

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

The Greenhouse Effect **Ephesians 4:20-24**

20 But you did not learn Christ in this way, 21 if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, 22 that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, 23 and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

Back in January of 2000, my family and I took a trip up north. Way up north, a couple of hours beyond of the Minnesota border. We were headed to Thunder Bay, Canada, as I was to be the best man at a friend's wedding. Of course, being in January, the weather was extremely cold. In fact, on the day before the wedding, when we were to have the rehearsal and all the pictures, I believe the high was only about 5°. There was about a 20 to 30 mile an hour wind, making it nearly unbearable to be outside. I believe it was about 10 AM in the morning and we were to have pictures taken at this particular location. What struck me about the location of these pictures was that it was an atrium. We walked into this huge glass building, and while the temperature outside was 5°, inside this building it was about 75° and there were tropical plants and it was beautiful. It was an amazing contrast from the outside to the inside. The outside environment was cold, bitter, and inhospitable. Yet, inside, the environment was warm, inviting, and hospitable. I would like you to hold on to that image for a moment.

When I say the word "church" what comes to your mind? Do you think of a cathedral with stained-glass windows? Probably not if you are thinking about Hope. For some, the church is nothing more than a classroom in which to learn. For others, the church is like a concert hall; a place where you go to listen to music or to be entertained. For some the church is more of a social center, a place to gather to socialize; what we Christians like to call, fellowship.

If you think back upon the churches you have visited over your lifetime, I am sure there is an element of truth in some of these statements. There is nothing wrong with seeing the church as a place to learn, a place to watch, a place to listen, and the place of fellowship. But let us bring in a little closer to home, and let me ask you what comes to your mind when you think of Hope Community Bible Church? As I think about our vision statement, the picture that comes to my mind when I think about our church is "a greenhouse." Yes, a greenhouse. For what takes place in a greenhouse? Things grow in a greenhouse. To be sure, we are more than a greenhouse, but I would like to consider that image this morning. The reason why I would like to consider this image is that we can too easily come to church with the deficient view or goal of what is supposed to be happening. If we are coming simply to listen to a sermon, or to enjoy some music, or to fellowship with family and friends, then we are coming with a less than adequate goal in mind. For at its very core, the church exists to be a place where growth occurs.

And if we stop to think about it, the outside world is a very cold, bitter, and inhospitable place particularly concerning the things of Christ. In contrast to such an image, the church is to be a greenhouse; a warm, inviting, and hospitable place where the truths of Christ caused genuine spiritual growth. And we, at Hope CBC, desire to be such a greenhouse. Consider with me the opening sentence of our vision statement that reads: *Hope Community Bible Church exists to glorify God by making disciples who will grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ...*

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Of course, our vision statement begins with that which is most important and that is we exist to bring glory to God. This means we gather and we fellowship in order to worship and bring praise to our God and we scatter to make His glories known. But how do we accomplish this primary goal? We do so as we become a greenhouse; a place where growth occurs. When I speak about the growth, I am not talking simply about size or numbers; for such things are simply the byproducts of healthy spiritual growth. What we need to have in view here is what Jesus commanded His disciples in Matthew 28:19–20, where He said in effect that where ever you go and whatever you do as a Christian, your goal is to be making disciples. And part of making disciples is seeing individuals being baptized, which means they are publicly identifying themselves with Christ and his people; as well as teaching people to old they all that he is commanded. We call this the great co-mission. In the simplest of terms, the great commission is nothing more than the twelve disciples teaching other disciples to do and to say what Jesus did and said. And those disciples are in turn to take what they have learned about what Jesus did and taught and teach it to others. Thus begins the cycle of what we call discipleship; or the greenhouse effect.

