

```
{ "@context": "https://schema.org", "@type": "ScholarlyArticle", "@id":
"https://theologygateway.info/articles/142-principles-of-spiritual-growth", "headline": "Principles
of Spiritual Growth with a Focus on the Local Church of Christ: Ephesians 4:11–16",
"alternativeHeadline": "Principles of Spiritual Growth with a Focus on the Local Church of
Christ", "author": { "@type": "Person", "name": "Boyan Mak Mihaylov" }, "publisher":
{ "@type": "Organization", "name": "Theology Gateway", "url":
"https://theologygateway.info" }, "datePublished": "2026", "url":
"https://theologygateway.info/articles/142-principles-of-spiritual-growth", "description": "This
article examines principles of Christian spiritual growth with particular attention to the role of the
local church as described in Ephesians 4:11–16. The study explores the biblical understanding
of spiritual maturity, the ministry gifts given by Christ for the building up of the church, the
relationship between leadership and discipleship, and the process by which believers grow into
unity and maturity in Christ. The article emphasizes that spiritual growth is not merely an
individual experience but takes place within the community of faith through teaching, service,
mutual edification, and the work of the Holy Spirit.", "keywords": [ "Spiritual Growth",
"Local Church", "Ephesians 4:11-16", "Church Ministry", "Spiritual Maturity",
"Discipleship", "Body of Christ", "Ministry Gifts", "Apostles", "Prophets",
"Evangelists", "Pastors", "Teachers", "Ecclesiology", "Christian Formation" ],
"inLanguage": "en", "about": [ { "@type": "Thing", "name": "Spiritual Formation"
}, { "@type": "Thing", "name": "Ecclesiology" }, { "@type": "Thing",
"name": "Discipleship" }, { "@type": "Thing", "name": "New Testament Theology"
} ], "mentions": [ { "@type": "CreativeWork", "name": "Letter to the Ephesians"
}, { "@type": "Person", "name": "Paul the Apostle" }, { "@type":
"Thing", "name": "Holy Spirit" }, { "@type": "Thing", "name": "Church as the
Body of Christ" } ], "citation": "Mihaylov, Boyan Mak. Principles of Spiritual Growth with a
Focus on the Local Church of Christ: Ephesians 4:11–16.", "articleSection": "Ecclesiology and
Christian Formation", "learningResourceType": "Academic article", "educationalLevel":
"Higher education" } @import "article.css"; img.sm_icon{margin: 0; padding: 0} by
```

Boyan Mak Mihaylov

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6257-1246>

Abstract: Boyan Mak Mihaylov, *Principles of Spiritual Growth with a Focus on the Local Church of Christ: Ephesians 4:11–16* . Holy Trinity Christian Church. Sofia: July 26, 2020

This exegetical study examines the Apostle Paul's theological framework for spiritual growth within the Body of Christ as articulated in Ephesians 4:11–16. Situated against the backdrop of first-century Ephesus—a city marked by religious diversity, occult practices, and economic tensions—Paul's letter presents spiritual maturation as both the goal and process of Christian community. The analysis identifies three dimensions of growth: the goal of attaining unity, knowledge, and the fullness of Christ; the cause of avoiding doctrinal deception; and the process of speaking truth in love while functioning as interconnected parts of Christ's body. The study argues that Paul employs organic metaphors—body, temple, bride—to counter

individualistic tendencies and establish ecclesial interdependence. Special attention is given to Paul's warning against spiritual immaturity, depicted through vivid imagery of being tossed by waves and deceived by craftiness, which this paper interprets as a caution against treating faith as a spiritual gamble. The findings suggest that authentic spiritual growth requires both proper doctrinal foundation and practical communal participation, with love serving as both the means and ultimate purpose of edification. Keywords: spiritual growth, Ephesians, ecclesiology, maturity, truth in love, unity, doctrine, body of Christ, Pauline theology, deception Original language: [Bulgarian](#)

Table of Contents: [Introduction](#) [The Goal of Spiritual Growth](#) [The Cause of Spiritual Growth](#) [The Process of Spiritual Growth](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Exegetical Notes](#)

[The City of Ephesus](#)

[The Epistle to the Ephesians](#)

[Important Words and Expressions](#)

[Abbreviations Used](#)

[Sources Used](#)

```
.video-wrapper { width: 90%; max-width: 56em; /* optional cap (~896px at 16px base) */ margin: 0 auto; /* center horizontally */ aspect-ratio: 16 / 9; } .video-wrapper iframe { margin: 1em; width: 100%; height: 100%; border: 0; }
```

Introduction

How does growth occur? At first glance this seems a very basic question, but when we reflect on the mechanisms of growth in everything around us, we realize how complex the answer actually is. Plants and animals grow within an ecosystem. Without such an environment, there is no life.

