

# "God's Blueprint For Building Up His Church!"

October 16, 2005



## Ephesians 4:7-16

Tonight I want you to consider God's Blueprint for Building Up His Church. Before we move into that, I want to mention what I think is one of the most helpful books there is on the topic of spiritual warfare. I am referring to C.S. Lewis' Screwtape Letters. It is a fictional account of thirty-one letters written from a demon named Screwtape to his nephew, Wormwood. Screwtape is a seasoned, veteran demon who has worked his way up the ranks to become a sort of diabolical administrator and elder statesman. In his letters, he offers his seasoned advice to the inexperienced, now front-line tempter, Wormwood, on how to neutralize the soul of a believer whom he refers to as the "patient." This "patient" happens to be a young Christian man just trying to live out his everyday life.

What stands out in the book is not the spectacular nature of spiritual warfare with dramatic encounters revolving around demon possession and attempts at exorcism. Rather Lewis unfolds a far more subtle sort of warfare that plays out in a Christian's relationships with friends and family, in his understanding of the church, and even in the practice of prayer. It starts out with Wormwood's failure to prevent his "patient" from becoming a Christian. But as alarming as you would think that would be for a demon, the confident Screwtape assures his nephew that the "patient" is by no means a lost cause for the forces of darkness. He then goes on to discuss a number of strategies.

As I was thinking about this book, it occurred to me that the text before us this evening would be of great concern to the Enemies of Christ. In fact, if Satan had a list of the Top Ten dangerous texts, I believe Ephesians 4:7-16 would be on that list. And so I tried to use a little sanctified imagination and speculate what Screwtape might say to Wormwood about it. It might sound something like this:

"My dear Wormwood, when it comes to countering the Enemy's blueprint for building the church, I have found a direct assault to be not only ineffective—but surprisingly counter-productive. '*Persecution*' only seems to strengthen resolve and clarify purpose. A far more subtle strategy is called for—namely '*distraction*.' This approach, like Judo, depends on using the "patient's" forward motion against him. Don't try to frighten him out of going to church or seduce him away from attending its services. Instead, encourage

a minimal level of involvement. Make him believe his involvement will even gain him special favor. If you can, encourage him to be obsessive about attendance. What matters most is that you alter his beliefs about what the Church is and what its members are supposed to be doing. Narrow his definition of the Church to a time and a place. Make him think that our Enemy's Mission is largely confined to what is done within its four walls and that its Power is limited to Sunday meetings. Whatever you do—*do not*—I repeat—*do not* let him even think of praying or singing together with other believers anywhere other than a church building. Make him think that singing has to follow an order of service—but should never be done as a spontaneous expression of praise to our Enemy. That could be disastrous.

Most importantly, lower the patient's own expectation of his own usefulness. Convince him that the most he can do is to be in his place on Sunday—but that *real* ministry belongs to the '*experts*.' Hades forbid that he would be so brave as to talk to a friend or neighbor about 'you-know-what.' The '*G*' word. If he even gets close to inviting a friend to join with the Enemy—at least get him to call a pastor. Hopefully he will continue to believe that only trained professionals can do such things.

Finally, make him think that believers aren't supposed to have problems—and if they do, another believer has no business trying to help him or encourage him. Limit his understanding of ministry to participating in an occasional program—but never getting involved deeply in another's life. Let him talk with other believers all that he wants—but limit the topics to sports or current events. And if he does happen to bring up the Bible, keep it on the level of people just offering their opinions about what the Bible means. You may even encourage him to mention an occasional prayer request—but make sure he doesn't consider any purposes beyond his immediate desires or personal needs. Never allow him for a moment to see that request in light of the overall purposes of the Enemy's larger plan. Convince him that the term, "believer" is really a synonym for the word, 'Consumer.' And that ministry ultimately is about satisfying his 'felt' needs. If our Ministry of Counter-Intelligence provides you with the proper support—when it comes to influencing other 'Consumers,' he and others like him will forget about the power of the 'You-know-what' and put all their energy into acquiring drums or smoke machines or preserving organs or hymn books. As long as they forget that the power we fear most is found in their Savior."

Our text for tonight is a critical passage for the Church. If Matthew 28:19-20 is our marching orders—this is our strategic battle plan—our blueprint for cooperating with our Head as He builds His Church. Again we need to remind ourselves of the bigger picture. God wants to bring glory to Himself by doing what no man or organization has done or ever will do. To come to earth in the person of His Son and break the back of sin through His redemptive work. Specifically, to reconcile rebellious sinners like us to himself and moreover to reconcile them to each other—thus restoring *true peace*. The huge truth that we have learned so far in Ephesians is that the Church is to be right in the middle of all this. In fact, it is to be leading the way because it alone is equipped with the Gospel of Peace.

