

The Ministry Of The Body

Ephesians Four And Biblical Counseling

It is very interesting to hear how churches define themselves. Some churches draw their identity from being progressive, conservative, or liberal. Others may define themselves as being relevant, separate, or unique. Some churches might even use the term “biblical” to define themselves. However, this is a very ambiguous term. What exactly is a “biblical” church? Often, churches have a very skewed view of what it means to be a biblical church. They might think a biblical church is a church that has good programs, or does good things in its community and world. Some even think that merely using the Bible in some way makes a church biblical.

A misdiagnosis of the definition of a biblical church spills over into the realm of the practicality of ministry. All people, and this includes churches, live out of some sense of identity, and thus the way a church defines itself will determine the way the church approaches its ministry. This applies very amply to the counseling arena. A church that mislabels itself as a biblical church will misapply biblical principles in the way they help others. If a church defines itself as a biblical church solely because they are progressive, conservative, or liberal, then they will seek to minister in those ways at any cost. However, a misdiagnosis of biblical identity will result in unbiblical goals, methods, and means.

The Bible itself paints a very clear picture of a biblical church. It does not picture a biblical church as a church that is all about size, power, or community recognition, though these things are not necessarily bad to an extent and are all aspects of ministry. Rather, the biblical church is a church that is motivated by and for the Gospel. A biblical counseling ministry is a ministry that draws its goals, methods, and means from the Word of God and more specifically from the Gospel itself.

Background

The Apostle Paul, who wrote most of the New Testament, had a special passion for the church. He considered it an honor to be included in God’s collective, communal plan for believers. Paul had not grown up as a Christian. He grew up as a Jew. However, he was not just any Jew. In Philippians 3:4-6, he described himself as meeting all the requirements for being an outstanding leader in the Jewish community. He also described himself as a man on a mission; a mission to destroy the church.

As a Jewish leader, a worshipper of the one true God, Paul saw Christ, and thus the church, as a heretical enemy, and one that must be wiped out. In

his mind, Jesus was nothing more than a man and did not deserve worship or devotion. Thus, he spent his time pursuing, imprisoning, and putting Christians to death. Yet in verse seven, he says, “But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.”¹ On his way to persecute Christians in Damascus, Paul came face to face with the risen Christ and it changed his life. Christ took a man who possessed nothing but hatred for Him and His church, and turned him into one of the greatest Apostles and servants the world has ever seen.

In the book of Ephesians, Paul is writing to the church in Ephesus to give comfort and hope to them in the midst of their struggles. That Paul is the author is testified to by Ephesians 1:1, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are at Ephesus and *who are* faithful in Christ Jesus.” Ephesus was a city known for its idolatry and sorcery. The church struggled with how to maintain a Christian identity and ministry. Thus, Paul was reminding them of their resources and responsibilities in Christ. He taught in Ephesians 1-3 that they, and thus all believers, have been chosen, predestined, redeemed, sealed, united with Christ, and made an equal part of the body of Christ. The theme of Ephesians is that God has saved us, changed us, and made us a part of something bigger: the church. As such, we should live our lives in light of this Gospel. Ephesians 4:1 states, “Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called.” In light of the Gospel, every aspect of our lives should be an outworking of the Gospel, including, as Ephesians 4:1-16 teaches, the way we “do church.” Thus, the church of God is to be a “Gospel-centered” church.

In these verses, Paul expounds on what it means to be a church that is centered on the working and plan of God. If the Ephesians were going to be a biblical church, they would have to be a Gospel-centered church. They would have to live out what God has done for them. In Ephesians 4:1-16, Paul supplies the Ephesians with three sets of instructions they should follow, tying each one back to the truth and work of God in the Gospel. If they were going to be a Gospel-centered church, they would have to seek

¹ All Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, © Copyright The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, 1995. Used by permission.

biblical unity (4:2-6), submit to biblical leadership (4:7-12), and strive towards biblical purpose (4:12-16). In this paper, these themes will be developed and then applied to the ministry of the church and, more specifically, to the counseling ministry of the church.

