

Camelback Bible Church



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THE FAMILY AT THE CENTER OF THE PLAN

The Plan: Reclaiming All Things for God's Glory (Part 9)
Ephesians 4:7-16

This morning as we sit in this beautiful and peaceful sanctuary, somewhat insulated from the troubles of our society, I want you to know that a plan has been put in place to put right everything that ails our world. That's correct. Everything that's wrong with this world is to be put right. The project is not only underway, it's succeeding. Everything hurtful, everything wrong put right.

And the reason why it's succeeding is because God is the author of this plan. He's in the process of reclaiming all things for his glory. It's his plan and he's executing it right now!

Why aren't we rejoicing? Well, probably because we have difficulty seeing The Plan in practice.

We've got kooks in Iran building nuclear weapons, Greeks and Italians borrowing without restraint and causing the international economy to convulse as a result, big men in showers doing abominable things to little children. We've got malcontents occupying Wall Street, universities raising tuition twenty-five percent annually, three-quarters of adult Americans pessimistic about the future, to say nothing about our own personal fears and disappointments.

And we're to believe that God is reclaiming all things for his glory?! Please show me where this is happening?

Actually, it's amazing we'd have to ask. Something so good ought to be so obvious, and yet we do need to ask – Where precisely is God reclaiming all things for his glory?

Well the answer couldn't be closer to home. It's happening right next to you. Right here at church, at Camelback Bible Church. Here in our midst God is assembling a new body of people for his glory.

The New Family

Look with me at Ephesians chapter one verse nine – God is *making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ, as a **plan** for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*

Take careful note of three very important words in this verse – God’s *will*; God’s *purpose*; and God’s *plan*. And note as well that all three are happening in Christ. What’s happening in Christ? This is what’s happening – All things, whether things in heaven or things on earth, are being united in Christ, literally, gathered together under one head, namely, Jesus Christ.

No longer is everything spinning out of control, going its own way, doing its own thing, propelled by self-grasping, people hurting people, inflicting strife and creating division, resulting in fears and disappointments. Instead everything is being united, drawn together under one head. And it’s a head unlike any other head – namely, a head which guides its bodily member into the practice of self-giving love, because the head is Jesus Christ, and he is quintessentially the self-giving One.

So where is this drawing-together-under-one-head-namely-Jesus-Christ taking place? This gigantic reclamation project of all things for the glory of God – where, in a world in seemingly complete disarray, is this happening?

We got to know. We’ve got to find out. Where is The Plan coming to fruition?

Well, we couldn’t have a more magnificent answer. Look with me at the end of the first chapter of Ephesians, and in verse 22 – *And he [God] put all things under his [Christ’s] feet and gave him [Christ] as head over all things* [we’ve already heard that, but where specifically is it happening? Here comes the three of the most explosive words of the Bible. God gave Christ as head over all things] *to the church*.

To the church!

Do you know what that means? It means that church is ground zero in God’s enormous project to reclaim all things for his glory.

Specifically, the local church. (There is no universal church without its local expression.) The local church is the home base for God’s plan. The church is the place where God is drawing all things together and filling them with his fullness, the fullness of his self-giving love.

Look at verse 23 – *The church is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all*. What a magnificent statement. Christ is the head and the church is his body. As a good head he is intent to fill his body with all his fullness – that is, filling all its members with all that he is, with all his self-giving love, which we have learned is essentially who and what he is. What a body – the church! What a head – Jesus Christ!

If you want to see what God is doing on this planet – and he could scarcely be doing more – if you want to see his plan in action – and nothing could be more beautiful – if you want to see where and how he’s putting all things right, look at the body of Christ, look at the church, look the local church, look at Camelback Bible. Look at the family at the center of God’s plan.

Remember, we learned, on our study of The Plan, we cannot image God as isolated individuals. The image of God requires at least a duality. God has always imaged himself through a family. He started with the family of Adam and Eve. And when they went their own way, he moved on to the family of Abraham and Sarah and their progeny, too, went their own way.

