

*BluePrints: Visionary*

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*1 Chronicles 29:10-20; Matthew 16:13-18; Ephesians 3:8-21*

Friends, our final Scripture reading today is Ephesians 3:8-21. I invite you to turn their in your Bibles and to pull out your bulletin insert to follow along. Listen now to the Word of God. “Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory. For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge -- that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”

What is the church good for? For decades, folks went to church because it was the right thing to do – and because your parents, your neighbors, even your boss expected you to. Now, there are no expectations. In fact, going to church is out of step. Some churches are social clubs; others are dedicated to helping their communities. But what was the church made for? Apart from a building and activities and programs and aid, why does it matter? What's its foundation?

Our first day together as CrossWay, it's a great question to start with. If we don't know what a church is or why it exists, there's really no reason to be here! We need to know what is special about this particular church. Many of us came right around the corner from Church of the Covenant. What will be the same and what will be different at CrossWay? That's what we'll talk about tonight...the vision of CrossWay Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

Vision is a popular word. To be “visionary” is to be forward thinking, to envision how things should be. Steve Jobs was a visionary. When he was in charge, Apple was always way ahead of its competition. How many of you have an iPhone in your pocket? Apple has a 50% market share in cell phones. Android phones are made by tons of different companies – Apple has the same amount of business as all of them combined. They had forward thinking.

The modern church loves vision, too. No matter what you think of megachurches, their vision is to attract people. That's no accident. They work to get noticed. Virtually every church has a vision statement. Before CrossWay even formed, before we could get off the ground, we needed a vision statement. Everybody wants to know what you're about. It can be a good thing.

Yet when I dove into the Bible the last couple of weeks to talk about vision, I realized something I had never ever noticed in years of Bible reading. The Bible mentions the insight and good judgment required to understand God's ways. It discusses how wisdom is a requirement for leaders to serve faithfully. But not once will you ever search the Bible and find the word "vision" used in the way we think of it. There's no concept of earthly visionaries.

Every time the word "vision" is used, it's when God has directly intervened. Sometimes the vision is visual; the prophets saw something they could have never known otherwise. But just as often, when someone has a vision, God speaks directly to them. Biblically, a vision is always from God and about God. The prophet who saw the vision merely reported on what the vision was about; they never took credit for what was revealed.

So what is God's vision for His church? In the Bible, the word for church, *ekklesia*, means "assembly" or "gathering." It's the people of God claimed by God who gather together in His name for His sake. And Ephesians 3 tells us the key role of the church. Paul writes, "this grace was given to me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That's a mouthful, but it's simpler than we might think. The church is responsible for the "administration" of a mystery. The word is *oikonomios* – where we get the word "economy." We are the stewards, the managers, we handle the "economics" of the mystery of God. Well, what is that mystery? It's the plan that God kept hidden for ages and is still hidden from so many people. Through the church – through us, the people of God – God's ultimate mystery, the plan of salvation in Jesus Christ, is made known. We're the caretakers of the good news. We're the ones who reveal it to peasants and kings alike until the whole of creation knows who Jesus Christ is and what He did on our behalf to the glory of God the Father.

God's vision for His church – all churches, every body of believers – is for us to make His mystery known. We're to help others go from ignorance of God to a relationship with Him. We're to make plain the wisdom that God had in sending His Son to earth as an atoning sacrifice for sin. We're to make it known that, "In Jesus and through faith in Him we may approach God with freedom and confidence." We get to come alongside others, and together with them "grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ." As the church, we get to "know this love that surpasses knowledge" and to "be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." That's God's vision for this church and for any group of faithful followers.

Here's how CrossWay's elders worded our church's vision statement, keeping in mind God's vision for the universal church: *our vision at CrossWay is to lead others toward a life-changing relationship with Jesus through service, invitation, fellowship, and the teaching of God's Word, inviting them to faithfully follow as His disciples.*

Let's break down each part of this and how it involves us. First, *the church exists to bring people into a life-changing relationship with Jesus*. That applies to each and every one of us. We were made by God. We belong to Jesus. Everything in the universe exists in accordance with His will and purpose. We were made for Him. And as Augustine wrote in his famous Confessions, "our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You, Lord."

There is nothing more important than having a relationship with Jesus. Our sin, our brokenness, our unwillingness to follow God's ways, has separated us from Him. We wander around life aimlessly, pursuing this hobby, following after this pleasure, going through sorrows and grief uncertain why it all happens. If we don't recognize God as the center of life who gives us meaning, no matter how much we accomplish, we ultimately have no significance, no purpose.

Our purpose is found in God. He made us for a reason. He created us to glorify Him and to enjoy Him forever. The only way we can fulfill that purpose is to come into relationship with Him. When we believe Him – not just believe that He exists, but trust Him, believe Him, hold onto Him in faith – He forgives us completely and begins to transform us into His own image. He gives us the Holy Spirit as our counselor. He calls us righteous in His sight, and He begins to root out the sin nature in us. Where once it was impossible to please Him in our sinfulness, through Jesus the Father makes it possible to truly love Him and to find real joy in Him.

Friends, this is our first night together as CrossWay, but I've known many of you a long time. Many have gone through struggle and heartbreak recently. For some, it's the loss of a church building where a lot of memories were made. For others, it's our illness or that of a loved one. Some are dealing with the deaths of those very close to them. Others are dealing with the ramifications of sins coming back to haunt them. There's heartbreak in every pew.

We need Jesus. We need His love and forgiveness to save us from sin. We need Him to change us from the inside out. We need His grace to show compassion to people who are hard to love. We need His transformation so that we can become the people God created us to be. That's the point of the church. It's to lead people into that kind of relationship with Jesus Christ and to nurture it. It's my prayer that you will embrace CrossWay as your church and find your hope and healing in the loving arms of Jesus.

