

The Implications of Christ's Plan for His Church (Part 3)

Ephesians 4:14-16

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As we have studied Ephesians 4 together, it's amazing how often Paul uses the image of the human body to describe the church. When you think about the human body, it really is an amazing expression of the creative wisdom and power of God. One author, Joseph Paturi, describes our amazing bodies as,

“the greatest of all creations, the marvelous machine precise and efficient. Take for example just the human brain. The brain is the complex computer system of the body, more wonderful than any computer system that man has ever or will ever create. The body's computer system computes and sends billions of bits of information that control every action right down to the very flicker of your eyelid. In most computer systems, the information is carried by wires and electronic parts, but in the body, the nerves are the wires that carry the information back and forth from the central nervous system which is your brain and spinal column. There's in one human brain, it's estimated that there is probably more wiring, more electrical circuitry, than in all of the computer systems of the world put together. It is by far the most complex information management system in the universe.”

[Paturi writes this,] “If we take all human information processes together both conscious ones (like language and voluntary movements) and unconscious ones (like the functions of your organs or your hormone system), this involves the processing of ten to the twenty-fourth power bits of information every day.” [Now that's not a number we can easily comprehend, but he goes on to say,] “This is astronomically higher by a factor of one million (that is, one million times greater) than the total human knowledge of ten to the eighteenth bits of power stored in all the world's libraries.”

Think about that for a moment. The information your brain processes in a single day is one million times greater than all the information contained in all the libraries of the world. It's no wonder that the psalmist wrote, "I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well."

It's also no wonder that when Paul wants to illustrate the amazing complexity and the organic unity of the church of Jesus Christ, he uses the image of the human body, as we will especially see today in the very last verse of the paragraph that we have been studying together over the last number of weeks. In Ephesians 4, Paul begins the application of the great doctrines that he has taught in the first half of this letter. He begins by saying I want you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling that I have just described. And the very first way you can walk in a manner worthy is by walking in unity in the church; that is, by preserving the unity that is in the church. And in verses 2 of chapter 4 down through verse 16, Paul tells us how to preserve the unity that God has created among Christians.

One of the means for preserving that unity is when the church lives out Christ's plan that He has for His church. We've studied this together. In verses 7 of Ephesians 4 down through 16, Paul actually explains Christ's plan for His church. Over the last couple of weeks, we've been studying the very last part of this plan and that is the practical implications of Christ's plan for His church, the very practical implications of the plan Christ has for His church. And these implications are found in verses 14 - 16. Let me read them for you again. Here are the implications that, of the plan Christ has for His church. Verse 14,

As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried out 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, 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."

Now in those three verses, there are the implications of Christ's plan for every individual here this morning, for every individual Christian (that's in verses 14 and 15). And also, we have the implications of Christ's plan for us as an entire church corporately. And those implications are found in verse 16.

Now we've looked at the individual implications of Christ's plan in verses 14 and 15. Let me just remind you of what we discovered. The individual implications of Christ's plan – number one, every Christian begins the Christian life as a spiritual infant. We're to be no longer children – that is, we start off as children. Understand that implication.

A second implication is that every immature Christian shares two primary characteristics with children. Every immature Christian shares two primary characteristics of children. And Paul lays them out here in verse 14. We are personally unstable, “tossed here and there by waves”, and we are easily deceived. We are swept away by various “winds of doctrine”, winds of teaching.

The third implication we discovered individually of Christ's plan is that Satan then works to take advantage of that immaturity, the fact that we are easily deceived. And there are men who are into trickery; who are into exalting themselves; who are into profit and greed. And they present these schemes of error and invite Christians, immature Christians, to buy into their schemes of error. Satan works to take advantage of our immaturity.

And the fourth individual implication we saw of Christ's plan is that we can only grow up spiritually by means of the truth mixed with love. We can only grow up spiritually by means of the truth mixed with love. We saw that in verse 15, “but ... [holding to] the truth (or literally ‘truthing’) in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ.” We looked at that last week.

