

REDISCOVERING THE CHURCH

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1. Preaching about the church presents special challenges.
 - a. With 2,000 years of history, the church has accumulated a record that is open to criticism. Various reformation movements are witnesses to the church's need for change.
 - b. Protestantism, which began as a protest against the established church, has held to a low view of the church, giving precedence to the individual's salvation.
 - i. Luther's view of justification by faith focused on the individual's discovery of a gracious God.
 - ii. A common view is that one can follow Jesus without participating in church.
 - iii. According to this view, the church exists to meet the needs of individuals.
 - c. The Enlightenment legacy is the emphasis on the rights of individuals.
 - d. People today are less likely to join groups than they were in earlier days (cf. *Bowling Alone*).
 - e. Those who have heard sermons on the church in a sectarian context are weary of the topic.
2. Preaching on the church is important today because of the numerous attempts now to define the church.
 - a. Some envision the church as a corporation that exists to improve assets, numbers, and market-share.
 - b. For others, the church is a theater that exists to provide entertainment that attracts the greatest number.
 - c. The church functions in some circles as an association in which one pays fees and expects benefits in return.
 - d. The missional church exists to carry out the mission of God (which is not always well defined).
3. We turn to Paul because all of his letters, at some level, answer the question: What does it mean to be church?
 - a. He spoke to communities that measured the church by their own previous experience of groups.
 - b. He does not speak of making individual conversions, but of forming communities.
 - c. He challenged listeners to recognize the difference between the church and all other communities.
4. Our question is like that of Paul: In a world where people have experienced many communities, what is distinctive about the church?

Lecture One: Paul's Corporate Christology

Prepositions play an important role in Paul's doctrine of the church. Believers have been baptized "into Christ" (*eis christon* Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27; cf. 1 Cor. 10:2; 12:13) and died "with Christ" (*syn christō*, Rom. 6:8; cf. 6:6; 8:17; Gal. 2:19; 2 Tim. 2:11). As a result, they now exist "in Christ" (*en Christō*), "in him" (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9) and "in the body of Christ" (Rom. 12:1-8; 1 Cor. 12:12-27). They are also "of Christ" (*hoi tou christou*, 1 Cor. 3:23; Gal. 3:29). In addition, Paul affirms that Christ (or the Spirit) dwells (*oikei*) "in" believers (Rom. 8:9-10; 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16; cf. Gal. 4:19). These prepositions indicate the inseparability of Christ and the church.

1 Corinthians 3:5-17: Building God's House

1. This passage belongs to the larger context of those who apply partisan politics to the church ("I am of Paul, I am of Apollos" resembled political slogans in ancient cities), assuming that the church existed by the same norms as the political unit. The specific issue is the nature of Christian leadership.
2. Because this text is a lengthy unit, the preacher should maintain the focus on the major point rather than attempt to explain the obscure phrases.
3. Verses 5-9 employ the image of agriculture and make the transition to the image of the building (v. 9), which becomes the dominant metaphor for 3:10-17. Both images are drawn from the OT: Israel is God's field (Isa. 5:1-7) and building (Jer. 1:10; 24:6). The images appear together in Jer. 24:6.
4. Note the movement in vss. 5-9: From God who gives the increase (vss. 6-7) to "we are God's field, God's building" (v. 9). *In the midst of partisan politics among Corinthians, Paul the focus is on God.* It is God's church, not a community like others.
5. It is a community like none other: Christ is the foundation who determines the shape of the building. Not only is it God's building. Note the Trinitarian perspective: It is God's building, Christ is the foundation, and the Holy Spirit dwells in the community. It is no ordinary dwelling, but the temple where the Holy Spirit dwells. Paul draws on the Old Testament images of the temple as the dwelling place of God. God instructs, "Make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them" (Exod. 25:8) and promises, "I will make my dwelling in your midst" (Lev. 26:11). Just as God once dwelled in the temple, God now dwells in the church.
6. In this passage, we learn that, not only do we live in Christ, but the Holy Spirit dwells in us. It is important to note that 3:16 is not about the Spirit dwelling in individuals, but in the church.
7. Sermon Focus: The fact that the church is God's vineyard, God's building, and the house where the Spirit lives places all of our quarrels in perspective, reminding us that our task is to build rather than to destroy.
8. Sermon Plot.