But the church doesn't just exist for us; it exists for all who would come to Jesus. So the vision continues by saying we will *lead others toward a life-changing relationship with Jesus*. The quickest way for a body of believers to die out is to become self-focused. Self-focus is the opposite of what Jesus did. Despite the fact that He is God in His very nature, Jesus took on the form of a servant. He came not to be served but to serve. If we are His disciples and we truly believe that He saves all who would believe, we have to be about leading others to Him.

How do we do that? How do we accomplish what God desires? We do it through obedience to the four-part vision: *service, invitation, fellowship, and the teaching of God's Word*.

The first part is *service*. This can be where a church stands or falls. There are two pitfalls we have. The first is to simply not serve, to make everything we do about us. We might have a lot of programs for people in the church, but they don't actually touch anybody out in the community. That doesn't serve God's vision of reaching new people with the gospel. If we aren't looking to meet our community's needs, we aren't serving as Christ served.

The second pitfall is that we serve without the vision of giving them Christ in mind. We can feed everybody in the world for a year and build them homes and give them jobs, and at the end of the day, if we haven't introduced them to Christ, we've failed. Lots of secular organizations exist to help people, and they can give people far more food and clothing and shelter than we ever can. There is only one thing we can give the world that the world cannot offer, and that's Jesus. When we serve, we serve with the goal of sharing Jesus.

When we do both – when we reach out into the community and serve its deepest needs both physically and spiritually – then we will serve as Christ served. He fed the 5,000 as they'd come to hear the word of life He preached. He healed the sick to prove the Kingdom had come into their midst. The vision of the church is to lead through the kind of service Christ showed us.

The second part of our vision is *invitation*. We've got to ask people to come, to be a part of who we are. This doesn't have to be intimidating. It's saying, "Come and see!" In Scripture, when people first met Jesus, they were awestruck by Him, but they didn't go tell every last detail about Him to their friends and neighbors. The Samaritan woman Jesus encountered at a well said, "Come and meet the man who told me everything I ever did." When the first disciples encountered Jesus, they told their friends about Him, and they became followers too.

We invite others because faith and trust in Jesus is the key to life and eternity – if we believe it, inviting others to come is natural. Sometimes we think, "I don't need to invite them – they have a church. They're Catholic/Lutheran/whatever." But do you know that they have a life-changing relationship with Jesus? Do you know they are hearing the truth? Invite them to find out!

If they don't know Jesus, then they'll be introduced when they come! And if they do know Jesus, if they're at a good church that teaches them how to follow Jesus faithfully, that's great! And still, they will be thankful you care enough about them to ask them to come with you. We have friends here tonight from other churches that may never join CrossWay but are here because like all faithful believers, they can worship anywhere the truth of Jesus is preached.

The third part of our vision is *fellowship*. Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Now for many of us here, this comes naturally. A lot of us know one another. We like each other. We spend time together. And we would love for more people to be involved so we can make the family of faith even bigger. But it's not just about having fun together or enjoying one another's company. The church displays the love of God when we care about one another just because we are brothers and sisters brought together by Christ. It transcends all the artificial boundaries we put up.

You can go in many churches and five minutes after their worship service is over, the building is empty. People get offended when you accidentally sit in the seat they've sat in for the last sixty years. We want to avoid that. We want everyone to feel genuinely welcomed into our community.

But fellowship is far more than hanging out after service or doing a few special events together. It's living life together. It's rejoicing together when something great happens and mourning together when there's a loss. It's caring about each other enough that we don't just say, "Can I help?" It's seeing the obvious need and doing something about it. It's loving one another so completely that when people in our neighborhoods hear about it, they think, "God is really working through them." On one side, that requires risk from all of us. We have to risk telling people about our hurts and faults. We can't truly fellowship if we don't know one another. But on the other side, it means that we get to experience the joy of true Christian community as God meant for it to be.

The last part of the vision, but not least, is *the teaching of God's Word*. Jesus said, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." If we are to obey God's Word, we've got to know it, learn it, love it, and apply it. The other things we do – service, invitation, fellowship – if they aren't based on who we know Jesus to be in the Bible, we've accomplished nothing. But not only that, hearing the Word of God preached and taught makes it come alive in our hearts. Through the teaching of God's Word, we become convicted of our sin. We become convinced of God's love for us and the salvation that comes through faith in Jesus. Taught well, God's Word becomes a part of us, and it fuels everything else we're called to do as a church.

So some might be wondering...what's going to be the difference between Church of the Covenant and CrossWay? What's going to set the two apart? Simply put, it's that everything we do as CrossWay is going to be examined in light of God's vision for His universal church. We'll do many things we did before – they might have different names, but we'll have Bible study and children's church and Meal and a Movie Night. But as we do them, we'll make certain that what we do is focused on what God has called us to be and do as the church. Some ministries might grow stronger as they reflect the four-fold means of introducing Jesus to our community. Some might fade away if they aren't serving that purpose. Instead of just doing things that sound good, we will regularly look to see that the Spirit is calling us to do them together as the people of God.

There's also more that will hold us together – the essential tenets of our faith. Our new denomination, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, has eight beliefs that root us and ground us together with likeminded churches. Over the next two months, they will lay the blueprints for us, giving us the simple groundwork of Christian faith on which we stand. Every leader in the denomination signs onto the essentials unreservedly. And the essentials are beliefs that almost all Protestant Christians can affirm. By being united in what is central to the faith – and showing grace on matters that aren't – we can focus on being faithful stewards of the mystery that Christ died for us, rose for us, and reigns over us, offering us eternal life if we simply trust in Him.

It's my prayer that we would join together as CrossWay and be God's church to Macomb Township.