

“Together, Becoming Like the Real Jesus” | Ephesians 4:11-16 (Becoming Like the Real Jesus, Together)

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(Discussion questions on page 8)

Basketball fans were shocked to learn this week that the University of Virginia men’s coach, Tony Bennett, was retiring. Two-time national coach the year, in 2019 he led the Cavaliers to a national championship. Now at the age of only fifty-five, he’s stepping down. Why?

Hearing his press conference, it wasn’t hard to discern his reason. The game is no longer the game he loves. Recent changes allow players to make millions, hire agents, and a transfer portal sees players moving from one team to another each offseason. For a coach who excels in team building, the college game is becoming a stage for individual aggrandizement.

“The game and college athletics is not in a healthy spot,” Bennett said bluntly. “... I think I was equipped to do the job here the old way. That’s who I am and that’s how it was.”¹

Well-intentioned, these changes threaten the foundation of the sport, which is *team culture*. Basketball is about a team, players committed to each other through thick and thin, where no one personality eclipses the purpose of the group.

We all can appreciate the tension Bennett has faced—the tension between the individual and the group. Steeped as we are in a culture of radical individualism, it is hard for us to integrate (even surrender) our own development and success with the purposes of the group. Whether in the context of a team, or company, or family, or nation, we tend to ask what this larger body is doing for us, rather than what we are doing for it.

This issue runs through the core of Christianity. In his letters, Saint Paul is as concerned about the spiritual development of the church body as he is about the growth of individual Christians. Paul doesn’t separate the stardom of the individual Christian from that of Team-Church. Paul is not against the solo-violinist making melody—he just knows God is forming an orchestra.

This September we spent four weeks asking what it might mean to become like the real Jesus. We looked at Jesus, the perfect expression of being human, and asked what His image revealed to us about living an authentic life. From his *sonship*, *servanthood*, *holiness*, and *heavenliness*, we learned much about human identity, purpose, character, and destiny. And it was natural, and perfectly okay, during those sermons to think mainly about how this impacted our own, individual lives.

¹ <https://www.pilotonline.com/2024/10/18/ive-given-everything-i-can-for-15-years-uva-mens-basketball-coach-tony-bennett-resigns/>

But it would be insufficient if we stopped there. Scripture never envisions a Christian's growth for his or her own sake. We become like Jesus, *together*.

Notice in our passage for today from **Ephesians 4:11-16**—which is all about growth in Christlikeness—, the inseparable relationship between the individual and the church body:

Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 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. (4:15-16).

Each individual Christian is in mind, as Paul speaks of “each part working properly.” But image of growth is more than the individual, it is the “body” that is growing, “building itself up in love.” And just as we as individuals are to grow up in Christlikeness, so too the church as a body is to grow, Paul says in verse 13, “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (v.13).

Here, then, is my question for us today, as we complete our series, *Becoming Like the Real Jesus, Together*: How does our individual growth toward Christlikeness intertwine with the Church's growth toward Christlikeness. In what ways does the individual player only realize his true stature when immersed in, and building up, the team? This passage suggests at least three ways to think about this.

I. God Calls Us Together

First, individual and corporate growth is linked because of God's calling. Back in Eph 4:1, Paul begins this vision of a unified and growing church, saying,

walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:1-3).

By God's design and calling, when a Christian is born (“born again,” is Jesus' language²), they not only become a son or daughter of God, but also a member of God's family, the church. This communal feature of God's call can be missed by modern versions of spirituality.

I have met some people who say they connect with God best in nature, so forgo coming to a church. I have met others who connect with God through the sermon or sacrament, so they slip into the service just in time to receive those, then slip out right after. Others, never enter into a thick community but prefer to enjoy various ministries of various churches that minister to their interest or spiritual needs. Others connect with their favorite pastor online, never gathering in person with God's people.

² See John 3

We may connect with God in all these ways—but none of them are a sufficient vision of biblical Christianity. When God calls a man or woman to himself, he simultaneously calls them to be a part of a larger family, His people.

The communal call sounds across Scripture: It was not good that Adam was alone, so God brought him into family; Abraham was called to become a people; Christians are called to be “members one of another” (Rom 12:5), “branches together in one Vine” (John 15), different limbs and parts of “a single body” (1 Cor 12).

Apply: A lesson for us here is that we cannot associate God’s calling with ease or with our spiritual preferences. The calling into a church is not always a call to something easy. Commitment to a people takes time, effort. And churches are not made up of perfect people. God is not a snob in the company he keeps—we are sinners, hypocrites, backsliders, lost and broken. What we have in common is not perfection, but Christ; not our giftedness, but the gift of grace that we live by.

Can you identify the church, the family of other Christians, God has called you to?

This calling into community, however, is not arbitrary. As we reflect more on our passage, we see that the community is the central *environment* where God forms us to be Christlike. The way a larger team is the necessary context for a basketball player to truly develop, so too, a Christian only grows wings when doing life amid other Christians. This brings us to our second and third ways of thinking about how the individual and community intersect in Christian growth: *how the community form us*. And then, *how we, in tandem with the people of God, participate in forming the community*.

