Chapter Two - A Church *of* Biblical Counseling

By Brad Bigney and Steve Viars

**Loving the Church**

Followers of Jesus Christ love the word *church* and everything it entails. We remember the critical place in Scripture where after Peter made the marvelous declaration that Jesus was the Messiah and Son of the Living God, that Jesus promised to build His church where the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). Of all the topics Jesus could have chosen to discuss as that pivotal moment, He emphasized the birth and development of His church. We wonder what the disciples must have thought when Christ used this word which literally means “called out ones” to describe the body He was going to develop after His death, burial and resurrection. The church was obviously of critical importance to the Lord and therefore it is of critical importance to us.

We also marvel at the central role the church places as the New Testament unfolds. When the resurrected Christ promises His followers that something tremendous is going to happen a few days after His ascension, shortly thereafter the church is miraculously born. Thousands of people from many nations begin placing their faith in Jesus Christ and become transformed proof of Jesus' promise. This new entity is so miraculous and Spirit-filled that some detractors accuse the early church of turning the world upside-down with their teaching (Acts 17:6 - KJV). The apostle Paul goes so far as to call this new group “…the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). We love the church because our Lord is mediating His plan and program through this delightful and unique group of people.

Many of us also love the church because some of our grandest experiences occurred there. We love gathering together and worshipping our Savior with our brothers and sisters in Christ and have powerful memories of doing so over the years. We think back to all the times the Word of God was proclaimed in a way that resulted in encouragement, conviction, comfort, and ultimately dramatic life change. We have developed deep and abiding friendships as we have served shoulder to shoulder in good days and bad. It is not a perfect institution because it includes imperfect people like you and me; but it is a place that many of us hold near and dear.

We (Brad and Steve) love being called to pastor two of Jesus' churches. We would not trade this adventure for anything the world has to offer. But we don't just want to serve Jesus--we want to serve Him well. We want our churches to fit the biblical pattern and accomplish the goals articulated for us in the Word of God. One passage that we have both found especially helpful is Ephesians 4:12-16. After spending three chapters unpacking and explaining the gospel indicatives--who we are in Christ, the apostle directs our attention in the second half of the book to the gospel imperatives--how we are to live in the power and strength of our resurrected Savior.

In chapter 4, Paul includes a delightful passage of what a local church is to be like. Clearly the theme is spiritual growth, known theologically as the doctrine of progressive sanctification. But what has especially impacted us is the notion that growth is to be emphasized church-wide. Soul-care is not what a few people do, it is what everyone does. Counseling and discipleship permeate every facet of the ministry--it is to be part of the church’s DNA. That is what we believe God wants us to develop in our congregations -- not just churches that have counseling centers, but churches that are counseling centers. Please allow us to use the major emphases of this passage to explain how we believe our Lord wants us to accomplish this task.

**1. Where Pastor/Teachers Embrace Their Role as Shepherds Seven Days a Week**

If you want to see Ephesians 4:11-16 happen in a local church, the pastor of that church has to understand that his role is much bigger than just preaching and teaching every week. That’s why Ephesians 4:11 says that Christ gave the church some ‘pastors and teachers.’ Sadly, too many seminaries are focused exclusively on homiletics and exegesis, which are essential, but the role of shepherd and equipper is either being assumed or ignored altogether. Too often the training for shepherd /equipper is reduced one class titled, ‘Practical Theology,’ where they learn to marry and bury people, but as far as learning how to shepherd people through the various struggles in life that are unrelated to a wedding or a funeral, the pastor is left to grope his way through it, ignore it, or farm it out to someone outside the church.

For the past 18 years, I’ve (Brad) invested my life in a church where I’ve been saying my goal is to train godly disciples who can handle life effectively by handling God’s Word accurately. That’s much bigger, and broader, and, I think, more biblical than just saying, ‘I want to preach and teach faithfully through the Bible so that I can feed my people the right spiritual food.’ That’s a great start. And an essential start. But it’s not the total package of what you see in Ephesians 4:11-16.

The ministry of what I’m doing Monday through Saturday is just as important as what I do each Sunday in preaching. The pastor who’s been gripped by Ephesians 4:11-16 is counseling one on one with people throughout the week, he’s spending time with other church leaders equipping them and showing them how to actually use God’s Word to help a real person with a real problem, and he’s looking for every opportunity to take a regular ‘business’ meeting with his staff, deacons, elders, trustees, or board and to infuse it with an element of showing leaders how to help real people with real problems, using God’s Word.

