

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 11/6/11
Ephesians 4:20-24 “A Commitment to Growing Disciples”**

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Main Idea: As a church we are committed to growing disciples. That’s the eighth mark of a healthy church. The key word is *growing*. We’re going to look at a biblical example of this commitment, and then consider the implications of it for WBC.

- I. Let’s consider an example of a commitment to growing disciples (Eph 4:20-24).
 - A. Growing is a community project (20a).
 - B. Growing requires knowing Christ (20-21).
 - C. Growing requires learning the right curriculum (22a).
 - D. Growing requires participating in the process of change (22-24).
 1. You must put off the thinking, desires, and behavior of the old man.
 2. You must put on the thinking, desires, and behavior of the new man.
 - E. Growing results in resembling Christ (24b).
- II. Let’s consider some implications of being committed to growing disciples.

In order to be a church that grows disciples...

 - A. You must understand that growing is a result of grace, not a requirement for it.
 - B. You must have a strong teaching ministry.
 - C. You must give new Christians a theology they can grow into, not out of.
 - D. You must view sanctification as a process.
 - E. You must remember that it takes the whole church working together.
 - F. You must provide modeling and accountability.
 - G. You must do ministry with the long view in mind.

The Bottom Line: In Christ we have all that it takes to accomplish all He desires.

What picture best expresses what comes to your mind when you think of a church? Is it a school classroom (a place to learn)? A concert hall (a place to listen)? A theater (a place to watch)? A fitness center (a place to get tired)? A day-care (a place that cares for kids)? A café (a place to socialize)?

When I think of the various churches I’ve visited in my lifetime, those pictures come to mind. I suppose there’s an element of truth in each of those images. Church is a place for learning, listening, watching, getting tired in the Lord’s work, caring for kids, and fellowshiping with others. Usually, if you had to do so, you could pick just one image to sum up a particular local church, for each church often has its own distinctive emphasis.

What picture best summarizes Wheelersburg Baptist Church? I know it’s subjective, but here’s the picture that comes to my mind. Church is like a greenhouse, *a place for growing*.

That’s what WBC is, a greenhouse, a place for growing. Granted, it’s not all that we all, but it’s central to our identity.

If you come to WBC merely to listen to a sermon, or enjoy some music, or fellowship with some friends, or provide some spiritual care for your kids, you’ve come with a deficient goal. Fundamentally, church is a place to grow.

I know it’s more than that. In vertical terms, we exist to glorify God, so we gather to give Him praise and worship and scatter to give Him obedience. But I’m talking in horizontal terms. We glorify Him in the horizontal. And by God’s design church is supposed to be a place for growing.

What does that mean? Am I talking about growing in size? Not primarily, though it’s a by-product. I have in mind the assignment Jesus gave His disciples in

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

Matthew 28:19-20. He told them to go and *make disciples*. He said to baptize those disciples to identify them as His followers, and then He said to *teach* those disciples everything He commanded.

That's the great commission. Jesus told the Twelve to do with others what He had done with them, to call people to follow Him, and then to invest time and energy into teaching them how to obey His commands. That's what making disciples is all about, and the fulfillment of that assignment takes, not just a few months or years, but a lifetime.

Friends, that's the mission Jesus gave, and the early church took that mission seriously. Read the book of Acts, and what do you see? Disciples making disciples and then forming them into a community of connected disciples known as a church. That's what church is. Growing disciples committed to growing other disciples.

Keep reading the NT and you come to the epistles, and what do you see there? You see letters written to early churches and church leaders, and again you see the same emphasis on growing disciples. That what Paul's passion, and Peter's, and James'. They wrote the epistles to help Jesus' followers grow up and resemble their Savior.

At WBC, we try to take this seriously. We are committed to growing disciples. That's the eighth mark of a healthy church. Again, the key word is *growing*. We're going to look at a biblical example of this commitment, and then consider some implications for how we do church.

What are the marks of a healthy church that we value at WBC? One, a commitment to expository preaching. Two, biblical theology, preaching the whole book and each part of it with the whole in mind. Three, we're all about the gospel. Four, we teach God-centered conversion. Five, we practice God-centered evangelism. Six, we are committed to church membership. Seven, we practice biblical church discipline. And now we come to number eight. We're committed to growing disciples. Not just to giving people a good experience on Sunday mornings, not even just seeing people get saved. We're all about *growing disciples*.

