

Church: God's agenda for local churches

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[0 : 00] Good morning, church family. We're going to now read God's Word together. There's two passages we're reading from today. So first of all, we're reading 2 Corinthians chapter 3, the first six verses.

And then after that, we're turning to Ephesians chapter 4 and reading the first 16 verses. So let's go to 2 Corinthians chapter 3 first. Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?

Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts to be known and read by all.

And you show that you are a letter from Christ, delivered by us, written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God. Not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ towards God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the spirit.

[1 : 15] For the letter kills, but the spirit gives life. Let's turn over to Ephesians chapter 4 now. So chapter 4, starting at verse 1. I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore, it says, When he ascended on high, he led a host of captives and he gave gifts to men.

In saying he ascended, what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

[2 : 57] Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

This is the word of the Lord. Well, good morning, everyone, and good morning to those on Zoom with us this morning. I'm one of the pastors here.

My name's David. We're four weeks into exploring God's vision for his church in our teaching series called Church, A Foretaste of Heaven.

A pretty ambitious title, is it not? Church, A Foretaste of Heaven. And in four weeks, we've explored how God's church is so precious to him.

It's the focus of his work in the world. It's the community in which saved individuals come to spiritual maturity.

[4 : 14] So the question then that's coming along with us each week is, does your vision of the value and purpose of our local church family, this part that you're here of this morning, does your vision of us align with God's vision?

It's quite a challenge for us, really, to think about that. Last week, we started to explore God's agenda for local churches.

And we said that to be relevant and contemporary, and that's what we hear all the time these days, people want to be relevant and contemporary. Well, to be relevant and contemporary, we need to follow God's agenda for the church, rather than what society says we should be doing as a church, or perhaps even what our own personal preferences for doing, for what we should be doing as a church might be.

Or, in the case of some churches, it would seem like their agenda is just entirely pragmatic. That is, their goal is to get the crowds in, and so they do whatever works.

Last week, I suggest there were two big-picture principles that governs the agenda, God's agenda for the church. The first one, be who you are, and we looked at that last week. Our primary agenda is to be who we are.

[5 : 52] That is, to be the living temple, living stones in the living temple of the living Lord. And the other picture we looked at last week was to be the pillar and foundation of the truth of God's word.

This morning, we consider the second principle, which I'm just calling this morning, do what our specialist tools equip us to do.

Now, if you enter the workspace of a carpenter, or a plumber, or an engineer, or a medical researcher, or an author, or whatever else, enter their workspace, and you will observe the tools of trade.

And the tools of trade make their agenda obvious. Specialist workers need specialist tools, which in turn reflect the specialist nature of their work.

And on top of that, then, a good boss will always ensure that his workers have the best tools for the job. The best, we hear today talk about workplaces that are fit for purpose.

[7 : 11] So that, with the tools provided, and the workplace environment, then the boss can be sure that his business is going to thrive, be successful, and achieve that which he wants his business to achieve.

Well, I'm going to say to you this morning that Christ provides us with the very specialist tools we need for our very specialist task, and a workplace fit for purpose.

So our agenda, in a sense, one sense is really quite simple, that is, to be skilled in using our specialist spiritual tools for our specialist spiritual task.

I won't say that again, because I wasn't even sure we'd get it out once, let alone saying it multiple times, so you'll have to remember it from now on. We start in 2 Corinthians 10, verses 3-5.

If you've got time, if you quickly look it up, it'll be good, otherwise just listen up, I'm going to read it to you. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10, verse 3, For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh.

[8 : 25] For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but have divine power to demolish and destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments, and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.

The background story to these verses in the church at Corinth was that there were powerful individuals determined to exert their influence on the church and take the church down a pathway of their choosing.

And it was quite a divergent pathway to what Paul had urged on them when he came to them speaking nothing but the gospel of Jesus crucified.

And so their strategy was to ridicule Paul's Christ-centered teaching and to mock Paul's character, Christ-centered character, while promoting an alternative gospel and an alternative set of leadership characteristics within the church.