Too often, in America, the pastor is viewed as nothing more than the lead vision-caster and a biblically-glorified CEO of a corporation with a mission. But Ephesians 4:11-16 calls me to fight against the pressures of this world, and the expectations of the ‘corporate’ American church, that try to squeeze me into the mold of CEO, holding me captive to the pulpit instead of also seated at the kitchen table and the living room, with real people.

John Piper reflects this same fight when he says, “We pastors are being killed by the professionalizing of the pastoral ministry. The mentality of the professional is not the mentality of the prophet. It is not the mentality of the slave of Christ. Professionalism has nothing to do with the essence and heart of the Christian ministry. The more professional we long to be, the more spiritual death we will leave in our wake.” [[1]](#endnote-1)

He goes on to say, “The world sets the agenda of the professional man; God sets the agenda of the spiritual man.”[[2]](#endnote-2) And that agenda can be seen clearly in Ephesians 4:11-16. May God give us a revival of men who seek to live out ‘pastor’ as well as ‘teacher,’ to the glory of God!

**2. Where Church Members Love Being Equipped for the Work of Service**

I’ve (Brad) been a pastor for almost 30 years now, and I’m more committed today than ever before to equipping every believer to actually do the work of ministry. And I mean real stuff, the hard stuff, big stuff. 

The word ‘equip’ in Ephesians 4:12 is a Greek word that has the idea of making something fit or preparing something fully through training and discipline. It also has the idea of mending or restoring. Many of the people that come into the church are crushed by life and sin, and will need mending and restoring, but that’s not the end game. Ephesians 4:12 calls us to go on and equip those that have been mended to do ministry! Pastors should recognize that we're not looking for spectators; we don't need any more fans, and the church is not a Christian cruise ship, focused on how comfortable we can make our people.   
Ephesians 4:12 calls us to equip people to do ministry, because the church is a battle ship, on a mission, with a spiritual war going on.

Bill Hull recognizes the problem when he says, “The evangelical church has become weak, flabby, and too dependent on artificial means that can only simulate real spiritual power. Churches are too little like training centers to shape up the saints… The average Christian resides in the comfort zone of ‘I pay the pastor to preach, administrate, and counsel… I am the consumer, he is the retailer… I have the needs, he meets them... that’s what I pay for.’” [[3]](#endnote-3)  
But Ephesians 4:12 flies in the face of consumer Christianity, as there's a marvelous chain of events that's spelled out in v. 12, with three prepositions that unpack God's plan for what church ministry should look like. It's the little word 'for.'

**‘For the equipping of the saints’** – The pastor / teacher is called not only to *do* ministry but to help others *learn* how to do it! That’s why whenever I counsel I have someone else sitting in with me to observe and learn how to do it. That’s why I have an apprentice in the small group I lead, so that I can eventually birth my group to him. It’s why I meet with ‘young eagles’ in our church that show interest in full-time ministry. It’s why I trained eight godly couples to do all the pre-marital counseling instead of me. It’s why I started a men’s and women’s leadership development ministry, where we select men and women to spend a year reading good books, memorizing Scripture, and discussing theology, as well as practical ministry concerns, so that they can go to the next level in their ability to do ministry.

**‘For the work of ministry’** – Notice, who's supposed to actually do the work of ministry? Ephesians 4:12 tells us ‘the saints.’ And He doesn't say anything about Bible college training, or special calling, or giftedness. No diplomas are mentioned in Ephesians 4:12.  
  
**‘For the building up of the body of Christ’** – What's the end result of doing things God's way? The church becomes strong, and stops looking so anemic and sickly.   
  
Some of God’s people, sitting in Bible-believing churches, have been *objects* of God's mercy and love for years now; it's time for them to be an *instrument* of that love in the lives of others around them! But they will need pastor / teachers who are committed to showing them *how.*

**3. Where the Body of Christ is being Built Up**

Churches that are biblical counseling centers are constantly looking for ways to comfort those who are suffering and to confront and correct those who are sinning. Consider first the issue of suffering. Somewhere along the line we bought the notion that Christians are supposed to tape plastic smiles over broken hearts. We believe that big boys don't cry and that followers of Jesus Christ should not be authentic about how and why we are hurting. No wonder some people report that they feel more comfortable pouring out their problems at a bar than at a church.

The Scripture paints a markedly different picture. The only way a Christian will get serious about being built up is by being honest about ways he or she feels knocked down. The most natural place in all the world for this to occur is at the church-house. Imagine the power of fellow sufferers locking arms and going to the throne of grace together. Because our focus is on our perfect Savior as opposed to the painted on false perfection of self, we can be authentic about our hurts.

