

February 8th, 2015

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[0:00] As you know, I am Lebanese by birth. I grew up in Beirut, Lebanon, and came to this country as a student to study in college.

I remember a very early experience as a foreigner. I've been naturalized since then, and I've served two years in the army during the Vietnam era, so I am a naturalized citizen. But I remember when I first came, some of my friends wanted me to go to a baseball game. You realize that in Lebanon, all that we saw was soccer. Soccer was the only thing. And so if I went to a soccer game, I knew what to expect. If I went to a concert, I'd know what to expect. If I went to a library, I know what to expect. But they took me to a baseball game, and I had no idea what on earth was happening. I mean, I was completely lost. I mean, I had no idea.

What are the rules? What are they trying to accomplish? Why are they doing this? Why aren't they doing that? I had no idea. Some of you may feel the same way about church.

That is, you know what to expect in a library, you know what to expect in a movie theater, you know what to expect in a concert, you know what to expect in a class at school.

But what is it that happens in church? What is church all about? I also remember the first time I flew in an airplane from Lebanon to New York.

[1:48] I had read about New York and tried to learn something about the city, but as we flew over it, it dawned on me what New York was like.

So there is the Empire State Building, and there is the Statue of Liberty, and there is the Rockefeller Center. And in the airplane, because we were flying high, we could see the larger picture.

Not just one block, but the larger picture. So what I'm going to do this morning, Lord willing, is to give you the larger picture, a really big picture of what this church is about.

So if you take out your bulletins at the back, I wrote some things, so hopefully you'll be able to follow what I'm doing. Ask yourself, during a typical week, what different activities happen in this place?

I mean, there are people who shovel snow, there are people who unlock doors, there are people who empty garbage cans, there are people who cook food for Sunday morning, there are people who are greeters, people who take the offering, people who clean up at the end of the service.

[3:17] How many activities and tasks take place in a place like this during the week? Over 50 activities. Over 50.

And sometimes maybe one or two persons do most of the work, and sometimes if you're in a big church, you could hire a larger staff. But there are all these activities to do.

And of course, if I gave you a list of 50 things, most of us wouldn't be able to remember. They need to be somehow organized or reflect some sense of order to remember the 50, but just an arbitrary list of 50 people, it's hard to do, it's hard to remember.

So what has happened in the church is that as we have been reflecting on this for 2,000 years, several approaches have been done, and I want to walk you through some of them.

So if you say to yourself, I can't remember all 50 activities, is there some other way to organize the data? Yes, there is. One way of looking at it is to ask yourself, how does the New Testament describe the church?

[4:42] And there is no simple answer. There is a scholar by the name of Paul Meniere who did the research for that. He was paid by Yale University to do it.

And in a book called New Testament Images of the Church, he found out that the New Testament describes the church in 95 different ways.

95 different ways of describing the church. Well, I mean, if memorizing 50 is bad, memorizing 95 is a little bit more challenge. So he asked himself, can we organize, can we group things together, can we put them in different boxes?

And he came up with six very important ways of looking at the church. The church is the people of God. The church is the flock of God.

The church is the temple of God. The church are the called out ones, the saints of God. The church is the body of Christ.

[5:49] The church is the bride of Christ. So if I am thinking about the church and I think to myself, we are the body of Christ, then the next thing I should ask myself, well, what does that entail?

Well, a couple things for sure. That we are different. That there is diversity. We're not all ears. We're not all eyes.

I mean, be the weirdest looking body if you had nothing but eyes everywhere. You know, we're not all feet. We're not all hands. We reflect enormous diversity and that we need each other.

If you don't believe me, try to feed yourself through your ear this afternoon. You know, see how the cake goes down, if it will. We are diverse. So we look at these various images and we ask ourselves, what is the church and what activity goes with these metaphors and pictures of the church?

There was a teacher who was very, very influential. Almost everybody who studied with her became professors in some important Christian universities.

[7:07] Now, she had students who were all single and they were all studying Christian ministry and they were all preparing for the pastorate. So this mean teacher used to look at them and used to say, remember your wife.

Now, you can take that in one of two ways. One way it means if you are single, if you are single and you graduate and you think you're going to get a job as a single pastor, forget about it.

Unless you're married, nobody is going to hire you. So remember your wife meant better start dating, you know, improve your prayer life, ask God to bring Rebecca into your existence.

because if you're single, you're not going to be employed. Churches are not looking for single youth pastors or senior pastors or lead pastors.

Well, that's not what she meant with remember your wife. I'm so delighted that some of my friends here at this church who are either already pastors or pastors in training or hoping to become pastors, I'm so glad that you're all married.

[8:26] I mean, you know, that's one prayer list. I mean, I have to pray for you in some other way but not for that one at least. You have lightened my burden. But when she said, remember your wife, she really meant something else.

She said, she is saying, have a healthy church. Look, my doctor told me, either you lose weight or you're flirting with diabetes.

So the last few months, I have been trying to lose weight and I lost 31 pounds. I won't tell you how many I've regained but I have lost 31. And sometimes when I become ambitious or panic, I think to myself, the only thing I'm going to eat is cauliflower.