At the beginning of chapter 4, you learned that God wants you and me to *spare no effort* in pursuing the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. At the same time, you learned that He has generously provided us with all that we need to *work out* this unity. But what exactly is it that He has given us? And for what purpose are His gifts to be used? That is what Paul now explains.

*7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. 8 This is why it says: “When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.” 9 (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? 10 He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) 11 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. 14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*

There are two emphases in this passage. The first is...

I. God sovereignly distributes His gifts *to* His Church (4:7-10).

A. To each believer in different proportions (7).

*“But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it...”*

God is not “into” boredom. He doesn’t use some celestial cookie cutter when he dispenses His gifts. He doesn’t mass produce them in some heavenly factory as though we are all supposed to be exact replicas of each other. Like snowflakes—no two gifts are alike. They differ in kind and they differ in extent. But the one thing we all have in common—*each one* of us has been given a gift.

We may or may not appreciate the gift He has given us. We might look at another’s giftedness and wish we had their gift. But the truth is—God has given you exactly what you need to have and in the exact proportion you need it to do what He has gifted you to do. And in the end, God will get glory not only in what you do and how you do it—He will get glory for distributing the gifts in a way that is best calculated to bring Him the most glory. Because His glory is what He is all about!

But exactly how does your giftedness fit into His glory? Verses 8-10 tell us that God has gifted you and me ....

B. To advance His sovereign rule over all things (8-10).

*8 This is why it says: “When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.” 9 (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? 10 He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)*

This is one of those head scratching texts you come across every now and then. It just doesn't seem to make a whole lot of sense to the modern reader. What battle? What captives? What gifts? And depending on what translation you are using, it might sound as though Christ is descending into some sort of underworld. Sounds like a paragraph out of *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*. And to top it all off, Paul appears in verse 8 to be quoting from Psalm 68:18—though not necessarily word for word. So what is going on here?

In looking at these verses, the first thing you need to keep in mind is Paul's line of thought throughout the entire book of Ephesians. God has this big, overarching agenda to restore the earth under the headship of His Son and to establish His supremacy over the powers of evil. We have seen this already in Ephesians 1:9-10:

*9 “And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to **bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.**”*

We saw it again in Ephesians 1:19b-23.

*19 “...That power is like the working of his mighty strength, 20 which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, 21 **far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.** 22 **And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.**”*

And now in Ephesians 4:8-10, I think you are seeing it again. Notice especially verse 10:

*10 He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, **in order to fill** (which conveys in this context the idea of “rule”) **the whole universe.**)*

Though good men differ over the details of these verses, in light of Paul's consistent emphasis throughout the epistle, I think Paul is applying Psalm 68:18 to Christ's victory over death and over the forces of darkness. The essence of the psalm is that a military victor has the right to give gifts to those who are identified with him. Paul is simply saying that when Christ came to earth and died for sinners—and then rose again and ascended back to heaven—like any triumphant King after the battle, He divided the spoils of battle among His people. How? By giving them the spiritual gifts through which to carry out the victory He had won at Calvary.

As for the phrase in verse 8: "He led captives in his train...", that is simply the language of victory. For when one power defeated another, you would see the vanquished soldiers tied to one another and then marched into the city of the Victors where they would be jeered and humiliated and the spoils of the battle would be distributed to those who valiantly fought with their leader. We don't really need to try and identify who these captives are—though it would seem to me in light of Paul's emphasis throughout this book, it is the demons. The point is—when Christ defeated sin and death and ascended back to heaven where He is now at God's right hand, He showered on His Church all she needs to carry out and finish the battle against the Enemy. And He will continue to do so until He comes back and completes His victory and finally "fills" or "rules the whole universe."

Do you see the significance of these verses? Do you see their implications? **All** the spiritual gifts God gives to His Church—including but not limited to the ones He mentions in verse 11 are weapons in the battle. You and I are His weapons. The gifts that He gives us are meant to carry out His kingdom purposes! Wow. That makes spiritual gifts and their stewardship very strategic and of critical importance! Which brings us to the second emphasis in this passage. God not only sovereignly distributes His gifts *to* His Church, but He...

II. God expects His gifts to be used *for* and *through* His Church (4:11-16).

A. He has given us a *plan* to carry out (vs. 11-12).

1. God gives *some* gifted people to equip *all the other* gifted people...(11-12a)

*11 "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God's people...."*

Let me restate what ought to be obvious—yet we forget, or just get distracted from this simple truth. God gifts **all** His people. That is what Paul just said in verse 7. But out of the totality of **all** the gifts, God selects *some* gifted people to help equip the *other* gifted people to maximize the effective deployment of their gifts.