This affects every facet of local church ministry. Small groups or Adult Bible Fellowships should be places where men and women can suffer together. The Body of Christ is built up because the men and women in the church family openly acknowledge their pain, hurts, and struggles. There is mutual edification and the net effect is biblical counseling for sufferers at every level of ministry.

The same can be said for times when we struggle with sin. In moments of honesty we can and should admit our need to be built up. When that mindset becomes part of the church culture, there is a willingness to be vulnerable about where we are failing. Friendships in the church family include the component of being honest about ways we need to grow.

My (Steve) mentor Bill Goode taught me that this kind of authenticity needed to begin at the level of the leadership. He would frequently say to our pastors and deacons; “Men, if we want the members of our church to grow spiritually, we have to grow spiritually.” One of the qualifying questions potential leaders are asked is if they thought one of our pastors was sinning in some way, would they go and talk with the pastor? If the man answered no, he could not be considered for a position of leadership in our church.

In our pastors’ and deacons’ meetings, we divide up into accountability groups and talk about ways we need to change. There is a sense in which we are counseling one another as church leaders. Such conversations over time just become as natural as anything else we do in our meetings.

We also believe this kind of counseling should extend to every person in our church family. Each church member is assigned to a deacon's care group. That deacon in turn contacts the men and women on his team for the purpose of helping each person be built up spiritually. A significant percentage of our leaders have received biblical counseling training and their conversations with the people on their care groups often have the feel of an informal counseling session. For situations that are more intense, more formal biblical counseling is available. But even when that is necessary, it does not feel awkward or out of place because there is a sense in which every person in the church is being counseled in some way.

**4. Where Unity is Increasing**

We realize that some might object to this ministry philosophy by wondering if this approach will cause problems in the church. Our answer would be that the problems already exist -- the question is whether we are going to roll up our sleeves and deal with them biblically and relationally.

Our experience is that when men and women feel like they are receiving genuine help and answers for both episodes of suffering and occasions of sinning, the net effect is that the church family is more closely knitted together. Paul opened this section of Ephesians by teaching that we should be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). Now he holds out the real possibility that we can "all attain to the unity of the faith" (Ephesians 4:13).

This unity comes in part from each person seeing the efficacy of the biblical counseling process in his or her own life and those closest to them. There is a natural desire to share these biblical truths with others. This happened several years ago at Faith in Lafayette when an unexpected gift was offered to build Vision of Hope, a residential treatment center offering faith-based resources to young women ages 14-28 struggling with unplanned pregnancies, drug/alcohol abuse, eating disorders, and self-harm. On the one hand it was exciting for the church family to be offered this kind of gift. But the possibility for division existed because there could have been some who might have been afraid to bring such persons to our community and church in a residential setting. But because the counseling process in all its forms had had such a tremendous impact on the vast majority of our church members, we joyfully accepted this new ministry responsibility because we concluded that if God was powerful enough to help us change in all the ways He had already accomplished, He was surely powerful enough to help these new young ladies as well. It has been a delight to watch the church family rally around this new ministry endeavor and love each young woman who is brought to us. It is almost like God has healed us of a terrible disease and now we joyfully want to share that spiritual cure of the redeeming power of the blood of Christ with as many people as possible in a unified fashion.

**5. Where the Focus is Maturity in Christ**

One of the biggest mistakes people make regarding biblical counseling is to boil it down to nothing more than ‘name a sin and I’ll give you a Bible verse that commands you to stop it!’ But biblical counseling is so much bigger than that because it’s not person-centered or problem-centered, but Christ-centered.

Ephesians 4:13 tells us the goal when it says, “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.” Good biblical counselors understand that we’re doing more than just fixing a problem; we’re making a disciple. A problem may have brought the counselee in, but the scope of counseling is bigger than just fixing a problem. We want to see the counselee become more like Christ – thinking more like Christ, following harder after Christ, and making choices that please Christ.

Ed Welch points out the danger, and captures the focus well, when he says, “When principles or steps wander from Christ himself, they become self-serving guidelines. They make our marriages, families, friendships, and work go better, but the goal is our own betterment more than the glory of God… ‘Be good’ and ‘Do right’ are fine messages, but when they stand alone they have more in common with the Boy Scouts' Handbook than Scripture.” [[4]](#endnote-4)

It’s a vital growing relationship with Jesus Christ that keeps the counseling process from being sheer drudgery filled with accountability or just listening compassionately but never helping the counselee to move forward. A growing love for Christ, with increasing spiritual maturity, is what helps people go places they never thought they could go in their life. And it’s possible because the counseling process is focused on the person of Jesus Christ rather than just a system or model of change.