- a. Introduction: The church has a bad name. When you consider the divisions, the past sins of the church, you know why it has a bad name. Because churches of ordinary people who come with different opinions, life in the community can be messy.
- b. But it is not a human church: We—not as individuals, but as a church—are God’s vineyard and God’s building.
- c. Christ is the foundation. This is no merely human church.
- d. We are more than that. We are not an ordinary building, but God’s temple, the place where the Holy Spirit lives. The Spirit has taken up residence in us---not in specific individuals, but in the church. The church with all of its flaws is still the place where the Spirit dwells.
- e. When we recognize that this is God’s building, God’s temple, we know that our task is to build on to a divine edifice. The church is composed of humans, but it is God’s church.

Putting on Christ (Gal. 3:26-29)

Prepositions play an important role in Galatians, and they are a central feature of Paul's ecclesiology. Believers have been baptized "into Christ" (3:27), "put on Christ" (3:27), are "one in Christ" (3:28), and "of Christ" (3:29). This passage is probably an indication of what Paul means with his frequent phrase "in Christ." That is, "in" indicates a location. This passage offers an insight into what it means to be "in Christ."

1. The basic question of Galatians 3 is ecclesiological: Who are the people of God?
 - a. The obvious answer in Jewish tradition is: Abraham's children
 - b. Who are Abraham's children? Paul offers a different definition of church: Abraham's children are not physical descendants, but those who share his faith. This is alternative view of church.
 - c. Behind this issue is a question that we may ask: Is the church like an association of individuals who come together for mutual benefit?
2. While Paul's commentary on Galatians 3 is complicated—and the preacher does not need to wade through every detail—the focus becomes clear: The "seed" promised to Abraham is singular (3:16); it is Christ, and the people of God are those who believe (3:22).
3. Behind this remarkable argument is the Hebrew idea of the solidarity of the people in one person. The whole nation is present in its founder (cf. Rom. 5:12-21; Heb. 7:4-11). Thus Christ is the inclusive person, and his people are "in" him.
4. The climax of the argument in 3:26-29 has a profound significance for our understanding of the church, indicating that Christ and the church are inseparable.
 - a. Who are the children of God? Gal. 3:26, "All are children of God through faith in Christ." That is, Christ has within him a multi-ethnic community ("all") demarcated from the rest of the world by faith in Christ.
 - b. Who are the children of God? Gal. 3:27, "As many as have been baptized into Christ." "As many as" also indicates inclusiveness. Note the preposition: We become "in Christ" when we are baptized "into Christ." He is the location in which we live.
 - c. Implications. What kind of church are we? Gal. 3:28. We are the people of the new creation that knows none of this world's hierarchies or distinctions.
5. Sermon focus: We find our identity in Christ, and we come together as the children of God without the prejudices and class distinctions of the old creation. To be "in Christ" is to be a part of the church, the new humanity.
6. Hermeneutical Reflections. Churches are still separated by ethnicity and social class. Does the church mirror the associations in our own society?
7. Sermon plot:
 - a. For some, the church has an image problem. It is composed of the well-dressed, the prosperous, etc., but has no place for the jobless, the homeless, etc.
 - b. As the inclusive person, Jesus Christ includes all.
 - c. Baptism and faith are inclusive; when we "put on" Christ in baptism, we unite in him.

