

State of the Church: Vital Signs of a Healthy Church

Ephesians 4:14-16

ABC 1/25/15

This morning we're taking a break from Romans, &, as is my custom on annual meeting Sunday, taking a look at the church. Whenever you're sick & go to the doctor, they check your vital signs. They take your temperature, blood pressure, & heart rate. They listen to your heart & your lungs. Why? Because they know what the vital signs of a healthy body should be & they compare yours with the standard to determine how sick you are. As the body of Christ, known as ABC, we too should measure up to certain standards of spiritual health. We need to know these standards so that we can be who God has called us to be. While no church is perfect, we should always be striving to be healthy & headed in the right direction. We need to have some biblical criteria by which to evaluate our health. Just because a church calls itself *Christian* or has *Bible* in its name doesn't mean that it's a place that will nourish you spiritually. There are many churches that promote damaging & damning errors. We don't want to be one. In our text this morning from Eph 4 (turn there), Paul gives us 4 vital signs of a healthy church. This isn't a comprehensive list. He doesn't mention

several important things but he touches on 4 vital signs our church should have. **4:11-16** PRAY

While in our text this morning, vss 14-16, Paul doesn't mention solid Bible teaching, that undergirds this whole passage. In the Greek text, vss 11-16 are one long sentence. Vs 14 begins **as a result** or **so that**, indicating the logical connection with what comes before it. It's as the pastor-teachers in the church equip the saints for the work of ministry through the Word of God that the body grows to maturity in Christ. Vs 13 teaches that a mature church grows into doctrinal unity on the essentials of the faith. We grow into a deeper knowledge of the Son of God through our deepening knowledge of the Word of God, which reveals Christ to us. So as a result of the pastor-teachers equipping the saints with the Word, the church won't be tossed around by every wave & wind of doctrine, but instead will grow up into Christ, the head. Paul is especially focused on the health of the whole body, although individual members must be healthy & growing for the entire body to be strong. We see this morning that a healthy body 1st has doctrinal discernment.

1. A healthy body has Doctrinal Discernment 14

It's significant that when Paul talks about the spiritual maturity of the church, doctrinal discernment & stability is at the top of

his list! I'd venture to say that it would probably be at or near the bottom of most lists among American Christians today. We hear people saying,

I want my faith to be simple & childlike, I don't need to know doctrine or theology. All I need to know is Jesus. Doctrine is divisive, we just need to love each other.

That's a childish attitude &, I believe, a sinful one as well. Yes, the Bible does call us to be like children in 2 specific ways. 1st, Jesus says that unless we approach the kingdom of God as little children we'll never enter it (Mt 18:3). We must have a simple, childlike trust & confidence in God. The 2nd way we're to be like children is **in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature** (1 Cor 14:20). We are to be like infants in respect to evil. Don't get me wrong. Babies aren't innocent, but they're relatively blameless compared to adults. We're to be adult in our thinking & like infants in regard to evil. But for the most part, American churches aren't into doctrine. Need proof? The largest so-called *evangelical* church in America is pastored by Joel Osteen. He has never been accused of teaching the deep truths & doctrines of God's Word. Instead he says things like, *As long as you're doing your best & desire to do what's right according to*

*God's Word, you can be assured God is pleased with you.*¹

We've been infected with the cultural virus of postmodernism, which holds that there's no such thing as absolute truth in the spiritual realm. If anyone claims to know the truth, they're labeled as arrogant, insensitive, & intolerant. Postmodernism makes *truth* subjective, so that what is *true* for one may not be *true* for another. Thus tolerance & acceptance of any & all views becomes the supreme virtue. The only view that postmodernism cannot tolerate is that of someone who claims to have exclusive truth. This kind of thinking has invaded the evangelical church as well. It's somewhat surprising that it's gained such a foothold among those who claim to follow Jesus, because He plainly declared, **I am the way, & the truth, & the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me** (Jn 14:6). You can't get much more narrow & exclusive than that! In fact, when Jesus spoke with Pilate at His trial, He said, **For this I have been born, & for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice** (Jn 18:37). Since testifying to the truth was Jesus' stated mission, undermining the truth must be Satan's mission. Jesus referred