And Paul accuses them, it's a pretty harsh accusation, Paul accuses them of being peddlers of God's word, using the tools of the world. Those tools, if you read through the letter of Corinthians, especially to Corinthians, those tools were the tools of self-promotion, the tools of manipulation, pressure, designed to control people and to get the people in the church to do what these leaders wanted them to do, these powerful individuals wanted them to do.

[10 : 12] They were running their own agenda. In sharp contrast, then, Paul speaks of the specialist spiritual weapons or spiritual tools provided by the Lord and interestingly, these tools are not designed to control or manipulate, but they're designed to get inside and change.

Demolishing hardened unbelief and bringing people to God in new attitudes and obedience. What are these tools or weapons?

Well, you only need to read through 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians and you'll see Paul over and over and over again going back to his primary weapon as the weapon of the gospel, the weapon of God's word.

The tool of God's word supernaturally applied by God's Holy Spirit. Now, if you look at 2 Corinthians 3 with me, if you've got your finger in there, 2 Corinthians 3 is just one example throughout Paul's ministry of Paul's repeated emphasis on God's word and being applied by God's spirit and the outcome of it.

So, in these verses, Paul's really saying, look, at the end of the day, God's word applied by God's Holy Spirit is the only tool capable of producing real change, internal change, a change that brings and is sourced in life, new life, new obedience, new orientation.

[12 : 00] How does that work? Well, again, the background context, I don't have time to get into it, but it's primarily by regeneration. That is, the word brings people alive to start with.

And then, God's spirit applies that word in a process of total renovation from the inside out. At the same point, it's made in the letter to Hebrews, Hebrews 4, verse 12.

Let me read that to you as well when I find it. Hebrews 4, verse 12. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

What a weapon Jesus has provided for our specialist task, a task that pushes us not to control people from the outside, but to see them changed from the inside.

And God's word is that weapon able to slice, and that's the picture. It's a very gruesome picture, but it's able to slice through the hardest of rebellion, getting into our innermost being, and it opens us up in our innermost being to the light of the gospel.

[13 : 37] And then totally reformats us from our innermost being out to a new love for the Lord. So what does all that mean for Paul?

What does that look like on the ground for Paul? Well, very simple, really. Paul was busy doing what he was equipped to do with the tools he was equipped with.

That is, he was busy speaking the gospel. He was busy doing what the Lord had equipped him to do, knowing also that the Spirit of the living Lord will do what only he can do, and that is, take that spoken word and make it real, make it new in the lives of those to whom it was spoken.

Paul does what he's equipped to do, and is comfortable leaving the Holy Spirit to do what only the Holy Spirit can do, give new life and relationship with God.

Then there's the tool of prayer, which Paul repeatedly urges believers to take up and utilize, to be urgent in.

[14 : 52] Why? Because Paul believed and knew it to be a very powerful, effective tool provided by the Lord Jesus, provided by the Lord, for our use in this spiritual warfare.

2 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 11. The context of 2 Corinthians chapter 1 is Paul just rehearsing some of the struggles and the suffering and the terrible situations he's been through as an ambassador for Jesus.

And it's interesting, and you can go and read for yourself again, I don't have time to take it all apart, but Paul's really saying this, he said, look, it's prayer that's got me through this.

Your prayer, he says to those he's writing, the Corinthians, and the prayer of many other believers, and my prayer. His prayer that was instrumental in enabling Paul to not only survive the daily struggles, but to thrive and keep going in his proclamation of the gospel through daily struggles.

Now friends, across the breadth of scripture, we just get this common refrain, the Lord loves to hear his people pray.

[16 : 19] The Lord loves to hear his people pray because prayer is simply the expression of our helplessness, the pouring out of our helplessness before the Lord, the pouring out of our sense of total dependence upon him.

and in prayer, we're asking the Lord to give us those things which he has already determined to give us, but as a father, delights to hear his children ask for them anyway.

Prayer works. The Lord builds his kingdom through the prayers of his people. We're told that repeatedly in the pages of the Bible.

And in 2 Corinthians 3, the passage we're just looking at there, prayer results in far more than that. It actually results in more glory and praise for the Lord.

Paul says that. Verse 6 there. So, you also must help us by prayer so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

[17 : 29] it starts a cycle. The more people pray, the more they see their prayers answered and the gospel advanced, Christ honored.