But God had made a covenant, saying, “I promise to provide you, Abraham and Sarah, with an offspring, a very special offspring, an offspring who will in fact emerge from my very own triune Family. I will send my Son, my one and only Son, to fulfill the covenant I made with you that you and your family become a blessing to all the other families of earth. My Son will accomplish that plan by calling out a new family of people, who will succeed where other families have failed, namely, who will provide an image of me. His family, my Son’s family, will fulfill my plan for the world: they will be fruitful and multiply and go into this world, every nook and cranny, and image my glory, the glory of my infinite self-emptying love.”

The new family that my Son is going to constitute is the church. Brothers and sisters who share in a blood heritage, the blood of Jesus, who, as their elder brother, shed his blood to reunite us to our heavenly Father.

You see, for God it’s all about family. We image God corporately, as a family. Let’s learn a little bit more about this.

The church is an amazing body of people because we’ve got an amazing head and because it’s where he’s working his plan for the world. The church. Look at it with me.

Probably no chapter of the Bible lays out the beauty of the family of the local church for us better than Ephesians 4:1 – [Paul says] *I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you [the church] to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called – Walk in a manner worthy of calling. And what might that manner be? – with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in self-giving, supernatural, triune-like, cruciform love.*

Wow. That’s a unique family. A family marked by humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love.

It gets even better. Verse 3 – This family *eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.* Unity, peace, a little heaven on earth it seems. Yes, indeed, that’s the church because *there is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

Notice the repetition of the word ‘one.’ This Father of “all things” is drawing them together into one new family. He’s pulling together people who were once fractured and divided, spinning off in all directions, chasing their autonomous desires, but now uniting them under Christ, in one body, by one Spirit, for one Lord, faith, baptism, to the glory of the one God.

Do you see? No longer people doing their own self-grasping things, but all people under Christ doing one thing. And what is that one thing?

Giving Away Your Gift

We must read on. Verse 7 – *But grace* [the word is *charis* from which we get the word *charismata*. But grace] *has been given to each one of us*, each one of us who is a member in the body of Christ. We're all charismatics in the sense that we've all been given a *charis*, a grace, a gift, a spiritual gift. And you want to know what your gift is, don't you? But before you learn its identity, Paul wants to tell you how **big** your gift it is.

Verse 7 – *This grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.*

What was the measure of Christ's gift? Well, what was Christ's gift? It was his self-emptying love of his sacrificial death, a gift measurable only by the expanse that separates heaven and a cross.

How far are heaven and a cross away from each other? Surely, an infinite distance.

Heaven is the place where Jesus began, in a celestial paradise so perfect we can't begin to understand it. But when he looked down to earth, and with x-ray vision peered into human hearts, he saw a profound need, he saw hearts dying in their sins.

And because of his love, he came to earth to do something about our sin. And he didn't just come to earth and enter a human body. He did far more than that. He chose to climb up onto the most ignominious object in history, the most shameful place the world has ever seen. He died on a cross, something so hideous we can't get our minds around it.

You can't find two poles farther apart than heaven and a cross. The gulf between them is so gaping we can't begin to comprehend it.

And yet it is precisely that infinite divide which represents the measure of the gift of Christ. We must measure his gift in terms of its starting point – heaven – and its ending point – a cross. That is a gift marked by an infinite expanse.

And – here is the kicker – we've been told that each one of us has been given a gift according to the measure of Christ's gift. We have a gift that is infinite in its measure. Did you know that?

May no one at Camelback ever say, "I have little to offer the work of God. I don't have much going for me. I'm not very gifted." What? You have been gifted according to the measure of Christ's gift. You have in your possession a gift from the heavens.

Literally verse 8 – *Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men."* Paul is quoting here from Psalm 68 and applying it to Christ.

