

What the Bible Says about the Church: Six Dynamics

Primary Scripture Text: Ephesians, Eph. 3:15-4:3

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INTRODUCTORY LESSON: Introducing the Series

How can we escape the contemporary cultural confines that tend to define church in our society, in our world, in our culture? Most churches are task oriented -- such churches define themselves by leadership, prayer, spiritual growth, youth concerns, their ability to do a variety of activities and to provide a variety of services. Is this the way one should define the church? What is nature of church? What is a biblical answer?

Consider various ways that people define the idea of church -- various possibilities.

First, we can give a practical answer to our question, we may consider contemporary culture, churches have personality, we can seek to know identification, personality, style, turf, history, context, struggles. We can celebrate past, present, future.

There is good Bible for this kind of contemporary consideration, remembering the past, using it to inform the present. Examples would be the feasts throughout the Old Testament, the key word is "remember." The Lord's Supper is God's remembrance--part of a long story. We must know that story, we must remember. There are several ways to remember—bring the Bible story to the present.

- Translation (bring “over” a remembrance to our “place” and attempt to imitate it)
- Transposition (same structure, different key, ask how that remembrance makes a difference to us today, what claim scripture makes upon us today)
- Transition (pass “over” a remembrance of history as we might solve an ancient puzzle)
- Transformation (change in form that allows Bible to transform even the context into which it speaks)
- Trajectory (casting “across” so Scripture is context-centered).

Second, we can give a biblical answer, allow the Bible alone to answer our question: What is the church?

Third, we may seek some combination. Try to integrate answers we find in Scripture with practical concerns.

A related idea seeks historical answers, integrate history into our biblical understandings and practical concerns. The historical development of the church, the historical development of the idea of church.

BIBLE STUDY

Let us begin in Rom 12:1ff. Romans explains gospel (1-11), followed by practical section (12-16). The Bible is practical; Bible answers will be practical. "...I beseech you, by mercies of God, be living sacrifice, transformed, prove God's will in your world." Romans 12 admonishes us to be transformed, be renewed. Such is a frequent theme in the Bible.

Consider the OT prophets, new heart, renewal, new action of God

The early church grew in a phenomenal way, but then quit. Hebrews tells of a church in danger of quitting. There is a constant need for renewal. How can it occur? How can we be church? How can we be the people of God?

Gospel of Mark, church needed help, confusion about the identity of Jesus, identity of followers of Jesus.

Reinhold Niebuhr -- four faith steps: man, message, movement, monument. When a vital movement becomes a monument, renewal is needed. Today there much contention about what we will be; the more significant question is what we will become.

Back to text! In Eph. 3:15-4:3, transition from doctrine to practice. I see six concepts -- faith, focus on Christ, family, faithfulness, festivity, future. In coming weeks, we will explore these six dynamics of the church.

What are the concerns we must address if we are to be church? Here is how the Bible gives a practical answer when we ask how we can be church. Becoming people of: faith, focus, fellowship or family, fidelity, festivity, and future. Faith means the church is didactic, focus means the church is directional, family speaks to the dynamic of the church, fidelity implies that the church is determined and decided, festivity means the church is a delightful place, the future speaks to destiny. We will study each of these in this series.

LESSON ONE

-1- FAITH (church is didactic)

Luke 18:8, the church cannot live on borrowed faith. Read Heb. 8, notice the quote from Jer. 31. Contrast OT-NT. Problem with OT was not in teaching-didactic, but in its dynamic. NT church is composed of people of faith. Under NT, must know the Lord before being part of covenant, not just by physical birth. Some in NT kingdom have never understood. We hear questions like, "What's your religious background?" with the answer, "I was raised in the church." Where is Bible for that? Church is people born of water and spirit. We have too much borrowed faith among God's people today.

What is faith about? We assume the presence of faith. You cannot expect works from non-faith people. As a result, we are exasperated. James 2 says that faith works, faith is not just inner conviction.