The more they pray in thankfulness and so on and so forth. Friends, our God-given task reflected in our God-given tools are designed to affect change from the inside out.

Radically changing attitudes, desires, understanding, radically moving people from rebellion against God from a stronghold of autonomy to faithful living under his rule.

Now, who's up for that task? Well, the answer is every believer providing we're skilled and equipped with the tools that the Lord has provided because the tools are fit for purpose.

We do what the Lord asks us to do, speak the gospel and pray and trust that the Lord will do what only he can do, is make that word alive in the depths of a person's heart and mind.

[19 : 04] Now, that's a fairly simple agenda in lots of ways, isn't it? Now, there's lots of other complications as you go along the road, but that's not too hard to understand. And yet, the church seems to have found it really, really hard to hang on to and be committed to.

See, we look around our world and there are many, many organisations who are doing great things, but a majority of them have to be by virtue doing limited things, because the things they do, while great, are from the outside in.

So, there are organisations who can draft new laws to correct injustices, they can bring in new schedules to address corruption, they can educate people in farming techniques, they can come up with new processes to tackle hunger and poverty, and so on and so forth.

But that will only ever be limited in its effect. By contrast, God's church is to pursue real change, lasting change, deep change from the inside out.

A change that will actually, as Jesus said, dismantle the kingdom of evil, dismantle the self-interested attitudes and thinking of individuals and governments. And that will only be dismantled with the word of God, prayerfully spoken into our world.

[20 : 42] Now, hear me very carefully at this point, and this sweeps over the last three or four weeks. Individual Christians may well choose to be involved directly in social action or in any number of organizations that are doing good things to change the structure in society and stuff like that.

That's perfectly legitimate for any believer to be in. But I'm saying this morning, it's not primarily the role of the church. The role of the church is to have a clear contemporary expression of God's living word, calling people back to God, praying for inside-out change, and modeling the reality of that gospel to change people powerfully in the way we live and treat each other.

God's agenda is that when we see God's agenda like that, it doesn't seem as exciting as political activism.

Indeed, it may not even seem to achieve as much as political activism. Involvement in a foreign aid program can take you to exotic places and introduce you to a range of wonderful people.

But if you look through history and look through history fairly, then you'll see that it's actually been when the word of God has been taken to people, that lasting and substantial change has been brought into God's world.

[22 : 26] world. All right, second point I want to make this morning then is that the church family is God's fit-for-purpose base for his work in the world.

I've already hinted at it, but business operators commonly speak of the importance of having a workspace that is fit-for-purpose, meaning it's designed to maximize the success of a particular business venture.

Well, I want you to hear this morning that I'm saying this local church family is God's fit-for-purpose workspace for building his kingdom and his glory.

Yep, with all our flaws, with all our failings, with all our insufficiencies, God intends us and has designed us to be a fit-for-purpose workspace.

It's quite incredible, really, just to say it like that and think about it for a moment. And it's the base for nurturing the family in the home.

[23 : 39] Ephesians 4 is where we go to next. We've dipped into that a couple of times over the last few weeks. Ephesians 4, 1-16. Ephesians 4, 1-16. Ephesians 4, 1-16.

It picks up there the whole idea of us being the body, identity, we looked at two weeks ago. Our identity, our calling, chapter 4, verse 1, is to demonstrate the wisdom of God's salvation purpose worked out in and through local church families like ours here this morning.

Ephesians 4 gives the detail of that calling. And essentially, the detail is that we are to be a gospel revealing community.

A gospel revealing community. gospel is God's good news, as Martin had it up on the screen for us this morning. It's God's word.

It's God's good news word of forgiveness and new relationship with God in and through Christ. Ongoing renewal from the inside out by the power of the Holy Spirit living within us.

[24 : 56] So therefore, we ought to be, as I said last week, word, focused. Gospel focused. Since every part of God's written word, every part of the Bible is either speaking about Jesus in the future or reflecting on Jesus now that he's come.

We need to be word focused. And we are a gospel revealing community in that you can't really see the gospel except in the people that it's taken hold of and changed.

