

01 The Church - Introduction

Text

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. 7 But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. 8 Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.”

9 (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? 10 He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) 11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 14 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. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 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.

17 Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. 18 They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. 19 They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. 20 But that is not the way you learned Christ!— 21 assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, 22 to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, 23 and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24 and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

25 Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. 26 Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and give no opportunity to the devil. 28 Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. 29 Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Introduction

I see that we have no new people today. So if you think last week's sermon was long... Get ready. I have almost exclusively preached on books of the Bible in our years together. Thus far there were 27 messages in Colossians, 55 in Judges, and 95 in Mark. But I think it is time we take a break and spend some time in a bit of Systematic Theology. The topic I have chosen for this series is ecclesiology.

Church is a common word for us in 21st century America. There is a church on every corner and it has been part of our heritage. The church has been around for a long time. And yet, many people, perhaps even most people, do not have a good understanding of what the church is. I believe that it is the single most important institution in the world, and yet we know very little about it. That is an absolute travesty. As Christians, so much of our life is wrapped up in the church (whether we realize it or not) and yet we have little understanding of it. We do not know what it is, we do not know what its mission is, we do not know what its purpose is, we do not know our role in it, nor even that we each have a role in it. For an institution to thrive as well as it does when there is such systemic ignorance and disorganization is surely a testimony to its divine origin.

Pro Visio Defensio

Before I embark on a study of the church, I'd like to cast a vision for Grace Community Church. It may seem that this notion of vision is a very modern business-oriented term. I want to suggest that it is not. Jonathan Swift said, "Vision is the art of seeing things invisible." The things invisible of which he spoke was obviously the world as it could be in the future. Let me propose several ways in which vision is a good biblical concept.

First, I want to ground vision in creation. My daughter Elia recently asked me if people were mammals. I said yes they are since we are air-breathing vertebrates that give birth to their young live and drink from their mother's milk. We are a creature. But whatever things we have in common with the rest of creation, there is one thing that sets us apart, we are made in the image of God. Nothing else in all of creation bears the image of God.

Although that is a large topic in itself, part of what makes us in the image of God is our ability to contemplate ourselves, contemplate the world, and conceive of something different. God is the Creator and if you have ever spent time studying this world and its creatures you know that he is an amazingly creative creator. That is a communicable attribute that we share. We have the ability to see David in a rock and carve away the stone until he emerges. We have the ability to see steel and imagine and create massive skyscrapers. We can and do think of the world as being different than it is. We can look at McCook and imagine what it may yet be.

Second, Jonathan Swift said, "Vision is the art of seeing things invisible" and the author of Hebrews said something very similar about faith: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Yes, our faith is in a person, not an outcome as such, but the two cannot be separated. He continues in verse 7 says, "By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes

by faith." He had faith in God regarding a future state of the world. So not only do we have the ability to conceive of the world as being different than it is, but we have faith in a God who is the ultimate cause of the world moving into a different state of existence.

Third, We as fathers and husbands are required to provide for our wife and family. Normally when we think of this we think solely in terms of money. The term provide comes from the Latin *pro-visio* and from the Greek *pro-noeo*. *Pro* means before or in front of. And *visio* or *noeo* means to see or perceive. Thus to provide is to see beforehand the needs of your family. It certainly means financial needs, but it also means spiritual needs, emotional needs, intellectual needs, nutritional needs, etc. Our job men, is to peer into the future and make plans to meet the needs that will arise. We build the future as we do so.

The same holds true for the leaders of a church. As the elders, or shepherds, or overseers, their job is to provide for the household of God. Lord Tennyson said:

For I dipped into the future, far as human eye could see,
Saw the vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be.

We must dip into the future. But ours is not simply to peer into it, but to shape it. That is the whole point of providing. We see the world as it will be and it is not good. Therefore we take steps to make it something different. So not only can we conceive of a world that is different, and have faith the God who forms it, but we also have a responsibility to take part in seeing that future world and shaping it.

