

## Free Divine Consultation for Churches

In my work with congregations, I have almost never felt like we were doing what we should be and always felt the need for guidance about how to make things better. So I have read many books and taken many guest speakers out to lunch to pick their brains about what we should be doing. Today there are many who serve as church consultants, and I have visited with several of them as well. Their very existence suggests many churches do indeed need help. The need is further substantiated by the many Christians we know in different parts of our nation who are dissatisfied with their congregations.

I recognize that member dissatisfaction could also be a fault on the part of the members. I also know some consultants personally and believe they are doing some good things with churches. Even so, it seems to me that we can all benefit from a consult with God himself. Hopefully we already listen to him regularly about many things, but from time to time we ought to give concentrated attention to the guidance our Divine Consultant gives about the specific matter of churches.

Ephesians 4:11-16 is a word from God that gives us just such an opportunity. It directly addresses the subject of what a church is supposed to be. Father, help us to listen humbly and obediently to your guidance.

“<sup>11</sup> So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup> to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up <sup>13</sup> until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

<sup>14</sup> Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. <sup>15</sup> Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. <sup>16</sup> From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:11-16).

I think I can capture the essence of the divine wisdom here in three important statements.

1. Leaders need to implement a focus.

Any group of people, such as a church, will develop a focus, intentionally or not. If they choose not to focus on anything in particular, that, too, becomes a focus. Another ever-present danger for churches is allowing unhealthy teachings, ungodly people, and/or the latest ideas to set the agenda. All these dangers are specifically mentioned in Scripture (Ephesians 4:14; Acts 17:21).

God here gives leaders a responsibility in the church. According to the passage the leaders are at least the evangelists and pastor-teachers (elders). God's word to these leaders in Ephesians 4:11-12 is that we are to use the gifts he has given us to develop a healthy focus in the church. This is in distinction to allowing the body to determine what it wants to do. The body of Christ should be led by the spiritual wisdom of mature leaders, not the secular desires of immature members. I am concerned that by our strong emphasis on the valid concepts of relevance and meeting needs we may be unwittingly cooperating with secular society in encouraging self-centeredness in our people. We appear to have done a better job of creating consumers than making disciples. It is true that many members will also be mature and have good spiritual wisdom to offer. This can be accessed and utilized without surrendering the leadership of the church to the desires of the consumeristic body at large.

Leadership providing a focus for the church is also in distinction to the anti-authority, individualistic, don't-tell-me-what-to-do value that has pervaded our society for decades now. I'm not advocating a heavy-handed, authoritarian leadership. That is not the way of Christ either (Mark 10:42-45). Rather, I am simply advocating that the leaders lead, based on the word of Christ, as depicted in Ephesians 4. If people don't want to follow what Christ says his church is to be about, then at some point, with humble, broken hearts, the leaders need to go on and implement God's will anyway without them.

2. The focus the leaders should develop is equipping the members to serve and so build up the body.

Ephesians 4:11-12 states clearly that the purpose or goal of the evangelists and pastor-teachers is the equipping of the members to serve so that the body can be built up (see vv. 15-16 for more details on what that looks like). The leaders are responsible for creating this kind of focus and culture in the church. We are concerned sometimes when we perceive our leaders have a hidden agenda. In contrast, Ephesians 4:11-12 is an agenda that leaders ought to have. This agenda should not be hidden, of course, but rather publicized loud and clear.

The leaders are to use their own gifts to equip the members to find their gifts and then use them to serve others. If this takes place, then the church will have not only evangelists and pastor-teachers (v. 11) but also people who have a whole range of gifts, such as serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, and showing mercy, to name a few (Romans 12:6-8). Equipping members to actually serve (Ephesians 4:12) matches the teaching about the purpose of spiritual gifts, which is also to serve (1 Corinthians 12:7; 1 Peter 4:10). Again, Ephesians 4:16 shows what this looks like when it is working properly.

The word equip or prepare (v. 12) is important and instructive. The range of meaning includes mending, restoring, putting in order, completing, preparing and training. This overlaps with the elders' responsibility for shepherding people, since one aspect of shepherding is "mending" broken people (Ezekiel 34:1-10). Shepherds first heal the wounds of the sheep and then equip and prepare them to serve. It's not enough to get people out of the first aid tent; we need to get them out on the field.

Teaching is a vital component to equipping, but equipping entails much more. Jesus' equipping of the twelve included not only teaching, but also showing them what to do, giving them power to do it, sending them out to practice it, and processing it with them afterward. (For more on this, go to [empoweringsubjects.org](http://empoweringsubjects.org), click on "Blog," scroll to the bottom and under Topics select the category of "How Jesus Changed the World." #5 is on How Jesus Equipped People.) How much of this sort of thing are we doing with the flock God has entrusted into our care?

In light of Ephesians' emphasis on the unity of the entire body, we take the teaching here out of context if we apply it only to individuals instead of to the church as a whole. In Ephesians 4 our Consultant emphasizes that the scope of the equipping is "his people" (v. 12), "the body of Christ" (v. 12), and "all" (v. 13). Yes, individuals must grow for the church to grow, but we must not be content to promote growth among a few individuals. We must seek to equip the whole body for service and growth. If some people don't want to be equipped, we need to explore ways to "back up" the training and first help them develop such hearts and attitudes that they will (later) be open to it.

We should not let the emphasis on the building up and growth of the body blind us to the fact that we must also equip people to reach out to others who are not yet a part of it. That was a substantial part of Jesus' ministry and his training of the twelve. It is another important way the body grows. Serving others, telling them good news of the kingdom of God, and then equipping them for service to the King is the special focus of the training offered by Empowering Subjects (go to [empoweringsubjects.com](http://empoweringsubjects.com) and click on "Training" for more info.).