What does it take to grow disciples? You can't just say, "Okay, grow!" Ultimately, only God can make something grow, as Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 3:6, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but *God made it grow*." But God works through instruments, and when it comes to growing, our part is to create the environment for growing.

That's why I like the analogy of a greenhouse. Growing plants requires seeds, good soil, water, nutrition, sunlight, and a safe environment. Provide those things and watch God perform the miracle of life and growth for plants.

And so it is in the greenhouse of the church. We provide the environment and the seed and the light and so on, and God produces the growth.

Now let's look at a biblical example, and then talk about implications.

I. Let's consider an example of a commitment to growing disciples (Eph 4:20-24).

I'm not sure there's a clearer explanation in the Bible of what it means to be committed to growing disciples than the one seen in Ephesians 4. In fact, Paul's relationship with the church at Ephesus models for us this commitment to grow disciples.

Paul went to Ephesus, a large city in what we know today as western Turkey, on his second missionary trip, around AD 52. He did some synagogue evangelism, then left the city with the promise to return if the Lord allowed him, and left behind his Christian

co-laborers, Priscilla and Aquilla (Acts 18:19-21). About a year or so later, he did return during his third missionary journey. He spent almost three years in Ephesus, from around AD 53-56, and he poured his life into growing disciples. Acts 19:9-10 indicates he found a lecture hall and started having daily discussions of God's Word that lasted for two years. What resulted was a church dear to his heart.

About five years later, around AD 60, Paul was under house arrest in Rome, when the Holy Spirit guided him to write an inspired letter to the church in Ephesus. In the first half of the letter he reminded his friends of their resources in Christ. In the second half he talked about their responsibilities in Christ. In God's economy, resources always lead to responsibilities.

Ephesians is a great letter. You read chapters 1-3 and learn what you have in Christ. Then you read chapters 4-6 and find out why. We're going to examine Ephesians 4:20-24, where we learn five things about growing.

A. Growing is a community project (20a). Verse 20 begins, "You, however, did not come to know Christ that way." Paul knew these readers. He knew how they came to know Christ. In fact, in the first words of his letter he reminded them how they had experienced an identity change. He began in Ephesians 1:1, "To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus." That reveals some important things about these readers. They were *saints*—literally "holy ones, those set apart to God." And they were *in Christ*. That was their position, something Paul emphasizes throughout the first three chapters.

That's critical to see. The recipients of this letter *knew Christ*. They've been born again, are in God's family, and are heading to heaven. But they still *need to grow*. That's why Paul wrote this letter. They weren't where they used to be, praise God, but they still weren't where they needed to be either.

When you scan the letter you see Paul teaching about communication, anger, marriage roles, parenting, etc. What's that indicate? These people were in Christ, yes, but they were also in trouble. They still had areas in which they needed to grow.

Now, don't miss the significance of the pronoun *you*. It's plural. That says tons, namely, that by God's design, growing is something that's supposed to happen in community. But not just any community. God intends to grow up His kids in a community called *the church*. So growing is a community project. More about that when we get to the implications.

B. Growing requires knowing Christ (20-21). Notice the relational verb in verse 20, "You, however, did not come to *know* Christ that way." That indicates the people reading this letter had come to know Christ personally. They didn't come to know Him by indulging in the lusts of their fleshly appetite, as Paul just clarified in verses 17-20. How then? How did it happen? Paul reminds them in verse 21, "Surely you *heard* of him and were *taught* in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus."

There's how it happened. It's how any person comes to know Christ. They must *hear* and *be taught*. Hear what? *Of him*, referring to Christ. And be taught what? *The truth*. What truth? *The truth that is in Jesus*. Jesus said in Matthew 11:29, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

Friends, you can't grow to become the person that God intends apart from hearing and learning the truth regarding Jesus. On your own, you're cut off from God. That's

what sin does. It separates the sinner from His Maker. But God sent His precious Son into the world to reconcile sinners back to Himself. That's why Jesus, after living a perfect life, deliberately went to the cross to die a sinner's death. He came to rescue sinners by paying sin's penalty for them. And because He conquered death and is presently alive, He is a person you can know. And if you know, you can grow.

