Ephesians 4:13-16

Attributes of a Healthy Church

Sermon

This morning we are finishing our series "Entrusted with a Miracle". Next week we are going to start a new series entitled, "A New Way to Walk" – we'll see how Paul describes our new way of walking as Christians as we continue to go through the book of Ephesians verse by verse.

Every child after they are born must be brought for their regular pediatrician check-ups. They check the eyes, the ears, the reflexes. They are measured and weighed. All of this is to ensure that the child is growing at a healthy pace.

There are certain characteristics that mark healthy growth. The child should be growing within a certain height and weight. Their reflexes should be working properly. The child has to be eating regularly and maintain a healthy diet. There is healthy activity where the muscles and coordination are working properly. Milestones like the child flipping over, and then crawling, and then walking, and then running. Their immune system is working properly…when they get sick, the body fights off disease in a timely and effective way. Their skin and nails and hair are growing which reflect outwardly that the child is healthy, happy, and radiant.

Here's my question for us to consider this morning. What does a healthy church body look like? How would you describe it? What does it look like if a church is not healthy, not growing well?

There is a medical term for a child that isn't growing in a healthy way. "Failure to Thrive". This is where a child is failing to grow and if it persists the child will remain in a state of infancy that is unhealthy and can prove to be life threatening in many ways. What does a healthy church body look like? What does "failure to thrive" look like for a church body?

In the book of Ephesians, Paul describes the church as "the body of Christ". Back in 2:19-22 Paul described the body as a "structure" that is being built of diverse individuals from diverse backgrounds who are all now united and growing together, being built together, and becoming a suitable dwelling place for God. Paul calls the church a "holy temple of God". Failure to thrive as a church means a church that is failing to become the dwelling place suitable for God that Jesus envisions.

The body of Christ grows as Christ causes it to grow. It is HIS body…and it grows by the supply that He gives to it. And yet the Bible is also clear that we participate in causing this body to grow. He grows the church THROUGH us. We can also stunt its growth as well. The first

place the body is mentioned was in 1:22-23 where Paul described the church as "***the fullness of Him who fills all in all"***. Christ means to nourish and fill His church with all that is needed for the church to reach its potential. Then in 3:19 Paul further describes what this "filling" of Jesus looks like, namely, that we would "***know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God***." As we know the love of Christ intimately and truly, we grow, even as a child without the nourishing love of their parents will "fail to thrive", the church (or church individuals) that isn't nourished and cherished regularly in the love of Jesus will also fail to thrive. Then last week we saw in 4:7-12 that Jesus, the ascended and victorious King, fills the church with gifts. 5 leadership gifts that are intended to equip the body for the work of ministry, and for the "building up of the body of Christ". The healthy structure has bones, and ligaments, and tissue…that is growing, stretching, and as we'll see, it is filled by Jesus for the ultimate purpose of reflecting the radiance of Jesus to the world around it. A healthy, happy, growing infant is radiant…a healthy, happy, thriving church radiates the glory of God to the world around it.

The Scripture gives the picture of the church as the bride of Christ. Christ fills the church so that the church might become radiant, and then He presents the church like a bride on her wedding day to Himself. Listen to the way Paul describes the churches presentation to Himself in Ephesians 5:27:

> **so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Eph. 5:27)**

This morning I want for us to consider in our text three attributes of a healthy church and then consider what that means for RR Trevor.

1. **A healthy church is a church that grows in unity (4:12-13)**

to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, [13] until we all attain [so here is the goal of church growth…first…] **to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God…**

We've already seen this in our study through Ephesians. God is very very concerned with unity. In v.3 – we are to be "eager to maintain unity". Then in vv.4-6 Paul gave us 7 affirmations of truth that we are to be united under. Again, last week Paul gave us 5 leadership gifts that equip the church "until we attain unity". A word that's used for a body that functions in unity is homeostasis. There is also a tragic term used for a body that begins to attack itself – it's called an "auto-immune" disease. Where the cells of the body actually think that other healthy cells are the enemy and they attack. Church division is like an auto-immune disease.

Paul gives us two things we are to be united about: We are to have a common faith, and a common experience/relationship. Common faith - "until we attain unity of the faith" – back in

v.5 Paul told us there is "one faith". One common faith or doctrine that we all share. Common experience – "until we attain to the unity…of the knowledge of the Son of God". Here Paul is using the word "knowledge" in the sense of "experiential knowledge". You can know all about ***marriage*** before getting married by reading a book…but you really don't know marriage until you experience it. You can read a book on ***skiing***, but you don't know how to ski until you experience skiing. So here Paul is describing both a common faith/doctrine as well as a common experience of knowing the Son of God.