Intimacy with Christ is a powerful engine for change; otherwise, drudgery sets in and people lose heart. Sam Storms says, “It is a dreary holiness indeed that is merely resisting sin. The joy of holiness is found in having heard a sweeter song… Grace is the work of the Holy Spirit in transforming our desires so that knowing Jesus becomes sweeter than illicit sex, sweeter than money and what it can buy, sweeter than every fruitless joy. Grace is God satisfying our souls with his Son so that we're ruined for anything else!” [[5]](#endnote-5) In many ways, counseling is helping my counselee to taste and see how good Christ is so that they’re ruined for anything else!

Leslie Vernick states as much when she says, “Rules won't change us, but a growing relationship with Christ will. Change or maturity for a Christian comes about through deepening our intimacy with Jesus, not by following certain rules or doctrines. When we begin to grasp his love for us, our hearts respond with love for him. He tells us if we love him, we will keep his commandments (John 14:15). Our love for him is what begins to move our hearts toward obedience. We cease when we come to love something else more than ourselves or our sin.” [[6]](#endnote-6)

What a joy to step into the sin and suffering of people’s lives and lead them not to a system but a Savior, Jesus Christ!

**6. Where there is a Thirst for and Delight in Sound Doctrine**

Woven right into this passage about believers growing up into maturity is Paul’s statement in v. 14 (NASB) that 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.”

So while an emphasis on doctrine today is too often dismissed in favor of a simple and pure devotion to Christ, Paul never took that approach. While he was certainly concerned that believers not wander from a pure and simple devotion to Christ (2 Corinthians 11:3) he didn’t think the solution was to avoid doctrine altogether.

In fact, he was convinced that believers need to understand doctrine. That’s why Paul’s letters to the church are structured the way they are. He usually spends the first part reviewing and laying a solid foundation of doctrine before he ever touches on any area of concern. His letters are front-loaded with indicatives long before he ever backs up the truck of imperatives and starts telling them what to do.

The book of Ephesians is a perfect example, as chapters 1-3 are full of doctrine regarding who we are and what God has done for us. Strikingly, chapter one is nothing more than a run-on sentence of glorious indicatives, all strung together, as to who we are now in Christ: chosen, forgiven, predestined, redeemed, adopted, ransomed, sealed with the Holy Spirit, seated in the heavenlies with Christ, and blessed with every spiritual blessing. It’s only after Paul’s gushed on and on about all that God has done *for* us that he even thinks about telling us what to *do*. Not until chapter 4 does he change gears and say, “I, therefore… beseech you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you were called” (Ephesians 4:1).

And even though Paul himself was counted among those Christians who had some amazing personal experiences (check out 2 Corinthians 12:1-4), he didn’t make those experiences the basis of his Christian life, and he certainly didn’t exhort other believers to seek after the same. He knew all too well that experiences come and go, but a growing foundation of solid doctrine will keep you alive and growing for a lifetime.

John Piper gives the same warning when he says, “Large spiritual passion with small doctrinal understanding is large sails and tall masts on a tiny boat in high winds. It will dart wildly over the surface for a hundred yards. Then one wave, or one crosswind, will bring it all crashing into the unforgiving sea. Give as much attention to enlarging the depth of your ballast as you do to the height of your sails.” [[7]](#endnote-7)

In Hosea 4:6 God tells us, “﻿My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge…” He doesn’t say they’re destroyed for lack of a certain kind of experience. Experiences come and go, but the unchanging truth of God’s Word is what we desperately need to know. If we want to see the church of Jesus Christ rise up in power, with ability to persevere through suffering, as well as persecution, then we’ll need pastors who are committed to feeding the church with solid doctrine from God’s Word – all of it – just like Paul himself who said to the church at Ephesus, “I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27 NASB).

**7. Where there is Authentic Communication Centered on Spiritual Growth**

**'Rather, speaking the truth in love…'** Churches that are biblical counseling centers find ways to move relationships from surface level communication to appropriate levels of depth. This is achieved in part by laying out clear expectations. Church members expect their deacons to ask how things are going spiritually. Small group and Adult Bible Fellowship participants expect their leaders and fellow members to ask hard questions. Teenagers expect accountability from their youth leaders. It should seem like everyone is talking about spiritual growth on all sorts of levels and in all sorts of ways.