My guess is most evangelists and pastor-teachers already feel overwhelmed and cannot conceive how they would add a substantial responsibility like this to their schedules. Yet if a leadership team is convinced it is God's will for them to equip the church for service, perhaps they could empower each other to relinquish any current responsibilities (even good ones) that do not come from God and scale back on ones that do, so as to achieve a balance of their responsibilities that includes equipping the church. If we believe Ephesians 4 is guidance from God, we must find a way of implementing it.

3. Leaders should persevere in this focus for the long haul, until we reach unity, maturity, and Christlikeness.

Three results are specified in Ephesians 4:13 as the goals of the equipping, each introduced with the same preposition (*eis*, "to, to the extent of"). They are unity, maturity, and attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (v. 13).

As to the goal of unity, the verse literally says unity is "of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God" (v. 13). "The faith" could refer to our trusting in Christ (as in 4:4), but since it is here preceded by the article "the," it may well refer to something like Christianity, the Christian way, the Christian message and teaching (compare Acts 6:7; 14:22; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Galatians 1:23; 1 Timothy 4:1; Jude 3). I don't think we can know for certain whether Paul was

referring to trust or the Christian teaching, but I also don't think it matters too much because one will naturally lead to the other. Our trust in Christ will lead us to listen to all his teachings and let them shape our thinking, beliefs, and lives. As each member in the whole body moves toward "the Christian way," the body will converge in unity.

Unity also comes from "the knowledge of the Son of God." The term "knowledge," which is an intensive form (*epignosis*), along with all we know about Christ, indicates that this knowledge is not merely academic information. We certainly need to know *truths* about the Son of God, but we also need to know *him*. To know God or Christ in the Bible means to have such a relationship with him that you are transformed to become like him, including doing the deeds he did (cf. Jeremiah 22:15-16; John 17:3; Galatians 4:8-9; Philippians 3:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:5; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; Titus 1:16; 1 John 4:8). If our knowledge of him does not lead us to be like him, He will consequently judge us with the poignant words "I never knew you" (Matthew 7:21-23).

So, to reach the goal of unity, we need to be equipping people to serve, helping them grow in faith moving toward an apprehension of the teachings of the faith, and helping them grow in true, relational knowledge of Jesus Christ. Ephesians has much more to say about unity elsewhere (for more on this, go to the Blog, click on Topics and select the Category, "God's Purpose to Unify Everything").

As to the second goal, maturity, Paul writes that spiritual infants are characterized by instability. They are tossed back and forth by every new wave of teaching that comes along (v. 14). In contrast, mature Christians will be stable in their beliefs.

Jealousy, quarrelling, and identifying oneself with various human leaders or schools of thought instead of with Christ are also signs of immaturity (1 Corinthians 1:11-12; 3:1-4). These things are way too common in the church and are sometimes even accepted as just the way things are. First Corinthians reminds us that there will in fact be immaturity in the church, but it also shows us that God is not okay with it and that it must be addressed. That's why we have a 1 Corinthians. Our Divine Consult has said elsewhere that divisive people are to be warned twice and then disregarded (Titus 3:9-11). This appears to be a reference to withdrawing fellowship from them (1 Corinthians 5:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15). Destroying the body of Christ through division or anything else is serious sin (1 Corinthians 3:16). Threats to the body must be dealt with decisively, though in a Christlike fashion (Galatians 6:1; 2 Timothy 2:24-26). We cannot let divisive people destroy the body of Christ.

On a more positive note, maturity is associated with being like Christ (Colossians 1:28-29). In this way the second and third goals overlap. Maturity is also associated with obeying or doing (Ephesians 4:12, 16). Mature Christians have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil *by constant use* of the solid spiritual food they have been consuming (Hebrews 5:14). Immature Christians talk a lot; mature Christians do a lot.

The third goal, attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ, means something like Christlikeness. Jesus once said that everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher (Luke 6:40; “trained” in this verse is the same word as prepare or equip in Ephesians 4:12). Here again, Christ himself is the focus. What are we doing to train our people to be like Jesus?

Unity, maturity, and Christlikeness, then, are beacons that guide and focus the leaders’ work of equipping the body.

The word “until” at the beginning of Ephesians 4:13 reminds us that we will not reach these goals quickly or automatically. Time will be required for us to reach them, so we need to persevere. If you have ever accomplished anything substantial, you have no doubt experienced this truth. Leaders should persevere in this focus for the long haul, until we reach unity, maturity, and Christlikeness.

That is the essence of God’s guidance for churches in Ephesians 4:11-13. Verses 14-16 give more details and paint a picture of what it will look like if leaders heed God’s wisdom. How would you like your congregation to be full of stable people who are not led astray by every wind of teaching and ungodly people’s deceitful schemes? How would you like there to be an atmosphere where people speak the truth in love and grow to be like Jesus? How would you like for the Lord to bless your congregation with true growth and upbuilding? How would you like the whole body to be closely joined and held together? How would you like to see each part of the body serving and building up others? The word “then” or “so that” at the beginning of v. 14 tells us that these good things are the result of leadership focusing on for the long haul on equipping the whole body to serve, with a view toward unity, maturity, and Christlikeness.

I realize that working this out in practice will not be neat and tidy. Working with human beings in churches is a complex matter and things get messy. Still, I wanted to restate God’s guidance clearly, as Paul does here, because we are not likely to make much progress toward what God wants our churches to be if the goal is not even well-defined in our hearts and minds.

The wisdom of our Divine Consultant is well worth our consideration period, and all the more so since so many churches are struggling terribly today. I encourage leaders to take advantage of God’s “free consult” by taking it to heart, making it a priority and finding ways to implement it. I also challenge members to deliberately set aside any consumer mentality and follow your leaders as they implement the focus on equipping people for service that God urges on us here. This is God’s will for his church.