The Gospel-Centered Church Seeks Biblical Unity

As mentioned previously, the Ephesian church was called to live out the Gospel in the midst of a pagan and superstitious society. The culture the Ephesians came from was marked by division and chaos. Their gods and goddesses were essentially innumerable and there was no universal thinking about any of them. The Ephesian culture, as is the case with any culture devoid of the worship of God, was about looking out for number one. People did what was in their own self-interest.

In contrast, the Ephesian church was called to function with unity. Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:3, “being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Harold Hoehner notes that this word for “diligent” denotes “to be busy, eager, to make haste.”² The Ephesians were to not only desire unity, but they were to actively pursue and preserve unity. This unity comes from the Spirit of God and the Ephesians were to seek it from Him. Only God can truly give the type of unity that is “the bond of peace.”

Unity is a word that is often used, but in a very abstract way. The definition is not always as clear as one would hope. The Ephesians may have had reason for hopelessness in light of this admonition, but Paul does not leave them stranded. Even in the midst of a pagan and anti-Christian people, the Ephesians could demonstrate unity. In verse 2, Paul writes, “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love.” He mentions several key character traits of unity, ways that unity is played out in the life of the church. A church that displays these types of behaviors and motives is a church that seeks unity. In humility, the people of the church realize that they are no better than the people outside of the church, only better off. John MacArthur comments that, “It begins with an honest, unadorned, unretouched view of oneself.”³ Humility is an honest assessment of status. The Ephesian believers, as seen in Ephesians 2, were, at one time,

as sinful and evil as the rest of their world. They needed to remember that they too were sinners saved by grace. Furthermore, there is always the temptation to think that one is better than other members of the church. Humility declares that God has given grace to both and both are in the process of progressive sanctification.

In gentleness, the church exhibits self-control and a distaste for being brash and unnecessarily aggressive towards one another. Patience shows grace to others. It does not get discouraged when people do not grow at the rate desired. Rather, it displays an enduring dedication to others. Tolerance shows a willingness to put up with minor differences. There are key areas that must be agreed upon, but there are also areas upon which good Christians can disagree. The Ephesians, in such a pagan culture, probably had many areas where disagreements could arise. But true unity allows for minor differences. Finally, love is the glue that holds it all together. It’s no wonder that Christ said that the first and second greatest commandments were to love God and love others. Love puts others first, love serves, love gives, love helps. In Colossians 3:14, Paul wrote, “Beyond all these things *put on* love, which is the perfect bond of unity.”

When a church displays these characteristics, there is unity. These characteristics are the essence of what unity is about. But it is not enough that a church display these types of characteristics. According to Paul, the reason these characteristics are biblical is that they are the outworking of the Gospel. He writes in Ephesians 4:4-6, “*There is* one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.” In the quest to be Gospel-centered, Paul reminds the Ephesians of the theological truth that serves as the basis for their unity. He reminded them that there is only one body, one Spirit, one hope in their calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father. These are all aspects of the benefits of the Gospel. Thus, because of this theological truth, the Gospel-centered church should also pursue unity. If it is true that in the Gospel, the Ephesians had been made into one body, then it follows that they should pursue unity in that body. If in the Gospel there is one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one baptism, and one God, then it follows that the Ephesians should pursue oneness in their relationships with one another.

Further, it is only because of the unity given in the Gospel that the Ephesians could live in unity. These character traits are so foreign to the attitude of man. However, the Gospel redefines the capability of believers. God has given the church the ability to live in unity because He has made us one in Christ.

² Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 511.

³ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Ephesians* (Chicago, IL.: Moody Press, 1986), 120.

The Gospel-Centered Church Submits To Biblical Leadership

When Adam and Eve fell in the Garden of Eden, the Lord pronounced judgment upon them. Among others, one judgment, directed to Eve, would be that, “. . . your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” (Gen 3:16) Since that time, all of mankind has struggled with authority. Man wants his own way, not God’s, and certainly not others’.