This is the mission that Jesus gave to the church. And as we have been studying in the book of acts, the early church took this mission with intentional and relentless determination. In the book of Acts, we see disciples making disciples. And if there were a book of Hope CBC, we should see the same thing, disciples making disciples. This was the command of Jesus, and it became the passion of Peter, of Paul, of James, in the entire church. These disciples were connected to one another in a community known as the body of Christ. As our vision statement says we need to be equally committed to glorifying God through the making of disciples who follow intensely after the person of Jesus Christ. But how do we know if we are following intensely after Jesus? We know we are following hard after Jesus if we are growing in the knowledge, practice and proclamation of Jesus. So, if we are going to be a divine greenhouse to the glory of God, then it is going to take commitment from each and every one of us to see this accomplished.

But making disciples as a church is not simply a matter of having it on our vision statement. Unlike God, we cannot simply speak something into existence. But truly we know that only God can bring the growth. In first Corinthians 3:6, Paul said, **"I planted the seed, Apollo's watered it, but God made it grow."** So how are you and I involved in this? It is true, that God makes things grow, but we are the instruments He chooses to use in the greenhouse.

Let me come back to the greenhouse now and ask you; what takes place in a greenhouse? Fundamentally, everything necessary for plant to grow. From seedling, too good soil, to water, and fertilization, and a warm safe environment; regardless of how hostile the environment is outside. These are the things a greenhouse provides for plant. And in like manner, all that is necessary for a Christian to grow rich and strong in the Lord, is to be found in the church.

From our text this morning in Ephesians 4:20–24 I would like you to notice with me four essential components necessary for proper spiritual growth. These are four fundamental and biblical truths we must each be striving to see implemented and increasing here at Hope CBC if we are to be a church that truly is making disciples. Here in our text, we have a very clear example of what it means to be committed to growing disciples. We could actually take Paul's entire relationship to the church at Ephesus as the example we are to follow in seeing people grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Before we look at these four truths, let me remind you of the background of the book of Ephesians. Ephesus was a large city in Asia Minor, known today as the country of Turkey. Paul's

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first trip to Ephesus was around 52 A.D. on his second missionary journey. After seeing some converts come to Christ, he promised to return, but left his two co-laborers, Priscilla and Aquila, to help the young church along. After about a year, Paul returned during his third missionary journey and remained in Ephesus for nearly 3 years, pouring his life into the disciples there in that church. The church at Ephesus became one of the dearest to the apostle Paul. About five years after all of this, around 60 A.D., Paul entered his first Roman imprisonment. It was while he was in Rome, that the Holy Spirit inspired this letter to be given to the church at Ephesus.

As is typical in many of Paul's letters, this great letter is divided into two sections. The first three chapters focus on the person of Jesus Christ and what God has accomplished for the church through His Son. Then, beginning in chapter 4 and running through the end of the letter are the practical, or every day implications, of living by that doctrine of Christ as Head of the Church. Seeing that we are in Ephesians 4, we are looking at some of the practical implications of what it means to be in Christ. And in our verses in particular, we see four these fundamental keys about growing in Christ; about having the perfect greenhouse regardless of the hostile environment around us. So let us walk through these four keys. If we are to be; and more personally, if you are to be rightly growing as a follower of Christ, then you must...

1. Be engaged in a Christian Community (20a)

But you did not learn Christ in this way...

As we read the first words of verse 20, we quickly see the intimacy that Paul had with the Ephesians. He was very much aware of how they came to know Jesus Christ. He knows them to be believers. In fact in Ephesians 1:1 we read, **"to the saints who are at Ephesus and who are faithful in Christ Jesus."** What did Paul believe about these people? He believed they were saints, literally "holy ones, set apart for God's purposes." He says that they are "in Christ," a statement about their position and standing with God. It is so important for us to note this, that these people knew Jesus Christ. They were born again; part of God's family and were on their way to heaven. These are words of high commendation. These are words that any church should desire to hear from a spiritual mentor. And yet, they still needed to grow. And this is why Paul wrote his letter, to help them in their growing into Jesus. In a sense, the letter could be divided into two sections as we noted but with the headers as follows: chapters one through three would say; *"You are no longer what you used to be before Christ."* And chapters four through six would read, *"But you are not yet all that you ought to be in Christ."*

When you look at some of the issues that Paul was addressing with the Ephesians, things like communication, prayer, anger, roles in marriage, and interpersonal relationships; we see a church full of Christians that yet have problems that must be addressed. There are areas for them to grow.

