

Church: Its expression in local church families

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[0 : 0 0] We're going to be reading from Ephesians chapter 2. So if you'd like to turn there from verse 19 onwards. In him, you are also being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

For this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles, assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation as I have written briefly.

You have heard, you have read this. You can perceive my insights into the mystery of Christ, which is not made known to the sons of men in other generations, as has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel, I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given to me by the working of his power.

To him, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

[1 : 5 4] This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus, our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory, he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have the strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, and that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever.

Amen. Amen. Everyone, and especially to those on Zoom, who can't be with us but may well like to be with us.

Okay, I don't think anybody here would have any trouble, you know, just warming to and identifying with that beautiful picture of the heavenly church that we saw last week in Hebrews 12, which Martin started with this morning from Revelation.

[3 : 3 6] It just draws us in, doesn't it? It's beautiful. We long for it. But the question this morning sort of bounces against that. How important is the local church?

And that's perhaps an abstract question, so let me try and break it down a little bit into two smaller questions and give you a couple of scenarios. So here's a very common scenario today.

We'll see what you think about it. Is it acceptable for a Christian to say yes to a relationship with Jesus, but no to commitment to a local church like ours?

Now, I would suggest around Newcastle and Australia, there's perhaps thousands of people who would call themselves Christians who say exactly that.

I've said yes to Jesus, but no to the church. Not interested. They reject any serious involvement in or commitment to a local church family.

[4 : 41] Now, having asked that question, then we have to ask a further question that sort of is prompted by that first question, and that is this.

Is it actually possible for a Christian to grow into spiritual maturity? And by spiritual maturity, I mean grow in obedience and delight in God.

Is it possible to grow into spiritual maturity without being seriously committed to the community of Christ's people in a local church?

Well, again, lots of people would say absolutely. So I turn the question a little bit.

Is there an alternative pathway to honoring God as my father, and for me as a believer, growing in his love as an adopted child, growing into his likeness?

[5 : 45] Is there an alternative pathway to doing all that other than community of his people, the local church? As I say, many believers, I know some of them, many believers say, well, yes.

And then their answer goes something like this. You see, I'm very much aware of being part of what they call the universal church. That is, I'm loosely connected to all believers everywhere in this world, but I don't feel any need to be particularly connected to any group of believers in the local church, such as this.

And often that comes with a whole practice then. So they may well interact selectively with other believers of their choice.

So in other words, they just hang out with other Christians that they like, get on easily with. And that's their fellowship. And oftentimes then, in today's society, they'll download sermons, the best speakers in the world, podcasts.

They'll download music from YouTube, and they'll sing along with the best produced songs imaginable. And all of that, they say, well, that's part of me being committed to the universal church.

[7 : 12] Last week, I began the series by suggesting that many Christians appear very confused in their thinking about church. And I said last week that in part that confusion comes from thinking individualistically, as our culture has taught us well.

So we think about God's salvation primarily in terms of personal benefit. You know, I've been saved. I've been renewed. I've got a place in heaven. Even though the New Testament predominantly speaks in plural, plural nouns, collective, and focuses on community.

More confusion then comes from our own experience. And I spoke about that a little bit last week as well. Our understanding of God's heavenly church, as I've already said, that picture of being gathered in heaven and consisting of all God's saved people throughout eternity, gathered around Jesus, pictured in perfect unity and praise.

It's just a warm, lovely picture, isn't it? But it's so very much at odds oftentimes with how we experience the local church, which is, in contrast, so often ugly, hurtful, and perhaps some would say, not everybody, totally unappealing.

And I think that's caused many Christians to be rather scathing of the local church in general and devote with their feet by withdrawing from meaningful involvement in and commitment to the local church family.

[8 : 54] Now, as somebody pointed out last week, of course, not everybody has a negative experience of church. As some of you here might have always just been happily involved in a church somewhere.