Ephesus was a city comparable in size to present-day Pazardzhik—approximately 300,000 inhabitants. Its residents were highly religious: the Greek goddess Artemis (or the Roman

Diana) was regarded as the patroness of hunting and young maidens. Ephesus was also home to many occult practitioners, who burned their magical books after becoming believers in Jesus Christ. The business of the goldsmiths suffered as a result of Paul's preaching, since their small golden shrines no longer sold well. They organized a protest in their rather large amphitheater (the size of a stadium), and Paul was restrained by his co-workers from entering the amphitheater, lest he be torn apart by the crowd.

Against this backdrop, the apostle Paul nevertheless succeeded in making Ephesus the center of his spiritual activity in Asia Minor. Paul wrote the Epistle to the Ephesians from prison in Rome toward the end of his life. He traveled to Ephesus at least twice and spent more than two years and three months in the city, forming numerous disciples. Epaphras likely founded the church in Colossae, and Paul wrote the Epistle to the Colossians, which closely resembles Ephesians. In fact, Ephesians was probably circulated among a wider circle of churches in the region around Ephesus—hence the absence of personal greetings in the letter. It was certainly read in the church in Laodicea, since some manuscripts do not contain “in Ephesus” but instead read “in Laodicea.”

In Ephesians, Paul employs three metaphors for the church: body (Eph. 1:23), temple (Eph. 2:21), and bride (Eph. 5:25). In today's text, Paul speaks of the church as a Body.

The Goal of Spiritual Growth

“And He gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.” (Eph. 4:11–13, NASB)

What is the ultimate goal of a Christian's growth? After speaking about “one body,” the church, and about its unity, Paul writes about five kinds of ministers given to the whole church for a specific purpose.

Who gives these ministers? Christ Himself, as the head of the Body of Christ. Who carries out the work of ministry? The entire body does (not only the pastors and teachers, prophets, evangelists, and apostles).

In today's individualism, with the rise of the Self and of “Mine,” Paul sounds old-fashioned. He

speaks about edification and unity. In Ephesians he repeatedly says of believers that they are “in Christ.” As a goal, Paul uses three expressions that are difficult for us and that complement one another: 1) the knowledge of the Son of God, 2) mature adulthood, and 3) the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. The biblical idea of perfection is not absolute perfectionism, but maturity (adulthood and growth).

Example 1: Jesus gives the example of a tree that bears fruit. A tree is first planted, then it grows, then it puts out leaves, then it blossoms, and then it bears fruit—and not in the first year.

Example 2: A human organism is first an embryo, then a baby, then a child, then an adolescent, then a young adult, and finally a mature man.

Later on, Paul will return briefly to the theme of childhood in order to explain why we should not remain infants in the faith, but become mature sons and daughters.

The Cause of Spiritual Growth

“...so that we are no longer children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming...” (Eph. 4:14, NASB)

In the Bible, the word “children” has subtle nuances. The biblical authors use at least three different terms.

Jesus calls His disciples “children” (sons, daughters, possibly grown—Τέκνα [1](#)) in Mark 10:24. Jesus says, “Permit the children (Τέκνα) to come to Me,” and that whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all (Luke 18:16). God calls those who believe in Him “children of God.” In terms of our relationship with God, we always remain children. We need a childlike trust in God, in His fatherhood. That is why we call Him “Our Father.”

In his letters, the Apostle Paul uses the word “children” in a somewhat different way. “Brothers and sisters, do not be children (a little child, toddler, infant, παιῖδια [2](#)) in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature,” the apostle says to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 14:20).

In Eph. 4:14 Paul uses the word “children” (νήπιοι [3](#)), which means immature, undeveloped, an infant or nursing baby, from which it follows that we must immediately distinguish this term from the concept of “child of God.”

Example 3: a hurricane-force wind that spins objects in circles.

Paul’s expressions become exceptionally vivid. “Tossed here and there and carried about” suggests circular motion—spinning, wandering, being swept along. The wind of teaching spins a person so thoroughly that he thinks he is moving toward spiritual growth, while in reality he is merely turning uselessly in circles until complete exhaustion. When the goal of spiritual growth is not correct, only the impression of growth is created.

Example 4: gambling, a game of dice.

“By the trickery of men” (ἐν τῇ κυβίᾳ [4](#) τῶν ἀνθρώπων) fundamentally refers to dice-playing, a game in which deception is most common, and thus it becomes a metaphor for deceit. Paul expands the example with “by craftiness” (ἐν πανουργίᾳ [5](#))—cunning, fraud (Luke 20:23; 1 Cor. 3:19; 2 Cor. 4:2; 11:3); skill, dexterity, cleverness (Eph. 4:14).

“In deceitful scheming” (πρὸς τὴν μεθοδίαν τῆς πλάνης). In fact, at the root of “scheming” lies the word “method”—deliberately and systematically devised deceptions.