1 Corinthians 12:12-27: The Body of Christ

1. This passage is a part of the discussion (chs. 12-14) that focuses on self-serving behavior in public worship in a letter that responds to anti-communal forces, individualism, and partisan politics in the church.
 - a. After establishing the principle of unity within diversity (12:4-11), Paul offers the illustration of the church as a body in 12:12-27, which is the appropriate preaching text.
 - b. Although many consider the body Paul's most important image for the church, the image appears only in 1 Cor, Rom, Col, and Eph.
 - c. Paul has anticipated the image already in 1:13 ("is Christ divided?") and 6:15 ("Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?")
2. The image does not appear in the Old Testament to describe the people of God, but is well known in ancient political discourse to describe the body politic. The best known example of this image is the story Menenius Agrippa, in which the members of the body politic conspire to withhold food from the stomach because they are tired of the stomach's taking without giving anything in return (Livy 2.32; Epictetus, Diatr. 2.10.4-5).
3. The structure of the passage provides the key for preaching.
 - a. The passage has an inclusion (bookends) at 12:12-13 and 12:27: The church is the body of Christ.
 - b. 12:12:14-26 does not mention Christ, but draws lessons that philosophers often made about the city as a body.
 - i. The body is one and has indispensable members (vss. 14-20).
 - ii. Even apparently insignificant members are indispensable (vss. 21-25).
 - iii. The body is united by sympathy: when one part hurts, the whole body hurts (v. 26).
4. While others could have made the statements in vss. 14-26 (and they are good points!), the frame of the passage (12:12-13 and 12:27) goes beyond what others could have said.
 - a. According to 12:12, it is Christ who is one and has many members ("so it is with Christ"). Christ lives in the church, his body; i.e., the church is not like a body, but is the body of Christ.
 - b. According to 12:13, baptism is not a private experience, but incorporation into the body of Christ
 - c. Paul summarizes in 12:27: You are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.
 - d. To be a "member" is not to be a card-carrier, as with other associations, but to be a functioning member of Christ.
5. Focus: Our unity in Christ distinguishes us from the unity of all other communities; the church does not exist to meet the needs of individuals, but to be Jesus Christ in the world. Christ lives on in a community composed of people who did not choose each other—Jews and Greeks, slaves and free—but who have been incorporated into Jesus Christ.
 - a. Sermon movement
 - b. People look for communities for a variety of reasons.
 - c. Paul speaks of an ideal community in 12:12-26: One that ancient people desired.

- d. The church is a special community; not only does it supply the needs mentioned in vss. 12-26, but it is in Christ, and being in Christ involves a community composed of people who are different from us.

Lecture Two: A People Being Formed

Many books have been written in the last two decades on spiritual formation, which encourage the development of the habits of prayer, Bible-reading, hospitality, and other practices. Spiritual formation is important for Paul, but it is always corporate formation. That is, the community is being “formed” together. Paul uses the root word *morph-* on numerous occasions (cf. Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 4:19; Phil. 2:6; 3:10, 21), but he also uses such terms as “sanctify” (cf. 1 Thess. 3:13). In other stances, he speaks of the church as his “boast” at the return of Christ (cf. Rom. 16:17; 2 Cor. 1:14; Phil. 2:16; 1 Thess. 2:19) and prays that they will be “blameless in holiness” at the end (1 Thess. 3:13). Our ultimate goal as a group is to be “conformed to the image of the Son” (Rom. 8:19; Phil. 3:21). We are being formed in the present (Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 3:18), and our destiny is to be completely formed in the future.

Phil. 1:3-11: Our Corporate Narrative

1. Paul does not use the term “spiritual formation in this passage, but the concept is present in his description of the church. The first person plural indicates the corporate identity of the community. He does not speak of the conversion of individuals in his letters, but of the founding of a church.
2. The church has its own story. As Paul writes, they are in the middle of their story.
 - a. The church has a past. “God began a good work” among them when the church was established.
 - i. The past continues “from the first day until now” (1:5).
 - ii. Their participation in the collection (1:5) was an indication that good things had happened in the past.
 - b. The church lives in the present between the beginning and the end.
 - c. The church lives in anticipation of the future: “The one who began a good work will bring it to completion at the day of Christ (1:6).
 - i. It is God who was at work in the beginning and will be until the end (cf. 2:13, “It is God who works among you”).
 - ii. “You” is plural; God is at work in the community, bringing it to completion at the final day. Spiritual formation is corporate formation.
 - iii. Our ultimate destiny is to be conformed to the image of Christ (3:21).
3. What does corporate formation look like?
 - a. Paul’s prayer in 1:9-11 offers a valuable insight into transformation.
 - i. “That your love may grow more and more un full knowledge and discernment”
 - ii. “That you may approve the better things”: that is, that we are more ethical, having the right priorities.
 - iii. “Filled with the fruit of righteousness.”
 - b. The remainder of Philippians elaborates on the nature of spiritual formation.
 - i. A life of self-denial based on the story of Christ (2:1-11)
 - ii. A life like that of Paul, who also denied himself (3:2-21).