Forth, and finally, we have guidelines for how it should be shaped. If I may lean on Michaelangelo's David for analogy again, it is not as though God merely gave us a stone to shape, the power to imagine, the tools to bring about, and the responsibility to shape. If that were all, then we are still left scratching our heads as to what form we shall chisel out of the stone. God has gone even further in giving us the blueprint as to what he would like us to craft. God's word provides a clear picture of what the world is as well as a picture of what the world should be like.

The Vision Elements

Unity

From our text this morning, I gather that God's design for the church is unity. The emphasis is so pronounced it is hard to miss. Paul is talking about uniformity, that is something different. We are all different people with different gifts but we have one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

Diversity in unity. But frankly, our bigger problem is unity.

There are some 33,000 protestant denominations! That is too many. That is a good example of disunity.

In McCook we have an American Baptist church, and AG church, an E-Free church, a Missouri Synod Lutheran, a United Methodist church, and episcopal church, a Christian church, an Independant Baptist church, a Church of Christ, a Church of God, a Nazarene church, a congregational church, Our Savior's Lutheran (which is not LCMS but something different), St John's Lutheran (a different one yet), Trinity Evangelical Lutheran (different still), a Rhema church, a Seventh Day Adventist church, and one Southern Baptist church. That is 18 churches. And that is not counting the Christian science, Mormon, Jehovah Witness, Catholic, etc.

McCook only has 8000 people in it. That's 3,370 households. There is a new church for every 180 houses. Fractured! Disunity! Distrust! Not Ephesians 4.

Knowledge

- Only half of adults interviewed nationwide could name any of the four Gospels of the New Testament.
- Just 37% of those interviewed could name all four Gospels.
- Only 42% of adults were able to name as many as five of the Ten Commandments correctly
- Seven in ten (70%) were able to name the town where Jesus was born, but just 42% could identify him as the person who delivered the Sermon on the Mount.
- 38% of Americans believe the entire Bible was written several decades after Jesus' death and resurrection (While this is true of the New Testament, the entire Old Testament was written hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus Christ).
- 12% of adults believe that Noah's wife was Joan of Arc.
- 49% believe that the Bible teaches that money is the root of all evil. (The love of money is said to be the root of all types of evil).
- 75% believe that the Bible teaches that God helps those who help themselves.
- fewer than half of Americans can name the first book of the Bible
- One-third of the students tested (Burge wrote about surveys which are administered by Wheaton College to incoming freshmen to assess their knowledge of the Bible.) could not put the following in sequential order: Abraham, the Old Testament prophets, the death of Christ, and Pentecost.
- Half could not sequence the following: Moses in Egypt, Isaac's birth, Saul's death, and Judah's exile.
- One-third could not identify Matthew as an apostle from a list of New Testament names.
- One-third could not identify the book of Acts as the location of Paul's missionary travels
- half did not know that the Christmas story was in Matthew
- half did not know that the Passover story was in Exodus.
- USA Today reported that 50 percent of high school seniors think Sodom and Gomorrah were married.

God says, "My people perish for lack of knowledge." As with the level of unity, so also McCook follows the nation on biblical literacy. As we have seen, Ephesians 4 calls for unity. But to be unified, we must be unified in something. It states that we are to attain "the unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

Philippians 2:2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

1 Peter 3:8 Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.

1 Cor 1:10 I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.

Biblical unity means we be of the same mind. It means that we are completely united on the faith. We are completely united in the knowledge of the Son of God. Unity does not exist if we do not agree. There may be a cease fire, but there is no unity. The opposing views may not be shooting at each other, but neither do they share one mind. We need to have a high view of Scripture. We need to be people who are theologically astute. We need to not sweep differences under the rug but address them humbly and diligently.

Sanctification

One of the buzz-words of today is authenticity. Being authentic was one of the major modification to the church that the emergent church went after. It seemed too stiff and fake. They are right. Eph 4:25-27 says:

25 Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. 26 Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and give no opportunity to the devil.

Put away falsehood. Put away that plastic smile. Put away the surface greetings that falsely convey to the world that everything is just great in your life. Put away all false fronts and lies. Be angry and do not sin. When relationships get messy it is ok to be angry at the wrongs that have been committed, but do not sin. Keep it real and authentic.