You say, "I've tried, but the Christian life doesn't work for me." Your problem could be a misunderstanding regarding how the Christian life "works," and we'll get to that in a moment. But the problem may be a faulty assumption, for the Christian life "works" only for those who truly *know Christ*. Are you sure you know Christ?

Awhile back I was talking with a man and asked him when he was saved. He told me it happened twenty-five years earlier in a revival meeting. That's when he got saved and joined the church. I had known this man for several years and I confess, I never heard him talk about Christ, nor ever saw any evidence that he was burdened to see others come to know Christ. I don't know his heart, but I do know there are people in churches today whose salvation experience goes back to a meeting with emotional music, a fearful story about hell, and a little bit of Jesus.

Now contrast that with the Ephesians. Paul said his readers were taught the truth regarding Jesus. That took time. That took a willingness on their part to learn. And when they professed faith in Christ, it's because they truly knew Him.

That's why I ask, are you sure you know Him. Growing requires knowing Christ.

C. Growing requires learning the right curriculum (22a). Notice the first words of verse 22, "You were taught." It's a passive verb. The Ephesians *were taught*. Paul should know. He did most of the teaching.

In Acts 19 Luke mentions the daily teaching sessions that lasted for two years. No doubt more teaching took place during the corporate worship service on the Lord's Day.

The word for "taught" is the Greek term *didasko*, which carries the idea of instructing in doctrine, even catechizing. If we're going to grow that's what we need, to be *taught*.

Taught what? What's the curriculum? In verse 21 Paul says they were taught, not just the truth that is in Jesus, but as the NIV puts it, "*in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.*" In other words, the truth about the person and work of Jesus has implications for the lives of those who know Him. And Paul taught those implications.

That's what he says in verses 22-24. "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."

There's the curriculum for growing disciples. You teach people the truth that is in Jesus, and then you teach them how to live in light of that truth. Or, as Jesus put it in the Great Commission, "teach them to obey everything I have commanded you." Not just *know*, not just be able to affirm, but to *obey*.

Quite frankly, in contemporary discipleship this is often ignored. Look at the typical book for discipling a new Christian, and what's in it? It covers some basics about Jesus, and perhaps some basic topics like assurance, prayer, Bible study, baptism, maybe church membership.

Now look at Paul's curriculum. It's not just academic, but about life-change. Scan verses 25 through 5:18 and you'll see a host of nitty-gritty things that Paul included in his discipleship curriculum with the Ephesians. In verse 25 he addressed the need to stop lying and become a truth-teller in every situation. In verse 26 he insisted that Christians must not go to bed angry. In verse 27, he said all stealing must go and emphasized the importance of getting a good job, saving, and then sharing with those in need. He talked about how to communicate in ways that make Christ attractive in verse 29, about getting rid of bitterness and slander in verse 31, and how to be kind and forgive in verse 32. He talked about sex in 5:3-4, not wasting time in 5:15-16, and alcohol in 5:18.

That's what I call a comprehensive curriculum! And that's what growing disciples requires. What's more...

D. Growing requires participating in the process of change (22-24). Those are two key words, *participating* and *process*. There's no holy zap in the Christian life. I wish there was. When I'm counseling a brother who's struggling with pornography or alcohol or his anger or tongue, I wish I could give him a prayer to pray that would bring instant transformation, but there is no such prayer. By God's design, he needs to learn to *participate* in the *process* of change.

It's called progressive sanctification. Some churches teach that the Holy Spirit does "a second work of grace," sometimes called "entire sanctification." But at WBC, based on this and other texts like it, we believe that sanctification involves a process, a life-long, two-step process.

1. *You must put off the thinking, desires, and behavior of the old man.*

That's verse 22. And...

2. *You must put on the thinking, desires, and behavior of the new man.*

That's verse 24.

This is vital to see. Life-change involves this double assignment. *Put off. Put on.* And not just behavior, but the thinking and desires behind the behavior, too.

First, *put off*. Colossians 3:8 puts it this way, "But now you must **rid yourselves** of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips." Hebrews 12:1 says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us **throw off** everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." We hear it in James 1:21 too, "Therefore, **get rid of** all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you." It's in 1 Peter 2:1 too, "Therefore, **rid yourselves** of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind."

