

Blueprints: The Gospel Foundation

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Today we begin a new series entitled *Blueprints*. I recently was blessed to be married to my new wonderful wife, Jennifer. We are four weeks into our marriage. If any of you are struggling in your marriage, please come talk to us because we pretty much have it all figured out.

Actually we don't, and after our honeymoon, we've spent two weeks now at home trying to figure out how to do life together and to lay a foundation for what we hope is a really great marriage. Already, after only four weeks, we are regularly having moments where we discover that the way her family does things or looks at things is different than the way the DeWitt family does things or looks at things. Right now, you want me to list for you what some of those are. I'm not going to do that and you can keep yours to yourself as well. What is clear is that as we forge a new relationship and a new household, it means change and a fresh opportunity to start this chapter well.

Here we are in September of 2012. Our grand opening of our Cedar Lake campus was last week. It is the fruit of a coming together of two churches, both with sometimes different ways of looking at things or doing things. It is the coming together of two cultures, and like my marriage, this merger requires us to lay a foundation for our future relationship that is solid and can be built upon to God's glory for years to come. To that end, this series will work through core values that can be that foundation for us. To use a musical phrase, we want to make sure we are all singing off the same sheet of music.

We've entitled the series, *Blueprints*. This is a play on our church's name, *Bethel*. Bethel is a Hebrew word meaning, "House of God." *Beth*, house. *El*, God. *House of God*. It was a location named by Jacob where he had his dream of the ladder to heaven. Jacob names that spot, *Bethel*, house of God.

House. To build a quality *house*, you need high quality blueprints – designs which the actual construction and home can be built upon. That is what this series is for, to lay out biblical blueprints – God's plan for a vibrant church. Would we all agree that for a church to be blessed by God it must be built by God? Built the way He intended? God's Word lays out the essentials of the kind of church God blesses. Our approach will be to use this picture of a house and the rooms of a quality home, each room having a purpose.

Living Room: *Worship*; Kitchen: *Word and Spirit*; Family Room: *Love and Fellowship*;
Garden: *Serve and Nourish*; Closet: *Prayer*; Neighborhood: *Loving Outreach*

Today we begin where all house construction begins, the foundation. We are not looking for one as God has made it clear who the foundation is. *For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.* (1 Corinthians 3:11 ESV)

This is metaphorical language, but I hope everyone gets what it is saying. Like a building, Christianity is built upon a foundation. This foundation isn't cement or pylons; it is a person and a truth. Scripture uses a word descriptively for this foundation: gospel. Gospel is a translation of a Greek word that literally means "good news." Indeed it is.

Why do we begin this series with the gospel about Jesus? Why start with the foundation? This is where all buildings begin. Can you imagine a construction meeting with the construction managers and the foremen and the tradesmen? *Listen everyone, for this project we have decided that rather than beginning with the foundation, the first thing we are going to build is the second story.* There would be nothing but laughter.

Yet, when have you seen a house from the road and walked through a house and thought to yourself, *What an amazing foundation?* Look at pictures of houses for sale; they never feature pictures of the foundation. They have pictures of the kitchen and the rose garden and the master bedroom. There is never a shot of the foundation. Foundations are the most important part of the building, but too often it gets the least attention.

The foundation of the church is often treated the same way. I think most people walk into a house and assume the foundation is good. People walk into churches and assume the same thing. *It's a church. It's a Christian church. It must believe, you know, the important stuff.*

How do I know this? Because my observation over the years is that people tend to evaluate whether they like a church much more by the feel of the kids' ministry than by what they read in the doctrinal statement. In fact, there are many people who will join a church without even reading the doctrinal statement. *The people of the church seem nice. Everything seems orderly. We will assume the foundation is solid.* It may or may not be.

Our starting point is that we want to be a church built on the solid foundation of Jesus.

What is the Gospel?