Contrasts: people of doctrinal purity looking for faith--1900s; people of faith looking for doctrinal purity--1800s. We speak because we believe (Acts 5). 2000s—people searching for faith through secular lens

In Hebrews, faith and endurance are connected, Heb 10:36. Confidence, assurance, perseverance. Chapter 11 is about perseverance based on promise. We see the implication clearly in chap. 12. People fall by wayside because of lack of faith. How to get faith? -- Rom 10:17, faith from word of God, is reference to OT! Paul had faith before Damascus road, Paul knew OT. OT is not revelation of man, is revelation of God. Story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph's God. Story of Exodus is story of God, gracious, identified, thus foundation of first commandment, Ex 19:5-6; 34:1-6. We must see God.

Paul in Acts 18 is in Corinth, scared, v. 9, I am with you... Again, in Acts 27.

Jesus Christ is the object of faith; our faith is in Jesus Christ. There is no merit in unfocused faith -- faith in faith, faith in self, restudy Gospel of John, 20:30-31.

We must internalize faith--if doctrine does not change our lives, why have doctrine? Doctrine is not for believing, doctrine is for living. Doctrine is resources, strength, spiritual health. What I believe must have something to do with how I live.

There is so much more to say!

We can see this in Ephesians when we look carefully at the transition from chapters 1-3 (primarily doctrinal) to chapters 4-6 (practical). Chapters 1-3 are about faith development; Chapters 4-6 are about the faith life.

Faith runs as a thread through Ephesians. Here is our text: Eph. 3:14-21. The heart of this study is a textual study of this text. Do we understand it? Do we believe it?

The goal is to grow up in Lord, not just grow old in the church. There is always a place for growing in faith. WE MUST BASE LIFE ON FAITH!

LESSON TWO

-2- FOCUS (church is directed and directional)

Focus determines success--in all of life. Three areas in the matter of focus. Various texts from Ephesians.

1. Individual purpose, Eph. 1, imitate God, faith in God leads to living in God's image, Eph. 5:1, 4:24-25, be like God. Life in Christ is not merely conforming to a set of do/don't, but conforming to the original, be like God. There is much we don't need to know, but we do need to know God, so we can be like him. We must understand God, love, forgive, live. In our world, relationships are breaking, husbands and wives, kids and parents, on and on. Most things are pretty easy. Be like God, give unconditional love, forgive completely, heal problems. Such would go a long way toward solving problems in church. In many places, no big problem but series of little problems.

Live to praise of God, Eph. 1:6, 12, 14. Mt 5:12, in your conduct, be to his praise/honor/glory. Our whole view of God is warped, see God as grandfather more than father. With warped view of God, we live however we want to, because God does not discipline.

Who gets the praise for the way you live? This matter, although individual in this first point, informs our assemblies. I am a changed person. I am not the audience; God is the audience. Each of us is participant. We are not here to grade one another, or to grade the worship, we are here as people of God to praise him. This attitude will clear the back rows, this will solve problems of those coming late, leaving early, missing entirely.

We are worship crazy. We want to improve our assemblies. How? We try everything but what will work. We fool with the lights, but that is not the problem. Isa. 6 enlightens, the vision of God emboldens, empowers, commissions. This view of God takes care of missions and our other insufficiencies. Thanks be to God for victory. We cannot foul the assembly up if see God.

Many have a radio view of God, turn him on and off. We are always in God's presence, Ps. 139. Worship is the continual response of a thankful heart. I will be with you.... This is different than saying all of life is worship.

2. Corporate purpose, Acts 6:4. Here is prayer, ministry in word, service. Respect the elders. Some things are difficult, hard, and even harder when we are so misdirected. What are elders about? What is leadership? What is our corporate focus? Is it on the elders or the flock? Is it on self or others? Elders meetings--will we focus on the physical plant or worship? Will we focus on things or people?

