

Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



Ephesians 4:11-16 *And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, **12** to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, **13** until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, **14** so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. **15** Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, **16** from whom 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.*

In 1678, the great English author John Bunyan wrote the classic piece of Christian Fiction called “The Pilgrim’s Progress.” Maybe some of you have read snippets from it before. Throughout this book, he often refers to the Christian Church as “the Palace Beautiful.” And evidently in those days, after reading his descriptions of the church, people would often be left surprised when they found out that the place John Bunyan called his church, where he actually worshipped, was just a small little country church—much like a barn. How could he worship in that shack and yet describe the church as “The Palace Beautiful”? Well, I think we all understand that he wasn’t thinking about the four walls of his church or its decorations, but rather He was considering the lofty spires of the Universal Christian Church on earth, the church made without hands. That is a structure that is truly beautiful, even though we can’t see it.

Today being Pentecost—the great holiday of the Church year that is set aside for the Holy Spirit—there will be many churches speaking today about spirituality and being blessed by the Holy Spirit. And that’s the case here this morning as well; after all, we also are a very spiritual church, we have been filled with the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is working here today through Word and Sacrament, even among us.

The only problem is that I think if we had any visitors this morning, they might look around at this point and think, “*This isn’t a very spiritual church.*” I wouldn’t blame them if they thought that, because a lot of the practices and customs and visible demonstrations that are often associated with spirituality and the Holy Spirit are not things that you will find in this particular congregation. So are we a Spiritual Church? I won’t make you wait until the end of the sermon. The answer is yes, we are. But just as John Bunyan’s little country church was part of the palace beautiful despite all appearances, we also are a spiritual church that has been blessed by the Holy Spirit, despite what we might often think that should *look* like. And that’s because of factors that we’ll take a look at as we consider the theme:

The Building Plans of a Spiritual Church

- I. Built with eyes on the truth
- II. Built with eyes on Christ
- III. Built with eyes on tomorrow

There’s great confusion among Christians in America about what it means to be spiritual, what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit, what it means to be a spiritual church. And so today I want to address many of those issues. I’m going to bring up a number of the common teachings about the Holy Spirit and spirituality, not to attack any other church, but to prepare you to defend yourself with the Word of God. I think it’s important to do this, because there is so much confusion about the Holy Spirit, and especially here in Florida, I find that we’re exposed to a lot of these false ideas.

The way most people talk about spirituality, it's thought of as a feeling—that when you are filled with the Holy Spirit you can feel it in your chest and can be guided internally by those feelings. Let's make no mistake: God does not promise to guide us by our feelings or by an inner voice of any kind. When the Holy Spirit guides us, He does promise to use the Word of God. That's just as it says in the Psalms, "**[God's] Word is a lamp for my feet and a light for my path.**" (Psalm 119:105) Or as Peter writes in his second epistle, "**We have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place.**" (2 Peter 1:19)

God tells us repeatedly that He guides us through His Word and as such, He wants us to pay close attention to it. That's what God inspired Paul to say here in our text: "**And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds (or pastors) and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry . . . so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.**" And then here is how that's all done: "**Rather, speaking the truth in love...**" That is how the Holy Spirit guides a church, and that's how He guides Christians. It's through the speaking of the truth of God's Word.

Paul used this same phrase when he was writing a very similar letter to the Galatian Christians; there some false teachers had come into that church and were promoting error, and Paul stood up for the truth and told them what God thought. And he then he wrote to them, "**Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?**" (Galatians 4:16) There were people in that congregation that didn't like what Paul had to say, that were not interested in hearing the truth of God's Word. Because sometimes the truth hurts.

And I think we all know how that is—those times when you hear the law, whether out of this pulpit or when a fellow Christian out of concern confronts you with some sin that you've fallen into. They say, "**Hey, this isn't right, and you know it.**" And you get kind of annoyed. And perhaps you even get defensive, "**You're a sinner too!**" Or "**What about that time when you did this!**" Or "**Why aren't you talking to this person, what they did was much worse!**" We often fool ourselves into thinking that what someone else has done makes up for what I've done. That's just our sinful nature trying to defend our sins, trying to protect them. And that's often the type of response we make.

No, we don't always like hearing the truth. Sure, we're fine with hearing the generic truth about sin, we are fine hearing in general terms that everyone is sinful. But once that turns personal, and the accusations of sin are directed precisely right at me, that's when I bristle. And I'm guessing that's when you don't like hearing the truth either.

But we need to hear the truth, it is imperative for our soul's salvation that we hold on to nothing but the Word of God. Because if we become unmoored to God's Word and instead are being directed by our hearts or what we feel is right, we then will be "**tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.**" No, the Spirit doesn't lead us through anything that could change from person to person, he leads us through the objective, unchanging truth of Scripture. That's what Jesus meant as He prayed in John 17, "**Sanctify them by the truth. Your Word is truth.**" (John 17:17) Being led by the Spirit in a truly spiritual way, is to be led by the Word of God alone. It's to be led by God's Word to confess that I am the chief of sinners. It's to take a good look at what you see within your own heart. And it's to be led on your knees, straight to Christ's Cross for forgiveness.

The first building block a Spiritual Church is that its built on the objective truth that can only be found in Scripture. And that truth will always lead a spiritual church to be built on Christ.