¹ Joel Osteen, *Become A Better You*

to the Holy Spirit as **the Spirit of truth** (Jn 14:17). He promised to send the Spirit to the apostles to teach them all things & bring to their remembrance all that Jesus had spoken to them (Jn 14:26). The entire Bible is filled with warnings about false teachers & exhortations to believe the truth as revealed by God & hold to that truth at all costs. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned, **Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves** (Mt 7:15). He emphasizes the danger of & false prophets who will deceive many (Mt 24:23-26). Paul warned of false apostles, who are disguised as angels of light & servants of righteousness (2 Cor 11:13-15). He warned the Galatians that if men distorted the gospel of Christ, they were to be accursed (1:8-9). He warned the Colossians of those who were trying to take them captive through philosophy & empty deception (2:8). He warned the Thessalonians that in the end times, there will be a major apostasy that will deceive many (2 Thes 2:3-13). In his letters to Timothy & Titus, there are frequent exhortations to preach sound doctrine, along with warnings about those who've turned to false doctrine. In his final meeting with the Ephesian elders, Paul warned them,

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; & from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them (Acts 20:29-30).

What a frightening warning! Beyond this, the letters of John, Peter, Jude, & Revelation all have strong warnings against the dangers of false teachers. Paul says because we're no longer to be children we must grow to maturity (4:13, 15). We shouldn't remain children but grow to maturity so that we aren't tossed around by the waves & winds of false doctrine. These false ideas vary from generation to generation, but they always represent an attack on God's Word. Paul's picture of being tossed about by waves & carried about by the winds of doctrine may be rooted in his memories of being shipwrecked at sea. Without rudder & sails, his ship was tossed around by forces far more powerful than the sailors could overcome. It amazes me how the ideas of philosophers filter down through society, even to kids, who have no idea why they're acting as they do. They've never read these philosophers, but their godless ideas directly influence the thinking & way of life of these youths. For example, you can trace the reasons why kids dress in black & exalt self-mutilation & death directly to the nihilism of Nietzsche. Most of the hippies of 60s & 70s never

read the existentialists, but their lives largely followed the implications of that philosophy. &, many today that profess to believe in Jesus, but don't see the need for sound doctrine, are being carried around by the waves of postmodernism. It warps their view of Scripture & it makes them vulnerable to all sorts of serious errors. Children need help & guidance as they grow up. Kids tend to act impulsively, based on their feelings of the moment, rather than thoughtfully & carefully. Part of helping your children mature is to help them learn to think about the consequences of their actions before they act. You want to help them learn to act on the basis of right beliefs, not according to the whim of the moment. Children often lack self-control. Very few kids ever think about disciplining their time or money or appetites for a greater goal. Also, because of their ignorance & relative inexperience, they're easily deceived by evil people who want to take advantage of them. Every conscientious parent warns his child about the dangers of strangers. Spiritually, there are many comparisons. Paul here says that false teachers use trickery. The Greek word is *kubeia*, from which we get our word *cube*. It referred to cheating at dice. In his travels, Paul had probably watched some salty sailors & soldiers use loaded dice to fleece some unsuspecting victim.

They enticed them by greed & used the loaded dice to take away their money in what looked like an honest game of chance. Paul also says that these false teachers use **craftiness in deceitful scheming**. **Craftiness** is used of Satan deceiving Eve (2 Cor 11:3). **Deceitful scheming** indicates that there is a deliberate plan. The word **scheming** originally had the idea of tracking someone as a wild animal tracks its prey. That's how the cults work, going after unsuspecting, untaught young believers, claiming to explain the Bible in a better way! Also children enjoy entertainment & showmanship. Many of the religious hucksters parading on TV draw in untaught Christians like a carny at a circus lures people to pay to see the freak show. Although these teachers blatantly deny biblical truth, people send them money in the hopes of being healed or having some problem resolved. It all stems from a lack of doctrinal discernment. So Paul says, *Grow from childhood to maturity so that you don't get taken in by the spiritual charlatans!* This means not only reading, but also studying your Bible. Don't dodge the difficult doctrinal sections. They're in there to help you mature in the faith. Read solid books, such as John MacArthur's, *The Truth War* or *Ashamed of the Gospel*. Work your way through a *Systematic & Theology* or some of

the excellent doctrinal books by RC Sproul or John Piper. They'll help you grow in this much-needed vital sign of doctrinal discernment. Be Bereans (Acts 17:11) & search the Scriptures to see if what is taught by me, from this pulpit, in your SS class, & your G² all lines up with the truth of God. We must be a church of doctrinal discernment which means we must be people of the Word!

