

The Church: Anchored in Intentional Relationships

"We are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ...makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love..."

Ephesians 4:15a, 16b

Introduction: Over the summer I love getting the opportunity to talk to others outside of our church, from family members to friends, about their experiences in ministry and life. This helps gain perspective, keeps us away from becoming myopic in thinking, and we can learn from others in order to improve what we are doing in our own lives. One of the conversations that stuck with me was with a family member who has been on the mission field for decades and still works for a highly reputable mission's organization that has engaged in church planting all over the world among the hardest soils possible. My question was simple: *"On the teams you've been a part of and now oversee, would there be consensus among each member in defining the church?"* Again, this was posed to a leader of a church planting organization, and the response was surprising but not shocking: *"Hmmm...I'm not sure there would be agreement on the definition of the gospel, let alone the church."* I was a bit taken back, but on reflection, this is more common than not. A lack of clarity on the gospel and the church can lead to a lack of motivation in missions, a lack of fruitfulness in the church, and a lack of true salvation among those who *think* they are saved but will find out they were not (Matt. 7:21-23).

Last week we started a small series desiring to bring Biblical definition to the question, *"What is the Church?"* First, we examined the word "church" to understand it means *"called out ones"*, as well as the usage of *"assembly"*. We then took a look at Biblical **metaphors**, primarily the picture of a marriage between Christ, the groom, and the church, His bride. We said the church is a group of *redeemed believers*, who have been purchased by the blood of Christ from the wrath of God, to *unite* with Him in *devoted submission, growing purity, and committed love for Him* and others as we wait for His return to be with Him forever. The church is **anchored** in its transformed identity in Christ as His bride, which changes everything for us.

This morning, we are going to continue on with Biblical metaphors and contemplate how the church is based around **relationships, intentionally so**. We are **anchored** in our relationship with Christ, each other, and the God given leaders of the church, and that is seen in the picture of a **body and shepherd relationship**. The goal of this morning is for each of us to **clarify** these relational lines in our own mind and life, and hopefully take steps of obedience or turn away from wrong thinking and living. The church is a phenomenal organism created by God for His glory, our good, and to fulfill the mission to which He's called us.

The Body of Christ

Colossians 1:18 *"And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent"*

1 Corinthians 12:12 *"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit."*

God, in His gracious and understanding nature, gave us simple pictures to understand greater concepts. One of these is the fact that the **church is compared to a body** (1 Cor. 12:12-31; Rom 12:3-8; Eph. 1:22-

23), since, you know, we all have one. But it is often the simple things that we take for granted or never really contemplate. The comparison to a body is brilliant because we can all understand what the point is: **one body has MANY parts, all working together, to keep life going.** There are obviously parts that are more seen (hands, arms, ears, etc.) and those internal structures that are only seen in surgeries, cannon wounds or x-rays. But our bodies are a diverse makeup of different parts, each fulfilling their function, so that the whole can thrive. Our goal is not to overcomplicate this metaphor but rather understand it in all of its fullness.

The Primary Connection to the Head:

It is undeniable that in the metaphor the fact that **Christ is the head of the church** (see also Eph. 1:22-23; 5:23). In the metaphor, the head is the most important part of the body and the whole body is lifeless without it. There are several clear implications in the fact that Christ is head and we are the many members:

- **He has absolute leadership and sovereign rule over the church:**

Colossians 1:15-17 *“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together”*

We looked last week at the fact that Christ **purchased** the church with the payment price of His own blood through His atoning death (Acts 20:28), but here we are reminded that because He purchased the church, He also exercises sovereign rule over her. It is HIS CHURCH, not ours. We are ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20), caretakers, and servants, but not owners. It is why we try our best NOT to create goals around what we think should be done but rather what He has already communicated what should be done. He is the sovereign Lord and Master of the church, and our job is to arrange ourselves under His leadership, not fight against it or circumvent it.

- **Christ is the One who grows the church**

Colossians 2:19 *“and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God”*

We can work out our salvation because God is at work to will and to work in us, all for His pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13). The whole metaphor is a promise that a body is **built to grow**. As we grow up, we not only grow in intellect and wisdom, but our bodies actually develop, become stronger, resistant to things that would harm us, and are able then to help others. One of the misunderstandings that church is somehow about **entertainment or comfort** is that we forget that **maturity** is a goal, and maturity never comes to a body by entertaining it or putting no amount of tension on it (Col. 1:28-29).