Today we come to the last verse in this wonderful paragraph and to the implications of Christ's plan not for each of us individually as we've seen in verses 14 and 15, but on the entire church corporately. I want us to look today at verse 16 and at the corporate implications of Christ's plan for His church. Look at verse 16 again, “from whom [that is, from Christ] 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.”

Paul ends this amazing passage on Christ’s plan for the church with an illustration or a picture of what the plan looks like. And it’s as if he can’t get his arms around it because he uses a number of metaphors. He mixes his metaphors. Verse 16 has the image of the growth of a human body, it has the image of the construction of a building, and it even has the image of the development of a growing marriage. All of those images are in verse 16. In the genius of the Holy Spirit, he has provided us these different images that together give us a comprehensive view of the nature of the church.

For several years when I was in California early in my career out there in the late 80’s, I was responsible for a magazine that we published called *Masterpiece Magazine*. I was the managing editor, and part of my responsibilities was to go to the print shop when the magazine was being printed and to make sure that the print quality was up to what we wanted it to be. And in those days on a four-color press, there were four plates that were made, and each plate printed a different color ink. And as it laid down those different colors and ran through the press, each plate would lay its color on top of the previous colors. If you were to examine a sheet that had just run under one of those plates, under one of those colors, you would get a distorted view of the image that was on that page. To gain a complete view, you had to see all four colors printed from the plates that had been made. Each color added its layer, its dimension, to the final product.

And that’s how it is with these metaphors for the church. There is not a single metaphor that adequately pictures the church. And so, in the genius of the Spirit, He lays down these different shades of color, if you will, to help us understand, to get an accurate picture of the church. Now throughout these extended metaphors in verse 16, there is a clear, implied call to action. There isn’t an imperative. There isn’t a command. And yet at the same time, there is inherent in this verse a call to you and to me to do something, to get involved.

Now let's look at verse 16 together because in this verse, we're going to see four clear implications of Christ's plan corporately on the entire church - on this church, on every church. What are the corporate implications of the plan of Jesus Christ for His church? First of all, Christ is the head of His church. Christ is the head of His church. Look at how the verse begins, "from whom [that is, from Christ as the head] the whole body [grows]." Christ is the head of the church. Now what does that mean? When we say that Christ is the head of the church, what are we saying? Well, in this context of Ephesians, I think we're primarily saying two things. We're saying that Christ is the sovereign over His church, that He is the final authority in His church.

Look back at Ephesians 1. Paul makes this point using this same image. Ephesians 1, he says in verse 22,

... [God] put all things in subjection under ... [the feet of Christ], and gave ... [Christ] as the head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

In this context, he's speaking of Him as the head in the sense that everything else was subjected to Him. He is the authority. He is in charge. You want a graphic picture of Christ being in charge? Read, at some point, Revelation 1 where Christ is pictured as walking among the lampstands which represent the churches and speaking as the one who controls them and their leaders. He is the ultimate authority in the church.

You see this again in chapter 5 because in chapter 5 as Paul is talking about wives and their responsibilities, he says to them in Ephesians 5:23,

For the husband is the head of the wife [here's his, here's that image again, and then he tells us about Christ], as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself *being* the Savior of the body. ... as the church is subject to Christ, so the wives *ought to be* to their husbands in everything.

The point is if, while he's making a point about wives, he's using Christ as the head of the church to make that point. And so, if we back up and look at the image he uses, understand that

he is saying Christ is the head in the sense that He is in charge. He is the One who is the authority over His church. The head, your physical head, directs your physical body – what it should do, how it should behave. And as the head of the church, Christ directs what happens in the life of His church. That’s one of the meanings of Christ being the head of His church.