He explains himself in verse 9 – *In saying, “He [Christ] ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.*

Paul is underscoring once again, in another way, the sheer magnitude of our gift. Jesus, who descended to earth, who came to walk the dusty lanes of Jerusalem and die on a cross – do you know where he descended from? Far above all the heavens. He had access, this Jesus, to all the treasures of heaven when he descended to earth. Consequently, he came with his hands full of heaven’s bounty so that he could fill up all things, fill up us with an immeasurably bountiful gift.

Nobody’s richer than we are, the people of God, members of the body of Christ, members of Camelback Bible. We have been filled with gifts from the hand of the Lord of the heavens.

Have you ever heard anything more magnificent ever said about you? Actually, said about what God is doing in you? Our esteem for God has gone up this morning. He has given us a humungous gift.

You say, “What is my gift?”

Well, says Paul verse 11 – *He gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, some as shepherds, some as teachers* [and if you look at Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 you’ll find that in addition he gave some as servants, some as financial givers, some as merciful, some as administrators, and some as many other things as well].

The point is, God has given to each one of us a gift, an ability, a talent that’s as big as the gift of Christ’s gift of himself, and straight from the storehouses of heaven! Each of us has been given a gift according to the measure of Christ. We have something so huge that we can’t keep it in, can’t keep it to ourselves – we need to give it away.

Where does it say I have to give my gift away? I have a gift from God and I’m going to keep it. Gifts are for keeps!

No, not in the local church they’re not. In the church gifts are for giving away. It’s what makes the church so beautiful. Everyone’s giving away his or her humungous gift.

Look again at verse 11 – *He gave some as apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, teachers* [in order] *to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood...* The word there for ‘mature’ is the word *telios* and manhood is really just the word ‘man’. So we become a *teliosed* man, a perfect man. Isn’t that interesting? All of us corporately becoming a more perfect person (singular), a more perfect man! (singular) so that we attain *to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*

When we’re giving away the humungous gift that God has given to us, when we are all using our gifts on others, we are equipping each other for the work of ministry. We are building up the

body of Christ in such a way that it becomes a more perfect body. We become so beautiful as a church. How beautiful? We start to attain to the measure of the fullness of Christ himself.

When people look at Camelback Bible Church, they should see an increasingly perfect man. They should see Christ. That is what the local church is meant to be. We're not fully there yet, but we're in process.

When we are giving our gifts away, when we are spending our gifts on others, we are progressively rising to the stature of the fullness of Christ himself, who was the perfect image of God, an image of the ultimately self-giving One. What a family! The church, imaging Christ by giving away our gifts as Christ – whose whole life was a perfect gift – gave himself to us.

Yes, what a family! It's a world of dysfunctional and self-grasping families, a world full of abused children and confused children, people *tossed to and fro by the waves* (verse 14). That's what we see out there when we look out into our world, isn't it? Human beings tossed to and fro by waves of deceit and deception and despair. One day it's this problem, the next day it's another.

Lesli and I were able to go to Hawaii with the boys for our 30th anniversary earlier this summer and we got tossed to and fro by the waves. I did anyway. I was trying to teach the boys how to snorkel.

I'm real good in the ocean. I grew up in southern California. I know what I'm doing. "Come on, guys. Let's go look at fish." The waves got bigger and bigger while we were looking at fish and I said, "Come on, boys. Let's go farther." And they followed me.

When I was many yards from shore, a big wave came up and just took me to the top of its crest and slammed me down on the reef, which I didn't know was there. Blood came gushing out of my chest and out of my hand. The boys looked at me and their expressions said, "We don't think we're going to follow you."

It's not fun to get tossed to and fro by the waves. This is a vivid picture of what's happening in our world. People getting slammed. People trying to find some meaning in life and finding themselves becoming bloodied. People trying to get love and finding only lovelessness. *Tossed to and fro* (verse 14) *by the waves* and banged about by *every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes*, by the battering of ubiquitous self-grasping.

The body of Christ stands out in the darkness as a bright beacon because we – see verse 15 – *speak truth in love*, in supernatural, self-giving, triune-like, cruciform love. And look what happens. When we speak the truth in love amongst ourselves, 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* [which means, when each member is giving away his or her humungous gift, when all of us at Camelback Bible are self-giving towards one another in regards to our gifts] *the body grows so that it builds itself up in love*.

