

“What about the Church?”

Ephesians 4:7-16
September 13, 2009

Do you ever think about air? Air!—this stuff that surrounds us. Do you ever spend any time thinking about it? Did you wake up this morning wondering whether there would be enough air to get you through the day?

Air is one of those things that we usually take for granted—that is, until we have a severe respiratory problem or find ourselves stuck behind some diesel truck belching out black smoke. When we find ourselves in those circumstances, *then* we find ourselves thinking about air. *Then* we learn once again just how precious air is.

This morning I want us to think about something else that we usually take for granted. Most of us who have been brought up in North America don't spend a lot of time thinking about it. We assume it is going to be there. We expect it to be there for us. Just like air we don't appreciate it until something goes wrong with it.

I'm talking about church. Most of us probably don't give church a lot of thought. We have been brought up going to church, or we have, at least, seen church buildings countless times during our lives. We come to church, and we know pretty much what to expect. No big surprises! We don't really need to devote a lot of time to thinking about the church.

But every now and then—just like air, we should think about church. Let's not just take it for granted. Let's think about it. What does the Bible say about church? What does God's Word teach us about the value of the church and how the church is supposed to work?

We're going to base our study on the letter that Paul wrote to the Ephesians back in the first century. We're going to ask three questions about church, and then we'll study how Paul by the inspiration of the Spirit addresses those questions.

What does God think of the church?

The first question is an important one: *What does God think of the church?* We could if we wanted to, conduct a survey of people here in our church and ask each of them what he or she thinks of the church. There is a time and place for surveys to be conducted in the church. But as Christians the ultimate question is not what any of us think about church. The real question is: What does God think of the church?

¹⁰His intent was that now, *through the church*, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, ¹¹according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Eph. 3:10-11 emphasis added)

That is an astounding statement. God says to all of the angels and all of the spiritual beings of the universe, “If you want to see my purpose for the world and see how wise I am, then you need look no further than the church! It is through the church that my manifold or multi-faceted wisdom is on exhibit.” How many of us would talk that way about the church? But that's what God says!

There's another passage in Ephesians that speaks of the value that God places on the church. I read this passage for years without truly appreciating what is being said. That's because it is tucked into Paul's teaching about marriage in chapter 5. In Ephesians 5:25, Paul writes, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” We read that passage and immediately start thinking about husbands and wives, but Paul is also making a strong statement about the church. “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

How many of us talk that way? Do you love the church? Jesus did. And think about what Jesus did. “He gave himself up for her.” Think about that statement. Don't we usually talk about how Christ loved sinful people and gave himself up for them? Do you ever hear anybody say, “Christ died for the church”? No, we say, “Christ loved us and died on the cross for us.” That's the way that we usually talk about Christ's love and sacrifice. We don't use the word *church*, but Paul does. “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for the church.”

The point is that there is a corporate or group dimension to the Christian life. You and I live in such an individualistic society that we miss what the Bible says about the importance of Christians being together

to help each other and to encourage each other in their worship of God. We miss that! Because we Americans have been so raised on the rhetoric of individual rights that we are almost blind to the importance of group responsibilities.

One of the leaders in the early church, a man by the name of Cyprian who lived back in the third century, made this classic statement: “You cannot have God for your Father unless you have the church for your mother.”¹ For centuries after Cyprian that statement was repeated and agreed to, but how many people would you find today who would endorse it? Not many probably. Because our culture has indoctrinated us to think in terms of individual Christians and not the church as a whole.

I think of conversations that I’ve had in which someone has said something like this: “I don’t go to church much because I worship God in his creation. It’s when I’m outdoors that I feel closest to God. That’s where I worship God!” Have you ever heard someone say something like that? Whenever someone says that to me, I always feel at a loss for words. I’m never quite sure what I should say. What I want to say is something like this: “I’m glad that you find that meaningful, but is that the kind of worship that God really wants?” Most people in our culture instinctively think of worship as something that *they* find meaningful, but the real issue is whether *God* finds it meaningful.

