

Church Growth

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 May 2012

Preacher: Jonathan Worthington

[0 : 00] Open your Bibles back up to Ephesians chapter 4. We're going to be thinking a bit about verses 7 to 16.

And many of you will have handouts that have the three basic questions that we'll be thinking about. That's on the left-hand side of the page. On the right-hand side is something that I'll mention at the very end of this time.

But as you can see, the topic is church growth. That's what this passage is largely about. I have some questions as we start to think about this from God's Word.

And some of these might be difficult questions to answer. What is your experience of church? Think about how you experience church.

If somebody said to you, describe your participation in church, what would you say? Now this question might cut more deeply to some of us.

[1 : 08] It certainly did to me when it occurred to me. If everyone had the same experience of church and the same participation in church as you yourself have, would the church be growing?

Would the church be healthy? Now before answering that, actually, some of you will probably have to say no.

Some of you will, I think, should say a legitimate yes. Before you answer that, I can say with incredibly deep satisfaction that I have never experienced, neither has Lindsay, have ever experienced a congregation that has as many people that pour themselves into ministry as you all do.

And so I hope that what follows, in some ways, is a two-edged sword. An encouragement to those of you, especially, who are investing yourselves in the way the passage talks about.

And a challenge to those of you who are not. Here's another closely related question to those I've been asking.

[2 : 21] Is Bon Accord growing? How will Bon Accord grow? Some people will probably answer, well, we'll grow by the faithful preaching of the word.

And that's partly true. That is, pastors and teachers, those who preach the word Sunday preaching, that has a role to play in the church growing, but it's actually an indirect role.

That's not the direct thing that causes the church to grow in the way this passage talks about. There's something else. We're going to explore that.

And so we turn to Ephesians 4 to explore the church growing. Ephesians, as a whole, is largely about the church.

It explains who we are, what Christ has done for us, by buying us for His Father with His blood. It explains why we're here, as the body of believers.

[3 : 29] So that's what Ephesians is largely about, the church. This is, in some ways, a timely message, in the sense that, in neighborhood fellowships, we're working through a book called The Church.

We're thinking about what the church is. And in prayer meetings, we're focusing on Ephesians. We've been working through Ephesians. So both of these are converging to help us contemplate Christ's body, the church.

And Ephesians 4, as I said, is particularly about the growth of the body. Ephesians 4 even addresses what the primary task is of the pastor and teacher.

And again, that's indirectly related to the growth of the church. Importantly, but indirectly. So here's a question, again, for us. Who causes the church to grow?

Who causes a church to grow? And how? How is the church grown in this way? And these are complicated questions to answer from this passage.

[4 : 38] When we say, who causes growth? It's complicated. When we ask, how does the growth occur? Well, that's complicated as well.

So let's jump into this passage and try to wrestle with some of these ideas about Christ's body and how we have a part to play. The way we're going to do this, we're going to look at verses 7 to 16, and we're going to ask three questions that works us through this passage.

And you have the questions on your handout. First, we're going to look at what is Jesus doing now? Right now, what is he doing? Second, we'll look at what do Jesus' gifts accomplish?

And then third, who grows the church? So those are the three questions that will help us work through what God's Word says about this.

What is Jesus doing now? That's the first question. Let's read verses 7 to 10. But to each one of us, grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

[5 : 55] This is why it says in Psalm 68, when he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men. What does he ascended mean except that he also descended to the lower earthly regions?

He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens in order to fill the universe, the whole universe.

What is Christ doing now? We often talk about Christ's finished work, don't we? It's a good phrase, Christ's finished work, because as he was on the cross, he cried out, it is finished.

He did finish something. But he finished, he finished something very important. He paid for the sins of anybody who would trust in him. And that was done.

It can't be added to. It doesn't have to be done again. It's finished. God's wrath on those who trust his son is satisfied and taken.

[7 : 00] That is finished. But that's not all that Christ came to do. So when we talk about Christ's finished work, we need to be careful that we talk about that central element, realizing that he's not finished with other things.

The image of Jesus sitting on the throne at the right hand of God is not an image of him passively not doing anything, watching his church go about its business.

Jesus is doing something that's ongoing. It's not finished. So what is Jesus still doing right now? Let me read to you a few verses from Acts and then I'll read a few verses from Ephesians 1.

In Acts chapter 2 verses 32 to 36, listen to what this says. That Jesus died for our sins, but this is what it says. God has raised this Jesus to life and we are all witnesses of the fact.

exalted to the right hand of God, Jesus has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.

[8 : 12] For David did not ascend to heaven and yet he said, the Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet. Therefore, let all Israel be assured of this.

God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ. So, Jesus ascended is sitting, reigning on the throne, pouring out his Spirit onto believers.

We see that throughout the book of Acts. Jesus is doing something. He ascended in order to pour out this promised gift on his followers. Ephesians 1, you can turn to this one.

Ephesians 1, 18 to 23. What is Jesus doing now? Ephesians 1, verse 18.

Paul prays for the believers. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which God has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

[9 : 30] That power is like the working of his mighty strength which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come, and God placed all things under Christ's feet and appointed him to be the head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Jesus is doing something, he's filling something for the church. and then in our own passage, what does it say in verse 7? Chapter 4, verse 7.