Can you think back to people in your life that not only taught you, but demonstrated what a relationship with Jesus looks like? RR Trevor must foster a common language of faith and experience with Jesus. This happens as we gather together, learn together, experience God together in worship (I was bummed to miss out on this Friday night), walk through life together, fall and rise together. In short, an environment of DISCIPLESHIP. This is how the 12 disciples grew into a common faith and common relationship with Jesus, they walked with Him. We need to walk with each other as we each walk with Jesus. Meeting together regularly, teaching and learning from one another.

2. A healthy church is a church that grows in maturity (4:13-14)

to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ [14] **so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.**

Jesus wants River Ridge Trevor to grow up into a "mature manhood" – or an adulthood that is complete. Jesus is perfecting the church, and He is doing it through the gifts given to the church for its growth. The goal is that we would reach "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ". Christ fills the church, so that the church would become the "fullness of Christ".

There is a process for making wine called "elevage". (a little lesson on how to make good wine at church, boy could this go south). The cellarmaster frequently inspects, tastes, and manipulates the wine in various ways to bring it to its desired, mature age. Jesus frequently inspects, tastes, and manipulates the church (AND YOUR LIFE) to bring the church to its fullness. To the right "measurement" to the correct "age" or stature…with the end goal being His own fullness/image. ***Jesus forms and manipulates the church until He can look into the barrel and see His own reflection.*** Overtime, we look more and more like Him.

What does a reflection of Jesus look like? Jesus is full of grace and truth. Jesus was full of faith and obedience to the Father. Jesus was victorious over Satan, over sin, over the flesh, over the world. Jesus was full of sorrow, acquainted with grief (there will be things in this world that grieve us). Jesus was full of joy. Jesus was full of compassion towards the lowly. Jesus was

full of sacrificial love. Jesus was full of wisdom, knowledge, holiness. Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit. You and I are in the process of maturing, like a well-manipulated wine until we reflect Jesus.

Paul wants for us to "mature"…he wants us to be "aged"… "so that we may no longer be children". Childish behavior is expected at a certain age of maturity, but if the child isn't growing properly, there is a "failure to thrive". Sadly, many Christians are stuck in a place the NT it is calls "spiritual infancy". To be sure we all have childish lapses. But spiritual infancy is a persistent, ongoing condition that can prove to be fatal.

In Hebrews 5:12-14 the writer describes a failure to thrive: This is someone who persists in a diet of milk – the basics of Christianity 101 which are very important but no teenager should only drink milk or eat baby food…a child needs to begin eating solid food. So spiritual infancy is characterized by poor nutrition. The writer of Hebrews further diagnoses them with being "dull of hearing". Hearing the Word of God, but not putting what they hear into practice. You can hear all you want, but if you never apply what you hear you'll never have be trained to discern between what is good and evil…and the winds and waves will blow and crash and you'll be overcome.

Jesus told us a house that is built on a rock will withstand the storms and winds and waves that come – what does this house look like? Mt. 7:24 – "everyone then who HEARS these words of mine AND DOES THEM will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock." If you hear God's Word, but you harden your heart and don't put it into practice you will over time become dull of hearing, like a spiritual infant.

Paul says, "I don't want you to be spiritual babies! **tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes."** The world and the devil are so crafty in the lies they spread…and the spiritual infant is unable to withstand because they haven't been trained in sound doctrine.

Isaac and I love to go to a sword shop in Galena and we have the guy take the sword down, we swing it around a bit, but we have NO IDEA how to properly use them. As Christians we can be this way. We hang Bible verses on the walls like trophies, but do we put them into practice? We listen to good teaching, but we never use the sword of the Spirit in life. We don't train ourselves to be hearers and doers of the word of God.

The church is to be a training ground for "biblical literacy" – people don't know their Bibles! This is not for us to have more verses to hang in our homes, or to add another book to my bookshelf. This is training for battle. The world will bring all sorts of destructive, logical, plausible, good sounding arguments that lead to death. We have to become equipped with God's Word so that when you get the phone call "it's cancer"…where are you going to go?

What are you going to do in the middle of the night when you wake up and the waves are crashing and the winds are blowing? Verses are like tiny daggers that you use and you stick them into the side of Satan when he comes with his storms that are raging. You're going to open your Word to the places you have underlined and set your house upon the rock so that the waves of cancer don't break the house apart.

