

The Goal of the Church **Ephesians 4:11-16**

I want to take a couple Sundays this spring to share some messages about where the elders believe God is leading us as a church. Some of these things will be familiar, but some will be new as we gain further clarification of what we believe God's vision is for East Lincoln.

There are a lot of local churches around and each is a little bit different – even when it comes to the goals and direction that guides them. So one of the most basic but important questions for a church to ask is: What should our primary goal be? What should our mission be? What should be the underlying direction that guides everything we do?

If you look at different churches, you begin to see they have slightly different things they emphasize and seem to center their efforts around. Here's a list of some that I've seen:

1. Theology/Doctrine – some churches focus heavily on Bible study
2. Prayer – Matt. 21:13: “my house shall be called a house of prayer”
3. Serving the poor – caring for “the least of these”
4. Close-knit Community – doing life together
5. Evangelism – reaching the lost with the gospel
6. Missions – supporting missionaries, mission trips, etc.
7. The Holy Spirit – signs and wonders, speaking in tongues, prophecy, manifestations
8. There are more, but you get the idea...

Different churches seem to have different flavors and different things that emerge as most important. You will probably even find within yourself a sense that one of them feels more important than the others. Of the ones I mentioned, I can see several of them that I thought should be our goal as a church at different times. At times I'd think one way after reading a book or going to a conference, but then I'd think something else after reading a different book or going to a different conference. It was common to hear teaching that I needed to come up with a vision for the church – something that God laid on my heart – but I could see that could shift with whatever I thought was most important at the time.

So I struggled with answering the question: “What’s your vision for East Lincoln? Where do you see the church heading?” For a long time my honest answer was: “I don’t really know.” I know there are a lot of really important things we should be doing, but I couldn’t see any reason for why one should be highlighted above the rest. I couldn’t see a clear path forward or a compelling reason to make any major changes because we were already doing a lot of good things.

Then the elders started reading the story of a church out in Idaho that was focused on one thing that seemed to incorporate all the other important things and their focus really began to resonate in our hearts with what we were seeing in Scripture regarding Christ’s mission for the church. Since that time, we have continued to find confirmation and clarity.

So this morning I want us to see what that one thing is that we believe the Bible teaches should be our goal or mission as a church. Then next week we’re going to look at how Christ designed the church so that it would be able to effectively carry out that mission. And then we’ll take one more week to talk about what we think that could look like here at East Lincoln.

The clearest and most direct biblical teaching I’ve found that speaks of these things is Ephesians 4:11-16. That’s going to be our primary text for the next two weeks. This passage is written by the Apostle Paul as he’s explaining Christ’s purpose for the church to the local church in Ephesus.

Read 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.

For this Sunday, I want us to look at the statements Paul makes about Christ’s goal or mission for the church. A goal is something you shoot for or aim at. Many

sports have some kind of literal goal that makes it obvious what the target is. It might be a hockey goal, a basketball hoop, or a finish line. In academia it might be a final test or research paper. In business it might be a certain number of products sold, patients seen, or profits made.

But what is it for the church? That's what this passage is all about and Paul makes 3 very similar statements throughout these verses that make it very clear:

- Vs. 13: *"until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God."*
- Vs. 13: *"until we all attain to... mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."*
- Vs. 15: *"we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ."*

You can see that the goal, or the finish line in all of these statements has to do with Christ – unity of the faith of Christ, unity of the knowledge of Christ, mature manhood, which is further described as the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, and then growing up in every way into Christ.

So Paul makes it clear what Christ's goal is for the church – it's experiencing the fullness of Christ – it's becoming spiritually mature, which is becoming like Christ in every way. Becoming mature in Christ is the finish line.

As Paul was getting further along in ministry he wrote about this in Philippians 3:8-14: *"Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

For Paul, his personal goal was to gain Christ – to know him, experience him, and become like him – and that was the goal he impressed on the churches he planted and wrote to as well.

This is a different goal than I see in a lot of churches. I gave several examples of what I see in different churches at the beginning of the sermon and in those examples, the churches are focused on primarily one aspect or characteristic of Christ. It could be biblical knowledge, or a biblical morality, or prayer, or compassion, or reaching the lost. These are all very important, but they're not the ultimate goal, they're only parts of it. And ironically, if they become the focus, they can actually become barriers – almost like idols – that can keep a church from reaching the goal.

I didn't realize it, but for a long time, my understanding of the goal of the Christian life was primarily biblical knowledge and morality. What Christ wanted from me was to know more about the Bible and to exemplify Christlike character. And that was basically it. That's the kind of life I'd lead and that's the kind of church I'd lead.

But over the years I kept running into passages that went beyond those things – things I could see in Christ that were lacking in my life. Yes, I knew a lot about the Bible and was a good, moral person, but was I storing up treasures on earth, or treasures in heaven? Was I denying myself and taking up my cross to follow Jesus? Was I ministering to the lost or to the poor? I was focusing on a couple aspects of Christianity that were important to me, but not really paying attention to others. And if that's the way I led a church, it would end up falling way short of the goal.

That's what I see happening in a lot of churches. But that's not the goal Jesus has for the church. His goal is attaining to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. To understand that, I like to picture one of my boys standing next to me, measuring themselves against me as the standard. They used to have to stretch out their necks and stand on their tippy-toes to do so, but now they are actually getting close to reaching my height. To them, I have been the measure of the stature of the fullness of being a mature man. And for the Christians who make up the local church, that's who Jesus is. Jesus is the measure of the stature of the fullness of what it means to be a Christian. No one else belongs there, no matter

how good of a Christian leader they are. The goal we are aiming for is the fullness of Christ.

And that includes more than biblical knowledge, or morality, or prayer, or compassion, or evangelism, and so on. It includes all of who Jesus was – what he thought about, what he cared about, what he did, and what his mission was on earth.

That is the ultimate goal of the church – becoming like Christ in every way and helping others do the same. That's what it means to be a disciple of Christ and to make disciples of Christ. That's why we use those terms in our mission statement. Becoming like Christ in every way is what shapes everything we do and the direction we're heading.

Paul makes it clear that as we do that, that's when we we're no longer like children who are tossed to and fro by the waves of faulty teaching that's coming out of our society and many churches. That's when we become a strong, healthy body, fully functioning as Christ intended. We're not there yet, but that's our goal, and we hope you'll continue to move forward with us.

Next week we're going to look at this same passage to see how Christ designed the church to function in order to reach that goal. And, as I said earlier, in the week after that we're going to share the vision for how we think this will look at East Lincoln.