Church has the same mission corporately as the individual Christian--we are God's church--we are to look like God, love like God, do what God does. We must live out our mission. The focus of the church is on good NEWS--nurturing, evangelizing, worshiping, sharing. Reread Eph. 1:6,12,14; 4:11-16. This is the ministry of the entire body, this is not a ministry of one department or curriculum, ministry is for all, all can serve. Churches need to appoint elders who are ministers, servants. This informs our ministry, our staff. Who knows the names of the Christians in this assembly? Who knows the names of the non-Christians in this assembly?

3. Preaching. This is an area of focus, but I include it here as an illustration of a church activity. We must focus in preaching. We think preaching is external to the church. This is something someone else does. This is for the preacher. But preaching is an activity of the church. Read the NT.

What is the center of preaching? What is the focus? Do we really have a message? Is our message focused in Jesus Christ? Read Acts 8:4-5, etc. 2:36, what is the focus of NT preaching? The bottom line is whether one is in Jesus Christ or out of Jesus Christ. Saved or lost. All of life is about this most important question. In the church today, we are better trained academically than any prior time in history of church, but...we have lost our heart for souls. There seems to be a correlation between higher degrees and less evangelism. We must regain our focus, get about the business. Preaching demands the right message. Acts 2 contains two questions. The second is "What shall we do?" We have spent lots of time answering that question. The first question is, "What does this mean?" We dare not answer the second until we have answered the first.

1 Cor. 15, the gospel of Christ is good news. It is of first importance. The Death, Burial, Resurrection! Jesus Christ died for our sins, was raised up, ascended. He solves our sin problem, death and grave problem, life problem. Consider again 1 Thess 4:11; 2 Cor 4:16ff. Will dead men live again? This is what the man on the street wants to know--Jesus Christ answers those questions. Here is a message to save the world. The Christian is in a win/win situation, Phil. 1:21ff, when live out God's focus.

LESSON THREE

-3- FELLOWSHIP and FAMILY (church is dynamic)

Paul writes about church, body, family, family pride. We see it throughout the book of Ephesians -- 2:11ff, 19-21; 3:15-21, 5:23...

Church is more than an organization. The church must never be institution, institutionalized (new application of old word!). Institutions redefine who is important, what matters. Institution redefines what church is about, who is important. Only those up-front, hierarchy. That is not the dynamic of the NT church.

Church is intimate. Intimacy is freedom from anxiety in presence of vulnerability. Church is not to make us more anxious. We need people in life to help establish priorities, provide support, get along, only way to make it. Church must be that. There is no solo Christianity.

We better discover that again! Church is a place of acceptance rather than judgment. Nurture and encourage. Our fellowship is suspicious, superficial, we are afraid to reveal self. We must find a different dynamic, small groups, learn to talk different. Mingle the private and public arenas. Return Christianity to the marketplace. Find greater continuity. Value the ministry of the invisible, recover that which was the source of appeal to unbelievers in the first century. We are family precisely because of the Father, Eph. 3, which depends on Eph. 2 – peace, togetherness, mutual access.

We need friends, family, better have them at the church. Intimate circle, be part of several groups. Then we can know one another, our fellowship with one another is based on the dynamic of our fellowship with God, 1 John 1:1-10.

How can we do this? The biblical answer is in smaller groups. In the early church, the small group assemblies defined the church more than the larger weekly assemblies – in fact, the larger weekly assembly is a product of the 4th century, not the 1st century!

Frankly, in most of our churches, we do not get Eph. 5 done in our assemblies nor in our Bible classes. Each Christian is not speaking, admonishing, giving thanks, submitting (not in the biblical sense of this passage). Why? Because institution does not need these things, they are not natural. We must rethink, rediscover the dynamic of the church.

Dynamic = power, we wonder where the power is. We preach harder, we do “institution-organization” harder. We organize what should be natural. We organize and lose power. Where is spontaneous fellowship? Where is the desire for togetherness that goes beyond “church time”?

The text of Ephesians is so clear – a brother wrote, responding to my introduction.

“The assembly will never transform people, the members do not recognize their gifts and if they do, there is no space to put them in service, the church that is only assembly has few that serve.”

Wow!! How many members of the church serve? Where? How? Who notices? What is expectation?

