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VITAL SIGNS OF A HEALTHY BODY

Ephesians 4:14-16

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Ephesians Lesson 29

Vital Signs of a Healthy Body Ephesians 4:14-16

Whenever you feel sick and go to the doctor, he will check your vital signs. He will take your temperature, your blood pressure, and your heart rate. He will listen to your heartbeat and to your breathing through his stethoscope. He knows what the vital signs of a healthy body should be and he compares your vital signs with the standard to determine just how sick you really are.

As the body of Christ, the church should measure up to certain standards of spiritual health. You need to know these standards so that you can help the church to which you are committed grow in health. Also, if you move and need to look for another church, you need to know what to look for. While no church is perfect, at least you should join one that is reasonably healthy and headed in the right direction.

Or, sometimes a friend will move and ask if you know of a good church in the new location. You need to have some biblical criteria by which to evaluate which churches are healthy and which are not so healthy. Just because a church calls itself "Christian" or by an appealing name does not mean that it is a place that will nourish you spiritually. There are many churches that promote serious and damaging errors. You need to know how to spot them and avoid them.

In our text, Paul gives us four vital signs of a healthy body. These are not comprehensive. He does not mention the quality of a church's worship. He does not bring up whether the church has a heart for missions and evangelism. Perhaps we could think of other important areas.

While in our immediate text, Paul does not mention solid Bible teaching, that requirement undergirds this entire section in its context. In the Greek text, verses 11-16 are one long sentence. Our text begins with, "as a result," or, "so that," indicating the logical connection with what precedes. It is as the pastor-teachers in the body equip the saints for the work of service through the Word of

God that the body grows to maturity in Christ. We saw (in 4:13) that a mature church grows into doctrinal unity on the core essentials of the faith. We grow into a deeper knowledge of the Son of God through our deepening knowledge of the Word of God, which reveals Christ to us. So as a result of the pastor-teachers equipping the saints with the Word, the church will not be tossed around by every wave and wind of doctrine, but rather will grow up into Christ, the head.

So Paul gives us here these four vital signs of spiritual health. He is especially focused on the health of the whole body, although the individual members must be healthy and growing for the entire body to be strong.

A healthy body has doctrinal discernment; truth
balanced with love; growing Christlikeness;
and, every member ministry.

1. A healthy body has doctrinal discernment (4:14).

It is highly significant that when Paul talks about the spiritual maturity of the church, doctrinal discernment and stability is at the top of his list! I would venture to say that it would be at the bottom of most lists among American Christians in our day, if it even made the list at all. American Christians are not into doctrine.

We have been infected with the cultural virus of postmodernism, which holds that there is no such thing as absolute truth in the spiritual realm, or if there is, we cannot know it. So, if anyone claims to know the truth, we think that he is arrogant or insensitive toward the views of others. Postmodernism makes "truth" subjective, so that what is "true" for one may not be "true" for another. Thus tolerance and acceptance of any and all views becomes the supreme virtue. The only view that postmodernism cannot tolerate is that of someone who claims to have the exclusive truth.

That kind of thinking pervades the evangelical church today, flooding in not only through mainline liberal churches, but also through the growing emerging church movement. But it comes straight from Satan. It is somewhat surprising that it has gained such a foothold among those who claim to follow Jesus, because He plainly declared (John 14:6), "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." You can't

get much more narrow and exclusive than that! In fact, when Jesus spoke with Pilate at His trial, He said (John 18:37b), "For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." Since testifying to the truth was Jesus' stated mission, undermining the truth as it is in Jesus is Satan's determined mission.

Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as "the Spirit of truth" (John 14:17). He promised to send the Spirit to the apostles to teach them all things and bring to their remembrance all that Jesus had spoken to them (John 14:26). We have that word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15) through the apostles contained in the New Testament.

The entire Bible (especially the New Testament) is filled with warnings about false teachers and exhortations to believe the truth as revealed by God and hold to that truth at all costs. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:15), Jesus warned, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves." His explanation of the end times emphasizes the danger of false Christs and false prophets, who will deceive many (Matt. 24:23-26).