God wants us to worship as individuals. Do sing praises to him as you enjoy his beautiful creation! But God also wants us to worship as a community of believers. If you are a believer in Christ, God wants you to be part of a church. It doesn’t have to be a building like this. It may be a small house church that contains no obvious religious symbolism. The truth, of course, is that it has nothing to do with buildings at all. It doesn’t have to be a large group of believers either. It may be just a small group of Christians who regularly meet together. But Christ did love the church, and if we are his disciples, then we need to follow his example.

Are you investing yourself in a community of believers? Do you identify with a recognizable group of Christians? Have you taken the time to get to know them so that you can serve them and receive help from them? God loves the church, and so should we.

Who does the work of the church?

Who does the work of the church? If you asked that question to most people, their immediate response would be, “The pastors! After all, that’s what we pay them for! They are supposed to do the church’s work.” But that is not what the Bible teaches, is it?

⁷But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. . . . ¹¹It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹²to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up . . . (Eph. 4:7, 11-12a)

Did you catch what Paul is saying in those verses? He says that “to each one of us,” who has trusted in Jesus as Lord, God has given us grace so that we can contribute to the building up and strengthening of one another. He doesn’t say that he gives that grace just to the pastors! He gives it to every one of his children.

Notice what the pastors are supposed to do. Verses 11 and 12 say that “the pastors and teachers” [that’s me and Pastor Jerry and Pastor Dave] are “to prepare God’s people [that’s you!] for works of service.” It’s your job to do the work of the church. All we’re supposed to do is teach you and prepare you and encourage you. We’re the coaches; you’re the players!

Paul repeats this teaching in verse 16. “From him [Christ] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” That’s the same idea that we saw in verse 7 and verse 12. The church is the body of Christ, and for the body to be healthy “every supporting ligament” needs to be in good working order. Each person needs to do his or her part.

So my question is simple: What are doing to build up your church? I’ll be blunt. Are you one of those people who is always thinking of what the pastors should be doing? (I won’t ask for a show of hands.) Or are you one who is always looking for more ways that you can serve and enhance the church’s life?

Which is more important—programs or people?

¹ Quoted in C.A. Blasing, “Cyprian,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* ed. by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 291.

That brings us to our third question: *Which is more important—programs or people?* That is a question that comes up frequently. I hear it a lot. It comes up naturally. People will suggest to me that we are not doing enough to help widows or the poor or the elderly or _____ [you fill in the blank]. It could be native Americans or college students or AIDS patients or the deaf. But at other times I hear people suggesting that we have too many programs in this church. You're always trying to recruit more people to do things. What we really need is fewer programs so that we can just concentrate on people!

So which is it? Is it programs or people?

When you look at the life of the early church, what do you find? Do you find programs? You don't find Sunday School. Sunday Schools didn't come on the scene until 1780. Nobody had ever heard of Sunday Schools before that. You won't find AWANA in the New Testament either. I can't find any mention of Alpha either. What about a nominating committee or a missions committee? The early churches didn't have any of those things. Maybe—just maybe we've missed the boat. We've become so organized that we have lost what is really important.

It is easy to reach that conclusion because when you first read the New Testament, the early church's programs don't jump out at you. But if you look more carefully, you do find what we would today call programs. There is one program that I find to be particularly outstanding. We read about in Paul's letter to the Romans and in the two of his other New Testament letters. Paul works for over a period of five years to collect money to help the poor Christians living in the city of Jerusalem.² Five years! He writes what we would today call fundraising letters to urge the Christians in Corinth to get on board. You'll find the first of those appeals in 1 Corinthians 16. In his second letter to the Corinthians he devotes two whole chapters to raising money for this gift that he wants to give to the church in Jerusalem. This is a major effort that required organization and oversight.

. . . ¹⁸And we are sending along with him [Titus] the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. ¹⁹What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help. ²⁰We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. ²¹For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men. (2 Cor. 8:18-21)

Read a little between the lines. Paul organizes a relief ministry that a variety of churches in Greece and Asia Minor participate in, and each church apparently chooses a representative to go with Paul to Jerusalem to see that the money is actually delivered.³ Today we call that accountability. This is not an unorganized spur-of-the-moment effort. It is carefully thought through and organized and carried out over a long period of time. That sounds an awful lot like what we would today call a program.