Such questions challenge us to rethink what the Bible says about the dynamic of the church as fellowship and family.

LESSON FOUR

-4- FIDELITY (church is decided, determined)

Jesus Christ is Lord; the Bible is word of God.

Some things are not up for debate, the church is a place of fidelity to God. We are seeking to restore NT Christianity. This is difficult, hard, not easy. But the attempt is worth it. The American Restoration Movement is built on a history of change. Today change is threatening. Let me encourage you to newness, shave other side first, brush other side of teeth first, try getting dressed by starting with the other pant leg, or the other sock.

This was not easy for early church. Reread Acts 2, 5, 10, can you imagine it? Gentiles, big stuff. Acts 10 is not conversion of Cornelius, but conversion of Peter, Jews, early church. Cornelius turned self in. In Acts 15 we read of a major transition, grinds gears, Gal. 2. Change is not easy.

Eph. 4-5 reflects that struggle, how to live out the Christian faith, recognizing that Jesus is Lord.

Change can be handled, even chaos, because fidelity is to God not man. We seek that which is scriptural, sound, workable. Conflict where there was peace? Solution is in Eph. 2. We will have differences in taste and opinion, we are still dealing with that. But do not equate our will with God's will. We are going to disagree. The inspiration for song writing did not cease in 1940. Not all old is bad, not all new is bad.

Introduction

Equipping the church for the mission of the church, Ephesians!

The mission is an imperative. It is a given. It must be done. How can one be so bold as to say it MUST be done? The primary argument is from Scripture -- 1 Peter 2:5-10; 1 Thess. 1:6-8. Sharing the saving message of Jesus is natural among those who are the people of God. We have made it unnatural, but it is natural.

After we agree it must be done, then we can ask how it SHOULD be done. That is about strategy, is pragmatic, asks about effective methods, and the answer will vary from congregation to congregation. How should this church evangelize? You must decide, explore, test, encourage, pray, even fast.

How CAN this church evangelize?

The necessity of self-understanding

Equipping the church for the mission of the church does not begin where we typically begin. Our tendency is to think action. We value accomplishments. We did this, we do that, we will do that, *ad infinitum*. If the local church is to accomplish its God-given mission, it must begin by understanding itself.

The church must know its identity before it can live out its identity. The doing follows the being. This is basic to equipping the church for the mission of the church. This study is designed to lay some foundations: understanding our identity so the church can learn to be the church. In general, if the local church is to accomplish its God-given mission, it must see four things. These are principles for equipping the church for the mission of the church. They are suggested in the text of Ephesians.

These principles involve the church (1) understanding itself, (2) organizing itself to accomplish its purpose, (3) expressing itself with a relevant message, and (4) celebrating what happens when the church is faithful to God's purpose.

These have to do with the church's teaching, structure, message, and example.

I. [Eph. 1] The church must hear and accept the REVELATION of its mission. The church must understand itself: this is self-understanding (teaching/theology) of the church. What is a biblical understanding of the church and its purpose? Understanding God's eternal purpose for the church is the source, the foundation, and the perpetuity of the mission.

A. At least two false images of the church must be combatted: (1) the church as a religious club which leads to introverted Christianity, and (2) the church as having primarily a secular mission which leads to a religionless Christianity. The first leads to spiritual navel gazing and a self-serving, selfish view of the church, consumerism, what can the church do for me, internal service. The latter leads to a social gospel which is the opposite of the religion that binds back together as reflected in Ephesians 2.

B. A biblical understanding of the church will show at least two major identifiers: (1) the church has been called out of the world to worship/serve God; (2) the church has been sent back into the world to serve the world and to witness to the world concerning God, Christ, and God's eternal purpose for salvation of the world.

C. Because this is so, these two marks of the church, (1) its holiness as a separated people, and (2) its commitment to be a presence in the world as an apostolic extension, lead to what Alec Vidler called a "holy worldliness." Paul called it in the world but not of the world.

D. Jesus Christ models this holy worldliness, the incarnation is the perfect embodiment of it. The church must understand itself as the very presence of Christ in this world as suggested in the last two verses of Eph. 1.