We are to put off our former way of life. Does that mean that we should no longer do anything we did in our pre-Christ lives? No. But it does mean we should no longer do anything the way we used to do it. Life in those days was all about us. We were created by God to live for God, but that wasn't happening. So when we played sports, it was about us. When we worked our jobs, it was about us. If we got married, it was because we were pursuing what we wanted. And so on. The Lord's purposes weren't in the picture.

But it goes further. There were some things, many things, in our pre-Christ days that now have no place in our lives. Anything that Christ would not do must go.

But that's only half the assignment. Put off, then *put on*. There's the key to lasting change. Don't just stop something. Replace it.

Colossians 3:10 say, "**Put on** the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator." Because we have been raised in Christ, says Romans 6:4, "we too may **live a new life**." In practical terms, Romans 6:13 offers this exhortation, "Do not offer the parts of your body to sin...but rather **offer yourselves to God**...and the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness."

Put off. Put on. When will this assignment end? Not until we see Christ, for on the day we see Him "we will be like Him, for we will see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2).

Now back to that word *participating*. You cannot be a spectator and be a growing disciple. You can't say, "Well, I went forward and turned my anger problem over to God. Now it's all up to Him." You can't say that because *He says* it's not all up to Him. He says that you have a responsibility, and it's a responsibility that you can fulfill because He gave you the necessary resources in Christ (see Eph 1:3-4).

I'll speak frankly. Here's one of the main reasons I'm leery of the revival system used in many Baptist and other fundamental churches in our area. Now I believe in true, Spirit-produced revival, but the revival system in our day often feeds a view of sanctification that ignores what we've just seen. How did Paul say he grew disciples? He didn't talk about having special meetings once or twice a year. He emphasized that growing is a community project. He said it requires making sure people really know Christ, which requires a regular teaching ministry using the right curriculum, and helping disciples participate every day in the process of change. In my opinion, the revival system often ends up becoming a short-cut approach that tries to bypass the hard work that God's Word calls us to invest in making disciples.

And the tragedy is, the short cut ends up being a dead end. It doesn't produce what it promises. So it must be repeated, again and again, with church-goers living most of their lives in frustration, or worse, deciding to walk away from the church altogether, convinced it doesn't work.

One more insight before we talk about implications. What's the goal as we seek to grow disciples? Simply put...

E. Growing results in resembling Christ (24b). Notice the final phrase in verse 24, "...*created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*" That's God's agenda, to see disciples resemble their Master, both individually and corporately. To use Ephesians 1:4 language, He wants us "to be holy and blameless in his sight."

That's God's goal for us, beloved, to resemble His Son. It's not just our short-term happiness, but our eternal holiness. That's what He's after. And that's what should matter to us, both for ourselves and each other.

II. Let's consider some implications of being committed to growing disciples.

In order to be a church that grows disciples, there are seven essentials.

A. You must understand that growing is a result of grace, not a requirement for it. The order in Ephesians is so significant. "For it is by grace you have been saved," says Ephesians 2:8, "not by works, so that no one can boast." But where there's grace, works will follow, says Ephesians 2:10, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works."

Friends, we don't emphasize growing at WBC because we're trying to win God's favor. We emphasize it because in Christ we have it! "Grace and peace be to you," says Paul as he begins this letter in 1:2, "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." We don't need to grow to get grace. We have grace. And it's what we have that makes the growth possible.

Sunday School teachers, make sure you teach those little ones about grace. Don't just teach them rules to live by, even though the Bible is full of commands, or they'll end up either being proud or disheartened. Yes, teach them God's commands, but then also teach them about the grace of Christ that makes obedience possible.

Number two, in order to be a church that grows disciples...

B. You must have a strong teaching ministry. Teaching isn't all we do, but it's at the heart of what we do. In every ministry of the church, we're either giving truth or trying to apply it. And by teaching, I don't just mean information. "Teaching them to obey," said Jesus. Teaching "in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus," said Paul. Applicational teaching. Showing people what God says in His Word, then showing them what to do with it.

Friends, there's no shortcut to this. In order to grow disciples, you must have a strong teaching ministry. I'm so thankful for our teachers and Bible study leaders and youth workers who work hard to prepare biblically-sound, nourishing lessons for those under their care. Your efforts are appreciated! There's no other way to grow disciples.