You might well say, well, I recognize there's no perfect church this side of heaven, and my experience of churching has been wonderful. I quite enjoy going to church. I get quite involved. And that might well be true for some.

But you can do all that and still not actually know, according to God's word, the importance of the local church in God's scheme of things. So church then becomes, perhaps, it's a nice, pleasant thing, but it becomes a little bit like a club.

So a club's where you go because you get similar interests, and you go with other like-minded people, and you enjoy the time. You might be involved and committed to do certain things. But, you know, don't understand the importance of the local church in God's purposes.

And more than that, perhaps you don't even think about what, therefore, a local church family ought to look like, and ought to do, and how it ought to shape itself. So this morning I want to jump into the word and see the link between God's heavenly church, or salvation community, and local churches, local salvation communities.

[10 : 21] And I'm going to do that as spelled out in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Now, it should be noted just as we jump into this, because I'm going to walk through a lot of passages without doing any of them in detail.

It's an easy way for a pastor to do that, because you avoid all the difficult stuff. But I just want to get a scan for what Paul's saying, because the thing to note here, that when Paul speaks mostly, or when he writes, mostly he's writing in the plural.

So he's talking about you plural, or to use the vernacular, use. Use or this, use or that. Yeah. And it's a very good word when it comes to, I don't like it normally, but it's a very good word when it comes to describing church.

Paul's always thinking plural. Use. Use. So what does Paul say? Well, in Ephesians 1, Paul's point is, the local church is the means by which God's purpose is achieved in his world.

If you look at verses 22 and 23 of Ephesians 1, it talks about God's purpose is to bring everything under the headship of Christ.

[11 : 33] He put all things under his feet, that's under Christ's feet, and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body. The fullness of him who fills all.

That's quite an extravagant statement about the relationship of Christ in the church. In other words, everything God has done or will do in his world has been for the benefit of his church.

Resulting, if you look at verse 12, resulting in God securing the glory, honor, and praise that he deserves. More precisely, even, everything God has done in this world has been part of his single purpose to secure the salvation of his people in and through Jesus.

Jesus, therefore, as it says, is the head of God's new salvation community, in which his saved people, Ephesians 1, verse 3, and following, enjoys every spiritual blessing imaginable.

That's what God has been doing in history. And that's what it's expressed in the local church. Every spiritual blessing, new hope, new inheritance together in Christ as a salvation community.

[13 : 10] And together, responding in a way that ascribes glory and praise to God for his grace and mercy. Ephesians 2 continues.

Ephesians 2 says that being a local church or salvation community actually defines us as Christians. It's not too much to say, and Paul uses the language in Ephesians chapter 4, it's not too much to say that being the church is our calling.

It defines us. Look at Ephesians 2, verses 4 to 10. Again, I'm not going to have time to read it all, but probably a familiar passage for most of you anyway. Talks there about God being rich in mercy because of the great love which he loved us.

Even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with him. And verse 6, raised us up with him, seated us with him, all of this is together, together made alive, together seated in the heavenly realms, together saved from our sin.

And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God. We're joined to Jesus in every way, having to be saved by him.

[14 : 34] And what that means is that coincidentally, we are, no, not coincidentally, that's the wrong word, simultaneously, we are joined with all other died-for people.

That's the together language. We are saved as individuals, as I said last week, but we're always saved into community. It's a new community, and it's defined by our spiritual inheritance in Christ.

Together, we have received God's grace and mercy. Together, we have been made alive in Christ. Together, we are guaranteed heaven. And if you look at verses 11 through to 21 in Ephesians, continuing on through that chapter, together, we have a new identity in Christ.

It talks there about how Jesus breaks down the old dividing wall of hostility and calls it a radical new humanity.

The church is actually a new humanity. Old, sin-driven divisions have been replaced with radically new family or community.

[15 : 56] Pictured, verse 19 through to 21, as a building, a temple, a beautiful temple being built together in Jesus and by Jesus and for Jesus.