So we're a gospel revealing community in that we make the reality of the changing power of the gospel visible in our world, visible in this community, in our local church family here.

community. And that community has a particular shape in its visibility. It's to be marked by holiness. We've seen that in past weeks.

Striving to be like our Lord and Savior because he is holy. It's to be marked by unity. Reflecting, again, Ephesians, reflecting the fact that Jesus died to remove old sin-driven walls of hostility, divisions, and create one new humanity that would live gladly and consistently under the Lord's rule.

[26 : 31] A community that would be marked by love, reflecting the generous, committed, self-sacrificing love we received from God in Jesus. It's there in Ephesians 4.

We are to be a gospel revealing community. My friends, since the local church is the body of Christ, brought together in such diversity, Ephesians 4, and at such great cost, Ephesians 1, then how can we possibly live as disembodied Christians, sitting loose to his died for community?

Spiritual health ought to be our primary desire. And this is the compelling, consistent display of being a gospel revealing community.

That is our agenda. Mark Davie, in one of his books, says that it's very easy to build community without the gospel.

If we build community without the gospel, or build community shaped by things other than the gospel, and you can go and see churches where those communities are built by a sense of shared need, a sense of common cause as we look at the world, a sense of common desire of what we want the world to look like.

[28 : 24] If we have a community built on things other than the gospel, then we're actually in serious spiritual ill health and in great danger.

We need to make sure that our community here is built on the gospel, shaped by the gospel, exists by the gospel and for the gospel. And likewise, if we claim to believe the gospel without overflowing into a gospel revealing community, then we're also very unwell spiritually and in great danger.

So it's the base for nurturing the family in the home, but it's also the base for equipping family members to work from home.

We're to be a gospel revealing community, but then at the same time we're to be a gospel gossiping community. We've got a sort of double identity.

The Lord calls us out of the world. This is John Stott's line. The Lord calls us out of the world, renews us, and then sends us back into the world to be gospel gossipers.

[29 : 56] Again, if you look at Ephesians 4, 9 and 10, a couple of very difficult verses in there, but I think I just want to lift out one thing because it's something similar to the thoughts in Ephesians 1.

That is that he might fill all things. In other words, however you think of our world or God's action within the world, everything according to God's purpose is to be filled by Christ.

To be filled with the Lordship of Christ. This local church here, 50 years now, exists by the gospel and it exists for the gospel because God's word is a missionary word.

A missionary word is the way by which God confronts people in his world and continues to grow his kingdom, continues to bring people into his died-for community, his body, the church.

And so again, a proper understanding and experience of the gospel of salvation will overflow naturally into proclaiming the good news of Jesus to others.

[31 : 18] In other words, if we understand the gospel properly, then naturally we will be a missional community. We will have a missional outlook.

And through that, we'll have an incredible impact on the world at large. Paul's own ministry and teaching bears this out in full.

Recently, I've been reading, rereading actually, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. It's a wonderful letter. I'm seeing stuff in it I've never seen before.

I'm not sure how I read it before, but maybe that's the nature of God's spirit working. But it's so chock-a-block full of gospel community, gospel-revealing community, gospel-gossiping community.

Because in there we see Paul's missional heart and we see its impact on a wide range of people. And he says in 1 Corinthians 2 that he didn't just share the bare words of the gospel.

[32 : 27] He did that. But his missional heart overflowed that he shared his life to go alongside those words. And that had a tremendous impact on those people in Thessalonica.

Because when they became Christians, they then started to model what Paul had modeled to them as they understood the gospel. And they also then became missional to a wide range of communities beyond their reaches.

friends, our local church here is the basis to work from home.

That is, we ought to be naturally, not by dint of being flogged out of guilt, but we ought to be naturally a missional community.

We ought to be overflowing as we gossip the gospel wherever we find ourselves. Now, that brings us into the fraught issue of evangelism.

[33 : 34] And I think I'm using the word missional instead of the word evangelism. Because I think sometimes we use the word evangelism these days too narrowly. So we think of evangelism as an event where we proclaim the message of Jesus to workmates or through some other thing that we've organized.

And there's real benefit in that. Don't get me wrong. But of itself, that would be quite limited. Sometimes I think we opt for those evangelistic events because they're either a little bit easy.