In the last point, Paul stated the Gospel at the end of the point. Here, he states it at the beginning. He explains that, through what Christ has done, believers share in the grace of God. This grace enables and empowers each believer to live out the gifts that Christ has given them. Each believer has a part to play in the unity of the body. Everyone has a role. Some of the Ephesians were blessed with the ability to serve. Some were blessed financially and could give generously. Some were gifted in other areas. The Bible Knowledge Commentary notes, “Each believer is to function in Christ’s body by God’s enablement, proportionate to the gift (spiritual ability) bestowed on him, no more and no less. This means that a variety of gifts will be exercised. . .”⁴ But Paul makes it clear that it was Christ who gave these abilities.

Paul then, quoting from Psalm 68:18, writes in Ephesians 4:7-10,

Therefore it says, ‘WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH, HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES, AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN.’ (Now this *expression*, “He ascended,” what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.)

This idea of giving gifts has precedent for even the Psalms speak of it. When Christ died on the cross, purchasing salvation, He also provided grace, strength, and the ability for service. He led believers away from sin and death as His own captives and then gave gifts and abilities for service.

Ephesians 4: 9-10 help give further explanation into this thought. By ascending and descending, Christ began the process of fulfilling all things, of righting the wrongs, of making all things new. Christ rose up from the grave and won victory over death

⁴ Harold Hoehner, “Ephesians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, 200AD), 634.

after previously descending down to earth to live and die.

At this point, Paul narrows the discussion and focuses on a select group of gifts that Christ has given. He writes in Ephesians 4:11-12,

And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and 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.

These leadership roles, or offices, are gifts from Christ Himself to the church. Christ loves His sheep and wants to give them leaders to help them grow. Apostles were the original disciples. These were the men who had seen Christ after He rose from the dead and had been specifically commissioned by Him to this office. That means that there were only twelve. Prophets were given for the purpose of revealing the word of God to a world that did not yet have it. There was no New Testament in the time of Ephesians.

Thus God gave revelation and information through prophets. Evangelists travel various places to spread the Gospel. These are those who go and lay the groundwork for the church. Pastors and teachers come along and supplement the work of the evangelist. Pastors and teachers, which refer to the same gift, do the follow-up and continuing work of the Gospel. Thus, it is Christ who gives these leaders to the church as a gift; not as burdens, not as task masters, but as beneficial gifts. Apparently, the Ephesians did not see their pastors that way. They refused to submit, to see that the leadership they had was an outworking of the Gospel itself.

In one succinct verse, Paul beautifully lays out the task of leaders. Simply stated, the task of leaders (more specifically pastors) is to train and equip others to do the work of the ministry so that the entire body of Christ may be increased and built up. The pastor was never meant to do the entire ministry, as people often mistakably think. Rather, the pastor is to train the body to do the ministry. The pastor’s preaching, counseling, leading, and teaching should all revolve around training and equipping.

The Ephesians were called to submit to their leaders. In and through the Gospel, through His gracious work in salvation, God gave, as a gift, leaders to the church. Thus, to submit to the leaders of the church is to submit to Christ Himself. If the church was going to live out God’s plan for the church, they would have to submit to the leadership of those whom God has led.

The Gospel-Centered Church Strives Toward Biblical Purpose

In Ephesians 4:11-12, Paul wrote, “And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and 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.” In light of modern and historical ways of looking at the ministry, Paul’s words here are radically charged with implication. According to the Bible, it is not the job of the pastor to do the work of the ministry. Rather, it is the work of the laymen to do the work of the ministry. Inclusive service rather than exclusive service. God’s plan was for the Ephesian believers to be a part of what He is doing.