II. [Eph. 2] The church must understand the REASON for the mission: this is the urgency and importance of the mission. To respond to this urgency, the church must organize itself: this is the structure of the church. What are the structures of the church according to Scripture?

For what are we structured? We look at the work of elders, deacons, ministers, teachers. What are we about? What are we trying to do? What do our structures allow, or more accurately, what do our understandings of these structures allow? Do we have a way to accomplish decision making, teaching, internal care, keep the membership numbers up, service, holiness (or worldliness), worship, fellowship, mission, evangelism, salvation? If we cannot accomplish what God wants in our current structuring, how should we restructure. I use the word structure purposefully, because I do not want to suggest we are discussing a change in God's plan which we usually describe as church organization. I am suggesting rather a change in activities, and in how we get activities accomplished. I am suggesting a bottom up model of leadership rather than a top down model, for this is the Jesus model in Luke 22 and its parallels.

Most churches would do well to take a local survey, evaluate themselves, ask what is our identification (self-understanding), and then ask if we are reflecting our identity in our actions. What does our community see in us? What is the identification of our community? Are there bridges over which the gospel can travel into this community from this church? These are questions we do not have time to consider today, but they are often described as questions of church personality, programing, and process.

III. [Eph. 3] The church must understand the RELEVANCE of the mission. The church must willingly express itself with RELEVANCE: this is the message of the church. The message must match the mission. Since the church always, whether it intends to or not, articulates a message, what is the relevant message?

Evangelism is sharing the good news. This means that the news must be right, and when it is shared it must be good. To understand the mission of the church and have a church ready to accomplish that mission, we must understand and define the good news. In brief, the essence of the gospel is Jesus Christ himself.

A more difficult question is this: how can we formulate and communicate this good news in an increasingly pluralistic society? How can we make it resonate, logically, sensibly in a relativistic, post-modern world where objective truth is rejected by most, and difficult to define at best?

I see two extremes: total fixity in which we are in bondage to the words, formulas, gospel stereotypes of the past, and total fluidity in which we are totally at the mercy of our culture and context so that the gospel is at the mercy of marketing, consumerism, and selfishness.

Total fixity emphasizes the gospel, revealed by God, received by us, passes on paradosis (tradition to be preserved) or paratheke (deposit to be guarded). Such sounds good and is good. Such cannot be discarded, but must be held in tension by the mission of the church.

Total fluidity says the gospel must be contextualized, communicated appropriately to each person in particular situations. Otherwise it is irrelevant. Such sounds good and is good, but must not be used to change the gospel, or fail to declare the whole gospel.

These two concerns must be integrated if the church is to willingly express its own identity as the body and voice of Jesus Christ in the message proclaimed.

IV. [Eph. 4] The church must see the RESULT of its mission. The church must be itself: this is the life of the church that lives out God's purpose. What does the church look like in its daily life?

The church is God's new society, the living embodiment of the gospel, the sign of the presence of the kingdom of God, a demonstration of a human community under the gracious rule of God.

When the church is itself in its biblical fullness, the good news is sent forth both visually and verbally--in word and in deed, in word and work.

Conclusion

These four principles suggest four prerequisites for evangelism and missions in the local church:

1. The Revelation of the Mission: provides a biblical theology of church which gives self-understanding, grasping our double identity as holiness in the midst of worldliness.
2. The Reason for the Mission: requires biblical structures of the church so our organizational understanding equips us to accomplish our God-given mission to carry the message to the world.
3. The Relevance of the Mission: motives a verbal expression by the church to proclaim and articulate the gospel in a way faithful to Scripture and relevant to our contemporary world.
4. The Result of the Mission: is a church that morally and spiritually reflects God's intention for the church; the church must be the church, transformed as a community that makes the invisible God visible to the world.

LESSON FIVE

-5- FESTIVITY (church is a delightful place)

Church is place of celebration, festivity, when we remember what God has done in our lives, that changes us, makes us, calls us. This characterizes daily life, shared life, assembled life.