The Plan of God, the glory of the triune Family's self-emptying love now effervescing in a dark world in and through a new family of brothers and sisters in Christ called the local church, which, as each of us gives his or her gift away, grows up in every way into Christ, imaging Christ in and to our world.

Remember the command in Genesis 1 – be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with families, with local churches imaging my glory. Fill every nook and cranny on earth with a local church, a family in Christ amidst a community of families that are dysfunctional. They can look in on this local church and see what I intended for human families. They can see my image expressed corporately. The world is desperate for a local church beaming out the glory and the image of God.

Postmodern society is riddled by loneliness. How many people are trying to put one foot in front of the other and sustain a meaningful existence, but sink constantly into a tangled web of frustration? Looking for friendship they receive only wounds of the soul. Craving companionship they become mired in loneliness. Seeking acceptance they fall into chronic self-pity. Yearning for security they are wracked by anxiety.

What are they going to do? Where are they going to go? Where are they going to look for hope?

There's only one place. They can go to Christ, in particular as he is imaged in a family of brothers and sisters called the local church.

The Local Church As Home Base

I have heard that last Monday night was an explosively powerful evening. A bunch of soccer players from our local high school, accompanied by their parents, many of whom cannot speak English, met in the home of one of our members at Camelback Bible Church, together with twenty men from our church family, ranging in age from 20 to 80. These men promised to mentor these soccer players, to love them, to help them in the name of Jesus with their schooling, with their athletics, with their character, with their lives.

Nobody had ever done that before and the soccer players were shocked, indeed profoundly moved by the love of our family at Camelback Bible Church. And not just they, but we too, were overwhelmed by the joy of spreading the love of our church family to others. One brother from Camelback told me that last Monday night was one of the top three highlights of his life.

There's nothing better than binding together in the name of our God and imaging his self-giving as a church family to our community. The community around us needs such a family, needs the love of Christ imaged by Camelback. This week it was imaged to the soccer team. Who will it be next week?

What about singles searching in vain for a fulfilling identity? What about husbands and wives lost in a tangle of disappointment and failed expectations? What about parents and children who don't know how to relate to each other? What about professionals who are exasperated by their

work and can't see light at the end of the tunnel? What about people who look to the arts in order to celebrate their humanity and find only dissonance and despair?

By the grace of our heavenly Father, who has called us out of the world to be a new family of brothers and sisters, we are living answers to each one of these questions. Imaging the self-giving love of Christ among ourselves, giving away to each other the humungous gifts we've been given by Christ. Our singles are nurtured, our marriages are united, our parents and children are communicating, our jobs are rewarding, our arts are exalted because Jesus is in our hearts and coming out of our hearts in torrents.

It's time for God's glory, and for our good, and for the sake of our community to take a hard look at the local church. No longer regarding the local church as a mere addendum to our lives, a place where we gather with others only for worship, where we are stirred by powerful sermons and engaging music, where we enjoy weekly reunions with friends, where we recite wedding vows, where we, in the end, lie motionlessly as friends gather in our memory. No, the local church is not an addendum to our lives.

We must come to view the local church as our home base of our lives. It's our home. It's the place where we put down roots and establish a base of operations. This is what Paul's teaching us in Ephesians 4. It's where we derive our meaning and mission in life. The local church, the family of Christ, is where we most belong. It's the springboard for ministry into our world.

The church family is the body through which nuclear families manifest the glory of the triune Family to a world of lost families.

How many of us view the local church as our primary base of operations? The number who do is probably very small, especially if you consider the national figures. We are a very individualistic as Christians. We don't naturally think corporately. We can divorce our church, we can shop for other churches, we can be Christians without a church.

Paul is saying there is no such thing as a Christian who is not an active member of his or her local church. It's the way God's glory is manifested – through inter-relational, miraculous, triune-like, cruciform, self-giving love. Look into the local church and you'll see that.