River Ridge Trevor must become a church that has a regular, and steady diet of the word of God. Good growth can only happen through nutritious eating. This means teaching milk but also solid food. Expositional preaching where the word of God is slowly and systematically taught verse by verse in context, searching for the original meaning, and then applying it to our lives as we become not only hearers, but doers of the Word of God. A healthy church is a Bible saturated church.

3. A healthy church is a church that grows in stability (4:15-16)

15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

A healthy body has a strong, supportive structure that is stable, and the communicates truth well. God has designed our bodies in an amazing way to support itself and to communicate well among the bodily organs. When communication and support breaks down the whole system suffers. Paul tells us the type of communication we are to have: "speaking the truth in love". Rather than being tossed to and fro from the storms of false teaching, we are to communicate frequently and faithfully the truth to one another.

What does Paul mean by "speaking the truth in love"? This verse is usually referenced to say, "I am to say hard things to others, but I need to do it in love". That's true, but I don't think Paul is talking about "speaking hard things" he is talking about "communicating the truth of the gospel to one another". We are to be a "confessional" church…in fact many scholars interpret this verse "confessing the truth to one another". The "truth" in Ephesians and in the context here is consistently speaking of the gospel in opposition to false teaching.

A healthy church is a church that communicates the truths of the gospel to one another. The gospel is to be our lingua franca – our common language. The death, the resurrection, the ascension, the coming Kingdom that we await. The forgiveness of sins. The grace and mercy of God. This "speech" needs to be central to all we say and do. How we deal with tension. What we keep as the focus of every outreach endeavor. How we make decisions on an elder board. How we pray with one another. How we forgive and teach forgiveness. Persisting in gospel speech in the face of false doctrine and to help each other grow. When the

storms of false teaching blow upon our church we are to lovingly speak truth to one another. This means viewing the world around us through the lens of the gospel.

Through speaking the truth in love we are to "we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ". Again, Jesus is the authority, the goal, and He is the source - It is "from Him" that "**the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped**".

Every joint in your body is "joined and held together" by a structure of tendons and ligaments that enable the joints to create movement. In 4:12 Paul said that leaders "equip" the body – this word was used to speak of "setting a bone back in place" – like the boxer in the movie who smashes his shoulder back in place to keep on fighting.

The members of the body of Christ are meant to support one another as the ligaments and tendons of the body are meant to support and help with movement and growth.

We are building as a church brothers and sisters. Can you believe it that we are almost at our first year?! If River Ridge is to be a healthy church we must become a strong support system for one another that provides stability as we each work together to support, and to grow into the dwelling place of God. Do you see how being a "solo Christian" is really a foreign idea to Paul? The idea of having a relationship with Jesus Christ but having not relationship with His church is a foreign idea to Paul. Jesus Christ, the head, is the authority, and the source, and the destination as He fills the church with all that is needed that we would become the fullness of Christ. **How are you supporting the body?**

Last week I gave to you all three words: plug in, discover, and cultivate. We talked about spiritual gifts and getting involved. For some of you the word is "plug in"…you need to start serving within the body of Christ. We want to give you a tangible way to plug in this morning, on your seats you probably noticed a slip of paper that has some boxes to check. As we listen to this last song, take a moment to quickly write your name on the paper and check a box. For some of you, the box might be, "I'm already serving." For some of you it might be a commitment to take a spiritual gifts survey. For others it may to check the box of ministries you're interested in learning more about. This is not a commitment…it's simply saying you're willing to learn more and prayerfully consider serving here at RR Trevor.

Let's pray.

Connection Group Questions

1. How would you define a healthy body? How would you define a healthy *church* body?
2. Read Ephesians 2:19-22 – what are some characteristics of the church in this passage?
3. Read Ephesians 4:13-16 – How does Paul describe a healthy church in this passage?
4. What are some key milestones that a pediatrician looks for in the early years of a child's life? What are some important signs that demonstrate that a believer is growing?
5. Pastor Brian mentioned three attributes of a healthy church: Unity, maturity, and stability. Which of these three do you feel you are doing well with? Which of these three do you feel you need to work on?
6. Read Hebrews 5:11-14 – how does the writer define spiritual infancy? What are some action steps that someone can take who is stuck in spiritual infancy?
7. Paul has been giving a vision of Jesus "filling the church with His fullness". What was Jesus "full of"? What can we do to "position" ourselves in a way to receive all that we need to grow?