4. Focus: The church is involved in a story that has a beginning, a middle, and an end as it is being formed into the image of Christ.
5. Sermon notes. I preached on this passage prior to the centennial at University Church in Abilene, asking, "Where are we going?" We can look to our past, but we also look to the future as we become conformed to the story of the one who emptied himself.

“We all . . . Are Being Transformed” (2 Cor. 3:1-18)

1. Second Corinthians is primarily a defense of Paul’s ministry, and “we” in most instances means “I.” However, “we all” refers to the entire community (cf. 2 Cor. 5:10, 14-15;)
2. In 2:14-7:4, Paul offers his credentials as a minister of Christ. In response to those who ask for his credentials (3:1), Paul compares his ministry with that of Moses.
 - a. Moses delivered a covenant written on stone, while Paul delivered a covenant written on hearts;
 - b. Moses put a veil on his face (3:12-16), but Paul speaks openly.
 - c. Paul is the minister of the new covenant announced by Jeremiah (Jer. 31:31-34; 2 Cor. 3:6), in which God’s Spirit dwells (cf. Ezek. 11:19).
3. Paul’s self-defense has major implications for the church, for the ultimate test of his ministry is the existence of a transformed people. The sermon could focus on two major statements on the church (3:2-3; 3:18).
 - a. “You (the entire church) are a letter from God. The church is no ordinary community, but a letter from God.
 - i. “Known and read by all men”: The very existence of the church is a witness to the world. It is known and read as it is a counterculture to the values of the world.
 - ii. Written with the Spirit of God: The church is the community anticipated by Ezekiel and Jeremiah (Ezek. 36:26; Jer. 31:31-34).
 - b. The church is empowered by the Spirit.
4. The contrast between Paul and Moses is also a contrast between the old and new people of God.
 - a. Israel—in the past and in Paul’s own day—cannot see the glory because of the veil.
 - b. In contrast, believers (“we all”) “with unveiled face behold the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the image of Christ. The present passive means a) this is a continuing experience and b) that God is at work in the church to change the entire community. Spiritual formation is corporate formation.
 - c. “Transformation” is literally “metamorphosis.”
5. What does metamorphosis look like? The larger context of 2 Corinthians indicates that transformation is participation in the sufferings of Christ—a matter of taking up the cross (see especially 2 Cor. 5:14-15). According to Romans 12:2, transformation (or metamorphosis) means living within the body, practicing brotherly love.
6. Sermon focus: We might combine 3:2-3 with 3:16-18 for a sermon on the church as the people who are empowered by God to change and be a witness to the world. Again, remember that “you” and “we all” refer to the corporate identity of the church.
7. Homiletical Plot: a. By human standards, the church appears to be insignificant in numbers and power. b. Even the insignificant-appearing church is empowered by God. c. We are being changed into the image of Christ as we share in his cross.