And I would offer this reminder to you "in the pew." Those nourishing messages won't help you grow if you don't hear them. Do all you can to make the teaching ministry of God's Word top priority in your life.

Here's a third essential. To be a church that grows disciples...

C. You must give new Christians a theology they can grow into, not out of. Be careful of giving trite answers to complex questions. "Just pray, and God will make it better!" Really? You tell a ten year old that now, and what conclusion will he draw next year when he prays and prays, only to see his best friend's parents divorce?"

Right here, I think, is a key reason as to why many young people walk away from the church when they hit college age. They didn't receive a theology they could grow into, but one they've grown out of. It happened both at home and at church.

Parents, Sunday School teachers, youth and children's workers, remember this. God doesn't fit into a little box, so let's not try to make Him fit. Don't be afraid to stretch your children. Give them a big view of God, one they can grow into. There's a difference between saying things simply and simplistically. Teach them about God's sovereignty. Teach them about propitiation and justification and sanctification. Use those terms, then use simpler terms to explain, and then tell them how they can experience those realities in Christ.

A fourth essential. To be a church that grows disciples...

D. You must view sanctification as a process. I can't emphasize this enough. If you don't see sanctification as a process in which you have ongoing responsibility, you will flounder again and again. I see it all the time in the counseling room.

"Pastor, my marriage is in trouble. What went wrong?" And so I ask, although I already know the answer. "Have you been spending time in God's Word every day? Have you been praying with your wife? Have you been meeting her needs? Have you been asking for her forgiveness when you hurt her, like God's Word says we're to do?"

Friends, you can walk an aisle every week, and shed tears, and plead with God, but that alone won't fix your marriage. In fact, it may contribute to your problem, for it reveals that you're clinging to a wrong understanding of how change occurs.

At WBC we are committed to the doctrine of progressive sanctification. That's why we welcome sinners to this church, no matter how messed up their lives may be when they first come. You don't have to be perfect to belong to WBC, but you do have to be saved, that's first, and then willing to grow and change.

Quite frankly, you won't feel very comfortable in this church if you're not willing to grow and change. We believe that growing and changing is why God saved us, so we'll resemble His Son, all to His glory. And so we talk about growing, and teach about growing, and encourage each other to be growing, and even hold each other accountable to be growing. And we even go after each other when we're not growing.

I'm so thankful for a church family like this. I need it. I need to know that I have brothers and sisters who are committed to seeing growth happen, in their lives and mine.

If you want to learn more about progressive sanctification, for your own benefit, or for the benefit of others you'd like to help, something special is coming. On Monday evenings, January through March, we'll be offering a counseling and discipleship training course we call "Biblical Answers for the Problems of Life." This is our thirteenth year of offering this course, and we've been privileged to build into the lives of nearly three hundred people from over thirty area churches. If you're looking for a very practical way to grow as a disciple *and* as a disciple-maker, then I invite you to join us this year. If you've come in the past, then come back for a refresher course! And please, help us get the word out. Talk to your friends from other churches about this opportunity.

For the sake of time, I'll just mention three more essentials quickly. To be a church that grows disciples...

E. You must remember that it takes the whole church working together.

Again, Ephesians makes it clear that growing is a community project. Ephesians 4:16 says the body grows "as each part does its work." You can't grow as God intends by just watching the tv preacher at home. You need your church. And your church needs you, too, for you have gifts that God intends to use for the good of others.

F. You must provide modeling and accountability. We touched on this earlier, but it's worth repeating. We need each other if we're going to grow. We need examples and encouragement and at times, exhortations.

G. You must do ministry with the long view in mind. Several years ago I wrote something in my Bible that I heard Wendell Kempton say when preaching from Ephesians 4. "No one gets holy in a hurry." So true. That's why we minister with the long view at WBC. So, you've stumbled and been on the sidelines awhile. Today's a new day. It's time to get back in the game and start growing again. Do you need help? Just ask. We love to help each other grow around here, not because it's easy, but because when we look in the mirror, we love to see our Savior! It's all about growing together so we look like Him.

One final thought as we finish. It's the bottom line. *In Christ we have all that it takes to accomplish all He desires.* So let's grow!