I really don't want to get into all of the details of which gifts are foundational gifts and which are ongoing. The point is that God gives His Church what she needs—when she needs it. Suffice it to say that the gifts mentioned here are leaders in the Church that God raises up to prepare or equip other believers to use their gifts well. Their primary job is not to *do* ministry—but to equip *others* for deployment in ministry. Which brings up another key point.

Assuming we *are* being equipped to use our gifts—when, where, and how do we do that? The middle of verse 12 answers that question for us. Notice the phrase...

“...*for works of service*”

This plan that God has given us not only involves *some* of the gifted people equipping the *other* gifted people, but it is an equipping with a specific purpose:

2. To serve our Lord by serving *each other*... (12b)

Who are the ministers at Cornerstone? You are! And yet for over 1,000 years, the Church has practically forgotten that. Ever since the Church began to make a distinction between the clergy and the laity (called the “auditori”). The ministers and the “not-so-important other people.” And in the process, Screwtape and his cohorts have managed to functionally take  $\frac{3}{4}$  of Christ's army off of active duty!

Most church growth numbers crunchers will tell you that 80% of the work is done by 20% of the people (the so-called Pareto principle). Why is that you ask? In part because we have convinced ourselves that ministry ultimately belongs to professionals. Part of this is due to this unbiblical clergy/laity distinction. Part of this is due to pastors who don't want to let go of ministry or don't know how to. But part of it is due to our definition of ministry itself. If we **a la** Screwtape's suggestion think of ministry as something that primarily happens on Sundays or behind the four walls of our building, then 20-30 % is about as good as you can do. But Paul does not circumscribe the boundaries of ministry so tightly. He describes it as simply “serving each other.” Now that surely includes what we do at church on Sunday or Wednesday—but frankly it goes well beyond it. Our whole scheme of ministry development using the baseball diamond goes way beyond that. In fact, most of this ministry should not even be thought of as formal. In other words, with a time and some structure. The formal ministries simply help us to get equipped for *some* formal opportunities—but they also prepare us for the informal ministry that really should be going on 24/7 wherever we may happen to be.

So what does that ministry look like?

**Spatially** speaking—you see it in Acts 2:42-47:

*42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

Notice there is some structure here. But you also get the feeling that a lot of what is going on here is extending beyond defined places and times. This is ministry that starts with the development of a passionate walk with God and overflows into each other's lives.

**Conceptually** speaking —you find it in all of the passages known as the “*one anothers*.” The New Testament writers express our mutual responsibilities to other members of the body in terms of several “one-anothers.” These responsibilities are most naturally carried out in a small group setting. The following list is representative (from the English Standard Version):

- **Love** one another (John 13:34-35; 15:12, 17; Romans 12:10; 13:8; etc.)
- **Live in harmony** with one another (Romans 12:16; 15:5)
- **Welcome** one another (Romans 15:7)
- **Instruct** one another (Romans 15:14)
- **Comfort** one another (2 Corinthians 13:11)
- **Serve** one another (Galatians 5:13; 1 Pet 4:10)
- **Bear with** one another (Ephesians 4:2; Col 3:13)
- **Be kind** to one another (Ephesians 4:32)
- **Forgive** one another (Ephesians 4:32; Col 3:13)
- **Address** one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19)
- **Teach** and **admonish** one another (Colossians 3:16)
- **Encourage** and **build up** one another (1 Thess. 4:18; 5:11; Heb 10:25)
- **Do good** to one another (1 Thessalonians 5:15)
- **Exhort** one another (Hebrews 3:13)
- **Consider** *how to stir up* one another to love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24)
- **Confess your sins** to one another (James 5:16)
- **Pray** for one another (James 5:16)
- **Show hospitality** to one another (1 Peter 4:9)
- **Clothe yourselves** with **humility** toward one another (1 Peter 5:5)
- **The bottom line:** No members *left behind* and no gifts *left unused!*

What is the result of all this? What happens when the church awakens to the work of God's Spirit and really goes after ministry as a *way of life*? It results in...

3. Resulting in the *building* up of the body (or Temple) of Christ (12c)

I added the word, Temple, because it carries over a metaphor that Paul used to end the second chapter. Paul has a tendency to mix his metaphors. He does this not because he is a clumsy writer—but a passionate communicator. And he loves to pile on the metaphors to make his point. We are of course a body and we are God's Temple.

Paul says that biblical ministry necessarily results in change in His body and His Temple. A bigger building. A growing body. But what is the nature of that change to which we should be aiming? Is it *quantity*? Or is it *quality*? I really hate to pit these two against one another. And yet that is invariably what happens. And so you have those who emphasize nickels, noses, and numbers pitted against those who advocate poverty, piety, and purity. Brothers and sisters. It is not either/or. It truly is a both/and. If you go after sheer numbers, you will fall into the trap of pragmatism and eventually you will lose the very thing you say you are striving for. If you emphasize spirituality, you may very well develop an “ingrown-ness” that can foster pride and indifference to the lost. The truth is—God is the One who is building His Church, His Temple. We need to get in step with His plan and purpose. The truth is...