But in Ephesians 4, I think the larger point is that Christ is the source - when we say Christ is the head, we mean He’s the source of the life and growth of the body. I think that’s the emphasis in Ephesians 4 - from Him as the head, the whole body grows. Without a head directing its growth, the rest of the body cannot grow. Paul makes this point over in Colossians 2, Colossians 2:19 in the sort of parallel account as he writes to the church in Colossae. He says there are those who “... [don’t hold] fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.” The head is responsible for the growth. Jesus Christ is the source of the church’s life and its growth. Isn’t that what He Himself promised when He was on the earth? You remember in Matthew 16 what He said? “I will build My church.” I’m responsible for it.

Your physical head, the one that’s attached to your body right now, specifically your brain, directs your physical body. The brain receives sensory information from thousands of miles (yes in your body, thousands of miles) of pale, shiny threads that run throughout your body – the nerve cells or the sensory neurons. And your brain then collects all of that data, it analyzes the data and decides how your body should respond. And it does it in a moment. You reach out your hand and touch the pot on the stove and in a moment’s time, your neurons, your sensory neurons, have sent that information to the brain. Your brain recognizes what’s going on, sends out other signals down a different set of motor neurons telling your hand to pull back. All that information travels through your body at up to three hundred and fifty feet per second. Some of the decisions your brain makes, it makes with your involvement. You decide certain things. Other decisions your brain makes, it makes completely without you. You simply are the recipient of the decision it makes.

In the same way, Christ, as the head of the church, monitors His body and directs it according to His sovereign will. He is the head of the body. Folks, the implications of this are huge. How can

Christ as the head of the body send directions as to what the body is to do? How do we get instructions from our head? It's right here in this book. We are responsible to follow the instructions of our head. And the instructions come to us not through shiny little thread nerves, but rather through the Word of God. As a church, we have no right to decide how this church should function or how it should run. We're not the head. We don't get that right. He is the head. We simply respond to the instructions He sends as any healthy human body responds to the instructions it gets from its head.

There's a second corporate implication of Christ's plan for His church. Not only that Christ is its head, but secondly, Christ intended for us to grow within a community of believers. Christ intended for us to grow within a community of believers. Look at verse 16 of Ephesians 4 again. If we were to strip out of verse 16 everything except the main clause, we would be left with this: "the whole body ... causes the growth of the body" – the whole body causes the growth of the body. That's the main clause of the sentence, of this relative clause. You see, like the cells in our physical bodies, every individual Christian only grows when he is connected, he or she is connected to the rest of the body. That's the point here. The whole body causes the body to grow. We don't grow and parts of our bodies cannot grow or live separate from the rest of our bodies.

On July 9th, 2001, off the Florida panhandle, an eight-year-old boy was swimming, and he was attacked by a bull shark. The shark literally severed his arm fairly cleanly about six inches below his shoulder. The boy's uncle stopped the attack and actually wrestled this bull shark to the shore. There was a park ranger nearby. The park ranger came over and shot the shark three times to loosen its jaws and to kill it. There were emergency medical technicians who shortly arrived, and they literally, as the boy was rushed off to the hospital, these emergency medical technicians literally rescued the severed boy's right arm from inside the shark's mouth. Through a twelve-hour delicate surgery, a team of physicians reattached that boy's right arm.

Think about it for a moment. If that young man's arm had remained separate from his body, in a very short period of time that arm would have atrophied and died. But once it was reattached through God's goodness to us and through the procedures that have been discovered through His

common grace - once that boy's arm was reattached, it not only continued to live, but as he grew, that arm grew with him.

That's how it is with the church. You and I can only grow when we are connected to the rest of the body. That's Paul's point in verse 16. It would be an odd thing for a member of the body to survive without the rest of the body. It can't happen. The body grows as a unified whole and as a Christian, listen carefully, as a Christian, God never intended that you as a Christian should live and grow separately from the rest of the body.