You know, eat 40 months, morning, lunch, noon, dinner, cauliflower. And then the doctor says, come on, Samir, we want balanced meal.

You know, cereal, meat, you know. So, he wants me to lose weight but do it in a balanced way, not just broccoli and cauliflower.

[9:47] She was saying to her students, if you're going to become pastors, then have a healthy church, not a distorted church, a church out of whack.

And the word that she used was wife. W-I-F-E. W, worship, I, instruction, F, fellowship, E, evangelism.

It is not healthy to go to a church that the only thing they ever do is evangelism. Now, I am all for evangelism. The Lord told us to do evangelism.

But he didn't say only evangelism and nothing else. That is not healthy. Or just fellowship. That's not healthy either. Or just Sunday school.

Or just worship. It is a combination of all four. And so she was saying to her students, have a healthy, balanced church.

[10:51] Not some distorted church with only one activity. So remember your wife. She was extremely influential. She was extremely influential. Her students are basically my generation and we have occupied every important position in Christian colleges. But somebody noticed that looking at wife that the idea of discipleship is missing.

So where does discipleship go? Well, you could try to find another word. You know, with five letters. Since I love languages, I came with a simple solution.

Make the word wife a verb rather than a noun. And then we have I wifed, you wifed, he, she, it wifed, you wifed, they wifed, we wifed.

And we've solved the problem. Regrettably, nobody follows my instructions. God hasn't given the gift of wisdom to the rest of people that he has given me.

[12:03] So nobody used wifed. And, consequently, people continue to argue in academic circles, in my circles.

What is discipleship? And some think, well, discipleship is a product. Make disciples, Jesus says. Some say, look, discipleship is a fifth activity.

She left it out, we put it back in. And that's what it is. It's an activity. I know how to praise, I know how to disciple. And then, some have thought that maybe discipleship is a style of doing things. I understand lectures, seminar discussions, paper presentations, skits. There are various ways of teaching, and maybe discipleship is a style of teaching.

Well, she never addressed that issue, but I did want to bring it up because discipleship is important. And if you want to know whether discipleship is one of the things those three or all three of them or et cetera, I have my wonderful friend, Billy Nye, who's an expert at these things and corner him and, but go gentle, you know.

[13:27] Go gentle. Another way to look at it is to ask yourself, when we do all these activities, who is the recipient of these activities?

Who is our target? And there are three targets. God, believers, and the world. God, believers, and the world.

So you can take something like wife and say, worship, where does that? To whom is worship directed at? Certainly not the world, heaven forbid. And certainly not us, we're not worshipping, we're not that conceited, you know, or grand, you know.

worship belongs to God. So, in trying to think of what we do, when it comes to God, there are two main activities.

The first one is to worship God. When we come to church, we are here to worship God. I was just so delighted, I was just so completely delighted that two of the songs, I don't mean only two, but at least two of them clearly, helped us think about praising God and worshiping him.

[14:46] that's just appropriate, that's the right thing to do. This is not a restaurant, this is a church. And we worship God.

The other major activity is the greatest commandment. What shall I do? Love the Lord your God with all of your heart. And Jesus says, if you love me, keep my commandments.

So when I come to church, the least minimum I expect is that I'll have a chance to worship God and I have a chance to say, Lord, I really love you, but you loved me first and you've, you know, you have raised me from the dead.

You have shown your light on my life. I really thank you for that and I'm grateful and I'm learning to love you. That is bare minimum. This is bare minimum.

Now, we can be mediocre. I was going to say McDonald's. I'm sorry. I don't mean to offend anybody. We can be mediocre or we can be good, but we need to love God and worship God.

[15:56] We need to love God. That is our primary activity toward God. So what does it, what is it for believers? Well, English translations use three different words in English, but they all mean the same thing.

To strengthen or to edify or to build up and these are all basically meaning the same thing.

When we get together, we are trying to edify each other, strengthen each other, build each other up in the faith and there are numerous places in the Bible that says so.

So how do we do that? How do we edify? What kind of activities go on in a church that are designed to build up each other, to strengthen each other?

Discipleship, clearly, fellowship, teaching, learning to lead holy lives? These are all activities that are aimed at believers.

[17:12] God doesn't need to be holy. I need to be holy. And so these activities are designed to help us grow so we can be healthy rather than sick and weak.

and what activity is aimed at the world. Traditionally, if you read about, you know, 100 years ago textbooks, they would say evangelism and missions and you evangelize in your own culture and you do missions in somebody else's culture.

So if I am witnessing to an Arab, because I'm an Arab, I am evangelizing, but if I am witnessing to a Chinese, since I'm not Chinese, I am doing missionary work.

Well, it may be helpful to think of it as outreach. We are reaching out to the world. Whether they speak our language or don't speak our language, it doesn't matter.

Whether we are using English or a different language, that doesn't matter. What matters is that we are reaching out to the world. and how do we reach out to the world?

[18:29] By proclaiming the gospel and by showing acts of kindness and mercy. Jesus says in Matthew 5 16 that we are the light of the world and they will see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven.