That is, okay, we gear ourselves up for X number of weeks and we run the event and it's all over. Sit down, down and dusted, and then we can go back to sleep again. Sometimes we get involved in evangelism out of a sense of guilt.

We sense that Christians should be speaking the gospel and, well, yeah, let's organize it and get on with it. We go for a bare minimum in some ways to solve our conscience.

But those things will not exhaust what we're called to here for our agenda is to be missional in outlook, missional in heart. As Christ died for our community.

[34 : 54] We ought to be overflowing with delight in the gospel, in the Lord Jesus. We ought to be overflowing with desire to gossip that gospel wherever we find ourselves, whether at work or at sports or wherever, buying our groceries or wherever.

I was even told this week that when I go to Weewa, I have to go to the barbers. I've never been to the barbers in 40 years. Alison cuts my hair. But I have to go to the barbers, according to Chez, and pay 50 bucks for a haircut because it's a gospel missional environment.

I'm still pondering that. Chez might go halves in the cost of that. Or when you see me at Christmas, I might have long hair. I'm not sure. I'll say. I might have dreadlocks or something.

We'll say. But we need to be missional wherever we find ourselves, whether it's at the hairdresser or the barber or buying or grocers or wherever. And then we bring those two things together.

Gospel gossiping and gospel revealing. We bring those we speak to back into our local community here as a reinforcement of the words we're saying to them.

[36 : 07] And I'll tell you, that is where the local church is at its best when these two things dovetail. In practice, you see, unbelievers are often attracted to the attractiveness of a community.

Before they're attracted to our theology of Jesus. They come into a place like this and they know they're desperate for community.

They're desperate for connection. They're desperate for hope in a hopeless world. They're desperate for something different, something substantial. And they may well interact with that as a community first before they then understand the details of the source of that in Christ.

And the opposite is also true. In my ministry experience, so many unbelievers I've come across, their first point of rejection has not been the words of Jesus per se, but the lack of consistency in the way they see Christians live.

So they reject that before they even start to think about the words of Jesus. So my friends, we need to be bringing these two things together.

[37 : 31] We need to welcome friends and family and invite them to join our community here. And we need to do that full of confidence that our community as a unit is authentic and compelling and winsome.

And we'll actually embellish or endorse what we've been saying to our friends and workmates privately and individually.

Nothing will make our impact on society greater when those two things come together really well and really practically.

And I can say before you this morning, and I've got to finish on this then, that it's a terrific delight to me, having been here for 23 years, to be able to say with no hesitation at all to anybody I meet wherever, whether it's through email or down the street, I say, just come along.

Come and have a look. Have a listen. No questions asked. Just sit, suck it in, look around, and you'll quickly learn what we're all about. I do that into a community that I know is well and truly sinful, like myself.

[38 : 55] There'll be lots of failings. But I believe this to be a gospel-revealing, gospel-gossiping community. And for that, I'm deeply, deeply thankful.

And ultimately, my friends, I think this is a real test of how closely aligned we are to God's agenda.

Because the question then to you is, are you happy, keen, willing, confident to invite your friends and family and workmates and sportsmates and whoever else's mates to come along and visit?

Are you keen, to go back to the series title, are you keen and confident and saying to your friends, look, come along, come along to our local church for a foretaste of heaven?

What a privilege the Lord has put before us. Let's rise to it. Let's struggle all the more to bring these two things together, to be a gospel-revealing community and a gospel-gossiping, missional community.

[40 : 25] This is God's agenda for us. And ultimately, nothing will secure glory and honor for the Lord more. Let me pray.

Lord, we thank you that your commissioning of us is rather simple in terms of your agenda being very clear and precise.

that forgive us, Lord, when we've turned away from that agenda, seeking something else of our own preference or being squeezed by our culture.

help us, Lord, to be delighted with that notion of our impact as a church here in this community and across the world, being greatest through our being a gospel-revealing community, a community of holiness, unity, and love, word-based, gospel-focused, Holy Spirit-dependent.

And help us, Lord, just to overflow with that so that those who come in contact with us might be drawn in and genuinely, through our witness, come to know the Lord Jesus Christ and get a foretaste of heaven.

[41 : 57] In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.