II. The Church Community Forms Us

Text: it is clear from our passage that Paul sees the community as a necessary ingredient for the growth of individual Christians: the individual Christian is “equipped for the ministry of building up the body of Christ” (v.12)—meaning, the Christian grows wings as they use them for the benefit of the larger body. And Paul’s metaphor here—of the human body—also suggest that each individual part is nourished by being part of the larger whole:

Christ is pictured as the head (v. 15), “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” (v16).

As with human anatomy, the growth of an individual body part—say, a hand or an eye—is dependent upon the larger workings of the body—blood flow, brain neurons, and so forth.

Let’s consider then how the environment of the larger body impacts our individual growth.

To begin, let's be clear about this universal fact: *we are not ourselves by ourselves*. Never mind the modern jargon about looking within yourself, discovering yourself, then becoming yourself. We are shaped by an array of communities and relationships outside of our own control.

Imagine for a moment you could take a gigantic magnet and with it pull out from your life all the influences of your parents and family. Then imagine you use it to pull out all the influences of your schools and friends. Next you pull out all the influences of your culture. Finally, you pull out all the influences of the era you've lived in, the twentieth and twenty-first century. Now, what is left? What is left of the you that is authentically, and originally *you*—the you that is free from all external influence; the you that so bravely and originally became your true self by yourself.

It's really hard to know who we are, or who we would have become, outside of these webs of relationships, communities and contexts within which we've grown up. It seems we are less original than we'd like to think.³

Consider how communal contexts impact how we develop socially and economically. A recent report of neighborhood maps across the nation—developed by the Census Bureau in collaboration with researches at Harvard and Brown—makes the case that neighborhoods—the communities we grow up immersed within—shape children for life.⁴

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt adds that communal contexts shape us morally, our intuitions about what is right and wrong. In his book, *The Righteous Mind*, he makes the case that modern Western culture cultivates in us sharp moral concern about harm and suffering, fairness and justice, but blunts our moral sense for things like purity, deference toward authority, and loyalty (all major moral senses in other cultures and in history).

A leading philosopher of today, Charles Taylor, in his book *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, says that

The very way we walk, move, gesture, speak is shaped from the earliest moments by our awareness that we appear before others, that we stand in public space, and that this space is potentially one of respect or contempt, or pride or shame.... One is a self only among other selves.⁵

We could add the findings of neurobiologist, who say we learn to smile and speak from imitating our parents; or linguists, who suggest native language shapes worldview.

³ "Born Originals," Edward Young said, "how comes it to pass that we die Copies?" Cited in Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 93.

⁴ The New York Times: Detailed new national maps show how neighborhoods shape children for life. Find online here: <https://nrcr.org/the-new-york-times-detailed-new-national-maps-show-how-neighborhoods-shape-children-for-life/>

⁵ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, 15, 35.

Suffice it to say, as one thinker recently put it, “Each of us is, in a sense, the sum total of the network of relationships we have with others and with our environment.”⁶ We are not ourselves by ourselves.

This is not to say there is no individual, or that bad or good behavior is due only to external influences. It is to say, however, that the Bible’s view of human being, increasingly confirmed by strands of modern thinking, suggests a less autonomous structure of human life.

In fact, for Paul, one is either in the world, influenced by the spirit of the age, guided headlong by the passions of the flesh (see Eph 2:1-3), or, one is in Christ, under the sway of the Spirit of God, guided increasingly by the Word of God. These different *conditioning-contexts* are known in Scripture as the World and the Church. And if this is true, we better take seriously that God has set forth the church as the new, alternative community for forming people.

How does the church, as a community, shape us, you ask. Consider a few ways:

The **church is a family**, “the household of God” (Eph 2:19), where through the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the individual is marked out as God’s son or daughter, and invited again and again to the family table for the Great Eucharist Meal. And in worship, weekly, they see the faces and hear the voices of their brothers and sisters in Christ. Their sense of identity is shaped.

The **church is a school**, where instruction (*katēcheō*) is given from the Scriptures (Luke 1:4; Acts 18:25; 1 Cor 14:19), where authorized teachers teach the authorized word (Titus 2:1; 2 Tim 1:14). Through this teaching, the Christian’s imagination is renewed; they are relocated in the true story of the world, delivered from false narratives others live by. Through the Word they are taught what holiness is, and encouraged to develop character in line with servanthood and godliness.

The **church is a recovery group**, where the individual is not left alone in his or her sin. Rather, they can “confess their sins to one another, that they may be healed” (James 5:16). They can borrow from the strength of others in the battle with sin.

The **church is a hospital**, where the individual finds spiritual nurses and doctors to apply the balm of prayer, encouragement and healing—where individuals do not carry burdens alone, “If one member suffers, all suffer together” (1 Cor 12:26).

The **church is the practice field**, where you hone the craft of the Christian way of life, learning by encounters with real people how to imitate Christ in servanthood, how to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph 4:32)

⁶ Carl Truman, *Rise and Triumph of Modern Self*, 404.

The **church is an army**, marching onward, where the individual Christian, weak-kneed and feeble, is born along by the centuries-old momentum of God's faithful, unto the celestial city—where “because we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses ... we run with endurance the race set before us” (Heb 12:1).