Sometimes in the modern church, JUST LIKE THE ANCIENT ONE, we think that growth will come from all kinds of different sources: service, attendance, or any other works. Now, are works and obedience important and imperative? YES. But the church at Colossae had people who were trying to grow by keeping certain regulations, attending certain festivals, or by NOT doing certain things and exercising *asceticism*. The problem with this: **anything done without faith in Christ or by honoring Him, worshipping Him, or knowing Him will NOT produce spiritual growth, but rather pride.** We can read

the Bible and miss out on a relationship with Christ (John 5:39-40), and thus miss out on life. My fear is that there can be a lot of activity in a church without growth, since things can be done in the name of Christ, but not OUT OF AN INTIMATE relationship with Him. It's much like a husband or wife who works so hard outside the home, working overtime, carting kids everywhere, and frantically moving from activity to activity in the name of love, but who ceases to actually know their spouse or kids. They wonder why there is such a disconnect, but it has everything to do with what is most important in holding fast to your spouse. This is all important when we understand our **source of life in Christ**.

- **Christ is the source of our life**

Colossians 3:3-4 *"For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."*

It is abundantly clear in the metaphor and in the whole of Scripture that the **source** of eternal life and identity in the church is IN CHRIST. We BELONG in the church NOT because of what we do, how we serve, what our gifting is, or if we can find friends. The church is undoubtedly a community, but a church community disconnected from Christ is merely a club.

*"The unity of the members is based not on a mutual relationship within the group but in their vital relationship to the **Head of the body, Christ Himself.**"¹*

We've talked before that a right goal in the church is to find friendships, meaningful relationships where encouragement, sharpening, and love can take place. But a concern for the church would be this: if we are looking to cultivate that level of relationship WITHOUT mutual growth in Christ, it will either never satisfy or will break down into a worldly, material driven, entertainment focused, comparison obsessed relationship. Christ is not only the goal of our life, but He is the connective tissue in all of our relationships. *How does this happen?* It starts with a correct, clear, and robust view of the gospel.

In a study put out in 2005 (20 years ago!) of young teens who were raised in the church but who waned in their passion and inability to articulate their faith when they got to college found that many had a **practical theology** expressed this way:

1. **God created the world** – (God is not denied, but trivialized)
2. **God wants people to be good, nice, fair to each other**, as taught in the Bible and most world religions (being good is good, and better than being bad)
3. **The central goal of life** is to be **happy** and to **feel good** about oneself (no room for suffering, trials, or struggle as means of maturity)
4. **God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life** except when needed to resolve a problem (magic genie, ATM card, or Apple pay)
5. **Good people go to heaven when they die** (especially if the good that I do outweighs the bad!)²

Michael Horton wrote a fantastic evaluation of this in a book entitled *"Christless Christianity"*, with the premise that the American church is plagued with an Americanized gospel which focuses on self-help, self-salvation, and the desire to make us feel better about ourselves. Gone is the scandal of the cross,

¹ Robert Saucy, "The Church in God's Program", p. 24.

² Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *"Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers"*, p. 162, 2006.

the offense of our sin before a holy, glorious God, and the need to humble ourselves before Him, repenting, and embracing a life of joy that comes with suffering, pain, and life being unfair. If we believe we are good people who are simply called to do good things, be better, try hard, serve some, participate when convenient, and we will all kind of find our way to heaven one day, then we not only practice *Christless Christianity* but we'll experience *headless churches, decapitated bodies* that only have the appearance of life, but are already dead.

Instead, we understand that a church is full of people who **have died** (Col. 3:3), died to self, died to sin, died to self-autonomy and self-authority, and have now been hidden with Christ. **Christ IS our life** (Col. 3:4), He is our *identity*, He is our *Lord*, He is our *Savior*, He is our *motivation*, He is our *greatest treasure*, He is the means of our *righteousness*, He is our *object and means of worship*, He is our *sure and steady anchor*, He is our *Shepherd*, He is our *Master*, He is our *joy*, He is our *hope*, and He is our *redeemer* and He is *Risen*. This is the primary relationship we are concerned with in the church, and everything that we do is designed to point each other to Him, since we are **perpetually forgetful, living in fleshly bodies that struggle with selfish sin, and that are continually putting off the old man and putting on the new through the renewing of our minds**. In other words, our connection with the Head of the Church now shapes our interaction with the fellow members in the church as part of the body.