And while this might be easily overlooked, notice that Paul uses the plural "you" here; speaking of the Christian community. He says in effect, "but you all who are united together by your common faith in Jesus Christ; you all who are now identified with the church of Jesus; you all who are actively engaged in the Christian community." The things that Paul addresses to the church at Ephesus, or the church at Corinth, or the church at Rome, these things are addressed to a community of believers. We are to be a community that seeks to work out these details among one another. If a church is to grow then, it must have this sense of community; of accountability; of inter-dependence upon one another. Let me make this rather bold statement, *to the extent that a body of believers is actively dependent upon one another for all things spiritual and even for things practical and material; it is to that extent that the church is truly growing.* In

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other words, if I am dependent upon you and you are dependent upon me, and we are increasingly dependent upon one another for discipleship; for fellowship; and for help; by these we know the church is growing. And the lack of such a dependence reveals the opposite; a lack of growth.

This commitment to one another; this desire to overcome the difficulties of still living in a sinful world, and often times being overwhelmed by our own sinful flesh as a body is the Christian community. We need accountability. We need one another, and as difficult as I know it is, to have others know us; to know what we are struggling with; to know what are the sins that so easily beset us is actually growth. Not that everyone in the church should know these things, but to know that you do belong to a community in which there will be individuals that you submit yourself to, you subject yourself to, and they engage you for the purpose of growing through these problems and difficulties in sin issues, overcoming them to the glory of God.

And as I speak of this Christian community, I do not want there to be any doubt of that to which I am speaking. The Christian community is the church and the church is the Christian community. It is impossible; let me say it again, it is impossible, for an individual Christian to grow rightly to the Lord apart from the church. And therefore, it stands to reason that the church is in need of people being committed to one another. When Paul says ***"but you [you all who are saints committed together there in Ephesus] did not learn Christ in this way..."*** Are you truly a part of the Christian community of Hope CBC? How are you a part of the community? It is more than seeing other for a couple of hours on Sunday; it is the seeking of an active involvement in the lives of others with whom you fellowship. Are you on the outside looking in at the warm environment of the church; or are you inside, part of that growing community? Are you part of this "you" of which Paul speaks?

So then, growth requires being engaged in a Christian community; but next, if you are to be rightly growing as a follower of Christ, then you must...

2. Be educated in the Curriculum of Christ (20-22a)

20 But you did not learn Christ in this way, 21 if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus that, in reference to your former manner of life...

Notice with me the intimate nature of the verbs Paul uses here in these verses. He says, that you did not learn, or come to know intimately, the person of Christ in a worldly or fleshly way, as just described in the verses before verse 20; that these believers had heard Him and been taught in Him. Again, we see that Paul believes these persons to be genuine believers. And how did they become believers? It was not by living like the world; not by giving themselves over to sensuality and for the practice of every kind of impurity and greediness as Paul mentions in verse 19. They came to know Christ, according to verse 21, by having ***"heard"*** Him and by having been ***"taught"*** in Him.

And beloved, this is the way it always is when coming to know Christ. You must hear of Christ and then you must be taught of Christ. This is exactly what we read as Paul says at the end of verse 21 "just as truth is in Jesus." We are quickly reminded that it is impossible for us to become the person God desires us to be apart from the continual contemplation that is the hearing and learning of the truth regarding Jesus. Before we are in Christ, and part of his church, we are in sin. And sin separates us from the truth of God. And yet we learn from the Bible that God has sent His Son into the world for this purpose, to reconcile, to bring us back together with Himself. If we are to grow, we must be contemplating Christ, and what he has done, the work he accomplished on the cross so that we might be made right with God. The church is a place where

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that contemplation is to be reinforced. The church is a place where that kind of knowledge that we are sinners in need of a Savior, is to be proclaimed so that we will constantly be in all of what are God has accomplished and what Jesus Christ has done so that we might no longer live for ourselves but for him who died and rose again for our sake.