John Calvin put it like this, "No growth is advantageous which does not bear a just proportion to the whole body. That man is mistaken who desires his own separate growth." If you cut yourself off from the rest of the body of Christ, you threaten your very life. Our spiritual life, (Paul wants us to know here), will only flourish as long as we are connected to the head and to the other parts of the body. It doesn't take a village to grow a Christian, but according to Paul in Ephesians 4:16, it does take a healthy functioning church to grow a Christian. Self-correction

The whole body causes the growth of the body. Just think about the implications of that for a moment. You will only grow spiritually as God intended as you remain connected to the body of Christ. That runs so contrary to the individualist spirit of our age, doesn't it? We like to think of ourselves as islands. I can come and go at will. I'll do what I want when I want. That's never the image of the New Testament. You and I will only grow as we remain connected to the head and to the rest of the body. That was God's intention.

There's a third implication of Christ's plan for the entire church corporately. It's this. Every individual Christian is supposed to contribute to the growth of the church. Every individual Christian is supposed to contribute to the growth of the church. Look at verse 16 again, "from ... [Christ] the whole body [now watch the intervening phrases], 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." So, think of it like this. Christ is the head, and He is the source of the church's growth. It's from Him that the growth of the body flows just as if your head is severed,

your body can't continue to grow. It is what directs the various cells of your body to grow properly.

But Christ uses (while He is the source of our spiritual growth), He uses the proper working of every individual part to accomplish that growth. Notice how Paul puts it, "the whole body, being fitted". That's an interesting word. We saw it in 2:21. It's an architectural word – "being fitted". It, in the ancient world, particularly when it came to building great monumental stone buildings, the stones were not put together with mortar. Instead, they were carefully cut and quarried so that they fit together with the other stones around them. That's the word picture behind this word.

The body of Christ, like a building, has been carefully designed. And every stone, to mix the metaphors as Paul does here, every stone has been carefully cut to perfectly fit the stones around it. In the same way, the body of Christ – every part has been designed to fit with the other parts it touches. Think about that for a moment. If you're a part of this church, it means that God has cut and fit all the members of this church together so that we would fit together as He designed – "being fitted".

But notice the whole body is not only being fitted, but also is "being held together", is being held together. If "being fitted" describes the designed contact between us, "being held together" describes our attachment to one another, our being knit together or united together. How is the body of Christ fitted together, and how then is it attached together, united together, held together? How is that unity preserved?

Notice how Paul continues, "by [or through] what every joint supplies", by or through what every joint supplies. Now there's been a lot of ink spilled over what the word "joint" here means in the Greek text. Most of the modern translations and most of the commentators take it to be "joint" because it's used similarly in Colossians 2. It's, it's used with the word "ligament" and so because of that, most have translated it this way, and I think it's probably the best way to understand it.

Now when you see that expression “through what every joint supplies”, some commentators think that every joint here refers back to the gifted men of verse 11. In other words, the joints are gifted men, and then the next phrase, “every individual part”, is talking about all of the members. That’s certainly possible, but I think it’s probably best to understand both of these phrases as referring to every single Christian, every part of the body.

So then, let’s put it together. The whole body then is fitted and held together by what every joint (or every Christian) supplies, through the supply that comes from every Christian. You say well what can every Christian supply? Well, notice the next phrase, “the proper working (or function) of each individual part”, according to the proper working or function of each individual part. You know, perhaps you’ve been tempted to say, “You know, I’m just one person. I mean, what can I do in this church? What can I do that’ll really contribute to this church?”

The answer is you can supply what only you can supply. You can fill your role. You have been given, as we saw earlier in this passage, a spiritual gift, a, a giftedness to serve in the church if you are truly a Christian and so has every other true Christian who attends this church. And so, if you would simply use your gift, if every individual Christian, if every individual part of the body functioned as it was designed, this local expression of the body of Christ will continue to grow. That’s Paul’s point.