So it is worship, edification, and outreach. Let me try to make this manageable.

Here is a passage that does a good job summarizing what I'm saying. The reason I haven't stuck to one passage is because I've wanted you to see all of Chicago, all of the forests, not just one tree.

But here is a fabulous passage. It's really fabulous. It's fabulous. New Testament authors are just brilliant. You know, they're just fantastic.

I read it and I think, gosh, how can anybody be so smart? Well, the Holy Spirit, obviously. So, look at Hebrews 13, 15.

[19:43] If you have a pencil, jot down 13, 15 somewhere. And then 13, 16. So, in Hebrews 13, 15, through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of our lips that confess his name.

Let us offer to God the sacrifice of praise. If you're not sure what praise is, let me recommend a passage for you.

The last five psalms, Psalms 146, 147, 148, 149, and 150, those last five psalms, every one of them begins in Hebrew with praise the Lord, and every one of them ends with praise the Lord.

Five psalms, five times. And, of course, praise the Lord in Hebrew is hallelujah. So, it begins hallelujah, and then a discussion of praise, and then hallelujah.

Again, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah. So, in case you're wondering, oh, what is praise like? Here are five psalms to start thinking about that.

[21:14] And so, the author of Hebrews is saying, when it comes to God, let us offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that confess his name.

And then verse 16, and don't forget to do good and to share with others. In the first one, we're offering God. In the second one, verse 16, it is to do good and to share with others.

For with such sacrifices God is pleased. Notice he calls praise sacrifice, and he calls doing good and sharing with others sacrifice.

It's the same word. That is an act of sacrifice, and this is an act of sacrifice. But one is directed at God, the other one is directed at people.

So do good and share with others. I don't think that, I personally don't think that giving somebody a ride to O'Hare is a spiritual sacrifice.

[22:21] Maybe I don't think so, but God thinks so. God bless my next door neighbor. He has a huge snow blower.

I have poor muscles who are getting weaker as I lose more and more weight. And when it snows, he clears, everybody is on the block, including my driveway.

He is doing good. He is sharing his lawnmower, not lawnmower, snowblower, sorry, snowblower with me. He's being kind to me.

But I want you to think deeper about this passage. Think this. We praise God, that's an activity directed at God. We share and do good, and that's activity directed at people.

What is behind God and people? The two greatest commandments. Love God and love your neighbor.

[23:24] So maybe one way I show God that I love him is by praising him. And maybe one way I show my neighbor that I love him by sharing and doing good.

So we minister to God with praise. We minister to each other with encouragement, edification, building up, strengthening, and we minister to the world through our outreach, through our good acts, acts of mercy, and through the preaching of the gospel.

They will see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven. Well, but I'm keeping the best to the last. If I worship God and strengthen believers and reach out to the world, or I should say it more properly, if our church, if we as a body of believers, all of us together as believers, if we praise God, strengthen each other, and reach out to the world, what is the result of that?

Are these three ends in themselves, or are they means to still one more higher end? what? Well, they are.

I thought, first of all, I would check how many times that word is used in the Bible. I stopped after 400. I thought, you know, there's other things to do in my life, and my eyes are not that good, you know.

[25:10] I suspect it's about 600 times, 600 times in the Bible. Where do I begin? You know, shall I just read you all 600 verses and say, ah, there it is, it's in the Bible.

I can't do that, so I thought I would choose two passages that represent as a sample, rather than an exhaustive list, just as a sample.

Turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 10, verse 31. 1 Corinthians chapter 10, verse 31.

chapter 11. So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, whatever covers fairly everything, you know, so whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

Do it all for the glory of God. whatever I do, putting on a shirt, I should do it to the glory of God.

[26:31] Driving to my work, I do it to the glory of God. When I edify believers, I'm doing it for the glory of God.

And another place where you can remember that, the very, very, very last verse in the epistle to the Romans. Romans. So turn to the end of Paul's epistle to the Romans.

Look at the very last verse. And Paul ends his magisterial epistle with these words.

To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ. Amen. To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ.

Amen. Whatever we do, the ultimate, the very ultimate purpose of the church is to glorify God. It's not about us.

[27:42] Even though we are important, even though he loves us, even though he gave his son for the world, it is not about us. It is about him. And I think these are indicators of a healthy church.

I know that as one of the elders here, I am committed to a healthy church. I am committed to a church that reflects all of these things. And if you look at the four goals that we have, they're all there.

Fellowship, holy living, burden for the unsaved, prayer, these are all activities designed to help us grow and be healthy.

May God give us the grace and the strength and the wisdom to do it. I want to pray for you. You're my family. Lord, Father, thank you for these dear believers.

Thank you for those who belong to you. Thank you because you have saved us and showed us your great love. I pray, Lord, Father, that you help us as a church to walk in this way.

[28:56] May you give us all the wisdom, the godliness, the devotion, the desire to please you and to glorify your wonderful name. Thank you for the many people who are here who contribute to these tasks, some big and some small, but all important and all to your glory.

I ask this, Lord, with much gratitude, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.