- *She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*" (Matthew 1:21 ESV)
- *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.* (1 Timothy 1:15 ESV)
- *For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.* (1 Corinthians 15:3-4 ESV)
- *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* (2 Corinthians 5:21 ESV)
- *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.* (1 Peter 3:18 ESV)
- *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.* (John 3:16 ESV)

If we synthesize what each of these is saying, note the consistent themes.

It tells of a person – Jesus

Jesus; Christ; him; only Son

We see in this that the foundation is not a truth but a person and the truth about Jesus. *Man* – fully man. *Only Son* – fully God. *Came to this world* – God became man.

All of these gospel passages say the same thing. The gospel is about Jesus. In fact, Jesus is the good news of the gospel. Jesus is the gospel. He was an historical real person who lived in time and space. He was not a legend or myth. He was not a literary figure simply created in the mind of an author. He was a real person who really lived. The writers of Scripture

who tell us about him were either eyewitnesses or wrote what eyewitnesses told them. He is described by them as the most absolutely unique person who has ever lived, which explains the other qualities they emphasize: the Son of God, born of a virgin, morally perfect life, miracle worker, teacher, healer, a life which bewilders an honest seeker to this day. The gospel is about Jesus.

It describes what he did

Came into the world; died for our sins; raised on the third day; made him to be sin; suffered

Jesus didn't simply live. The gospel also describes his saving work on our behalf. *Came into the world; died for our sins; raised on the third day; made him to be sin; suffered.* These are summary descriptions of the narrative of Jesus' life. His life was extraordinary by any measure. His teaching drew thousands to hillsides. His miracles shocked everyone, even those who believed in him. His power scared them. They'd never seen anything like it. The priorities of his life were so different – loving the sinner and the spiritually disenfranchised. Refusing to pander to the spiritually elite. A life of love lived for God's glory. The religious people of the day didn't like him, in fact, they conspired to kill him.

This they did through political pressure. If you think the Chicago political machine is corrupt, read the story of the Pharisees and the Romans. But this was all according to God's plan for Jesus to be the Savior. Jesus was crucified on a cross. A real Jesus actually crucified on a real cross. Dying as if he was a criminal having never sinned once. He never did what God's law said ought not to be done and he never once failed to do what God's law said should be done. Just that is staggering for us sinners to comprehend. His every thought and motivation was completely pure and perfect.

As 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

This verse captures the essence of how Jesus' death accomplished our salvation. Only one who had never sinned could die for sin, otherwise he would be dying for his own sin. Jesus died for our sin – the wonderful doctrine of substitutionary atonement. He had no sin but on the cross he had all our sin. God the Father treated him as if he was us, transferring our guilt upon him. God treated him as if he was us which frees God to treat us as if we are Jesus.

Jesus takes our guilt, we receive his righteousness. Because of Christ's atoning work and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us, God sees us as if we are as righteous as Jesus and makes an eternal declaration: holy; righteous; justified. Are we morally righteous in our lives? No. We are sinners. This is why anyone who really gets the gospel is not proud but brokenhearted and humble that God would save someone like me.

This is the glory of the gospel. He died. He was buried. As 1 Corinthians 15 says, he rose again on the third day. Why did he have to be resurrected? His death on the cross destroyed sin's grip on us and his resurrection destroyed death's grip on us. He ascended to heaven and is now at God's right hand. The gospel centers on who Christ is and what he did to save us.

It has glorious effects for those who believe

Save his people; save sinners; freed from everything; we might become the righteousness; might bring us to God; have eternal life

The one basic requirement for salvation from the guilt of sin and receiving forgiveness of sins and eternal life is a turning from sin known as repentance and a trusting in Jesus as Savior. The Bible calls this "faith" or the verb "believe." It answers the question of how Christ's redemptive work can be applied personally to me. The jailer in Philippi came trembling to Paul and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." (Acts 16:30-31) What he tells the jailer is God's answer to all humanity's plea, *Believe in the Lord Jesus*. So the gospel is first and foremost a person; it is also a story of God's rescue of sinners; it is also personal in that each of us must personally believe for the gospel's saving power to be ours.