The apostle Paul warned of false apostles, who are disguised as angels of light and servants of righteousness (2 Cor. 11:13-15). He warned the Galatians (1:8-9) that if men distorted the gospel of Christ, they were to be accursed. He warned the Colossians of those who were trying to take them captive through philosophy and empty deception (2:8). He warned the Thessalonians that in the end times, there will be a major apostasy that will deceive many (2 Thess. 2:3-13). In his final three letters to Timothy and Titus, there are frequent exhortations to preach sound doctrine, along with warnings about those who have turned to false doctrine. And, in his final meeting with the Ephesian elders, he warned them (Acts 20:29-30), "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." What a frightening warning!

Beyond this, the epistles of John, 2 Peter, Jude, and Revelation all have strong warnings against the dangers of false teachers. Martyn Lloyd-Jones comments (*Christian Unity* [Baker], p. 232), "Indeed it might almost be said that the New Testament came into

being in order to warn Christian people to beware of the terrible ever-present danger of being led astray by false teaching concerning our Lord Himself and His great salvation.”

In our text (4:14), Paul says that we are no longer to be children, but we need to grow to maturity (4:13, 15). There is a sense, of course, in which we are to be like little children, with a simple trust in Christ (Matt. 18:3) and a longing for the milk of the Word (1 Pet. 2:2). But in the sense Paul is using it here, we should not remain children, but rather grow to strong maturity so that we are not tossed around by the waves and winds of false doctrine.

These waves and winds of false teaching are the powerful currents of worldly philosophy that Satan brings on the scene to undermine biblical truth. These false ideas vary from generation to generation, but they always represent an assault on God's Word of truth. Almost thirty years ago when I preached on this text, I warned the church about the danger of existentialism. It was a dominant worldview of the time. Now, I am warning you about postmodernism, a new assault on the truth. Paul's picture of being tossed about by waves and carried about by the winds of doctrine may be rooted in his memories of being shipwrecked at sea. Without rudder and without sails, his ship was tossed around by forces far more powerful than the sailors could overcome.

It has always amazed me how the ideas of philosophers filter down to kids on the street, who have no idea why they are acting as they do. They've never read these philosophers, but their godless ideas directly influence the thinking and way of life of these youths. For example, you can trace the reasons why kids dress in black and exalt self-mutilation and death directly to the nihilism of Nietzsche. Most of the hippies of my younger days never read the existentialists, but their lives largely followed the implications of that philosophy. And, many today that profess to believe in Jesus, but do not see the need for sound doctrine, are being carried around by the waves of postmodernism. They have never studied that philosophy, but it warps their view of Scripture and it makes them vulnerable to all sorts of serious errors.

Children tend to act impulsively, based on their feelings of the moment, rather than thoughtfully and carefully. Part of helping your children mature is to help them learn to think about the con-

sequences of their actions before they act. You want to help them learn to act on the basis of right beliefs, not according to the whim of the moment. Children often lack self-control. Very few kids ever think about disciplining their time or money or appetites for a greater goal. Also, because of their ignorance and relative inexperience, children are easily deceived by evil people that want to take advantage of them. Every conscientious parent warns his child about the dangers of strangers or even family members who might touch them inappropriately or lure them into a dangerous place.

Spiritually, there are many comparisons. Paul here says that false teachers use trickery. The Greek word is *kubeia*, from which we get our word “cube.” It referred to cheating at dice playing. In his many travels, Paul had probably watched some salty old sailors use loaded dice to fleece some unsuspecting victim. They enticed them by greed and used the loaded dice to take away their money in what looked like an honest game of chance.

Paul also says that these false teachers use “craftiness in deceitful scheming.” *Craftiness* is used of Satan deceiving Eve (2 Cor. 11:3). *Deceitful scheming* indicates that there is a deliberate plan. The word *scheming* originally had the idea of tracking someone as a wild animal tracks its prey (Lloyd-Jones, p. 236). That is exactly how the cults work, going after unsuspecting, untaught young believers, purporting to explain the Bible in a better way!

