

“... by his Spirit, through his word, ...”

Introduction

Contemporant video [3 mins]

“The church is the gathering of God’s people, around Christ...”

We saw last time that the church is all about Jesus.

- We gather around him as our Head, our Husband, our Shepherd, our Cornerstone.

But this process of gathering people around Christ is on ongoing work.

- As you read about God’s church in the NT you will see time and again that God wants his church to *grow*.
- It’s not static.

And the church is to grow in two ways: outward and upward.

Outward because, while we here have been gathered in to God’s church, there are still many others out there that God also wants to bring in. And so his plan is for the church grow out, grow in numbers.

And grow **upward** because God wants us to grow in maturity as well. We are God’s family, God’s children, → and children should be growing and maturing into adulthood within the family of the church.

This growth of God’s church — outward and upward — is always “by his Spirit, and through his word”.

- That’s what we’re going to be focusing on today.

These are not two different ways in which God grows his church, as though__

- Mon–Wed it’s Spirit and Thu–Sun it’s word;
- nor is it as though in charismatic churches it’s the Spirit while in evangelical churches it’s the word.

No. The two always go together.

- We’d have more success trying to separate our breath from our speech than separating God’s Spirit from God’s word.
- Indeed, as Eph 6 tells us, the ‘sword of the Spirit ... is the word of God’.
- So what God has joined together let no one separate.

Let’s have a look, now, at how God’s Spirit wants to grow our churches OUT and UP.

1. Growing the church out

Our God is a gathering God.

- Not because he’s needy or lonely or insecure.
- But because the perfect love that the Father, Son, and Spirit have for each other overflows.
- It’s such a wonderful love, that God wants to share it with his creatures. Amazing!

He is a gathering God.

- And he is still in the business of gathering people today.
- God wants his church to keep growing.
- Seeking and saving the lost.

This happens “by his Spirit, through his word”.

What happened to the Thessalonians is typical of how God gathers people into his church.

1 Thessalonians 1

4 For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. 6 You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. 7 And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 8 The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, 9 for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Note the Spirit of God at work through the word of God.

- Paul, Silas, and Timothy preached the gospel to them, with words (v5). No one can come to Christ unless they hear the word of the gospel.

Perhaps you've heard the silly phrase "Preach the gospel, if necessary use words".

It makes about as much sense as saying "Feed the hungry, if necessary use food".

- So the word is crucial. But v5 goes on to say that this message came not with words alone, 'but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction'.
- Unless the Spirit works the words will find a hardened heart that cannot accept the truth. He is the only one who can soften hearts, unstop deaf ears, take the scales away from people's eyes.
- You see it again in v6: 'you welcomed the message ... with the joy given by the Holy Spirit'.

And then v9-10 are a wonderful case study of what coming to Christ actually looks like.

- They turned away from the idols they had been living for up until this point,
- And instead they turned to serve the living and true God.

- Looking back, they had come to understand that it was Jesus who had rescued them from the coming wrath, by his death and resurrection.
- And looking forward, they had no fear of that coming judgement, but were eagerly waiting for Jesus' return and all that that will mean.

This is a beautiful picture of God growing his church OUTWARDS “by his Spirit, through his word”.

What difference does this make?

a) Some churches have lost their drive

Some churches have completely lost any drive for evangelism. They've forgotten that God is still gathering people to himself.

Instead, for them, church has become ___

- a social club,
- or a place where we are comforted by the regularity of ritual and tradition,
- we come for the Lord's supper,
- or to sing our favourite hymns,
- or even recite the confession and creeds.

And all of those things are great. But any idea that we're supposed to be reaching the lost has disappeared.

When this happens it is very sad.

But I think, by and large, that we here come from churches who want to grow. And that's a good thing.

But how to grow? That's the question. And ___

b) Some churches have lost their confidence

They've lost their confidence that the Spirit will work through the word.

And when you're not sure that the gospel will be enough, you need to find something else. Here are some things I have noticed churches putting their trust in.

- Some think the key to growth is by “being relevant” to the surrounding culture. There's a temptation, then, to let go of the parts of God's word that our community may find offensive.
- Some have lost confidence in the word and have gone for gimmicks instead. Pet blessings is the one that comes to mind.
- Some think the key to growth is “Build it and they will come”. And so they build a large, state-of-the-art auditorium, with book shop and café included.
- Some think the key to growth is being cool, hip, and cutting-edge. [Even as I use the word “hip” I realise I am not cutting-edge.] They provide enjoyable experiences, there are smoke machines, and a rock concert as well. Being “contemporvant” is the order of the day.
- Some have centred their ministry around a particular leader who becomes a guru. And it's the power of his or her personality that seems to draw people in.
- Still others think the key to growth is the latest craze or bestseller. “We need to do *Alpha*. No, *A Purpose Driven Life*. No, it's the emerging church. No, God's working through missional communities now. No, it's...”
- Friends, some of those things may be fine, (some are not). The question is: where does our confidence lie? Is it in God's Spirit working through his word? Or is it in some kind of “silver bullet” that we think is going to fix all of our problems?