Gal. 4:12-20: Until Christ is Formed among You

1. Galatians 4:19 has the language of formation: “Until Christ is formed among you.” We look for the context to understand the meaning of formation.
 - a. The Galatians had a good beginning, but turned away from Paul’s gospel (1:6-9; 3:1-5; 4:8-11).
 - b. They had been rescued from the old aeon (Gal. 1:4) and incorporated into the new humanity/new creation (3:28; 6:15).
 - c. After Paul has restated the arguments for his gospel (3:1-4), he expresses the concern that his labor has been in vain (4:11), which is the context for the present passage.
 - d. Whereas Paul expresses confidence that God will complete the work with the church in Phil. 1:3-11, here he expresses fear that the corporate narrative will not turn out well. (Cf. Isa. 49:4, the servant says, “I have labored in vain.) This anxiety is the context for the concerns expressed in 4:12-20.
2. As in Philippians 1:3-11, Paul describes the narrative with its beginning, middle, and end.
 - a. The frame of the passage in 4:12, 20 indicates the tender relationship between Paul and the Galatians (at least from his side).
 - b. In 4:13-14, Paul describes the marvelous beginning of the churches of Galatia (Paul frequently refers to the beginning of the church (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18-2:5; Phil. 1:6; 1 Thess. 1:6-10). That is, these are all good beginnings. There was the outpouring of the Spirit (Gal. 3:3) and the change in the lives of the people.
 - c. In 4:15-18 Paul turns to the present tense. Some are trying to seduce the church, to take them to their side. Hence Paul does not know how the story will turn out.
 - d. In 4:19, Paul looks to the future. Whereas he is a father figure elsewhere (1 Thess. 2:12-13), here he is a mother in the pangs of childbirth, and the church is the fetus. Their ultimate goal is “that Christ be formed among you.”
 - i. Most translations render “until Christ be formed in you,” suggesting that he envisions individual formation. The passage is to be read as “until Christ is formed among you.” Formation is corporate.
 - ii. Whereas Paul most frequently speaks of the people “in Christ,” here he speaks of Christ taking shape in the church.
3. Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrate the qualities of formation (i.e., being slaves of one another, 5:13-14, putting away the works of the flesh and incorporating the fruit of the Spirit.
4. Hermeneutical orientation. We are the Galatians. Our church had a good beginning, but we are in the middle of the plot and uncertain how our story will turn out. Will Christ actually be formed among us? Can we reject the various seductions that will prevent us from reaching our goal? Is this church making progress toward being formed by Christ?
5. Homiletical Plot. A good story has a beginning, a middle and end. But it would not be a good story without a conflict that places the outcome in doubt.
 - a. We had a good beginning. We look back to the earlier change that was made in our lives.

- b. Our goal is for Christ to be “formed among us” –not just among heroic individuals, but among us as a community.
- c. But we aren’t there yet. We face the seductions (materialism, divided loyalties, etc.) that stand in our way.

Lecture Three: Ecclesiology and Justification

In Protestant thought, both justification by faith and baptism are commonly regarded as private experiences. Here we discover the corporate nature of justification and baptism.

Romans 6:1-11 and Justification by Faith

1. In Romans 6, the prepositions define the church in a significant way: Baptized *into* Christ (6:3), buried *with* Christ (6:4), crucified *with* Christ (6:6), and now living *in* Christ Jesus (6:11).
2. The larger context is Paul's declaration of justification by faith (chs. 1-4), which now redefines the people of God (cf. Rom. 4). That is, Abraham is the father of all who believe (ch. 4).
 - a. After speaking in the third person in 1:16-4:22, Paul changes to the first person plural in 4:23, and remains with the first person plural and second person plural until 8:39 (with a few exceptions; cf. 5:12-21; 7:7-25). That is, "we" and "you" plural point to the collective identity of the church. The church is composed of those who believe in the one who raised Jesus from the dead (4:24).
 - b. Rom. 6:1-11 is closely connected to 5:12-21, which describes the collective identity of the old humanity in which the destiny of one man determined the destiny of humankind, and the destiny of one man determined the fate of the new humanity. This is another way of saying that God's people are "in Christ."
 - c. In 6:1-11 Paul turns unexpectedly from faith (the topic of 1:16-5:11) to baptism—probably because baptism is the visible expression of faith and the demarcation between the old and new humanity.
 - d. He is speaking to the predominantly Gentile church.
3. The inclusion in 6:1, 11 indicates the major point of the passage and connects it to 5:12-21. As the new humanity described in 5:12-21, we do not "continue in sin" (6:1) and we are "dead to sin" (6:11). Hence we are dead to sin (6:2).
 - a. Paul speaks of those who would abuse the grace described in 5:12-21.
 - b. Baptism is the point of this death to sin, the entry into the new humanity (6:3-4).
 - c. Burial in baptism indicates irrevocability.
 - d. Buried into his death; i.e., laid in his grave.
 - e. The focal point of 6:1-11 is that the church is the community that shares the destiny of Christ: We died with him, and we will live with him (6:8).
 - f. Baptism is the point of justification by faith (6:8).
4. The focus of the passage is that the church is the new humanity that is dead to sin (baptism is a vivid illustration, but the main point is that the church is the new humanity that has left behind the sins of this culture).
 - a. In 6:12-21, Paul describes this new existence in new detail, describing how the church is a community that has overcome the passions.