What are you hearing and what are you being taught? What is influencing you day in and day out? Is it a contemplation of Christ or is it rather we come, ration of thoughts and go to Christ? What books, what music, what activities, do you invest more time in? Those centered upon Christ, were those things that have little or nothing to do with Christ? It is not a statement of legalism for I did not tell you that you ought not listen or read or have certain activities that may have little to do with Christ; some of them may be appropriate to a degree. But what I am asking you to contemplate right now is the question of what you contemplate most? If we are to be a church that is making disciples it will be because we are a people who make contemplating Christ our priority and helping others in that endeavor.

Notice in verse 22 that Paul says ***"in reference to your former manner of life"*** - in reference to what? This is a statement of contrast. They had heard and been taught in verse 21 something contrary and something that had an impact upon the way that they lived. But I believe the key here is found in verse 21 in that they were taught. The verb taught in verse 21 is a passive verb; it is something that happened to the Ephesians. And who taught them? Paul should know. He did most of the teaching for them. In Acts chapter 19 verses 9 to 10 Luke mentions that the daily practice for nearly 2 years at the church of Ephesus was the teaching of Paul Did you catch what I just said? The practice of the early church was a daily learning of the things of God.

I recently purchased some software by Rosetta Stone so that my family and I can learn to speak Spanish. As Laura and I have been contemplating how to do this, one of the ideas we have is to begin to speak as much as possible exclusively in Spanish. We will not always be able to speak in Spanish, because we do not know all there is to know. But, as much as possible we will seek to speak Spanish in our house. That is the correct curriculum in that situation. In like manner we ought to be seeking the correct curriculum, looking to and speaking about the things of Christ is often as possible in our homes, in our conversations, as much as possible.

And this brings us to the third key to being a growing church in the process of making disciples. If you are to be rightly growing as a follower of Christ, then you must...

3. Be Expecting Continual Change (22-24)

22 that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, 23 and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and put on the new self...

As we read verses 22 through 23 I would have you notice that this is a call for each of us to participate in a process. Over would be wonderful if when we became a Christian all the old stuff, all the old garbage, all the old attitudes, just instantaneously fell off in we were perfect in everything we did for the cause of Christ. Oh how I wish that when a person, or couple, is sitting in my office sharing with me the struggles that he you are they are going through that I had some kind of miraculous prayer that would simply instantaneously transform their lives. But that is not the way God works. It is God's design that we participate in a process of change. That we are a people committed to change and change Christ.

We call this process "sanctification" - the working out over time of our old sinful nature and replacing it with that holy and divine nature of Christ. Notice with me the two-step process that is involved in this change. First, there is a laying aside of the old self. This means you are

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intentionally seeking to put off thinking, desires, and behaviors of your old life, the way you did things before coming to know Jesus. And then, second, and this is found in verse 24, that you are putting on the new self, the new man that resembles Jesus Christ and adopting his thinking, desires, and behavior.

If we are to be a church that is growing and growing by making disciples, it will be because we are a people who take on this dual assignment; this putting off the old and then putting on the new. In Colossians 3:8 the apostle Paul specifically gives some things which are to be put off including; *anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from our mouths*. In Hebrews 12:1, we are told to lay aside *every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us*. In James 1:21 we are commanded to be putting *aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness so that in humility we might receive the word implanted which is able to save our souls*. And in 1 Peter 2:1 we read this, **"therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander..."** When we see any of these attitudes or actions begin to creep up in our lives, what are we supposed to do? We are supposed to be putting them off! It is a process! We are not to get discouraged, per se; but rather we are to be determined to see our lives rid of such things by the grace of God. That is a growing disciple.