Definition of gambling according to the Bulgarian Ministry of Health:

“Any game in which there is a stake and in which one can either gain a profit or lose the stake is gambling. Types of gambling games: lottery, lotto (“soft gambling”); roulette, blackjack, poker, slot machines, bingo; sports betting, horse racing; online betting.

Gambling addiction or pathological disorder related to gambling

A pathological gambling disorder is characterized by uncontrolled betting, beyond any limits of socially acceptable or recreational activity, resulting in serious consequences for the individual and the gambler's life... Many people gamble in order to escape emotionally from depression. This pattern is more common among women than among men. Some players seek an alternative mood change associated with gambling, namely the specific excitement and surge of energy they associate with gambling, more than with winning money.” ⁶

In gambling, profit is calculated using a mathematical model based on probability theory. The owner of the gambling business, in principle, wins at the expense of the participants. To today's Christians, the text seems to say:

“Do not turn your life into a spiritual slot machine! False teachings bring a ‘specific excitement and surge of energy,’ but lead to spiritual ruin! Stop gambling with your spiritual life and start seeking Christ the Head, living together with the rest of the body.”

Notes:

¹ СГБРНЗ №5043

² СГРБРН №3813

³ СГБРНЗ №3516 - невръстен, малък; незрял, непълнолетен; прен.детски, неопитен; пеленаче, бебе, дете

⁴ СГБРНЗ №2940

⁵ СГБРНЗ №3834

⁶ Хазарт и хазартна зависимост, In: Министерство на здравеопазването, <http://www.mh.government.bg/bg/informaciya-za-grazhdani/zdravosloven-nachin-na-zhivot/zavisimosti/hazart-i-hazartna-zavisimost/>, accessed 21 june 2026

The Process of Spiritual Growth

“A speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.” (Eph. 4:15–16, PV)

Spiritual growth begins with love. “Speaking the truth in love” (PV) or “acting truthfully in love” (RI, BL) carries the double meaning of being truthful and speaking the truth—an absolute rejection of gambling! In verse 15 there is a shift. Paul does not use “in Christ” here, but instead “into Him” (“to grow up in all things into Him”). Being “in Christ” means we have only begun the process of growth. What characteristics does the growing body have?

1) The body is fitted together (“fitted,” RI; “joined,” PV; συναρμολογέω [ζ](#)) and held together (συνβιβάζω [8](#))—the first term suggests that the parts are made for one another, while the second indicates they function together in a compact and effective way.

Paul’s example: the human joints.

Definition of “joint” from the Dictionary of the Bulgarian Language:

“1. A movable connection between the bones of living beings. Knee joint; 2. A connecting device in machines, musical instruments, etc., which allows movement.” [9](#)

When a joint wears out, the pain is severe and movement becomes limited. The whole organism suffers. A person gains weight and becomes immobile. Spiritually, when the connection between the parts is broken, the church becomes spiritually immobile and ceases to impact the world outside. The church stagnates.

The parts of our body function in synchronization. When, for example, the nervous system—which transmits electrical impulses—is affected, some parts either stop functioning or begin to act inappropriately. Specialists working with people with special needs understand this very well and seek the root of the problem. Lack of synchronization is a greater problem than the absence of a single part.

Example of Nick Vujicic: Nick Vujicic lives, works, and serves, and has a family, without arms and without legs. He needs assistance in various areas, but overall he lives a normal life because, apart from the limbs, everything else in him functions in harmony.

2) The proper working of each part

After verse 16, Paul begins to explain to the Ephesians what the New Man with the new way of life looks like in practice. In the context of the church he speaks about: lying, anger, forgiveness, marriage, children and parents, slaves and masters, and spiritual warfare. In Ephesus there were clearly problems with lying, theft, anger, rage, malice, immorality, and greed. Paul strongly warns that no sexually immoral or greedy person “has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ” (Eph. 5:5). Some parts of the local Body have either not matured, have atrophied, or have been affected by illness and therefore do not function properly. Notes:

[7](#) СГБРНЗ №4883

[8](#) СГБРНЗ №4822

[9](#) "Става", In: Речник на българския език, <https://rechnik.chitanka.info/w/%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B0>, accessed 21 June 2026

Conclusion

Growth for edification in love

The Apostle Paul begins and ends with love—“the growth of the body for its edification in love.” “Speaking the truth in love” is the basic operating principle of the Christian within the Body of Christ. In spiritual growth there is no “shortcut,” and there can be no “accelerated growth.” A human organism must grow in due time and in proper proportion: spiritually, psychologically, and physically. If there is no proper fitting together and proportional functioning, then the modern church produces “Christians with special needs.” It is true that Christ is the Head of the Church. But it is also true that you and I, as parts, also have contribution and responsibility.