Harold Hoehner, who just recently went to be with the Lord, in his excellent commentary on this passage, says, “The union and growth of the body can only come when there is contact with other members of the body.” We each supply something that causes the body to grow just as every cell in your body, however insignificant that individual cell may be, every cell together contributes to the growth of your body. Not one of them is unimportant. The same thing is true in the life of the church. The source of the church’s growth is Christ, and He causes that growth through what every joint supplies through the proper working of each individual part. Folks, when every part functions the way Christ designed, then the whole body causes the growth of the body.

Now Paul finishes off this idea by changing metaphors sort of in midstream. Notice what he says in verse 16: “... for the building up of itself ...”. The whole body causes the growth of the body

for the building up of itself. This building that he's talking about here, this building up, this edifying, is not a building made with dead stones, but it's a living organism made up of living believers. The head provides the life, directs the functioning of the entire body, helps every joint and every part fit together and hold together. And then every part fills its particular function and role. And when that happens, the body grows and builds itself up.

Hippocrates, the father of medicine, almost five hundred years before Christ, understood this. While some of his physiology was clearly wrong, at the same time he understood the basic principle that good health only occurs when the various parts of the body function in proper proportion to one another. That's what Paul is saying here. Paul's clear implication is that for the body to grow, all the parts have to do their part, all the parts have to fill their role. Again, John Calvin writes, "Through the members as canals is conveyed from the head all that is necessary for the nourishment of the body."

Let me ask you. Are you filling the role that Christ made you to fill, that He gifted you to fill? Or have you neglected both the church, your responsibility to the whole, and the gift that Christ has given you? Listen, if you will use your gift to serve in this church, not only will you grow individually spiritually stronger, but you will contribute to the growth of the other members of this church and ultimately to the entire body of Christ. So, get involved. Fill the role Christ created you to fill.

Now that brings us to one final corporate implication of Christ's plan. We've seen that Christ is the head of the church; that God intended that spiritual growth occur within a community of believers; that every individual part is to contribute to the growth of the church.

The fourth implication out of this passage, the fourth corporate implication, is this. The lifeblood of true spiritual growth is love. The lifeblood of true spiritual growth is love. The whole body causes the body to grow. And that happens when every individual Christian fills his unique role. But for the plan to work, the one necessary ingredient that has to be added comes at the end of verse 16. It all has to happen "in love" – that is, in the sphere of love. Think of it like this. We've talked about all the different parts of the body. Love functions like the blood does to our physical

bodies. The life of our physical bodies is in the blood which supplies oxygen and nutrients for the entire body. Without blood, there's no growth, there's no life. In the same way, without love, there will be no spiritual growth.

Isn't that what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, that great love chapter? He begins by saying it doesn't matter what I say. Nothing I say matters if I don't have love. He goes on to say no ministry or gift that I may have or use matters if I don't have love. No personal sacrifice or service matters if I don't have love. Without love, every spiritual enterprise is worthless. If all of us fill our role in this church, but there's no genuine love and concern for each other, then it will not, it cannot result in the building up of this church in spiritual growth. The Corinthian church is a great example of this. Paul begins the Corinthian letter. You know what he says to them in the first chapter? "You are lacking in no [spiritual] gift." They had them all. And according to chapters 12 - 14, they were using them, but they weren't using them in love for one another. And therefore, it wasn't benefitting them, it wasn't growing them.

We are to unselfishly, in a self-sacrificing way, seek to meet the needs of others regardless of their worthiness of it or their response to it. That's what love is. We're to do what we do not for ourselves, not so other people will look at our gifts and say, "Wow! There's a guy who's gifted. There's a lady who's really got a great set of spiritual gifting", but for each other. Do you see in this context why love is so important?

Let me ask you a question. When twenty-first century Christians think about church, what is the very first thing they think about? Themselves. What is it going to do for me? Will I like it? Will it benefit me? Will it help my growth? And it's not that those are never appropriate questions to ask. It's a matter of emphasis. For many, those things are their preoccupation. When they think about church, they think about them.