We give priority to other things, other things that occupy our time – earning an income, maintaining a residence, raising a family. And the venues of these things become our bases of operation – the office, the home, the school. We look at the local church as just one of the many cogs of our lives, not as the axle on which our lives rotate.

This is unfortunate because something enormously important is being forfeited for both us and our world. The local church is where God is working out his Plan. Are our plans in sync with his? They will be moving in the right direction when the local church becomes our home base of operations.

The Local Church at Work in the Community

My dad left the family business to go to seminary. Soon after his father died, he inherited the family business, which just happened to be largest Pontiac dealership in the world. In other words, it generated a lot of income.

My dad left it. He wanted to be a pastor in a local church. He thought it was the highest calling in the world. What was he thinking?

He was thinking, “I want to give more of my time to the principle organ through which God does his work in this world. I want to train to become a pastor.” Do we only image God fully when we are pastors? No – of course not. In fact, my dad finished only two years out of the three at seminary.

After those two years, he, much to his own disappointment at the time, sensed the Lord leading him back into business, but now with a very different emphasis. He was to start a new business from scratch and build it up and move the family down to north San Diego County. When we got there (by the way, there was no Interstate 5 at the time) there were quite a few people living there, but there was no church teaching the Bible carefully. And this prompted a special burden in the heart of my parents, especially for the youth in the community.

Prayerfully, they came up with a vision. It was to open up the home on Saturday evening. It was to start something called Student’s Christian Fellowship. It was to invite the youth of the community to come together in our home, all youth, from junior high to graduate students in university. People told us you can’t do that. You can’t mix junior high with graduates in university. But there was no place for youth to hear the good news about Jesus? So basically, my parents began a church for the youth of the area.

An amazing thing happened. After about a year or so into the venture, hundreds of students were assembling in our home. I was just a little boy, running around pretending I was invisible. I’d watch my mom make the food; I’d watch my dad prepare a lesson. I’d watch them send out invitations every Thursday to the youth of the community. I saw young people in hundreds. I saw young people ultimately come to Christ.

Dad would sit at the family dinner table on Sundays after Student’s Christian Fellowship and he would look at my mom, sister, and I and just laugh and say, “Can you believe what’s happening, what God is doing among the youth of our community in our home?” He was so pumped. He was a tentmaker, working in his business perhaps 40% of the time, and working in the community ministry to the youth about 60% of the time. He’d laugh and say, “Can you believe we’re making ends meet?! The Lord is doing it!”

You might say, “Well your dad was certainly a special case, giving that much time to the Lord’s work.”

Do we know what it means to make the local church a home base?

The Local Church a Home Base for Your Good

When Lesli and I were in Cambridge, we had dinner one night with the Catherwoods, in Sir Fred (knighted by Queen Elizabeth) and Lady Elizabeth's home. Elizabeth was the daughter of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, perhaps the greatest English-speaking preacher of the twentieth century.

My dream, going to England, was to get to know him. But he died six months shy of our departure to the Old World. But as providence would have it, we ended up in a church in Cambridge where both the widow and the daughter Lloyd-Jones attended. So I tried to spend as much time with Mrs. Lloyd Jones as I could.

When we were at the Catherwood dinner table for Christmas one year, Sir Fred started playing the devil's advocate with me. He would say, "Tim, why are you going to be a pastor?" "Well," I responded somewhat timidly fully aware of my interlocutor's powerful intellect, "I feel as the Lord is leading me to be a pastor." "I need more than that," growled Fred. And then he would start grilling me harder. "You're getting a Ph.D. from Cambridge and you're going to be a pastor of a local church? You ought to become a professor and teach in a university, or go into industry and become an upper-level manager. You need to do something big." By now, I'm sliding under the table. One of Her Majesty's Knights is telling me I'm headed in the wrong direction and I have exhausted all my responses.

