

A Healthy Body **Ephesians 4:11-16**

Last week we started a short message series to clarify the elders' vision for East Lincoln. We looked at some verses in Ephesians 4 that helped us to first see what our goal is and this week we're going to look at those same verses to see how Christ designed churches to function in order to reach their goal. It's great to have a clear goal to aim for, but you also need the right structure, plans and resources to reach it. Christ knew what he was doing when he designed and established the church 2,000 years ago and we don't need to invent something new, but we do need to see and follow what he did and what he wants to do in our church, and that's not very easy in our culture.

The goal for the church we saw in Ephesians 4:11-16 was that we all attain to maturity in Christ – becoming like him in every way and helping others do the same. In this way we become Christ to the world. We acknowledged that churches often focus on one important aspect of Christ, usually the thing that's most important to the pastor or key leaders, rather than seeking to experience and become all of who Christ is. And that's something we need to avoid. Another common problem has to do with how a local church functions to try to reach the goal, and that's what we're going to look at today.

Let's think a little bit more about what we see in local churches and some trends in how they operate that may be leading them off track. I've noticed that a lot of churches seem to gravitate toward a business-model mentality in our culture, where they rely heavily on the structure and methods of corporate America to function and try to reach their goals. Churches reflect businesses in a lot of ways and it's so normal in our culture, we probably don't even think anything of it. Some of these practices can be helpful, but some can actually undermine the effectiveness of the church without the church even knowing it.

So let me try to describe what I've seen and maybe you've seen it as well. Most churches have a Sr. Pastor who functions like the president or CEO of a small company. (Picture – Church Org. Chart) He's the professional leader who gives inspiring messages, along with leadership and direction for the church. He usually has some kind of leadership board that supports him and makes decisions that affect the overall direction of the church, and then he hires people or finds devoted volunteers to run the key ministries of the church. So there ends up

being a few people in leadership who are doing most of the work of ministry while the rest focus on their own personal growth. (Picture – Sunday School Class) Most discipleship takes place in the sanctuary or classroom with one designated preacher or teacher and the rest are listeners and learners.

What ends up happening is the majority of people naturally become spectators and consumers. They're learning, but don't really get involved in discipleship and ministry beyond that. They don't really need to because the church is set up in way that doesn't encourage or depend on it. It's a convenient way to do ministry in our culture and it yields some fruit, and it appears to be successful as long as people keep coming to the church.

But there are some problems I've seen and you've probably seen as well. Are these churches successful? Are they reaching the goal Christ has for us? What I see is that spiritual growth reaches a certain point and plateaus – people have head knowledge and Christian morality but it doesn't really translate into action or ministry. (Picture – Spiritual Infant) People remain spiritual infants because the church doesn't need or challenge them to get involved in ministry and discipleship. So churches might look successful as long as numbers are growing, but if most people are consumers and spectators, they aren't really accomplishing Christ's goal of making mature disciples. Churches can become a mile wide, but only an inch deep.

Another problem is that the stability of most churches depends way too much on their Sr. Pastor (Picture – Pastor preaching) – a regular, fallible, fellow struggler, who isn't perfect and will make mistakes, just like every other follower of Christ. I do think there's a place for key leaders and communicators within the church, but most churches put way too much dependence on one man. If he's a great leader and godly man and the church grows and does really well because of his leadership – that's not a good thing. Why would I say that? Because look at what happens when he leaves... The true strength of the church is revealed – way too much dependence on one man rather than a steady, ongoing team of elder shepherd leaders.

Churches often go through major upheaval when a good Sr. Pastor leaves. So much depended on his leadership that when he leaves, there's a gaping hole and progress gets put on hold. It takes a long time to find a replacement and the new guy almost never adequately fits his shoes. At that point it's easy for people to go

church shopping in search of greener pastures because they're consumers and spectators.

The elders here at East Lincoln believe there is a better way for our church to function in order to be strong, healthy, and reach our goal. And it's not something we came up with. It's something Christ came up with and we read about it in Ephesians 4. So we need to see it and pattern our church after it. These are the same verses we studied last week to find our goal; this time we're looking for how Jesus designed local churches to function.