2. A healthy body practices truth balanced with love. 15a

In contrast to the spiritual children who are tossed around by the waves & winds of false doctrine, a healthy body speaks the truth in love, it practices & lives out the truth it knows. The Greek word isn't literally *speaks* but rather, as some have coined the term, *truthing it in love*. It means to speak, deal, or act truthfully. It carries the idea of walking & living in a truthful way, one in which the truth is being proclaimed. It includes both truthful words & an honest lifestyle (4:25, 28). But, in this context, Paul isn't primarily thinking about honesty & integrity. Instead, he's emphasizing the need to hold to & proclaim the truth of the gospel (4:5, 13; 1:13). In Gal 4:16 it seems to emphasize preaching the gospel. Since that's the only other use of this verb in the NT, it seems safe to say that the emphasis here is also on proclaiming the truth. Of course, we

must live out these truths so that our lives back up our profession of faith. But Paul is mainly talking about holding firmly to the truth as revealed in Jesus Christ (4:21). This teaches that there is such a thing as absolute truth in the spiritual realm & that we can know it. Spiritual truth isn't subjective, according to individual preference or experience. It's objective & true in every time & every culture. This truth is given & explained in God's Word. This means that we can know & judge whether someone holds to the truth or promotes error. I realize that those who've been influenced by postmodernism will accuse us of arrogance, intolerance, divisiveness, & a lack of love. They'll say, *Jesus didn't say that the world will know we are Christians by our doctrinal correctness, but by our love!* But they fail to recognize that in the same context, Jesus said, **Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth** (Jn 17:17). A healthy church must hold to, proclaim, & practice the truth of the gospel. It's the task of each & every one of us to be people of the truth. We're told to search the truth, understand the truth, & communicate the truth. We're to do all of this in love. Dare I say that speaking the truth of the gospel is to love others? Why? Because it's only by believing the gospel that people will be saved from God's eternal judgment. It isn't

loving to tolerate or promote heresy. Spiritual error on the essentials of the gospel is both evil & cruel because it results in eternal ruin for those deceived by it. Biblical love is a commitment to seek the highest good of the one loved. Yes, we should be patient, kind, & sensitive in how we talk with others (1 Cor 13:4; Col 4:6). Yes, we should show compassion to those who are lost & alienated from Christ (Mt 9:36). Love doesn't take selfish advantage of others, but sacrifices self for the good of others. Love is to be the very atmosphere that permeates the church as we grow in Christ (Eph 4:16b). In fact, the phrase **in love** occurs 6 times in Eph (1:4; 3:17; 4:2, 15, 15; 5:2), more than in any other NT letter. But, biblical love isn't wishy-washy & sickening sweet. Jesus, who always acted lovingly, called the Pharisees hypocrites, blind guides, fools, & whitewashed tombs (Mt 23:13, 16, 17, 27)! He confronted the disciples as men of little faith. I'm not suggesting that we go around calling people names or blasting them in the name of love or truth, but we need to understand that true love involves confronting false teachers & those who persist in sin, because continuing in sin will destroy them. Truth without love can be harsh. But, love without truth can be deadly. It isn't genuine love, because spiritual error always destroys. Take love from

truth & you have tyranny, in which a church imposes human standards on those within it. Take truth from love & all you have is a kumbaya moment. But if you express love, for God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, each other, & the world while proclaiming the truth of God, what do you have? You have all the marks of a true church, because they will all grow out of this. Love for God leads to joy because nothing is more joyful than knowing & loving Him. Love for Jesus leads to holiness, sanctification. As He Himself said, **If you love Me, you will keep My commandments** (Jn 14:15). Love for the Spirit leads to fruitfulness & ministry because true fruit & service can't be done apart from Him & His power. Love for God's Word leads to truth. If we love it we'll read it & grow in knowledge of what it contains. Love for the world leads to missions. Love for other believers leads to unity. Mature believers whose lives are marked by love won't be victims of false teaching (14) but will be living & proclaiming the true gospel to a deceived & deceiving world. A healthy church body has doctrinal discernment & it practices truth balanced by love.

3. A healthy body grows toward Christ-likeness by submitting to His lordship in all areas . Paul includes himself when he writes, 15b

Growing in Christ is a lifelong quest. Even after Paul had been a Christian for many years, he said he hadn't yet arrived, but he pressed on toward the goal of maturity in Christ (Phil 3:12-14). We are to **grow up in all aspects into Christ**. This means bringing every area of your life under Christ's lordship as commanded in His Word. **The head ... Christ** expresses a familiar analogy of Paul's indicating Christ's authority, leadership, & controlling power (Eph 1:22; Col 1:18; Eph 5:23; Col 2:19). He is our head. Humans are declared dead when the EKG flat-lines, signifying brain death. As the brain is the control center of physical life, so Jesus is the source of life & power to the church. Your thought life should grow up into Christ. Your emotional life should grow up into Christ. How you use your body should grow up into Christ. The same applies to all of your relationships & to your business practices. It applies to your use of time, money, & possessions. The fruit of the Spirit as contrasted with the deeds of the flesh in Gal 5 (19-23) is a good place to see what's involved in Christ-like behavior, but all of the NT expands on what this means. Paul's mentioning