In order to accomplish the work that God has called us to, we need programs. I want to thank all of you who participate in them. Thank you for your preparation and the long hours that you put in. Thank you for your perseverance week after week after week. Programs are important to the life of the church.

But programs are never enough. Look at the instructions that Paul gives to the Ephesians. As we read these instructions, keep in mind that Paul is not just giving general instructions on how to be nice. Paul expects the Christians in Ephesus to put these principles into practice in their church.

²⁵Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.

Did you catch that? "The one body" that Paul refers to is the church. Are you careful to be honest with others in the church?

²⁶"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷and do not give the devil a foothold.

Paul gives that instruction because he knows that Christians sometimes get angry with each other. (Oh, not in our church, of course. But I've heard about it happening in other churches.)

²⁸He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.

² The instruction to the Galatian churches mentioned in 1 Cor. 16:1 probably took place in the summer of A.D. 62, and his trip to Rome to deliver the gift occurred in the spring of A.D. 67.

³ We know the names of the churches' representatives from Acts 20:4. "He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia."

The goal of that instruction is not just to do what is right. It's to do what is loving. “. . . share with those in need.”

²⁹Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

There is a practical verse for church life!

³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

³¹Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

Have you ever felt rage or anger at someone in the church? (I won't ask for a show of hands.)

³²Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Eph. 4:25-32)

What is the common denominator with all those instructions? People! Personal relationships!

Do you remember that verse that we started our study with? Ephesians 2:10? God's "intent was that now, *through the church*, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known." Paul's talking in that passage about how the first century division between Jew and non-Jew can be overcome through Jesus Christ. When a watching world looks at the church and observes how people who don't always agree on everything and who sometimes get angry at each other—when the world sees those people striving to live together and work together in spite of their differences, *then* God's purpose and wisdom are displayed.

It's not a choice between programs or people. We need both. We need our organized efforts to accomplish ministries, but we also need to develop relationships of love and accountability with each other.

One of the most important things you can do for our church is just to get to know each other. I learned a long time ago that ministry almost always grows out of personal relationships. It's often said that pastors don't really begin their ministry until they have been at a church for 2 years. Why is that? Because it takes a couple of years for the pastor to get to know the people and for the people to learn to trust him.

Sometime during the summer I would walk through the Fellowship Hall and see people sitting around the tables and drinking coffee. Part of me would want to say, "Hey! You should be over at our special Sunday School class session that we're having today." But as soon as that thought went through my mind, I would remember why we have those tables set up in the Fellowship Hall. It's so that people can sit around and have a cup of coffee together! Why do we want people to do that? Because ministry grows out of relationships, and we need to take the time to develop those relationships!

Last Sunday morning I experienced a delightful surprise. I forget if it was after the 8:30 or the 11:00 worship service, but I was standing at the back of the sanctuary—you know, where the Bible says that the pastor is supposed to stand after a worship service. I was surprised by how few people came by to shake my hand. I glanced over at the folding door to see if Pastor Jerry was more popular than I was, but I noticed that there weren't many shaking his hand either. Then I looked back in this sanctuary, and I saw that there were groups of people all over the place just standing around and talking to each other. And I immediately said, "Thank you, God. Thank you, God. Thank you, God."

One of the most important things that you can do for our church is to make the effort to get to know people. Get involved in a small group Bible study. On Sunday mornings don't be in too big a rush to get out of this building—even if the tables at the restaurant do fill up quickly and even if kick-off is at 12:00 sharp. Take time to introduce yourself to people that you don't know. That may seem like a small thing, but it is so important to the life of the church.

Conclusion

A wise and experienced pastor once observed that the church is made up of equal parts of mystery and mess.⁴ That observation comes from someone who has been around the block. Church life often is messy. The pastors and others in the church will at times let you down. But the mystery is that God does his work among us anyway!

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on September 13, 2009 by Dr. Frederic M. Martin.

⁴ Eugene Peterson quoted in Philip Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 45.