Paul wants us to turn our eyes out and say, 'No, it's about the other people. I'm to do what I do, I'm to think of the church in love for others.' Paul says where the church is functioning the way Christ designed, stop thinking about yourself and your own growth and your own needs, and start thinking about the role you're supposed to fill for the people around you.

By the way, in this context, one crucial way we can demonstrate that love – go back up to verse 2. You remember this? We are to show tolerance for one another in love. We're to respond to the faults of others by holding ourselves back, by exercising self-restraint. And we're to do that in love. We're to overlook the faults of others with a spirit of love and concern for them – not gritting our teeth, but rather having a toleration for them that springs from the heart motive of genuine love for them – being quick to overlook the faults and weaknesses of others. When we show that kind of love in the church, it is the life-giving blood which, by which the church will grow and live. Genuine sacrificial love then, listen carefully, genuine sacrificial love for one another becomes the ruler by which we measure the church's real growth.

Paul says there's a real vital unity in this section. There's a real unity that we didn't create, that the Holy Spirit created when we came to faith in Christ. And He united us to Christ, and He united us to each other. And verse 3 of this section says you and I are to preserve that unity. We're to do what we can to preserve that unity. And here he tells us how. As we've studied together, he has shown us how to preserve that unity. Verse 2, we learned that we are to put on the attitudes of unity – attitudes like humility and patience and gentleness and tolerance for one another in love. Where those attitudes exist, there will be unity. Where they do not, there will be conflict and discord and disunity.

We are to focus on the basis of our unity, verses 4 - 6 - those great realities that unite us. One body - we share a common life.

One Spirit – we share a common source or origin.

One hope – we share a common future.

One Lord – we share a common master.

One faith – we share a common body of belief.

One baptism – we share a common confession.

One God and Father – we share a common God and Father.

Those seven realities unite us to every other Christian, and we're to focus on those realities and not the petty issues that divide us.

And the third way he's told us in this passage that we can preserve the unity is by working on Christ's plan for unity which is the plan He has for His church. When the church functions the way Christ planned, the church will preserve its inherent unity. When the gifted leaders that Christ has given His church equip the members and the members (that's you), when you use the gift God has given you for the spiritual growth of others; when you do it in love for the help of the body as a whole, then the result is growth. We grow individually.

We're no longer children tossed here and there with personal instability. We're no longer easily deceived by every wind of teaching. But we grow up into likeness to Jesus Christ Himself. And from Christ, the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every individual Christian supplies - as each one fills his role - the whole body grows. And it does it in the sphere, with the lifeblood of love pumping through its veins. That's the plan. It's an amazing plan. It's Christ's plan for His church.

Let me ask you. You, you who claim to be in Christ, are you onboard personally with the plan? This is what's important to Christ. Listen, what you read about in the newspaper –ultimately, that is not important to Christ. He's in charge of it. He orders it. He directs it. But the most important thing to Christ in today's world is what happens in His church. That's what He's building. That's what matters for eternity. World powers will rise and fall, bad economies will come and go, but what matters to Christ is His church. Does it matter to you? Is that the number one priority to you? Get in step with the program.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for this incredible passage that we have walked through together over the last number of weeks. Lord, our minds have been stretched, our hearts and our devotion to Christ has been deepened. Our hearts have been challenged because, Father, we are by nature so selfish.

Help us to see that You never intended for us to function alone as islands as it were. But Father, help us to see instead that You designed us to be a part of a living organism in which we would

fill an important role. And it's the most important thing You're doing in the universe as You are redeeming a people by Your Son for Your Son to Your own glory.

Father, help us to get onboard with the plan. Forgive us for being distracted with the unimportant – the things that will someday all go away and be burned up, be forgotten in the trash bin of history. Father, help us to give our lives and our energies and the gifting You've given us to Christ's great plan.

We pray in Jesus' name and for His sake. Amen.