Each of us has received, to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. And this is why it says, when he ascended, he gave gifts to men.

And in fact, look at verse 10. The very one who ascended higher than all the heavens in order to do something, in order to fill the whole universe.

Now, each of these passages says something similar. That Jesus was exalted to God's right hand. That Jesus is reigning right now and that he's doing something.

[11 : 03] He's filling the universe. He's pouring out his spirit on the believers. He's giving grace to each of us who trust him.

In other words, Christ is active right now in us, in our midst, for the sake of the universe. He ascended higher than the heavens to fill the whole universe.

This is not, that's a confusing phrase, at least for me, to fill the whole universe. What does that mean that Jesus is filling the whole universe? I used to think of it as sort of the picture of the genie at the end of Aladdin.

how he starts growing and filling up and into the universe. You know, I have phenomenal cosmic power. It's huge. He's actually filling the universe and that was in my mind thinking, you know, is that what Christ is doing?

What does that even mean? But when you look at it in relation to all these other passages, that Jesus has ascended, he's not growing in that way, but he is pouring out his gifts and his graces, filling up the universe with his work, with his goodness, with his grace, with his gifts through the church.

[12 : 16] That's a very different image. It's an image of somebody climbing up to a tall tower and pouring something down. They've got to be really high so that they can fill everything with what they're pouring out and lavishing down below.

Jesus is lavishing his grace and gifts on the church in order to bless the whole universe. So what is Jesus doing now?

He's doing a lot. He's giving gifts to men to each one of us. Grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

And that's what we're going to shift on to focus now. What do Jesus' gifts accomplish? Jesus is active, pouring out his grace, giving gifts to his church.

What do his gifts accomplish? Let's look at verses 8 and 11. Excuse me.

[13 : 21] Chapter 4, verses 8 and 11. When Jesus ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men. In verse 11, he gives a few examples of some of these gifts.

It was Jesus who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers. I mentioned that Ephesians 4 does talk about the role of pastors and teachers.

Well, Jesus, this is one thing he gave to his church, pastors and teachers. And some of us might sit back and say, oh good, Jesus gave us pastors who can preach the word and cause us to grow, cause our churches to grow.

or, oh good, Jesus gave pastors to preach the gospel so that unbelievers can repent and the church will grow. But is that the picture of what the pastor is supposed to be doing that Paul paints for us here?

What does the gift of pastor accomplish? What do Jesus' gifts accomplish? In particular, this gift, the pastor teacher. Look at verse 12.

[14 : 34] Because this explains why Jesus gives pastors and teachers to the church. And it's not so that we can preach the gospel here and have unbelievers repent.

It has a different purpose. That will hopefully happen, but that's a different purpose for which Jesus gave it. Verse 12. He gave some to be pastors and teachers to prepare God's people for works of service so that the body may grow, may be built up.

I think there's a lot of weight in that statement. Jesus gave the pastors and teachers to the church in order to prepare you for works of service so that the body will grow, so that the church will be built up.

This is why I mentioned that the pastors and teachers have an indirect role in growing the church. The pastor and teacher equips you for acts of service and that's what causes church growth.

We'll explore that a bit more down below. Let's think about this weight as it affects each of us here. To prepare you for works of service so that your works cause Christ's body to be built up.

[16 : 00] Is this true or false? The primary thing that makes the church grow is good preaching. Is that true or false? At the beginning I said it was complicated.

Is that the primary thing that makes the church grow good preaching? In a way, based on what this describes the pastor and teacher supposed to be doing, that's sort of like saying this.

True or false? The primary thing that makes the mall secure is the quality of the training that the security guards received. Is that quite right? The thing that keeps the mall secure is the quality of training that the security guards received.

What if the security guard had good training but didn't show up that day? Would the mall be secure? What if the security guard just didn't put into practice what they had learned in their training?

Would the mall be secure? What if God's people, us, all of us, not the pastors and teachers for the moment, but all of us, what if we just don't do the works of service that the pastor trains us in?

[17 : 21] Will the church grow? Will God's body be built up? What if God's people, we, the ordinary Christians, what if we are gossiping and backbiting, or what if we're simply not interacting with each other in healthy, meaningful, Christ-centered ways?

Instead of doing what Paul has just said earlier in chapter 4, of being completely humble and gentle, being patient and bearing with each other in love, and making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace?

Will the church grow if we're not doing that? We, if we are not doing that? God, we're not going to do that. So to recap a little bit, what is Jesus doing now?

Well, to each one of us, He has apportioned grace. He has tasks for us, specific tasks, and He has equipped us to do these tasks.

That's what Jesus is doing now. He specifically has given the pastors and teachers to the church to train us to do works of service so that the body will be built up.

[18 : 44] That's what Jesus is doing now. He's equipping us with His grace and gifts to build His body up. What do Jesus' gifts accomplish?

Well, as we've seen, Jesus' gift to the church of pastors and teachers is to accomplish this primary goal, to prepare God's people for works of service.