Paul explains that this involves a willingness on the part of God's people to speak the truth. This is seldom easy for either the speaker or the recipient. But if change and growth need to occur, what more appropriate venue for that kind of truth-telling than the church of the living God? Truth-speakers must be willing to risk the possibility of being rejected or criticized in some way. Truth-recipients must truly believe that "faithful are the wounds of a friend" (Proverbs 27:6).

The bookend for this part of the discussion is that such words must be spoken in the context of Christian love. Some of the most important and potentially life-giving conversations that either of us have been involved in at our churches involved times when hard challenges were being honestly faced but in a context of Christ-like love. Thankfully, the net effect is often appreciation by the person who was confronted and a sincere desire to find tools and accountability to bring about lasting change.

One of my (Steve) earliest recollections of ministry at Faith was when it was my responsibility to go speak with a young couple about a possible concern with what was occurring in their family. I was shaking in my ministerial boots as I contemplated the meeting, fearing all the possible bad responses I might encounter. But I prayed, planned, and then went and spoke to the man and his wife. I'll never forget what they said when our meeting was over – “thank you for loving us enough to come and talk to us about this concern.” That built a conviction in my heart that biblical counseling could take all sorts of forms and that when it was done in a truthful and loving manner, marvelous results often occurred.

**8. Where Everyone is Part of a Growing Team**

I (Steve) have always believed that Ephesians 4:16 is a pastor's dream. Paul describes a church where the members are growing spiritually as “the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Ephesians 4:16). One of the great aspects of the way this passage ends is that everyone is involved. Paul speaks about “the whole body,” “held together by every joint,” and what happens when “each part is working properly.” The idea is that when every person in the church family is growing spiritually in a church that is a biblical counseling center, everyone can identify their spiritual gifts, be equipped to use those gifts well, and be deployed in meaningful ministry in the body of Christ. Our mantra at Faith is, “everyone growing in Christ -- everyone serving Christ -- everyone glorifying Christ.”

Please notice how different this is than the church where 90% of the work is done by 10% of the people. Someone has rightly said that the average church on Sunday morning is too much like the average college football game on Saturday afternoon, where there are 66,000 people badly in need of exercise watching 22 young men badly in need of rest.

Often that dynamic occurs because men and women in the church are guilty about their own lack of spiritual growth. Why serve in the church because who wants to spread the spiritual measles? But conversely when someone is experiencing genuine life change -- he or she wants to serve. When you provide the counseling and training resources to equip the entire church family to serve in these ways, powerful things will occur to the glory of God.

**Because God's Way Works**

When the body of Christ is progressing the way God designed, it is a beautiful thing. But that should not surprise us because Jesus is a beautiful Savior. The more His people grow, the more we will reflect the beauty that is ours in Christ.

It is true that the philosophy of ministry we have articulated in this chapter is hard work. It really amounts to pastoring seven days a week, not just one or two. But the results are worth it because we are cooperating with the work of Jesus Christ Himself. Please always remember that the Lord is the One who promised to build His church. When we seek to bring the principles and resources of spiritual growth to every facet of local church ministry, we can be assured that Jesus Himself will bless our endeavors.

The church members will also rejoice along with their Savior. There is something about being part of a family where problems are being solved and lives are being changed for the glory of God. It is refreshing to see a group of people united under and around this sanctifying goal.

I (Steve) think about this passage often, but especially when I have the privilege of leading our church family in observing the Lord's Table. From my seat, I have the privilege and honor of looking out over the elements representing Jesus' body and blood to a sea of men and women whose lives have been and are being dramatically changed. It is moments like that when I exclaim in my heart that having a church that is a counseling center is worth all the work, effort, and tears. Growing believers who are changing through the powerful blood of Christ are an absolutely beautiful sight.

1. John Piper, *Brothers, we are not professionals: a plea to pastors for radical ministry* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), pp. 1–2. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. John Piper, *Brothers, we are not professionals: a plea to pastors for radical ministry* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Bill Hull, *The Disciple Making Pastor: The Key to Building Healthy Christians in Today’s Church* (Tarrytown, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1988), p. 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Edward T. Welch, *Addictions: a Banquet in the Grave* (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 2001), p. 155. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Sam Storms, *One Thing****:*** *Developing a Passion for the Beauty of God* (Christian Focus, 2004), pp. 123 & 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Leslie Vernick,*How to live Right When Your Life Goes Wrong*(Doubleday Religious Publishing Group, 2003), p. 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. John Piper, “Large Sails and Little Ballast,” *Desiring God* blog (February 9, 2011), http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/large-sails-and-little-ballast. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)