Once again, rather than leave the Ephesians to fill in the blanks themselves, Paul also clarified just what that “work of the ministry” is. He writes, in Ephesians 4:13, “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.” The work of the ministry is helping the body to attain unity, faith, and the knowledge of the Son of God, mutual growth in faith and knowledge of Christ, and ultimately maturity in Christ. The Gospel-centered church is biblical because it seeks to grow in faith, love, and knowledge of God. Harold Hoehner writes, “Thus, Christ gave foundational gifts in order to prepare all the saints in ministry to edify the body.”⁵ In reference to the goal and method of this edification, Hoehner also writes, “This can be accomplished because believers who function in the body have the foundational gifts to prepare them and also because each individual believer has been given a gift in measure (vs. 7).”⁶ Paul taught that the people of the body of Christ, the church, were to seek after Christ-like maturity by being involved in the mutual ministry of exhorting and encouraging one another to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son. This is the goal toward which a biblical, Gospel-centered church is to strive.

In giving even more explanation, Paul stated the purpose of seeking maturity in Christ when he wrote in Ephesians 4:14-15,

As a result, we are no longer to be 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; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ.

⁵ Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, 558.

⁶ Hoehner, 558.

The Ephesians faced many different voices. There was the voice of the Greek philosophers telling them that God was irrelevant. There was the voice of the magicians and sorcerers telling them that God was not supreme. But if the Ephesians would press toward the Biblical goal of growth and maturity, they would not be tossed to and from by error, but would know how to handle adversity.

Once again, in Ephesians 4:16, Paul draws the Ephesians back to the truth that is the Gospel. He writes,

...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.

The Gospel shows us what Christ is doing. Through His death and resurrection Christ has created and is molding the church. The whole building (church) is being fitted and held together by Christ, causing its growth. The body, as a whole, is growing, “by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part.” As Christ works in the hearts and lives of the individual people, the body is strengthened and grown. Thus, the individual Ephesians should follow suit. If they were going to be a biblical, Gospel-centered church, the Ephesians would have to strive after biblical purpose.

Relating The Gospel-Centered Church To Biblical Counseling

The truth of God’s Word was never intended simply to make mankind smarter. It was intended to bring man to maturity in Christ. David Powlison writes,

Ephesians is not just about practical theology, it is practical theology. The distinction between ‘biblical truth’ and ‘practical application’ is artificial. In the Bible, truth arrives in action. Paul teaches by applying biblical truth to himself and others. Ephesians is not a treatise, manual, or commentary. It is a letter. Ephesians is application, life lived out before our eyes.⁷

In 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul wrote, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;

⁷ David Powlison, “Counsel Ephesians,” in *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition through the Lens of Scripture*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian And Reformed Publishing, 2003), 18.

so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” Thus, application must be made from the text to everyday life. This paper seeks to apply the text of Ephesians 4:1-16 to the ministry of the local church. More specifically in this paper, several points of application from Ephesians 4 can be made to the counseling ministry of the local church.

The first application is that, in the midst of church relationships, unity must be sought. Like the Ephesians, the church of today faces a “look out for number one” kind of a culture. In truth, however, the reason this is part of the culture is it is a part of man. With a fleshly sin nature, man seeks his own will. Thus Romans 3:11 states, “THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD.” Even believers can be, and many times are, dominated by their fleshly passions. This does not make for a unified environment. According to Ephesians 4:3, the church can only pursue biblical unity by living out the peace of God. It cannot be faked. Jay Adams writes “biblical unity is not artificial, like the unity of a pile of stones, simply thrown together, but a unity like that of stones cemented together according to a master-builder’s design.”⁸

So much of church ministry often becomes about the likes and dislikes, preferences and opinions of individuals rather than the unity of the body. Thus, the church will lack humility, gentleness, patience, tolerance, and love. A church made up of individuals with individual agendas for the church will never be a unified church. Unless the church of Jesus Christ is committed to seeking biblical unity in their ministry, they will never be a biblical church, and thus will never truly be the type of church that pleases and honors the Lord.