Paul says in verse 22-24, "22 to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, 23 and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24 and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." This is sanctification. This is that into which we must grow. We cannot be good at doctrine and poor at discipline. Good orthodoxy but poor orthopraxy. Our unity must be both theoretical and practical. The standard is "the stature of the fullness of Christ."

The Vision Itself

Imagine now a church that looked like that. But let us not be abstract. Imagine a McCook that is like that. Imagine that Grace Community, E-Free, Cornerstone, and the Christian church were all united.

Let me stop right there and make some things clear. We are imagining. We recognize that this is not a reality. We know that. We are imagining what could be, not what is. What "is" is description, what could be is vision. "Ok," you may say "I understand that you are talking about what could be, but it'll never happen." Why I ask? All you are doing is description and then superimposing that description on the future and saying that is vision. It's not. You are banking on the depravity of man. Let me suggest that that is not where our money should be. "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, [some in the depravity of man] but we trust in the name of the Lord our God" (Psalm 20:7).

Banking on man's depravity will only beget confused questions like "How then can anyone be saved" The answer is that "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God" (Mt 10:27). Remember, our faith is not in our abilities or fallen man's inabilities, but in the God who can. We cast vision based on our trust in God, not on our view of

mankind.

I want us to cast a vision. I want us to imagine. **Eph. 3:20-21** "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen." That which man can conceive, God can achieve.

We see how our kids are, we imagine how they could be, and we strive to bring those changes in our children. If you bank on their depravity as the basis for your action, then you will do nothing and they will become nothing. If you rest in the gospel of Jesus Christ and the grace that he purchased on the cross, both the common grace and the special grace, then our actions will be different and our children will be different. Let it so be in McCook as well. With that objection behind us, let us continue to imagine what could be through the power of God in the gospel of his Son Jesus Christ.

There would no longer be 20 some different churches in McCook. It would be more united. Perhaps some would not change, but that is not our concern. We leave that to the sovereign decree of God. People would be sanctified and so they would be real. There would be little gossip, much encouragement, little divorce, much faithfulness, little pride, much humility, little apathy, but great passion. Lives would be transformed.

People would love doctrine because they love their God and want to know him better. They would love theology because they love God and his word given to us. Oh how refreshed we would feel to plunge into the depths of the character of God daily for our bread and drink. Oh how stable we would be, not tossed to and fro by every wind and wave of doctrine. Oh how thoughtful we would be when our minds are soaked in the word of God Almighty. Oh how clear our path in life becomes when we seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and amazingly all these things are added unto us.

People would be united in doctrine and therefore united in purpose. Imagine the vast resources of hundreds of people giving sacrificially. Imagine the resources better spent when some buildings close, not because of division and decay, but because people are now united under one roof. Please don't get distracted here. I am not saying we need only one building in McCook, I am saying that we don't need 20 of them. The resources that we pour into land and lot, gas and water, buildings and ground can be better utilized for the sake of the kingdom. Imagine that one church building closes because two bodies have joined and the money saved goes to support a young ready-to-die-for-Jesus missionary in the 10-40 window. Imagine the books we could buy and give away for free. Imagine the library we could buy for one pastor in Hatii who is eager to study and who took the Schmicks into his home elated to show them his library which consisted of one small shelf. Imagine the resources we could put in that man's hands.

Imagine the care packets we could send to those who have been displaced due to persecution in other lands. Imagine the clean water we could bring. Imagine the training we could provide. Imagine the church planting that we could do in the surrounding areas if we were but united.

Final Defense

God has created us in his image with the ability to imagine and create. Our faith itself is a conviction of things not seen. As heads of home and church we are required to look into the future and act to shape it. And we have God's design before us as to what shape it ought to take.

Our job, our responsibility, therefore, is to take that template which God has given to us and craft our church and our community accordingly. If it never happens, it is still our responsibility. We cannot stand on the day of judgement and say that because people are sinners we saw no reason to obey God's commands. That will not fly. If nothing changes our responsibility is to obey. But things can change. It has happened many times through church history and it can happen again today. "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." **Eph. 3:20-21** "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."