A temple that's shaped by God's Holy Spirit. And again, there is the commonality, the togetherness. Each of us saved by Christ, each of us has the Holy Spirit within us, renewing us.

And that gives us a common bond, a common inheritance, a common salvation and a common identity in community.

And in verses 21 and 22, it says, in him the whole structure being joined together grows, present tense, into a holy temple in the Lord.

In him, you also are being built together, perfect passive into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. In some senses, as we read through Ephesians, the church, that building is already completed because of what Christ has done.

[17 : 05] He has, he's died for people gathered in heaven. But in another sense, it's still ongoing, it's being built, which has got to be a reference to this local church that Paul's writing to at Ephesus.

And all of this points to our calling in chapter 3, verse 10. So what is our calling? So that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

This was according to the eternal purpose that he realized in Christ Jesus, our Lord. What's our calling as the church together?

Well, it's to bear testimony to God's goodness, God's wisdom, God's power in salvation. How do we bear testimony to that?

In and through this died for salvation community. As people are changed from the inside out by the power of the gospel and demonstrate that change both to one another and to the wider community, we see God's power, God's wisdom.

[18 : 32] Who would have thought to do it like that? Again, it must refer to the local church at Ephesus that Paul's writing to because the world can't yet see the heavenly church.

So this is meant to be seen through a local church like us. That's a big calling, isn't it?

And that's consistent with the rest of Paul's letter which records his prayer and practical encouragement for the believers in Ephesus. So what's his prayer directed towards?

He's really saying that he wants the Lord to help them be the people they need to be as believers that will actually bring people to see the glory of God and the wisdom of God and the power of God.

He wants them to be this renewed gospel community that they actually are. So the watching world might sit up and take notice and think, wow, there's something different about that bunch of people.

[19 : 54] Ephesians 4 through to 6 local churches are the context in which Christians are nurtured to maturity. If you look at verse 1 of chapter 4 Paul says, I therefore a prisoner for the Lord urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you've been called.

What's that calling? Well I take it that refers back to the church which he's been saying right through chapters 1, 2, and 3. It refers back to your identity in Christ. Walk worthy of who you are in Christ.

And that's a together picture. We're to reflect as the following verses then show and I don't have time to read them or get into them but you can read them for yourself sometime.

As the following verses spell out we're to reflect the character and attitudes of Jesus to one another in community. verses 15 and 16 of chapter 4 it's something we need to nurture.

It's something we need to work towards. It doesn't just happen automatically. It says verse 15 rather speaking the truth in love so we're not to be tossed about we're not to be hither and just all over the place we've got a pathway to follow and that pathway is speaking the truth in love we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head into Christ and the metaphor changes from a temple now to a body from whom the whole body joined there we go the togetherness held together by every joint with which it is equipped when every part is working properly makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love we're to be the body of Christ we're to be a functioning body of Christ not a dysfunctional body of Christ and that functioning body of Christ will be marked as we're held together by speaking the truth in love and being controlled by the input from our head the Lord Jesus

[22 : 12] Christ through his word and through his spirit again it's a very strong picture it's in community that we show the old divisions the old sin driven divisions are now gone and we operate to a different drum beat not division but unity is our first reference point in Christ now let me just sum up to this point given the importance that God has given the local church in his salvation purpose then I think it's safe to say this and I say this to you this morning and I'll take full responsibility so talk to me afterwards if you think I'm overstating it it must be said I think that believers who refuse to join other believers in local churches are actually disobeying God they're actually rejecting his calling and they're robbing him of the glory he desires through his church and robbing themselves of the opportunity to grow into spiritual maturity now am I saying that a Christian outside a local church can't function can't read can't learn things in the bible absolutely not patently that would be stupid to say that because we can all point to people who do say that but I'm talking about what God would have us be doing and what is actually possible and necessary to do in the local church community which we can't do individually and in isolation and that's

