

Month of Mission

iv. What does a healthy Church look like?

Ephesians 4:14-16 & Revelation 2:1-7

Over the past few weeks we have been grappling with this series in the month of mission with the focus on Ephesians 4. This has been such a beautiful journey looking at a church renowned for its faithfulness, its perseverance and persistence in the truth of the Gospel and for us today, the legacy that this church has left behind. Up to this point, we have looked at three incredible aspects of Ephesians 4: The One who formed the church, being Jesus, who descended and ascended, the conquering King who does not keep gifts for Himself or for His own enjoyment and pleasure but rather gives gifts, specifically that indescribable gift, the understanding that love without truth is merely soft and sentimental while truth without love can be hard and legalistic and of course, the fact that, as God's people, as part of the body of Christ, the church, we should be preparing His people for His works of service, building each other up until we, as one church and body, reach unity and maturity in faith.

For many years, we as a people, have been fixated on this idea or concept of a healthy church. 500 - 600 years ago, we as human beings would have probably looked at the church as being healthy if the members went to service religiously without fail. Maybe it would have been a healthy church if its members accepted the words of the priest or pastor as infallible and inerrant. Maybe it would have been a healthy church if its members did not question doctrine, teaching or traditions. Maybe it was a healthy church if its members paid what they had to for their indulgences, performed their acts of penance and sang hymns deemed fit and proper by the elite and chosen group.

We fast-forward half a century and we are still trying to figure... this... out... Have the marks and characteristic changed, do these things still define a healthy church? Probably not. Now a days, we look at the church and characterize it as healthy is it has a full, loud and vibrant band singing the latest worship songs. It is a healthy church if its leaders, elders and pastors keep up with the latest fashions, are flamboyant, energetic and eloquent. It's a healthy church if its membership is 1000-2000-3000 people strong. It's a healthy church if it has some kind of political and social influence. It's a healthy church if it is making money.

While these attributes and characteristic are seen in many healthy, flourishing churches, I assure you that it is not these things that create a healthy church. First and foremost, something that is of the utmost importance when trying to understand what a healthy church looks like is remarkably simple and I want to pose this as a question: "Is it Biblical?" Ephesians 4:14-16 offers us an amazing insight in to what this looks like in four striking points:

Firstly, a healthy church is not an infantile church, "tossed back and forth by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming." Let me say this, this has nothing to do with the age of the church nor the age of its members. Simply put, it come down to the knowledge and understanding of the Word of God which Paul calls truth. Without knowledge and understanding of the word of God, it becomes so easy for us to be swayed and convinced by a fine sounding argument. Paul uses this image of being tossed back and forth which is so fitting. We jump between thoughts, beliefs and ideas because at times, we don't know any better. Ever argument, thought, belief and idea is easy to follow when we know no better. Yet truth in this sense is more than simply knowledge and understanding of the word of God, the truth that Paul speaks about is not an idle truth, more than that, it is allowing the truth, knowledge and understanding, to determine how we live out our lives and live out the gifts God has given us in a biblical manner.

Secondly, a healthy church is one that uses words well. At some point we all get caught in the trap of using too few words, possibly because we're too shy or in too much of a hurry, using too many words, possibly because we're not entirely sure of what we want to say or need to say so we just go overboard with it, in order to try and get our point across. This correlates somewhat with our first point: knowing and understanding the truth, allowing it to dictate how we live and by doing so, it will dictate our words. Words of course are at times more powerful than a physical action, they

sometime cut deep and hurt worse, and yet sometimes they offer the most hope and the most comfort and thus allowing the truth to dictate our lives, we are able to differentiate and discern between the two. We are called to do is to speak out the truth, not as cold legalism, pointing out facts, not gossiping behind the backs of people pointing out their faults or shortcomings, but in love, lifting each other up and building up each other in love.

Thirdly, a healthy church is growing towards Christ. In today's world, culture and society, we are bombarded with the view that it is all about me. And there are times where the church gets caught in that mind set as well. "I don't like the way we sang that song so I can't worship properly", "I didn't get anything from today's message, I didn't feel that personal connection, the pastor didn't look at me directly once during the service, so I'm not going back"... We need to move away from this self-centred identity and towards an identity where Christ is the central focus. If He is the head, what makes us think we don't need Him in order to function? The head is what controls the entire body and not the other way around. The body cannot survive without the head.

And finally, a healthy church is one that is growing together. Paul uses this image of the body "that grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." It amazes me every time when I consider the way in which the body works. If you look at how a cut heals itself, when one cell is damaged, the others do not simply leave it to fend for itself, cut it out of the group, rather, they begin to work together, each cell performing what it was designed to do, its own function and purpose, to correct the problem, to grow together and replace what has been damaged, and in so doing, the cut is healed restoring what was broken. We, as the church, as the body of Christ, need each other and need to be there for each other, building and lifting the other up in truth and in love.

Each of these points work together, and not against each other. They do not act in isolation of each other and they cannot be separated. And what holds this all together is simple, it is truth and love. The church at Ephesus was called to account in Revelation 2:4, "**Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.**" That is, they have forsaken the love they had at first for Christ and the love they had for each other. They had worked hard, persevered, they did not tolerate the wicked men and tested those who claimed to be apostles but were not, they endured hardships and through all of it, they did not grow weary. For this, they are praised yet it means nothing without love. As **1 Corinthians 13:1-3 says, If I... I gain nothing.**" Christ is and has to always remain our first love, and we ought never forget about the love we have for each other, as one body, as one family, as one church, united in Him who is the Head, Christ Jesus.

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