

# Life: Connected in growth

September 5, 2014

• *The Bible Studies for Life* lesson for Sept. 21 focuses on Ephesians 4:11-16.

## Introduction

One of Jesus' more well-known parables is about a mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32). It contains a simple observation of the growth of a mustard seed. The remarkable thing about a mustard seed is it starts so small and results in such a large plant it rivals a tree in size.

Jesus said the kingdom of God is like the mustard seed, referring to its inauspicious beginning, remarkable growth and dominating size. Certainly the presence of the Holy Spirit empowered kingdom growth (Acts 2:1-4). This lesson's passage also gives some insight into how the kingdom's remarkable growth has been accomplished. The Apostle Paul reveals God organized and gifted his human servants for kingdom growth.

The word "grow" appears twice in verses 15-16, and a quick survey of the passage uncovers other words related to growth. Verse 12 speaks of the body of Christ being built up. Two purposes of this building up are mentioned in verse 13: Unity—which connects to the theme of last week's lesson—and maturity in Christ. So, while God's kingdom is growing in size and influence, God's people are maturing in Christ. Believers are grown past infancy, with its associated issues (v. 14). Instead, believers grow to maturity in Christ that results in kingdom service.

## Church leaders equip us to do ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12)

Kingdom service is highlighted in verses 11-12. Paul states in verse 11 God gave gifted individuals to the body of Christ. He discusses gifting elsewhere

(Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12), emphasizing the gifting of individuals is for the greater benefit of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:7). While the other two passages explain God gifts his people, this passage emphasizes God gave gifted persons to the church. The first group of gifted ones is the apostles, the human agents through whom God authoritatively established the Christian movement. The second group is the prophets, who testified to the God-inspired direction and truth of the Christian movement. The Apostle Paul speaks of such prophets in plural, although amazingly only a few stories of Christian-era prophets are included in the New Testament (Acts 9:10-18; 21:10-11).

A third group of gifted kingdom servants are the evangelists, who had enhanced abilities to cross various social, cultural and psychological obstacles to evangelize effectively. Philip is an important example (Acts 8:4-8; 26-40; 21:8-9). The converts from such evangelization were organized into congregational groupings to be led by those mentioned next.

The fourth entry in verse 11 appears to be a group gifted for pastoral leadership (shepherding) and teaching. One pronoun governs both functions, so it is thought both functions appear in the same gifted person: a pastor/teacher. Leadership and teaching was so important for the life of the church, these two gifted abilities commonly occur in one manifestation.

An important group of believers yet remain in the gifting process. These are the vast numbers of believers constituting local congregations. Upon these believers falls the gift of ministry. Verse 12 indicates that these, "God's people," serve so the body of Christ may be built up. The word "ministry" is the standard word for ministry in the New Testament.

Surprisingly, it is the common believers who are gifted expressly for ministry to others, not the clergy or leadership. Pastoral leadership is charged with the tasks of shepherding and teaching so the people may be equipped to carry out their acts of ministry. The gift lists in Romans and 1

Corinthians will give more detail to the types of ministries the Spirit enables. Here the gifting of the common believer is summarized as ministry or service.

**The purpose of our ministry is to strive toward spiritual maturity (Ephesians 4:13)**

God has designed an impressive system of gifted ministry for his followers. The flow of gifting is “upward” from the apostles through congregational leadership to the crowning moment of ministry action by God’s people. Verse 13 declares the purpose for all this gifted activity—that the body of Christ would be built up until all reach three important goals. The first is unity, mentioned earlier in the chapter, which is described powerfully here as union in faith and the knowledge of the Son of God. The second objective is personal maturity. The third goal is an extension of the second—a maturity that attains to the fullness of Christ. Thus, all Christian ministry is empowered by God’s Spirit for the purpose of building up God’s people until they attain the maturity that reflects the character and person of Jesus.

**We are to support each other in growing toward spiritual maturity (Ephesians 4:14-16)**

Verse 14 describes the opposite of the maturity in Christ—a spiritual infancy susceptible to varieties of spiritual teachings and the craftiness of deceitful schemers. Spiritual maturity results in unity of faith, but spiritual immaturity demonstrates a weakness that succumbs to any kind of spiritual-sounding teaching and an inability to recognize the manipulations of false teachers.

Verse 15 points the devoted believer to grow up in Christ. Hence, in verses 13-15, we see a literary sandwich, emphasizing the importance of achieving Christian maturity so as to avoid the issues associated with spiritual

immaturity. Jesus is the focus of all discipleship and Christian ministry so believers may live meaningful and satisfying lives.

The image of bodily growth is advanced further in verse 16. The body is held together by ligaments, so each part can do its work. Participating in the service of God's kingdom is yet another sign of spiritual maturity.

Notice also the presence of love, God's most important character trait. Truth is to be spoken in love. Even God's truth, important as it is, must be delivered in a Christ-like way. As this happens, the body of Christ will be built up and grow together in a love that derives from God and becomes the standard operating procedure of God's people.