I think behind the appeal of another well known verse in Hebrews chapter 10 verse 24 and 25 where the writer to Hebrews says to the Christians there look do not neglect to meet together is it just because well come on guys I'm all into habits here this is what we normally do on Sunday morning I won't know what to do to fill in that hour if we don't meet together no that's not what he's about at all he's saying do not neglect to meet together why so we might stir one another up to love there it is again and good deeds showing the changing power of the gospel the wisdom of God the glory of God okay let's take another step forward then how does the heavenly church which is beautiful and extreme and its expression in local churches then fit together practically so at one point as Martin already said so I thought

I might not even have to preach this morning Martin was doing it really well at one point they completely overlap that is a local church properly formed around Christ and his word is a microcosm of the heavenly church of the heavenly church as Martin said it is a foretaste of heaven as our sermon series is called it is properly described as the church of God we are properly described here this morning one local church expression among countless thousands around the world but we are properly described here this morning as the church of God the church of Christ not just part of the church of Christ although that's also true but we are the church of Christ church of God gathered here in this building at Glendale interestingly when Paul addresses the rights to the

Corinthian church that's how he starts off now remember the Corinthian church it was about as full of division and bitterness and dysfunction as is imaginable but Paul's opening words are he addresses them as saints the church in Corinth for all their imperfections for all their sin they are the church in Corinth and indeed when you read through Corinthians you'll find that the reason Paul starts with that is because that is his basis of appeal for renewed behaviour renewed thinking in that community because they are the church you've got to start acting like it and stop acting like unbelievers is Paul's argument through Corinthians so at one point they completely overlap but another point then there's significant differences between the heavenly church and the local church and you probably don't need me to point them out although

I was particularly hoping that the little one who said that they come to listen to God on Sunday might have been referring to me but just leave me in my little bubble of hope alright please don't blow me down on that one yeah there's significant differences the heavenly church is gathered by God and is perfect and complete in every way sinless totally secure but on the other hand and I struggle to work out which words use here so I'm going with this on the other hand local churches are human communities Martin Luther wrote that the face of the local church is the face of the sinner and what he was saying there is that our local church will always be a mixed bag it will be a mixed bag of saved and unsaved people even though that won't always be obvious and those who are saved and unsaved won't always be the ones we think are the unsaved and the saved ones

[28 : 32] Christ tells us that in different points so it's always a mixed bag of saved and unsaved but it's also always going to be a mixed bag of good and bad motivations in whatever we do together good and bad attitudes and behaviours you don't need me to tell you that that's as plain as the nose on my face and that's plain the local church therefore is like God's building site and like all building sites it can be ugly and messy to observe and chaotic but here's where so many Christians get it wrong they harshly criticise the local church as a building site because of present imperfections but forget that it is a building site and that one day out of the ugliness and the messiness and the chaos will arise a beautiful building

Richard Baxter one of the Puritans described the local church as being like a field hospital and he said Christians are patients and they're in the hospital because they need what the hospital can offer them they need the ongoing treatment that God's word and God's spirit and God's people offer as they're being renewed from the inside out and Baxter goes on to say then well how sad is it that when one patient who's in hospital for this particular illness then criticizes all the other patients who happen to be in the hospital for the same illness and they said well I'm not going to stay in this hospital with all you other sick people it's a bit ironic isn't it when we should all be supplying the balm of the gospel the balm of God's word the medication that Jesus has freely made available and which we so desperately need and desperately need one another to apply it so the little community is formed by the gospel and for the gospel and that must be the starting point for working out what a true local church family will look like since it's to be a colony of heaven and earth

I'll be saying more about this next week when we look at the agenda for the local church but just some summary points here now so the local church formed by the gospel and for the gospel therefore must be an integrated functioning body that's the building integrated is the building the interdependency functioning body with Christ demonstrably as head of that body the dominant picture of the local church throughout the new testament is that of a body many parts forming an organic whole and Christ as the head of that body and that's what we saw in chapter these Ephesians verses and we see it again in chapter 4 verses 12 to 16 that I referred to before and what that means is this if we're going to be the local church in a proper expression then we always need to be word centered we always need to be