Brothers, sisters, one thing that CU and FOCUS have taught me is that people are more interested in learning about God from his word than I think they are.

- I don't know why I keep doubting this. This is a lesson I need to keep relearning. Perhaps it's the devil whispering lies to me; I'm not sure.
- But I keep feeling a tug to spend less time in God's word and more time doing the things I think students *really* want to do.
- But it's not true! The sheep know the voice of their shepherd, and they delight in hearing God speak through the Bible.

God has said that he will grow his church.

And he has given us everything we need to play our part.

Let's us have a renewed confidence that God will work by his Spirit, and through his word, to gather people in.

2. Growing the church up

OK. We've thought a bit about how God grows the church OUT.

Let's turn our attention now to how God wants to grow his church UP / grow in maturity. And a helpful passage for us to see that in is Ephesians 4; (which was read for us).

First of all, let's see who Paul is talking to:

Ephesians 4

¹ As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Paul is speaking to everyone in the church at Ephesus.

And the oneness and the unity of the church couldn't be more emphasised.

- One body (v4)
- One Spirit

- One hope
- One Lord, and so on.

But although they are already members of God's church, that's not the end, it's not static.

- Paul wants them to make sure they're living a life worthy of the calling they have received (v1).
- They are to make every effort to keep the unity they already have (v3).

These are signs that God wants our churches to be growing UPWARDS, not remaining static, (and certainly not going backwards!).

At ***the end*** of the passage we see what the goal of this growth is.

Halfway through v12__

Ephesians 4

¹² ... 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.

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 people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of 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.

Can you see the goal? This is a picture of where God wants his church to grow UPWARDS to:

- maturity,
- fullness,
- no longer infants getting tossed about by false teaching,
- but instead being marked by truth and love.

And Paul uses one of the metaphors for church we didn't have time to look at earlier in the week: the church as the body of Christ.

- We are to be growing up into the Head, that is Jesus.

OK.

- So we've looked at the beginning and seen Paul's audience.
- We've looked at the end and seen the goal.
- ***In the middle*** of the passage we see God's plan to achieve this growth and bring us to maturity.

Ephesians 4

⁷ But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ⁸ This is why it says:

*"When he ascended on high,
he took many captives
and gave gifts to his people."*

⁹ (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? ¹⁰ He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)

There are details there that I'm not going to engage with due to lack of time.

What I want you to see, v7–8, is that each of us has been given gifts as Christ thought it best to apportion things.

And if you look at v11 you'll see how these gifts are used by God to grow the church UP into maturity.

Ephesians 4

¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his 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.

Diagram A

Four gifts are mentioned in v11.

- Christ has given the 'apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers'. I'm not going to try to break down exactly what those different roles are right now. ([There was an elective on the](#)

different gifts this afternoon. So you can talk to Kirrily and Alan about that.)

- What I want you to notice is that all of them are what we might call “word gifts”. They are all people who bring God’s word to others.
- There is a certain priority to these “word gifts” because God grows his church “by his Spirit, through his word”. This should come as no surprise to us.
 - God’s word is powerful.
 - He spoke and brought creation into being in the first place.
 - He spoke again, in the gospel, and made us new creations when we became Christians.
 - And now his word continues to work in us, as Christians.
- The Christians with these word gifts have a job to do: v12, they are equipping / training the rest of the church.

Diagram B

- It’s crucial that these pastors and teachers are devoted to word and prayer. (Why “word and prayer”? Because God grows us by his Spirit, through his word.)
 - so as to equip us and train us
 - so that we can go and serve one another with the gifts that we have.
- Pastors/Ministers/Elders/Vicars are not to monopolise ministry, but multiply ministry. Their job is to equip God’s people for works of service.

Diagram C

- And that’s all the rest of us in the church. We need to be equipped to use our gifts to serve the body.
- And service = ministry = the same word. So who is “doing the ministry” in church? All of us! God’s people! The church!

And that is how the body of Christ, the church, is going to be built up and reach maturity.

Diagram D

- Not by the actions of the pastor or teacher or elder or some other leader — not directly anyway.
- It is through us — all of us — as we use our gifts that the whole church is going to grow up and reach maturity.

What difference does this make?

Four things.

1, Put to death the idea that your pastors / vicars / elders are the ones who're supposed to do all the ministry.

As an example of this, a while ago in my church an elderly member fell ill and was hospitalised.