Let me contrast the actual gospel with what I am calling "almost gospels" – gospels that appear to save but fall short of God's true gospel and therefore don't save, but damn.

Almost Gospels

The religious gospel

Religion says that the way to God or any god is by what I do or don't do. Religion places the saving responsibility upon us. We are the ones who do it, earn it, and therefore, can boast about it.

Religious people rest their hope on being good people, nice people, moral people, doers of good things, being better than most, avoiding what they consider major sins, raising good kids and being positive parts of society. They look in their mirror and think, *I'm religious, I believe in God, I do good things, and I must be on a path to heaven.*

These kinds of people believe in an almost gospel. You hear this when you talk about saving faith and they immediately will reassure you by telling you what religion they are: I'm Catholic. I'm protestant. I'm Greek Orthodox. I'm Muslim. I'm this or I'm that.

The religious gospel is not the actual gospel. In fact, while it sounds nice, it is the opposite of the actual gospel. The actual gospel says that it is not about what I do but what Christ has done. The religious gospel glorifies man. The actual gospel devastates man and crushes us under our inability to save ourselves. The actual gospel's starting point is that I cannot save myself. I need a Savior and his name is Jesus.

The experience gospel

This one is subtle because it sounds almost right. People who believe in the experience gospel will always talk about a spiritual experience they had. You ask them what they believe and they immediately tell you a story about when they were a kid or when they went to some event and they did something. "I went forward." "I threw a pinecone in the fire." "I grew up in the church." "I prayed a prayer."

Look carefully at the gospel verses. These experiences have little or nothing to do with the actual gospel. The apostle doesn't say to pray a prayer or walk an aisle, he says, *Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.*

A believer in the actual gospel builds their faith on Jesus and only on Jesus, not on an experience. It is faith in Christ that saves. Not my growing up Christian. Not my walking an aisle. And not technically in my prayer, although a prayer of genuine faith is a means to salvation.

This is subtle, but it may be the difference between heaven and hell for you. Trust in Christ fully and don't let your salvation rest even in the smallest degree on something you have done. As the old hymn says, "*My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.*"

The effects gospel

A third almost gospel is when a church centers itself on the effects of the gospel instead of the actual gospel. What do I mean?

I mean that the gospel is transformational, but the transforming fruit is not the gospel. We must not confuse sanctification with justification, the fruit for the root.

How many churches or Christians are known as churches devoted to the family, or justice issues, or outreach or something else? We are going to talk about these in the other rooms of the house. But fellowship and ministry and service and holiness are not the foundation. That would be like building a house upside down.

The actual gospel is Jesus. The actual gospel is God. The actual gospel is a cross and empty tomb. The actual gospel is faith as the means by which Jesus' redemptive work is applied to me. The gospel has glorious fruits and effects which make them very attractive potential foundations, but they are not saving foundations. Rather, they are beautiful rooms in the gospel house.

The historical gospel

Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day He arose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

Nicene Creed (325 AD)

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made. Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

Bethel Church Doctrinal Statement

As the promised Messiah, Jesus was sent by the Father to deliver people from their sins. He became fully human at the Incarnation without ceasing to be fully God. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of a virgin, and lived a perfect life free from sin and guilt. Jesus Christ was crucified on a cross, and His death provided the all-sufficient atonement for

sin. Christ became our representative before God, voluntarily substituting Himself in our place and bearing our sin and guilt. His sacrifice made provision for the forgiveness of sins, satisfied God's wrath toward believing sinners, and established a New Covenant between God and man. Because of Christ's redeeming work, it is now possible for people to experience genuine reconciliation with God and eternal life with Him.

Are we all on the same page? Do you personally believe in the actual gospel or in an almost gospel? The foundation of this church is Jesus and our only gospel is faith in Jesus for salvation. We can disagree on many things or have different perspectives on lesser matters, but on this we must unite and upon him we build this church.

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