Christ centered because Christ is the head and it's through his word that he brings renewal and that means we therefore have to be spirit dependent because the spirit enlivens us through the word and it's the spirit that enables us to participate meaningfully in this local body of Christ and it means that we need to strive to maintain a sense of being one family an integrated whole that's what a body is and that needs to happen not just when we meet together on Sunday morning as we're doing now but it also needs to be front and center in our mind as we meet together in a whole range of subunits during the week whether it's small group or kids club or play group or peer based groups or age specific learning groups interest groups and so on and so forth we get so many subunits each one of those subunits needs to be viewed as part of the integrated whole it must always be seen as being beneficial in so much as they help us become part of the integrated whole not that they become little churches in their own right and we must always show unity and interdependence in the context of diversity now this is a really challenging one for us as

Christians I think because we always start or tendency rather is to start from the point of view of difference and then wonder how we can manage or conjure up unity but if I'm understanding Ephesians chapter 4 verses 1 to 6 right then our starting point is wrong we need to be starting from a point of view of unity in Christ by the spirit and then work out given that unity what is the freedom to express diversity it's an entirely different picture and it will give an entirely different feel to a group like ours so we can express diversity in age that's a lovely diversity to be expressed in an interdependent way young need the life experience of us old geezers and us old geezers need the energy and the kick up well the encouragement shall I say of the younger people

[35 : 15] I'm going to recover that for a minute not sure where that came from I've lost my place in my notes as well just move on we see that difference in approach when Christians then just up and leave I don't like that person in how they're expressing their diversity so I'm out of here we so easily express our differences through criticism but we so easily forget to express our unity through selfless participation in a church family like this for the good of all it's not gospel shaped at all

I could take you to lots of churches where the community is built around similar likes and dislikes or similar needs similar demographics similar stage in life so you have congregations where they're just teenagers you've got congregations where you have young families and you've got congregations where they're old people and it's just based around lovely enjoyable community but it's not gospel shaped in that sense or it may not be gospel shaped well I want to say to you this morning that God is not happy just to have entertaining engaging meetings and music which are well attended and well enjoyed he wants us as a local salvation community to show the life changing power of the gospel in diversity in our life and relationships within and beyond the church family so wrapping up going back to the questions I started with

I suggested this morning that the answer to the questions I posed at the very start has to be a very loud and definite no a believer a believer cannot as I understand the scripture be in Christ and speak of God as my father and consider myself to be an adopted child into his family and at the same time reject God's family or sit loose to it and remember that family was assembled at great cost it's a died for family and again I would say a believer cannot expect to become spiritually mature in isolation even when listening to the best sermons and the best songs from around the world because there's an aspect of that that comes only by rubbing shoulders with other sinful people which is our opportunity to learn to act towards others in grace to know ourselves and to be gracious and loving and what else does that say except the glory of the

Lord changing us from the inside out the context in which we struggle and it is a struggle and we strive to grow up into maturity or become more and more like Christ must be in community because that's where it makes some sense to be challenged to speak the truth and love to express and maintain that unity and richness which we have in Christ which is constantly under threat because of our sinfulness God has brought us into a died for salvation community that is local churches as I said from Hebrews that we might stir one another up to love and good deeds two more sentences so many believers ask this question where does God and the church fit into my life or work or leisure but I think the real question ought to be how is my life fitted into

God's local church his central purpose for salvation the defining point of my existence as a believer the point of my identity in Christ my calling the context in which I become mature in him and thereby give him the glory he deserves so the question needs to be how is my life fitted into that very simply Christ calls you and me individually and together to have the same passion for his died for community in local expression as he has and to overdose million apologise last last and the how isivoliar to■■■■ who the opposite going as ou or