B. He has given us a *goal* at which to aim (13-15).

This goal is stated first positively, then negatively.

1. Positively—Attaining maturity (13, 15)

Verse 13 is a mouthful. But when you look more closely at it, it really is four different ways of saying the same thing: **Maturity!**

- to attain unity of the faith
- to gain a full knowledge of Christ
- to grow to mature spiritual adulthood
- become as fully adult as Jesus Christ

The bottom line is that God wants His people, His Temple, His Body to reflect more and more the character of Her Bridegroom, Her Architect, and Her Head. To think like Christ. Talk like Christ. Desire like Christ. Live like Christ.



When you look down at verse 15, you see that this is not automatic. It is part of an intentional process. It is something we aim at—and we must also aim at together. That is, we are not concerned about just our own growth and that of our immediate family. We are passionate to be a reflection of our Savior. So much so that we are willing to move beyond being mere listeners (auditori who sit in auditoriums and critique messages) and become doers of the Word who do the truth and speak the truth in love.

How? How can we get beyond putting up a front to preserve a fragile image. Fragile because deep down I know the gap that exists between who I am in Christ and how I am supposed to live during the week. *Speaking the truth* in love doesn't mean hoping that the preacher will straighten out other brothers and sisters who aren't pulling it off all that well. No—we are committed to doing it *together*. With each other! And we do so fully aware that our speech is not dependent on our own perfection. (Who am *I* to say *anything* to anyone else?) It is with an honesty that faces our own sin and the resources of the Gospel that are bigger than my sin and able to cover that sin and empower me to more and more put to death that sin! It is passionately pursuing that agenda and finding other people to do it with me! When you have this kind of growth, you will begin to see an atmosphere of humility and love that becomes irresistibly attractive to a watching world. You see that illustrated in Acts 2:47. As the church had favor with God because they were committed to growing together, they began to have favor with their watching neighbors! Didn't Jesus say that the calling card of the church was not her programs—but her display of love for each other?

But there is not only a positive description of what it means to be aiming at God's goal. There is a negative description that helps us to see when we are moving *away* from God's goal.

## 2. Negatively—Avoiding immaturity (14)

*14 “Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming (lit. ‘roll of the dice’)...”*

One paraphrase by G.B. Caird: “*Christians are warned not to be babies, in an open boat at the mercy of wind and wave, driven off course by the roll of the dice.*”

Do you know what I see in verse 14? This is a description of what happens when a church sets out to grow for the sake of *growing*. You

cater to the whims of the people you are trying to reach. In effect, you give them more of the same stuff that they are currently getting inundated with in the popular culture and from which they are seeking something more real, more genuine! It becomes a double whammy in that the church begins to starve and become malnourished—and the visitors can't see beyond the latest gig you are putting in front of them to make them attracted to your church.

**Illustration:** Church I was in recently. That church was all over the place. Jerked by the latest roll of the dice. No stability. No direction. Infighting over non-essentials. And the very thing they are wanting, they will lose if they can't recover the simplicity of the Gospel as a way of life.

If that happens, no blame can be laid at Christ's feet. Because...

C. He has given us the necessary resources for reaching His goal. (16)

1. The Head (Jesus Christ) His life mediated to us by His Spirit and through His life-changing word is what nourishes the body and reinforces His Temple.
2. The *supporting* ligaments (The gifted people who equip the *other* gifted people in the body). Bob and I and Fred and Jeff and Terry—we are just tendons. We are here to provide support for you to do ministry both here and as way of life.
3. The individual members.

But how? *Only* as *each part* does its work.

#### **Concluding thoughts:**

1. Christ is building His church. Our greatest need is not to figure out how to make the church relevant to a post-modern generation that could care less about dotting doctrinal "I's" and crossing theological "T's." It is getting in step with what Christ said He is doing in His Church. It is more than coming up with programs—which have their place if properly understood. It is more about getting with *His* program.
2. How are we doing in terms of ministry with and to each other? What obstacles are there? How does ministry the way we currently do it help us? In what ways does it hinder us?
3. Study Acts 2:42-47. Then go to Ephesians 4:7-16. Then to the "one-anothers." Then back to Acts and so on. Ask God to give us wisdom. Pray that more and more we would embrace and joyfully carry out what it means to speak and live the truth in love as a body before a watching world.
4. We are part of something so big and so glorious. The forces of darkness would like nothing better than to encourage you to lose sight of God's blueprint. To settle for far less. May God give us a clearer vision and a passion to pursue it for His glory.