church's prayer life.

- Maturity

and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Here's what we have talked about - maturity. What is it as far as Christians are concerned? Attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ; or as GNB puts it: *we shall become mature people, reaching to the very height of Christ's full stature.* Someone who's Christlike. Someone who has spent time in the presence of God and God's glory reflects. A mature believer is someone who is a godly, Christlike person. If I were to say to you, think of someone who you'd say is a godly person that you know. Now think of him or her in terms of the other things we have learnt about today. Immediately you'll associate them with being mature. And you also know that they spend time with God. I know that many of you have full lives - even in retirement, but every second, every minute extra you put aside for God will be worth it. You gain the whole measure of the fullness of Christ by spending time in His presence.

- Love

instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

Last but by no means least is love. Not sloppy slushy romance, but agape love - that self sacrificing love that puts others before ourselves. A love that when it comes out of our mouths makes a positive difference to the lives of others. When we speak together, it should be in a way that causes us to grow and encourage us to be more Christlike.

I've come across churches where people saw Christian growth in terms of how much of the Bible people knew and could put into practice. I've been to churches where they see filling pews as their measure of growth. But as we look in scripture, we see growth is about growing with one another in the local body of believers that God has put us in. In growing together we learn more about what God is like, we become more like Jesus - we mature in the faith. A mature believer is a loving believer. A mature church is a loving church.

Christian maturity is defined by the relationships we maintain not the rules we keep.
Stephen Crosby.

As we come to worship this morning, maybe we've realised that we've not grown in the faith as much as we could or should have. Maybe we've not seen one another as people we can learn from and whose gifts we can appreciate. Maybe we've been taught many things by the leaders and preachers who we have listened to over the years, but never put what God was teaching us into practice as we seek to serve Him. We all know about how important it is to spend time in the presence of God. We know that there is never such a thing as enough when we think of spending time with God. We know that praying with one another is important. We know that growing with one another is vital. But how much do we actually do it?

I don't need to give you that answer. Who we are right now speaks for itself. Are we satisfied with that? If you are, then think on this - is God satisfied with who we are and what we are as a church right now? The answer again is obvious from what we have just read in scripture. God has called us to be mature believers, not older believers. There is a difference. You can be old and immature as well as being young but mature. Maturity comes as we spend time with God and as we spend time with one another in the presence of God.

God gives us these challenges, not to make us feel bad, but to find forgiveness, to have an opportunity to commit ourselves afresh to Him - because God wants us to grow. But we need to fill that gap between words and doing.

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Scripture Quotes NIV unless otherwise stated