- b. Compare 12:1-2 and its context: The community is not “conformed to this age.” He then describes the transformed existence.
 - c. While the claims made in 6:2, 11 are stated in the indicative to describe a present reality, this is also performative speech—an encouragement to make this new situation a continuing reality.
5. Sermon focus: The church is no ordinary community, but the new humanity composed of those who die with Christ and to the realm in which does not rule.
6. Homiletical Plot.
- a. We can choose our friends, but we are born into our families. We didn’t choose each other. We may ask what holds us together.
 - b. We come together because we are recipients of God’s grace, and we are united as recipients of God’s grace (i.e., we didn’t choose each other, but God chose us), to which we responded in baptism.
 - c. Families are often held together by a shared story (or stories). What brings us together is that we not only tell the story of the death, burial, and resurrection; we are united with each other because we are united with Christ.
 - d. To be united with Christ is to be a countercultural community of those who live as the new humanity, rejecting the values of this age.

Justification and Ethics (Rom. 15:1-13)

1. This passage concludes the argument of Romans. A letter that began with the announcement of the righteousness of God for all who believe concludes with the twofold challenge: a) We the strong ought to bear the burdens of the weak and not please ourselves (15:1); and b) Welcome one another (15:6).
2. The climax of Romans may be 14:1-15:13, which draws out the implications of God's grace for all.
 - a. The background of Romans (and Paul's entire mission) is probably the challenge of bringing Jews and Gentiles together in one community.
 - b. The Roman church may be composed of different house churches that represent different cultures.
 - c. Different cultures have "differences of opinion" (14:1); Paul wishes to overcome the natural tendency for the different cultures to isolate themselves from others.
 - d. "Welcome" (14:1; 15:7) means "welcome into your homes (i.e., house churches).
 - e. The major theme of chapters 1-11 is that God's righteousness is for *all* who have faith; i.e., Gentiles and Jews. But can they live together? How can people live together when they have major differences on important issues?
3. Paul summarizes Romans with two parallel arguments (15:1-6 and 15:7-13).
 - a. 15:1-6. In 15:1 Paul speaks to the strong (i.e., those who are not scrupulous on food laws), identifying himself with them and giving the instruction, "Bear the burdens of the weak and not please ourselves" (15:1) and not to please ourselves (15:2).
 - i. The reason: Christ did not please himself (15:3), followed by the citation of Scripture (15:3) and the comment about the encouragement of Scripture (15:4).
 - ii. In the midst of differences of opinion, Paul challenges the readers to "think the same thing" (15:5); i.e., we can be united and have differences of opinion.
 - iii. Unity is expressed in worship among those who have differences of opinion: "That together you may glorify God with one voice" (15:6).
 - b. 15:7-13. Paul reiterates the same argument, but introduces the ethnic dimension here.
 - i. We receive each other because Christ received us (15:7), becoming a servant to the nations (15:8-12).
 - ii. The chain of Scripture passages indicates that God has chosen to bring Jews and Gentiles together.
 - c. Romans 15:1-13 is parallel to Phil. 2:1-11: The story of Jesus' self-sacrifice shapes our behavior.
 - d. Sermon Focus: Those who understand justification by faith will "glorify God with one voice" in a community where different ethnic groups, cultures, and opinions come together.
4. Homiletical Plot.

- a. Everyone knows that communities remain most harmonious when everyone shares common background, expectations, and interests.
- b. Paul has attempted the impossible: To hold together people from different cultural backgrounds. Can this experiment work? Does it ever work?
- c. Despite their differences of opinion, they share the story of the one who did not please himself.
- d. With this common story, our goal is to reach across differences of opinion and “glorify God with one voice.”