Christ as the head refers to His leadership, lordship, & care for His body. Just as your head controls your body & directs the members of the body to care for one another, so Christ does in the church. Just as your head doesn't cut off a sore finger but tenderly nurses it back to health, so Christ does for a wounded member of His body. Therefore, you can draw near to Him when you're hurting, knowing that He cares for you. To grow into His likeness is to be completely subject to His controlling power, obedient to His every thought & expression of will. It's to personify Paul's prayers, **For to me, to live is Christ** (Phil 1:21) & **it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me** (Gal 2:20). Are we as a church growing in our Christ-likeness? Are we submitting to His lordship in all things?

4. A healthy body has every member contributing to the growth of the whole (16). Vs 16 goes full circle back to vs 7, where Paul emphasized that each of us has been given a gracious spiritual gift to use in service to one another. The church isn't a one-man-ministry. Every part has something vital to contribute. Every person in the body of Christ is gifted by the Holy Spirit & is called to participate in the ministry of Christ. We each have a significant task to perform. No one is insignificant, no one is unimportant. There's no such thing as a misfit in the body of

Christ because Christ Himself, the Head of the Body, is the One who makes sure that we fit together & knit together into the unity of His Body. Some scholars argue that **every joint** refers to the gifted leaders of 4:11, whereas **each individual part** refers to the rest of the body. But in my opinion, that seems to read too much into & takes Paul's analogy too far. I believe he's simply saying that every part of the body has a function to perform. When all of the parts are working in accordance with their specific function, the body grows in love. This verse has 2 practical applications. 1st, the phrase **fitted & held together** implies that we must be close to one another in order to grow. Paul used **fitted together** in 2:21 to refer to us as stones in the temple being joined together. To fit those stones together, the mason has to chip off the rough edges. For us to be fitted & joined together, God has to chip off our rough edges & teach us to show mercy to one another in love (4:2). 2nd, Paul's emphasis on every joint supplying & each individual part working properly shows that every Christian must be a functioning, serving member of the body. If your body has a non-working part, you're to some degree incapacitated. God saved you to serve Him. The goal of all ministry is **the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love**. Ministry is having

your cup brim-full of Jesus & then getting around others & slopping Jesus onto them. Figure out where you fit into the body & start serving the Lord! Why? Because you're told to. Every believer is called to ministry. If your gift is teaching, then you better teach! If it's hospitality, you better be hospitable! If it's evangelism, you'd better evangelize! If it's to be a caregiver to shut-ins, then do it! If it's to help & serve behind the scenes, then help & serve! Each of us is called to do our part, thus ensuring that all the ministry is being fulfilled. The growth of the church isn't a result of clever methods or strategies or schemes but of every one of us in the Body fully using our spiritual gifts in close contact with one another. The power in the church flows from the Lord through individual believers & the relationships we have with each other.

Doctrinal discernment, practicing truth with love, growing toward Christ-likeness, & everyone has a ministry. I don't share these 4 vital signs so that we'll go around taking the specks out of the eye of other churches. May the Lord keep us from spiritual pride! I share them so that we'll honestly evaluate ourselves & take the log out of our own eye! Are you growing in doctrinal discernment so that you aren't tossed around by all of the waves & winds of doctrine? Are you practicing,

confessing, & proclaiming the truth of the gospel in the love of Christ? Are you growing towards Christ-likeness in all areas of life as you submit to His lordship? Are you serving so as to contribute to the growth of the whole body in love? As we grow in these areas together, this city will get a glimpse, however imperfect, through this body of our glorious head, our Lord & Savior Jesus Christ! Isn't that what we want? It better be!

The sum of all that these truths teach is that every individual believer is to stay close to Jesus, faithfully using his spiritual gift in close contact with every believer he touches, & that through such commitment & ministry the Lord's power will flow for the **building up** of the Body in love. How is ABC doing in these 4 areas? Doctrinal discernment, practicing truth in love, growing toward Christ-likeness, & every member involved in ministry? & yes, I do want you to answer that. Let me know. Let your G² leader know. Let your elders know. We want to know how we're doing as measured by God's vital signs for a church & we want you to be part of the solution by maturing & serving together with us.