You know, it's been said that the Holy Spirit is the blue-collar person of the Trinity—often underappreciated, working long hours behind the scenes. And I think that's an apt description if you think about the Holy Spirit's work. He doesn't work for his own glory or for His own praise. He works to bring us to faith in Christ Jesus. Think about that first Pentecost, which we read about in our Acts reading. This was it, the big day of the Holy Spirit; the day Jesus had promised His disciples would come soon, the day that had been prophesied from of old. This is the Holy Spirit's big moment at the center of attention, and what does He do? He leads Peter to speak at length. . .about the Christ! That's because Jesus Christ is the focus of all of the Holy Spirit's work!

Many Christians get mixed up on this; the idea of many is that if you are filled with the Holy Spirit you will speak in tongues, you will perform miracle healings, you will shake, you feel it deep down inside. But the point of all of these outward gestures is always just to "prove" that you have the Holy Spirit—but the Holy Spirit's real work is never to point himself! It is always to point to Christ!

When I was in High School up at Immanuel, the school administrators had been testing out a new alarm system that would handle both fire alarms and tornado alarms. But they forgot to tell us what each alarm would sound like. And so I remember one Thursday, the whole school was in choir practice, and the alarm was sounding. We all assumed it was a tornado drill, so we went into the bathrooms as trained and waited for the all-clear. And then the facilities manager came in and told us that in this drill, we'd all burned up because that was actually the fire alarm. We clearly all heard the sound, but we didn't know what it meant, and had it been real, it would have been disastrous.

There's a comparison to be made between that faulty fire drill and the tongue speaking of today. There are many churches today that claim that if you're a Christian you will be able to speak in tongues. But the majority of tongue speaking is just like that alarm. If you don't know what it means, it doesn't serve any good purpose. Paul writes about such speaking in tongues to the Corinthians and says, ***"If the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? ⁹ So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air."*** (1 Corinthians 14:8-9)

The truth is Holy Spirit does not work to aimlessly promote a generic spirituality. His Work is specifically to build us up in our confidence in Christ Jesus as our Savior. Jesus alluded to this, ***"When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness about me."*** (John 15:26) A truly Spiritual church, filled with the Holy Spirit, will be laser locked on Christ Crucified as its main focus.

Paul continues in our text, saying that we are speaking the truth in love so that we ***"Grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ, from whom 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."*** The Holy Spirit's work is to attach you to the head, to attach you to Christ. The Holy Spirit links you up with Christ who once set his own head toward Jerusalem so that he could march the weary road to the cross for which you were destined. The Holy Spirit links you up with Christ whose head was hung under the weight of grief in the garden, as prayed and sweat drops of blood—yet prayed that His Father's will would be done, and He willingly did it. The Holy Spirit links you up with Christ, whose head eventually sagged in the pangs of death as he breathed his last, and pronounced ***"It is finished."*** All of your debt, paid in full. And now the Holy Spirit links you to Christ who is head over all things, for whom the principalities and powers and governments of this world have become a footstool.

To be placed into the body of Christ and connected to Jesus as your head means to be included in all of that—and you are included! You have been built up as living stones of Christ’s church, founded upon the foundation of the sacrificial love which He first had for each of us.

So a truly spiritual church is built with its eyes on the Truth, built with its eyes on Christ, and finally, built with its eyes on tomorrow. Paul tells us in our text that we are building towards something; as Christians, speaking in love and building one another up in love, we’re building toward **unity of the faith** and **mature manhood** building toward **the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ**. We ought to keep striving towards these things, to keep active in the word of God, working toward growth from spiritual immaturity to spiritual maturity. We ought to strive for oneness within our church, speaking the truth in love with one another, standing upon God’s Word as the basis for our unity. But in truth, the ideals of this verse cannot be fully obtained in this life.

There is the common claim among churches, that a spiritual person will be able to do these things in this life. A truly spiritual person will be able to reach a perfection in this world, to cut out sin altogether. And this is a disastrous teaching that can lead many a sincere Christian to despair. Note that little word that Paul uses: **“until.”** He says **“until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...”**

Paul lived in what we might think of as the golden age of the Christian church. These were times when the church was selling everything and giving to those who had nothing. These were an age when the Apostles were still alive, an age when Christ’s resurrection was considered a verifiable fact—you could just find someone who’d seen Him and ask about it. In this golden age, Paul acknowledged that they weren’t there yet.

Will there ever be a time when every Christian is joined in unity of faith and achieves perfect maturity measuring up to the fulness of Christ? Not in this life, but there will be a time. That will be when God delivers us from these wretched bodies of sin, and takes us to join the choirs of heaven. John writes about the glorious realities of that day in his first epistle: **“We know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”** (1 John 3:2)

If you’ve been paying attention to the news lately, it’s been very distressing, and I don’t want to really get into it here. It’s just been another reminder over the past several days that this world is groaning under the pangs of our sin. And it will continue to groan because sin isn’t going away. Let’s look at these events and be reminded that there is deliverance from our problems as a nation and a world—that deliverance is the blood Jesus Christ. He alone casts out sin. He alone wipes away the stains of the sins that we have done. He alone can deliver us from this veil of tears and despair, and He promises that he will.

So let’s spend the time that we have left in this world wisely. Not tearing one another down, but encouraging one another in the ways that the Holy Spirit promises to help. Let’s encourage one another with the truths of God’s Word, speaking the truth from a loving heart. Let’s daily point one another to Christ Jesus, reminding each other of the full and free forgiveness which He has provided to each of us without cost. And let’s remind each other that we’re strangers here, and that we have something to look forward to: the blessed hope of eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

These are the building plans of true spirituality. Lord, help us as we build upon that Word of God. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7)