On the whole, the church is not like something you add to your week, like going to the gym a few times. The church—by its liturgy, preaching, sacraments, worship, prayer, community, life-together, ongoing care, weddings, funerals—is meant to become your **native world**. The more you are live here, the more foreign becomes the world out there. This not only shapes you into the image of Christ, but prepares you to go into the world as a representative of Christ.

We have seen that God calls us into this new community and we have seen that within this community, we ourselves are shaped and formed. Lastly, we note that Paul envisions the collective body itself growing up into the stature of Christ, and each individual is called to participate in such growth. Let us ask, therefore, how we are to “build up the body of Christ, unto the stature and the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13).

III. We Build Up the Church Community toward the Full Stature of Christ

The players that God calls onto his team, are equipped

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 (Eph 4:12-13).

Verse 15 details two ways we go about this:

¹⁵ speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,

We could think of many activities that build up the church—prayer, generosity, sacrifice, learning through suffering. Paul draws our attention in this passage to truth and love—or, we might say, we build up the church through *truthing* and *loving*.

Truthing

Some people think that Paul means by “speaking the truth” simply that Christians are honest and authentic with each other—they don't lie. But he means something more specific. Paul has in mind the truth of Scripture. Christians speak the Word of God to one another.

God has ordained that He creates and builds by his Word—everything from the world to the new Christian to the Church. And the church is built up not only by the preaching of the word on Sunday, but by the speaking of the word between one Christian and another, regularly. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *Life Together*, writes:

The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. . . . The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain; his brother's is sure.

Loving

And Paul adds that we speak the truth in love. This means that our manner, and our aim, when we speak to other Christians ought to be described as love. Truth without love can be condemning. And love without truth can be enabling. We hold both together.

I think this means that before you speak with other Christians, you should pray for them. Ask God to tenderize your heart for them. Ask God to help you discern what they need to hear. And this means that before you speak to them you take time to listen to them. And only then, rooted in listening and prayer, do you speak the truth to them, lovingly.

We underestimate the power of a community that is being built up by a culture of listening, praying then speaking the word of God to each other in love. It sounds so simple, but this is God's model for building his Church—it is through such bonds the Spirit loves to move.

This past year has been a tough one for me, personally. Leading the church has just been hard this past year, as we dove into some hard things from the past. Recently, I was encouraged by someone to see a counselor, to make sure I was doing okay.

I met twice in the past month with a Christian counselor. It's made me think about just how powerful it is, to have someone listen to you and speak back to you words of truth. I almost needed re-convincing from them that it was okay for me to talk about *me* for that long. I also noticed how encouraging it was to have someone who is wise and prayerful and Christian, offer words of wisdom to me.

Friends, this is such a simple thing—listening and speaking to someone. But it has *tremendous* power. Most of us in our church family are not trained counselors, but God has given you his Spirit, he has placed you here and given you two ears to listen with, a heart to pray with, and a Bible to offer encouragement from.

It may be that by cultivating a culture where individuals listen to other individuals, and prayerfully speak the truth in love, we will experience—collectively—tremendous healing and strengthening. Whatever is the ethos of good counseling, that should flood the culture of a church where the truth is spoken in love—from one member to another. Perhaps such a culture would be preventive medicine for a culture spiraling in a mental health crisis.

God's means of building up his church is not flashy. And God's way of growth is often not fast, either. And notice this passage is not focusing on numerical growth, but growth in the quality of our being. God works over time, through the faithful presence of Christians who lock arms and lock hearts, and seek to become like the real Jesus, together.

I'll close with this from Charles Spurgeon's autobiography, because it captures how closely he associated being connected to Christ's people, with being connected to Christ:

I felt that I could not be happy without fellowship with the people of God. I wanted to be wherever they were, and if anybody ridiculed them, I wished to be ridiculed with them, and if people had an ugly name for them, I wanted to be called by that ugly name, for I felt that, unless I suffered with Christ in his humiliation, I could not expect to reign with him in his glory.⁷

We are called to *become like the real Jesus—in his Sonship, his servanthood, his holiness, his heavenlies*—and we are called to do so, together.

Let's pray.

Small Group Questions

1. Can you think of an example when you put the development or success of a group (team, family, company, church) ahead of your personal desires? How did this end up impacting your personal growth?
2. Read Ephesians 4:15-16. What is growing in this passage? Have you witnessed a church grow more like Christ? What did that look like?
3. How have other Christians impacted your growth toward Christlikeness? How have you impacted such growth in other Christians? Read Eph 4:15. Paul says we are to "speak the truth in love" in order to build up the body. What might this look like if you were to do it for a Christian friend this week?
4. Many of Jesus' and Paul's images for growth leverage organic, agrarian things (vineyards, vines, fields, plants, etc.). What might this tell you about typical growth toward Christlikeness? Should we expect this growth to be fast or slow? And what means does God typically use, across Scripture, to make things grow?
5. Are you a part of a local church? If so, how might you help build that body up this fall?

⁷ Charles Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, vol., 1, *The Early Years*, 145.