Also (as Lloyd-Jones points out, pp. 229-230), children invariably enjoy entertainment and showmanship. Many of the religious hucksters parading on TV draw in untaught Christians like a barker at a circus lures people to pay to see the freak show. Although these teachers brazenly deny essential biblical truth, people send them money in the hopes of being healed or having a serious problem resolved. Although these false teachers flaunt expensive watches and jewelry, poor people send them more money to buy a new personal jet airliner! It’s incredible! It all stems from a lack of doctrinal discernment.

So, Paul says, “Grow from childhood to maturity so that you don’t get taken in by the spiritual hucksters!” This means not only reading, but also studying your Bible. Don’t dodge the difficult doctrinal sections. They’re in there to help you mature in the faith. Take advantage of the classes that we offer on systematic theology,

the attributes of God, surveys of the Bible, etc. Read solid books, such as John MacArthur's recent, *The Truth War* [Thomas Nelson], or his earlier, *Ashamed of the Gospel* [Crossway], or David Wells' *No Place for Truth* [Eerdmans]. Work your way through Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* [Zondervan], or some of the excellent doctrinal books by R. C. Sproul. They will help you grow in this much-needed vital sign, doctrinal discernment.

2. A healthy body practices truth balanced with love (4:15a).

In contrast to the spiritual children who are tossed around by the waves and winds of false doctrine, a healthy body speaks the truth in love.

A. A healthy body practices the truth.

The Greek word is not literally "speaks," but rather, as some have coined the term, "truthing it in love." It encompasses both truthful words and an honest lifestyle (see, 4:25, 28). But, in this context, Paul is not primarily thinking about honesty and integrity. Rather, he is emphasizing the need to hold to and proclaim the truth of the gospel, which includes the core truths of the faith (4:5, 13; see, 1:13). Of course, we must also live out these essential truths, so that our lives back up our profession of faith. But, Paul is mainly talking about holding firmly to the truth as revealed in Jesus Christ (4:21).

This implies, against postmodernism, that there is such a thing as absolute truth in the spiritual realm and that we can know such truth with reasonable certainty. In other words, spiritual truth is not subjective, according to individual preference or experience. It is objective and true in every time and every culture. This truth is defined in written propositions in God's Word. This means that we can know and judge whether someone holds to the truth or espouses error. I realize that those who have been tainted by postmodernism will accuse us of arrogance, intolerance, divisiveness, and a lack of love. They will say, "Jesus did not say that the world will know that we are Christians by our doctrinal correctness, but by our love!" But they fail to recognize that in the same context, Jesus said (John 17:17), "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth." A healthy body must hold to, proclaim, and practice the truth of the gospel.

B. A healthy body balances truth with love.

Speaking the truth of the gospel is to love others, because it is only by believing the gospel that people will be saved from God's eternal judgment. It is not loving to tolerate or promote heresy. Spiritual error on the essentials of the gospel is both evil and cruel because it results in eternal ruin for those that are deceived by it.

Biblical love is a commitment to seek the highest good of the one loved. We should be patient, kind, and sensitive in how we talk with others (1 Cor. 13:4; Col. 4:6). We should show compassion to those who are lost and alienated from Christ (Matt. 9:36). In all things, our heart's motive should be to win people to Christ and to build them in the faith. Love does not take selfish advantage of others, but rather sacrifices self for the good of others. Love is to be the very atmosphere that permeates the church as we grow in Christ (Eph. 4:16b). In fact, the phrase "in love" occurs six times in Ephesians (1:4; 3:17; 4:2, 15, 15; 5:2), more than in any other New Testament epistle.

But, biblical love is not always nice and outwardly sweet. Jesus, who always acted lovingly, called the Pharisees hypocrites, blind guides, fools, and whitewashed tombs (Matt. 23:13, 16, 17, 27)! He often confronted the disciples as men of little faith. I'm not suggesting that we go around calling people names or blasting them in the name of love or truth, but we need to understand that love necessarily involves confronting false teachers and those who persist in sin, because continuing in sin will destroy them.