The Vital Connection with Each Other:

Romans 12:4-5 “For as in one body we have many members, and the **members do not all have the same function**, 5 so we, though many, are **one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.**”

UNITY AMONG DIVERSITY

One of the glorious realities of God's church is the fact that He has called out people from all nations to be a part of His family, His flock, His body. In fact, in his glimpse of heaven, John the Apostle saw the ransomed people of God singing and worshipping around the throne who were from every *tribe, language, people, and nation*. (Rev. 5:19). This creates a beautiful mosaic of people, but also brings a layer of complexity to relationships. On top of this, 1 Corinthians 12 describes the body of the church as a hand, ear, and eye (12:14-17), but also as seemingly weaker and honorable, which in turn are both given greater honor and indispensable (14:21-24). The church is made up, INTENTIONALLY, of a diverse group of people so that the gospel is necessary, Christ is the only glue, and God receives all the glory when we walk in unity and love (Phil. 1:27-28; Eph. 4:3). Remember, the NT church was made up of Jews, Greeks, slaves and freemen, men, women (Gal. 3:28), circumcised, uncircumcised, barbarians, and Scythians (Col. 3:11), but **Christ was all, and in all, being ONE in Christ**.

But how does it work? How do we unite with every generation, nation, socio-economic reality, marriage status, or background? Or, to say another way, how did Jews and Greeks come together in unity when by birth they hated each other? Again, the gospel changed everything:

Ephesians 2:11-19 “Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— 12 remember that **you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world**. 13 But now in **Christ Jesus** you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who **has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility** 15 by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, **so making peace**, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in **one body**

*through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. 17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are **no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God***

What does this mean? That the hostility that was present between mankind and God was broken down through Jesus' shedding of blood and death on the cross, making peace with Him. The downstream result is the fact that through this, God made two sets of people – Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles) – into one new entity in Christ. It was NOT Gentiles becoming Jews, but Gentiles AND Jews coming to God in Christ, which then levels us at the foot of the cross and bringing us into the same household, citizenry, and body. In other words, by IDENTITY, in the body of Christ through the death of Christ, we are no longer arms-length bystanders or in a large crowd together, we are brought into an intimate, growing, and vitally integrated body.

NECESSITY OF INTERDEPENDANCE

We need to remember this because no follower of Jesus was called to walk in isolation or individualism. We are called to grow together in the body, and the only way one part of the body can grow is if all the other parts are growing as well. In the metaphor, if the ear grows but not the eye, or the hand but not the foot, or the seen parts but not the unseen, we will become a deformed body, unhealthy, and NOT reflective of the power of the gospel or Christ our head. That means, folks, and listen carefully, that my growth is dependent on yours, and vice versa. When we have people in the church who fail to play their roles, use their gifts, or engage in relationships, we stunt the growth as a whole.

Now, the NT church has been given gifts (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:27-31) in order to aid us in this pursuit, but we often think about these in terms of service alone, using a gift to serve in a particular area of ministry. But overall, the gifts are given to help us care for each other, move toward unity, and to grow up into Christ. Every relationship, activity, or ministry must have as its goal a pointing toward and movement in Christ. That is why **service is important, but relational interaction is vital**. The "One-Anothers" of the New Testament remind us that we are called to love, forgive, bear with, encourage, and exhort each other, and that will happen within the whole body, not just those that we like or get along with. That is why **humility of mind, patience, gentleness, and bearing with in love** (Eph. 4:2) is vital to having true, pure, Christ exalting relationships.

This demands that we *think differently about relationships in the church*. Instead of grouping together around common interests, we seek out people because of a common Savior. We look to encourage those who are discouraged, or help those who are struggling in faith, or even call out those who are moving toward sin. We open ourselves up to be known by others because we are already fully known in Christ. Of course we will spend time with people in our own age and stage range – parents with kids, retirees, college kids who sleep in till 10 – but we do not ONLY spend time in those pockets. We must realize that we have responsibilities with the whole, and though we cannot love everyone equally or the same, we are open to loving anyone in the church, regardless if we have anything obvious in common.

God has graciously given **shepherds/pastors/elders** to help in this, since we are the flock of God (Acts. 20:28). Elders are to protect us from false doctrine and destructive false truths (Acts 20:29), should keep watch over our souls (Heb. 13:17), teach faithfully (1 Tim. 3:2-5), and exercise pastoral care **among** the people of the church (1 Pet. 5:2-3), modelling and being an example of pursuing Christ. We are called to follow their lead, emulate their life, pray for them, respect them, and submit to their

leadership (Heb. 13:17). In doing this, we remember we are all one in Christ, and no one is better or less important than the other, but each have a role to play in the building up of the body.

What is a church? It is a group of redeemed people who are IN CHRIST, our life sourced in Him, and who seek to hold fast to Him. Because we are connected to Him, we are immediately and permanently connected to each other as we seek to honor our Savior and Lord. We move forward in unity together, because of our great and diverse makeup, with humility, love, and grace toward each other, desiring to help each one become mature in Christ (Col. 1:27-29).

*“To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, **which is Christ in you**, the hope of glory. 28 **Him we proclaim**, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present **everyone mature in Christ**. 29 For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.”*