Then all of a sudden Mrs. Lloyd-Jones, who had been perfectly quiet for the entire conversation, simply couldn't take it anymore and blurted out, "Fred." And Fred jerked to attention. "Fred, if this man feels he is being called into the pastorate, don't you do anything to stand in his way." I bolted up into an upright position in my chair. It was a great moment; one of the signal moments of my life.

Not everyone should be a pastor. In fact, no one should be a pastor unless he can't stay away from it. That was Lloyd-Jones' advice. Most of us work where the rubber meets the road. Terrific – what a witness for the gospel of Christ we can be in the workplace. But we must remember that the local church is still our home base of operations. And what a joy it is to me to have been called to be a pastor in a local church!

I will mention one other person by way of illustration.

We have a new Director of Ministry Development at Camelback Bible Church. About four years ago, this man was working at the very top of his industry, making more money in one year than most of us make in ten. But he sensed in his heart that he wanted to plug in more directly to what God is doing in and through the local church. To the astonishment of almost everybody, he quit his job and enrolled at Fuller Seminary. He completed a seminary degree.

When he graduated, he had head hunters from his old industry coming after him, offering him big contracts. Not only that, he had several large para-church ministries pursuing his services, asking him to become the CEO of their organizations. The monetary rewards would be great.

You know what he did? He became the Director of Ministry Development of Camelback Bible Church. He was drawn to Camelback Bible Church because of a strong conviction that it was where God was going to do a great work. Perhaps he was chasing a different kind of reward, giving away his gift in the one family which can bring God's glory to a very dark world. Perhaps in doing so, he was reaping an even greater reward.

It's not the way a lot of people think, is it? But it is the way we will start thinking after today. Never before have I been among such a gifted group of people as those assembled in this local church. God has given humungous gifts to the church family at Camelback Bible and has filled us with an enormous quantity of self-giving love. It is amazing how this church family gives of itself.

Our best days, God's best days among us, are in front of us. As we move out into this community, as we together move out and seek to serve in the name of Jesus Christ, may the glory of God start effervescing in Phoenix in new and life-transforming ways, because the local church at Camelback has become our home base and God is working through this church family.

I remember the day when I told my dad I was going to go into pastoral ministry. I walked into his office, his door was always open. He'd get off the phone if I walked in. He'd put everything down when I walked in. He always gave me the impression that I was, after mom and along with my sister, the most important person in his life.

On this particular day, I was a little nervous because he had already taken me on visits to several law schools. Above all, we had visited his alma mater, Stanford University, my first choice for the study of law. We had traveled to three or four others. And on this particular day, I thought to myself, "My dad has put money into these plane trips and he's arranged meetings with the big shots and the deans of the law schools. And now I'm going to reveal to my dad that I believe God is leading me to change directions, to go into pastoral ministry!"

So I walked into his office, sat down nervously, talked about the Dodgers for a while, not wanting to come directly to the subject really on my mind. But he looked at me and said, "Tim, you have something on your mind." I said, "Yes, Dad, it's about law. It's not sitting right." And then I just came right out and said it: "I think the Lord is leading me to be a pastor." He put his head down on the desk calmly, just for a moment. And I thought, "Oh no!" But when he lifted his head up, there were tears in his eyes and he said, "I always knew it. I always knew it."

And he said, "Let's pray and thank God for the great work he has done in your life."

Not just pastors. All of us. Christians, we all love the body of Christ. It's our home base. Let's, as a local church, image the glory of God together.

[PRAYER]

Father in heaven, we love you. We thank you for your goodness to us. That's not a trite phrase, Father. You are good, so infinitely good. We want to see your glory go from strength to strength

in our world and we want to be right in the middle of it. Father, use this local church family, not because we're so great, because you're so great. You've given us gifts. May we give away our gifts to others. And use us in this world for your glory and the good of many people whose names are not listed among those in your spiritual family, whose broken lives are not yet mended, whose praises in your name have not yet begun to ring out. Use us, Father, your children, your family, as a catalyst for the gospel of Christ in this world. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.