But this putting off is only half of the equation. For in addition to the putting off we are told we are to be putting on. Too often people think personal reformation, this attempt to make themselves appear Christian or to be received by God, is nothing more than stopping bad behavior. But Paul says that does not go far enough. There must be the putting on of the character of Christ. In other words, we must not simply stop doing one thing; we must also replace that thing. What do I mean by this? If you struggle with anger, it is not enough to simply stop being angry. That is the start, but in addition to putting off anger you must now purpose to put on love or compassion or kindness.

If we are to be a growing church then, we must be participating in the process of putting off and then putting on. And I do not know if this will be an encouragement to you or potential discouragement, however, this putting off and putting on will not end until we see Christ in that final day. So let me ask you this question, are you committed to change? Are you seeing change in your life, real, godly change? Do you pray that God will change your attitudes? Whatever your sinful hang-ups are; when they reared their ugly heads, do you plead for the mercy and grace of God to be rid of such things? Or do you perhaps like me at times rather relish continuing in such filth! Oh may never be! May we be a people expecting continual change in our lives.

So then, growth requires being engaged in a Christian community; of being educated in the curriculum of Christ; and of expecting continual change in our lives. But finally, if you are to be rightly growing as a follower of Christ, then you must...

4. Be Experiencing the Character Of Christ (24b)

which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth...

This final point is intricately connected to the others; this experience of the character of Christ in our lives. Notice the end of verse 24. What is God's goal for you and for me and for our church according to verse 24? God's purpose is to see us resemble our master both individually and corporately. What does God desire for us? Looking back at Ephesians 1:4, God's desire is that we would be holy and blameless before Him. Beloved, a church that desires to make disciples who are growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ consists of people, of individuals, who are committed personally to capturing the character of

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Christ; to resemble Jesus Christ in word, in action, indeed in all that he or she might do. This is according to verse 24 genuine righteousness and holiness of the truth. Jesus Christ is Righteousness; Jesus Christ is Holiness. If we would be happy, and if we would be holy, then this is what ought to matter to us the most; because it matters to our God the most. To borrow from the words of the apostle Paul is found in Philippians 3:9, I want to **"be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith..."**

One well-known Christian blogger recently made this post saying, *Evangelicalism suffers from spiritual contraception. Rather than the church pregnant with God's Word, its seed has been hindered. Result? Barren hearts and minds!*" The world is looking into the greenhouse, which is the church; and what do they see? Is it just as barren and inhospitable as the world? Is there any visible growth? What are you doing to change that perspective? Beloved, my desire, and I pray your desire, is that we will glorify God by making disciples who are growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. If we are to do that we must be engaged with a Christian community, be educating ourselves in the curriculum of Christ, be expecting continual change in our lives, and all for the goal of experiencing the character of Christ. This will prepare the greenhouse to be a place of growth and cause it to be inviting to a world that needs to know what it means to live and grow. Far too often, we can come to church on any given Sunday, or on any midweek service, and think that contemplating Christ; of learning about Christ is wonderfully sufficient. But we must come church; and we must be engaged and involved in one another's lives; not simply to know about Christ, but with the intentional resolve to be like Christ to the glory of God. This will change our hearts; this will cause us to grow; this will be an instrument in the hands of our God to edify one another and to evangelize the lost.

What are you doing to be more actively engaged in the lives of the Christian Community of Hope CBC?

What are you filling your mind with daily? Is there room for more of the curriculum of Christ?

Have you recently been experiencing change in your life; the putting off of old sinful ways and the putting on of new Christlike ways? If not, why not?

With brutal honesty, can you say that you have been experiencing the increasing character of Christ in your life? Would other say that the character of Christ is increasing in your life? How so? If not, why not?

Soli Deo Gloria

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