But Jesus also has a goal that this passage talks about, a goal for all of our works of service. And by the way, these works of service are not works that we can do in this hour on Sunday, or two hours on Sunday, morning and evening.

This is the training ground. This is when we're equipped. This is not when we do these works of service. So we've got to figure out, well, when do we do these? How does that work? What is the end goal of our works of service?

What is Jesus' goal for us in being active in service, based on the pastor's preparation? Let's look at verses 13 to 15.

[19 : 55] We're still thinking about what did Jesus' gifts accomplish, but now we're thinking specifically about ours, about what we do. What is the goal of our service?

Verses 13 to 15. So that Christ's body may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and unity in the knowledge of God's Son and become mature.

God's goal for God's goal for us. I should have said this before I started reading this verse. As we read these verses and hear God's goal for us, for our works of service, let's contemplate what we particularly do, what works of service you are already doing, because so many of you are doing so many works of service, and some of you others are probably not doing much.

So let's contemplate the works that we are doing. Are they aiming in this direction that this pastor says? Can they be aiming a bit better in this direction, the things I already am doing?

Or, if I'm not doing anything, or not much, what can I do to hit this goal? So now, let's read verses 13 to 15 with your particular ministry in mind.

[21 : 13] Christ's body being built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

And then we'll no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, blown here and there by every wind of teaching, and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.

Instead, speaking the truth, in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the head, that is Christ. Christ, is what you are doing, aiming in this direction of mature, built up unity that grows up into Jesus Christ?

With Him is the focus and the head. Is that what your works of service are doing? I've seen that it certainly is so much of the time with you, but you need to analyze your own hearts as well.

Let's look at the third question. We've looked at what Jesus is doing now, pouring out grace and gifts for His church to fill the universe with His goodness.

[22 : 36] We've looked at what His gifts are supposed to accomplish, the pastors and teachers, to equip you, to equip us, ordinary believers. We've looked at what our works of service are supposed to accomplish.

So who grows the church? Who causes growth to Jesus' church? This is the last question and it's a briefer one that we'll answer.

Who grows the church? Let's look at verse 16. Reminding ourselves of the questions from the beginning.

Is Bonacord growing? How will Bonacord grow? And I don't mean just numerically. Actually, the focus of growth is in maturity here.

So that's actually the primary meaning of growth here, in maturity. But adding more believers, that certainly would be glorious. How will Bonacord grow?

[23 : 40] Who grows the church? Verse 16. From him, that's Jesus, from Jesus, 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 who grows the church? It's complicated, isn't it? Because look at what it says first. From him. From Jesus. That is, the resurrected and ascended Jesus pouring his grace into believers, pouring his spirit into believers, pouring his gifts onto the church.

From him, this happens. He's the one causing the growth. But, look at what it says next. From him, the whole body, and then what?

The whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up. Now, there's a word missing that's in the, what Paul originally wrote that the NIV doesn't have, and it's an important word.

The whole body causes growth and builds itself up. the whole body makes itself grow and builds itself up.

[25 : 05] That's the language. It's kind of weird, actually, weird English. That's why they leave it out. The whole body causes growth of the body and builds itself up.

That's what is the basic statement. This is from Jesus, but it's the body causing growth to itself and building itself up. this puts a tremendous amount of cooperation onto our shoulders.

It's from Jesus, and we're doing it. As each part does its work. And this is a challenge.

I'm personally challenged by this passage. So we can return to the question that I asked at the beginning. Now that we've looked from this passage at what Jesus is doing, what his gifts accomplish, are supposed to accomplish, will accomplish, and who grows the church, that it's Jesus doing it through us building ourselves up in love.

We've looked at that from this passage. What's your participation in the church? And if everyone had the same participation that you have, would the church be growing?

[26 : 25] Would it be healthy? Again, we've been so blessed by how many of you in this congregation are serving as this passage says.

Others of us are not doing what we should, what Jesus has gifted us to do. We're not taking the opportunity to help his body grow as he has called us to.

So I hope this message is both an encouragement and a challenge. The handout, I'm wrapping things up by the way, the handout that you have has those three questions on it on its left, on the right.

I thought it would be helpful if you actually had in front of you some of the ways that people are and that you can work together to serve, do works of service for Christ's body by his gifting and power.

power. I'm not going to read over them of course. What I hope you can do is take this with you, look at the things that are already going on in this church because so many of the people who are serving in these ways are getting tired because they're doing a lot.

[27 : 40] Pray about how you might join in the works of service. There are other opportunities at the very bottom of the page, things to think creatively about.

How do we just encourage people? Offer hospitality, various things. Be creative with how you serve Jesus' body. How has he called you and equipped you to do that?

And as you see on the back, you can cut that off and you can even return this next week. And if you've given me your contact information, I can get you in contact with the people who can help you start serving in a way that you haven't been.

So that's to take away with you to pray about in light of God's word that we're looking at. Is Bonacord growing? Well, it can be because the resurrected, ascended, reigning son of God is pouring out his goodness and grace and equipping us.

It can be growing because he will not fail to grow his body. But it's through you and me that he does this. And he's equipped us by his spirit and grace.

[28 : 57] Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.