Read Ephesians 4:11-16.

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, 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.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.

You can see Christ's goal for the church that we looked at last week interwoven throughout these verses, and now I want us to pay attention to what these verses say about how he designed churches to reach this goal. How do churches encourage everyone to reach Christ-like maturity? It starts with a unique kind of leadership – different than that of corporate America. The church Christ designed doesn't have a president or CEO or even a Sr. Pastor. It also doesn't have a Reverend Alden from the Little House on the Prairie with a flock of 40-50 people he takes care of. Christ's design was different.

Paul outlines the leadership behind a healthy church in verse 11. My understanding of this verse is that it conveys two waves of leadership. First you have what we know as missionaries or church planters. These were teams consisting of apostles, prophets, and evangelists who went into new cities, proclaimed the gospel, taught the Word of God, gathered new believers, and taught them the ways of Christ. Paul and his teams are great examples of this.

Planting and establishing a church was a process that took 2-3 years in most cases, and eventually they would get to the point where they would appoint elders from within that new group of believers to carry out the long-term role of shepherding and teaching within the church (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). This is the second wave of leadership. This allowed the church planters to move on to other cities while the elders remained. There are many examples of this in the New Testament, and each is unique, but in every case you see these two waves.

The one I want us to pay most attention to today is the second wave – the long-term, ongoing leadership of elders in a local church – the shepherds and teachers. The New Testament pattern is that a group of elders provided shared leadership in each church, not just one elder or Sr. Pastor. I think we mistakenly get our idea of a Sr. Pastor from looking at Paul's ministry or Timothy's, but these guys were apostles, or missionaries who planted and established churches and moved on, not local elders who remained for the long haul. It was teams of elders that led churches.

And the kind of leadership they gave was unique. They didn't put themselves in an elevated position of experts who were responsible to do everything. The way they led was demonstrated best by shepherds tending a flock of sheep. We get a description of this in 1 Peter 5:2-3: *"Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock."* Elders led by humility, by serving, by example, and by love. It involved caring for and serving people, guiding and teaching them, protecting them, and showing them the way of Christ.

The goal of these leaders was probably different than what we're used to seeing in churches. They weren't responsible to do the ministry in the local church while the rest of the people received from them. In Ephesians 4:12 Paul says that Christ gave the shepherds and teachers *"to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ."* Elders were to shepherd and teach the saints in order to equip them, and then the saints did the work of ministry so that the body of Christ was built up and the local church accomplished their goal.

Paul reiterates this in verses 15-16: *"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.” It’s when the whole body is engaged in ministry and each part is working properly that the body grows and builds itself up in love. Every joint is involved in joining and holding the body together.

So if we put this together with what we learned last week – the elders are to equip the saints to grow into maturity in Christ so that the saints can help others grow into maturity in Christ. Every member ministry. Every member engaged in becoming like Christ in every way and helping others do the same. We aren’t just trying to put on a good show on Sunday morning with a professional preacher and worship team hoping to attract more and more people. We’re trying to join together to help one another become more like Christ. And we’re all doing that. It isn’t Reverend Alden’s job to do ministry while everyone else just goes about their own business. Every member needs to grow. Every member needs to make disciples. Every member needs to do their part in the body. Every member is valuable. Each of us is unique and God has given each of us an important role for the building up of the whole body.

That’s how Christ designed the church to function in order to be strong, healthy, and reach our goal. And that’s what we’re seeking to emulate here at East Lincoln. It’s different than a lot of churches, but I think that’s because a lot of churches have gotten away from the pattern that Christ established.

So we invite you to be part of this. We invite you to move from spectator and consumer to becoming an active member and participant where you have a valuable role in ministry and building up the body of Christ.

So these first two sermons have laid the theological foundation for the elders’ vision for East Lincoln, and next week we’re going to look at what we think this could look like in our church so you can see how everything fits together and how you fit in.