Another older member heard what had happened, and so visited them in hospital. They spent time there, read some Bible with them, prayed for them.

Then they called the pastor and kind of complained, saying: "No one from the church has visited this person!"

What they meant was: none of the staff have visited. But our pastor gently corrected them saying: "Someone from the church has visited them. You! And that's wonderful. ... But I will also visit as soon as I can."

This is one reason why I don't like calling our leaders "the minister". Because we're all ministering / we're all serving.

2, Head to your church gathering with an attitude of service.

If you had an exam tomorrow, then tonight is not the night to go out and have a big one, is it? Tonight's not the night for the late movie, or to have a couple of beers. ... Tonight you might do a bit of study, and then you'll get some sleep so that you will be at your best tomorrow morning.

That is how we must think of our Saturday nights if we attend a Sunday morning church service.

We want to be at our best Sunday morning (or whenever you gather with your church).

- Sleep early the night before.
- Arrive early to welcome newcomers.
- Think about the vibe you are giving off during the service. Sing like you mean it! Don't check your Facebook. Take notes of the sermon. But if it's on your laptop/tablet mute it and dim your screen.
- Hang around after the service to build relationships.
- Talk about things that matter — the Bible passage that was taught, for example.
- Take the time to pray with people about their concerns → right there over morning tea; why not?

Come with that attitude of serving others.

3, The ***training*** of Christians to use their gifts is super important. We need leaders in the church, yes. But more than that we need leaders *who can teach us and train us with the word of God.*

This is the heartbeat of what should be going on in our churches.

- gathering around Jesus
- hearing his word taught to us
- so that we can be trained to love and serve others.

So take every opportunity that comes your way to be trained and equipped, won't you?

I've got a 4th application for you, and it's about these "word gifts". And I'm going to take some time here because I'm speaking to you university students who are smart, able, gifted, and many of you will be future leaders in your chosen field.

We've seen that there is a bit of a distinction between what we might call "word gifts" and "all the other gifts".

- This distinction does not only appear in Eph 4.
- You see it other places as well.

1 Peter 4

¹⁰ Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. ¹¹ If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Two broad categories of gifts.

You see it in Acts 6 as well. ___

Acts 6

¹ In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ² So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

Note that the apostles felt there was a priority to the ministry of word and prayer.

- Now, let me be very clear.
- The last thing I want to do here is to create two levels of Christians; one more important than the other.

Let's think about this for a moment. If you had to draw a picture of the church, what would it look like?

Should we draw a pyramid? Pastors/Elders up the top? Then the rest of the church members down the bottom?

That picture is full of hierarchy, isn't it?

I want you to notice that this is not the picture Paul uses. His picture looks like this: a body.

Because the pastors/elders are not up the top. Jesus is.

And everyone else, whatever their role or gifting, are just different parts of the body.

- Elders, pastors, teachers ... they have a really important job. They have to use their gifts to equip the rest of us by teaching us the word of God.
- That's where the priority comes. Not because they're better or more important. But because God grows his church: "by the Spirit, through the word".

So the application is this:

4, If God has given you a gift to handle his word well, then make that a priority.

This is what your staffworkers in the room have chosen to do.

- Each of them were training in some profession or other.
- But there were Christians around them who tapped them on the shoulder and said "You actually have some gifts in handling God's word here, you should keep doing that."

And I have no doubt in the world that there are many students in this room who are just like that.

→ And you should keep prioritising those gifts too.

I would advise all of you to take every opportunity to serve that comes your way. If your staffworker or pastor asks you to lead in prayer, or read the Bible aloud, or welcome that newcomer → go for it!

- But if your staffworkers are tapping you on the shoulder because they see a gift in you to handle God's word well → then I want to encourage you to take 2 years out to do an apprenticeship with us.

Doing an apprenticeship does not mean that you have decided to give the rest of your life over to full-time ministry ... yet. But it's a great way to:

- Stop being so individualistic and actually listen to what the church is saying to you / what they've noticed about you. Don't be quick to brush away that tap on the shoulder. The body of Christ has noticed something about you → you should listen to that.
- To get trained to use your gifts. If you don't end up doing word-ministry full-time → I tell you what: your pastors will thank God for you / you'll be such an asset in your church.
- And many, many of you will go on to Bible college and from there ... who knows? A missionary overseas, prison chaplain, youth pastor, evangelist, or even a staffworker on a university campus.

Diagram E

I guess what I'm saying, is that some of you here need to think about moving over here.

And an apprenticeship is the best way I can think of to work through if that's you.

The census came out last week.