To understand church, to think in biblical terms, to redefine who we are and what we do, we have to talk about worship, but church is more than worship. Worship does not define church, church defines worship. Eph. 5:15-21, redeeming the time, filled with the Spirit, teaching, talking, singing, praying, encouraging, giving thanks, submitting, caring.

We cannot know worship and festivity until we know God. Why did God institute so much festivity and celebration in the life of his OT people? Have you thought through the feasts and festivals? Have you considered October (the seventh month)? Israel spent most of the month celebrating. When did they work?

When we know God, worship and festivity are natural. I am not talking about assembly, or at least, I am not talking only about assembly. When we know God, worship and festivity are a part of life, abundant life. We are always in God's presence, Ps. 139. Worship is the continual response of a thankful heart. "I will be with you...." This is different than saying all of life is worship. Worship is intentional, my life is worship when I am intentional in my focus on God. "I give this activity to God, spiritual, service, worship, considering God's mercy, transforming me, renewing thinking." We do a lot during a day that does not qualify!

We have no interest in knowing one another on a spiritual level until we know God. In many churches, celebration is secular not spiritual. We know one another socially not spiritually. What do we share? Faith? Focus? Fellowship? Fidelity of purpose? What does it mean to celebrate? Is the Supper celebration in the church where you attend?

Evangelism, discipleship, mission will give the church continued reasons for festivity and celebration. Evangelism will make the church a delightful, dynamic place.

I conclude with a survey study of Ephesians – worship, delight, sharing life, celebrating, rejoicing. How are we doing? How can we improve? The church is a place of festivity – a delightful place.

[These notes are only a summary – the oral presentation has many more illustrations, Bible texts and Bible studies, with comments.]

LESSON SIX

-6- FUTURE (church is destined)

Church is waiting, incomplete. Eph. 6:10-17, 18-21

The church lives with the “already and not yet” tension. The church is for the here and now, but it must always be focused on the future, it must see its destiny, it must share eternity.

This lesson is not eschatological, the description of the church in Eph. Is not eschatological. Nonetheless,

Ephesians anticipates the future.

- 1:9-10 is not yet reality, Paul’s prayer in 1:15-19 is for how the church will live out the reality of Christ’s fullness and presence within it.
- 2:9-10 makes clear that we are being formed for works that are not yet completed, prepared by God for his people.
- Paul’s message was designed to change the future, to bring more souls to Jesus, 3:1-13
- God’s action within and through the church is both present and future, even as we anticipate what he will do “above and beyond our thinking, imagination, and prayers,” 3:20-21. God’s glory has not yet been fully manifested in what the church can become and be through his power.
- Paul’s instructions to the church reflect present reality and future hope (4-5).

Thus, the church is in one sense incomplete, awaiting its destiny, waiting to see what God will accomplish through his church, what will be the final outcome. When the way forward toward God’s purpose is not obvious, we wait and work, we pray and prepare.

The church has not arrived, it is being formed—it is not fully formed.

The formation of the church has been an underlying thought in this study – developing greater faith to be God’s faithful people; focused on God’s nature as supreme power for transformation, renewal, and daily presence; cultivating relationships that will empower mutual ministry; festively celebrating what God has done while anticipating the future that will reveal what he will ultimately do to his glory!

CONCLUSION

Therefore, don't quit. God did not quit on us. God is faithful, 1 Th. 5:23. Church is on threshold of great things, sprint to the finish line, cross the line running, saving souls, developing disciples, sharing the message, establishing new outposts that declare God’s presence in this world. What will history say about church in this era? I pray that the conclusion will not be this: it could have but didn't!

God is calling his church to be his church. Let the church be the church. Sharing and faithfully living out the gospel of Christ (evangelism, discipleship, and mission), determined to be God's (sacrificial transformation that impels hearts and lives of worship), dynamic relationships that enable the ministry of every member (nurturing), understanding and living out mission, destined for glory (eagerly anticipating), firmly decided (spirituality).