Applying this principle to the realm of personal ministry, counseling, by its very nature, deals with disunity. This includes disunity in the church, the home, the workplace, or other areas of one’s personal life. People do not seek help because they are experiencing unity and its wonderful blessings. People seek help because they are experiencing the lack of blessings that only Gospel-centered unity can supply. One of the primary tasks of the counselor who wishes to be “biblical” in approach is to help the counselee see the lack of fruit as a result of not pursuing unity with his or her neighbors, which on a deeper level, is ultimately a denial or neglect of the Gospel itself. The counselee, the one who is

struggling to seek unity with other believers, needs to understand and live out the fact that God, in the Gospel, has made all believers into one. Therefore, unity must be sought.

The second application that immediately arises from the text is that the members of the local church have been called by Christ to submit to their leaders. Though in many cultures around the world, leaders are held with respect and honor, this practice is becoming a dying fad. Whether it be because of more independent minds or because of moral failures on the part of leaders, the world is growing increasingly skeptical, and even aggressive, toward leaders. However, the fact that it was Christ in the Gospel who gave pastors as gifts to the church should radically change the way the church responds to its leaders. If it is true that Christ has given the church pastors for the sake of growing the church’s faith and maturity, the church has the privilege and responsibility to obey.

In the realm of personal ministry, this attitude of distrust and rebellion often takes the form of neglect to follow through with the counselor’s instructions. In a more generic sense it often takes the form of refusing to seek help or accountability from the pastors of the local church. Churches and counselees need to be reminded that the ministry of their leaders in their lives should not be equated with a trip to the dentist, but rather should be a sober yet joyful opportunity to live out thankfulness to Christ.

A third application that can be made from the text of Ephesians 4 is that the goal of modern ministry, if it is to be biblical, is to train, exhort, and encourage people toward maturity in Christ. More and more churches, in examining themselves, are asking the vital question, “what’s the point?” There is much confusion as to what is the true purpose of the church. Many today would like to say that the sole purpose of the church is to evangelize the lost. Some would say that the church is on earth primarily to do good in its communities and circles of influence. However, the Bible teaches, as we have seen, that the primary purpose of the church is to lead and train others to know and love God more, thus growing in maturity.

This confusion over the ultimate purpose of the church manifests itself, as Paul predicted in Ephesians 4:13, in a lack of spiritual discernment among the followers of Christ. Thus, believers remain, as Paul described the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 3:1, as “infants in Christ.” Believers with many years under their belts are reduced to fighting the early battles of faith in simple matters, rather than moving on to maturity.

⁸ Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Commentary: Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon* (Hakettstown, NJ: Timeless Texts, 1994), 95.

Further, many people today do not understand their role in the body of Christ. To many churchgoers, the pastor is the one to whom the ministry has been entrusted and the laymen are the ones who receive such ministry. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The biblical model of ministry is an inclusive model, one in which people get involved. God has enlisted the body of Christ to be His tools of change and growth into maturity for other members of the body.

In response to the epidemic lack of discernment in modern churches, the biblical counselor must bring clarity, accountability, and purpose to the life of the counselee. The counselee often comes with unbiblical, self-serving goals. Whether the counselee wants circumstances, others, or their own situations to change, rarely do counselees expect to have to change themselves. Their goals fall short of maturity into the image of Christ and stops at temporary happiness. As Paul Tripp writes,

Such a counselee comes to counseling blind to the fact that his agenda is colored by fear, self-interest, control, personal happiness, or a desire for some other aspect of creation. His problem is not that he wants too much from the Lord, but that he is willing to settle for too little.⁹

The counselor must help the counselee to aspire to the biblical goal of maturity in Christ, using biblical means, grounded in the work of Christ.

What makes a biblical church? A biblical church is a church that draws its character, methods, and purpose from the Gospel. It is a church that is more concerned with how God would evaluate its ministry than how man would evaluate its ministry. A biblical church is a church that is faithful to the Word of God and seeks to minister to man in a way that is consistent with Scripture and truly loving to people. Thus, Paul reminds the Ephesians that biblical ministry, in its essence, is “speaking the truth in love.”

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⁹ Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian And Reformed Publishing, 2002), 299–300.