“In order to govern others, one must first learn to govern oneself; in order to teach others, one must first acquire knowledge oneself. When I cannot control myself, when there is no spirit of self-control in me, no spirit of meekness, holiness, love, and righteousness, then I am a bad steward. When all kinds of passions play with me, it is better for me not to undertake governing others, so as not to cause greater harm both to myself and to them.”

From the diary of St. John of Kronstadt

Exegetical Notes

The City of Ephesus

The city of Ephesus is mentioned for the first time in Acts 18:19–21. Paul begins his work in Ephesus during his second missionary journey, initially preaching in the synagogue and reasoning with the Jews. During Paul’s third missionary journey, Ephesus becomes a center for training Christian leaders (Acts 19:1–41).

Major events in Ephesus:

- 1) Paul finds some disciples who had been baptized only into John’s baptism. They are baptized in the name of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit comes upon them; they speak in tongues and prophesy.
- 2) For three months Paul reasons in the synagogue, but some become hardened and speak evil.
- 3) Paul separates the disciples and teaches them in the lecture hall of Tyrannus for two years (Acts 19:8–10).
- 4) God performs miracles through Paul. The sons of Sceva attempt to cast out an evil spirit (Acts 19:13–18).

5) Many of those who practiced magic believe (Acts 19:19).

6) Riots—the guild of goldsmiths who make shrines of Diana/Artemis suffers because of Paul’s preaching. The assembly gathers in the theater of Ephesus.

Epaphras (Col. 1:7; 4:12) is a co-worker of Paul from his ministry in Ephesus and most likely the founder of the church in Colossae.

The Epistle to the Ephesians

Authorship. For 18 centuries the Apostle Paul was considered the author. Critics present the following main arguments against Pauline authorship:

- the author addresses “peace to the brothers,” with no personal section in the letter;
- Christ’s role has cosmic dimensions;
- attention is focused on the church;
- reconciliation is between Jews and Gentiles rather than between the sinner and God [10](#).

Important Words and Expressions

Verse 14 - “so that we are no longer children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human deceit, by craftiness, by deceitful schemes”

The word “children” in the Bible appears in three different Greek terms:

1) Τέκνα

Jesus calls His disciples Τέκνα in Mark 10:24. Jesus says, “Let the children (Τέκνα) come to Me,” and that whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it (Luke 18:16).

2) παιδία

Paul: “Brothers, do not be children (παιδία) in your thinking, but be infants in evil, and in your thinking be mature.” (1 Cor. 14:20)

3) νήπιοι

“tossed here and there” (κλυδωνιζόμενοι [11](#) καὶ περιφερόμενοι [12](#))—“tossed” suggests fluctuation, while “carried about” means moving around, circling, wandering, being swept along.

“wind of doctrine” (ἀνέμῳ τῆς διδασκαλίας)—“wind” also denotes the ends of the earth; here it suggests teaching coming from somewhere and spinning believers in circles.

“by human deceit” (ἐν τῇ κυβίᾳ [13](#) τῶν ἀνθρώπων)—the primary meaning is dice-playing, used metaphorically for deceit and trickery.

“by craftiness” (ἐν πανουργίᾳ [14](#))—also meaning cunning, fraud, deception, or skillful manipulation (Luke 20:23; 1 Cor. 3:19; 2 Cor. 4:2; 11:3).

“by deceitful scheming” (πρὸς τὴν μεθοδίαν τῆς πλάνης)—here the root idea is methodological, systematic deception.

“speaking the truth in love” (PV)

“acting truthfully in love” (RI, BL)

᾿αληθεύοντες [15](#) δὲ ἐν ᾿αγάπῃ—a present participle meaning both being truthful and speaking the truth.

Notes:

[10](#) Стот, Джон. Посланието към ефесяните. Божието ново общество. София, Нов човек, 1999

[11](#) СГБРНЗ №2831

[12](#) СГБРНЗ №4064

[13](#) СГБРНЗ №2940

[14](#) СГБРНЗ №3834

[15](#) СГБРНЗ №0226

Abbreviations:

ПВ - Превод на издателство "Верен"

СГБРНЗ - Старогръцко-български речник на Новия Завет

Bibliography:

1. Библия. Ревизирано издание на изд. "Верен". Bible Time 3.0.0. for Linux, V.1.0
2. Новият завет. Съвременен превод на библейския текст. Учебно издание от проект отворена „Библия“. Международна мисия „Врата на надежда“, 1990
3. Кронщатски, Йоан. Моят Живот в Христа. Дневникът н Св.Отец Йоан Кронщатски. Част I. Хасково, изд. ЕТ „Ортодокс“
4. Старогръцко-български речник на Новия Завет. Българско-старогръцки речник на Новия Завет. С номерация на думите по Джеймс Стронг. София, Фондация "Извор на живот", 2010
5. Стот, Джон. Посланието към ефесяните. Божието ново общество. София, Нов човек, 1999