Truth without love can be harsh. But, love without truth becomes flabby. It is not genuine love, because spiritual error always destroys. A healthy body has doctrinal discernment and it practices truth balanced by love.

3. A healthy body grows toward Christlikeness by submitting to His lordship in all areas (4:15b).

Paul includes himself when he writes, "we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ." *Growing in Christ* is a lifelong quest. Even after Paul had been a Christian for many years, he said that he had not yet arrived, but he pressed on toward the goal of maturity in Christ (Phil. 3:12-14).

We are to “grow up *in all aspects* into Christ.” This means bringing every area of your life under Christ’s lordship as commanded in His Word. Your *thought life* should grow up into Christ. Your *emotional life* should grow up into Christ. How you use your *body*, including eating, exercise, rest, modest clothing, and moral purity should grow up into Christ. The same applies to all of your *relationships* and to your *business practices*. It applies to your use of *time, money, and possessions*. The fruit of the Spirit as contrasted with the deeds of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-23) is a good place to see what is involved in Christlike behavior, but all of the New Testament expands on what this means.

Paul’s mentioning Christ as the head refers to His lordship and to His care for His body. Just as your head controls your body and directs the members of the body to care for one another, so Christ does in the church. Just as your head does not cut off a sore finger, but tenderly nurses it back to health, so Christ does for a wounded member of His body. Thus you can draw near to Him when you’re hurting, knowing that He cares for you.

4. A healthy body has every member contributing to the growth of the whole (4:16).

Verse 16 goes full circle back to verse 7, where Paul emphasized that each of us has been given a gracious spiritual gift to use in service to one another. The church is not a one-man-ministry. Every part has something vital to contribute. Some scholars argue that “every joint” (NIV has “ligament”) refers to the gifted leaders of 4:11, whereas “each individual part” refers to the rest of the body. But in my opinion, that seems to read too much into Paul’s analogy. He is simply saying that every part of the body has a function to perform. When all of the parts are working in accordance with their specific function, the body grows in love.

This verse has two practical applications. First, the phrase “fitted and held together” implies that we must be close to one another in order to grow. Paul used “fitted together” in 2:21 to refer to us as stones in the temple being joined together. To fit those stones together, the mason has to chip off the rough edges. For us to be fitted and joined together, God has to chip off our rough edges and teach us to show forbearance to one another in love (4:2).

Second, Paul's emphasis on every joint supplying and each individual part working properly shows that every Christian must be a functioning, serving member of the body. If your body has a non-working part, you are somewhat incapacitated. God saved you to serve Him in some capacity. The goal of all ministry is "the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love." As I've said before, ministry is having your cup brim-full of Jesus Christ and then getting around others and slopping Christ onto them. Figure out where you fit into the body and start serving the Lord!

Conclusion

I don't share these four vital signs so that we will go around taking the specks out of the eye of other churches. May the Lord keep us from all spiritual pride!

I do share them so that we will honestly evaluate ourselves and take the log out of our own eye! Are you growing in doctrinal discernment, so that you are not tossed around by all of the modern waves and winds of doctrine? Are you practicing, confessing, and proclaiming the truth of the gospel in the love of Christ? Are you growing towards Christlikeness in all areas of life as you submit to His lordship? Are you serving so as to contribute to the growth of the whole body in love? As we grow in these areas together, this city will get a glimpse, however imperfect, through this body of our glorious head, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Application Questions

1. How can we develop doctrinal discernment without becoming proud, judgmental, and overbearing?
2. How can we discern between areas where there is room for tolerance of doctrinal difference versus areas where we must not compromise at all?
3. Is it ever loving to set aside essential truth so as not to offend? Why/why not?
4. How would you respond to a critic who said, "They will know that we are Christians by our love, not by our doctrinal correctness"? Why is that statement out of balance?

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