- Melbourne's population is now around 4,400,000.
- Do some numbers with me. Let's imagine we want to see 10% of Melbourne come to Christ. (Actually we want to see *everyone* come to Christ, right? But let's pick a figure.)
- 10% = 440,000 people.
- Let's imagine that they're each a part of a great church of, say, 200 members. That'd be a good-sized church, wouldn't it?
- That means we need 2,200 churches in Melbourne that are healthy, teaching the Bible well, warm community of genuine relationships, who are seeking to take the gospel out to community around them.

Can you think of 2,200 churches in Melbourne that fit that description?

Neither can I.

And that's just Melbourne.

- We haven't even thought about rural Victoria.
- Or the other states.
- Let alone the rest of the world.

We have, under God, a huge job to do.

- We need our current churches to be going well.
- And we need lots more new churches to be planted.
- And those churches are going to need leaders.

Where are they going to come from, friends?

... I suspect many of them are at university right now.

3. Our ultimate authority in the church

I hope you've been seeing how God gathers people into his church "by his Spirit, through his word" (= growing out); and also how God's Spirit and word are crucial in the maturing of God's people in the church (= growing up).

I want to finish by sharing with you a diagram that someone showed me when I was a uni student and which has stayed with me ever since. I've found it so helpful in many situations.

It's about where we find our absolute authority on matters of truth. Some of you will have seen this before. Others not.

Given all that we've said about God working "by his Spirit and through his word", it should come as no surprise to you that your highest authority in matters of faith should be God's Spirit-inspired word = the Bible.

- God’s word is always trustworthy and true.
- God has given us everything we need for our Christian walk in the Bible.

Quadrilateral diagram

All these areas will contain some truth that we can learn from. OK?
None of them are “bad”.

But they can certainly come into tension with one another.

- And at that point one or the other is going to win.

I’m going to try to quickly illustrate how these different areas might come into tension, using marriage as a test case.

Experience

- Imagine a man who is unhappy in his marriage, and decides to divorce his wife, because his experience of God is that God wants him to be happy. After all, he might argue, “God is love”.
- But we know from the Bible that marriage is for life. And the answer in that situation — even though I acknowledge it may be very hard — is to work on your marriage, not look elsewhere.

Tradition

- Imagine a young man, brought up in the Roman Catholic tradition. He would like to get married, but he is also considering becoming a priest. Now in Catholicism priests are to remain celibate / single.
- Even though when you read your Bible about the qualifications for someone being an elder or a pastor it says they must be the husband of but one wife. And if they have children they must be running the family well and raising their kids in the Lord.

Reason

- Picture a young couple, dating. And they're both Christians and they're heading for marriage. And up until now they've remained holy and haven't crossed any boundaries. But the temptation is there. And more than that, they say to one another: if we're going to be together for the rest of our lives, doesn't it make sense / isn't it reasonable to make sure we're sexually compatible before we make that huge commitment?
- It may seem reasonable to us in 2017. But God's word is clear, isn't it? The timescale in Gen 2 is that a man leaves his parents, begins a new family with his wife, and that is the time that it's appropriate for them to be "as one", emotionally / physically/ sexually / and all the rest.

Family

- Now I want you to picture a young Chinese woman who has become a Christian while studying in Australia. She has learnt that if she marries it must be to a Christian man. But upon returning home to her family in China her mother tells her how much she hopes she can be married soon, and make her a grandparent as well! In fact, her mum has a few photos with her of nice young men who she can arrange for her to meet.
- Our families —not always, but often — our families are blessings to us. And we owe our parents a lot. But they are not God. And we need to listen to him above everything else.
- In this situation this young woman needs to obey God #1, but also try to honour her parents while she is doing that. So she may need to ask her mum if she can help find some nice young *Christian* men that she could meet.

You get the idea, don't you? There is truth to be found in each of these quadrants, but the only one that is always 100% reliable is God's word in the Bible.

Everything else is tainted by sin. Everything else will contain a mixture of errors with the truth.

So hold on to God's word, my friends, won't you?

Conclusion

What I hope you have seen through the talk tonight is that God wants his church to grow. Outward and Upward.

- He wants you — sister, brother — to keep growing as a Christian.
- And his plan for how you will keep growing to maturity *is in community*.
- It's in the church.

Your church is the place where your leaders will be teaching you and training you from the word of God.

Your church is the place where you are to be edified, challenged, rebuked, encouraged, supported to keep going the distance as a Christian.

So stick close to your church.

And stick close to the word.

Prayer

As I pray this prayer why don't you think of your particular church that you're a member of.

Dear God,

Thank you for our churches. Thank you that you have given us a community of believers where we can belong.

We pray for our churches that you will raise up the leaders we need. Leaders who will teach your word to us faithfully, and so equip us to serve the body.

We pray that you will help each of us to play our own part, using whatever gifts and abilities you've given us.

And we pray that each of churches will be healthy places where the body is growing up into Jesus, and so becoming mature.

We pray this in his name,

Amen.