

The Church, Pt. 1—Attitude
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Let's start by reading a passage of Scripture found in Ephesians, chapter 3...Ephesians chapter 3. I'm just gonna read a short section of verses here, beginning at the seventh verse. And let me set the stage for you. The Apostle Paul is in prison, and he's writing a letter to a church, a church in Ephesus. It's a strong church. It's a solid, healthy church. They were meeting in a rented hall. Paul had been very instrumental in helping the church get going some years before. And they're a church that is strong in faith; they're convinced in the reality of Jesus. They're a caring church; they love each other. Probably the one thing where they're a little weak in is in the area of hope, of confident expectation of things working out well. Part of that is, I believe, due to the situation they were living in. They lived in a city that was absolutely devoted to worshiping the pagan goddess Diana. In fact there was in this city a huge temple, one of the seven wonders of the world; one of the richest places in the entire Mediterranean area. In fact, it was so rich that it was like the Swiss bank of the Roman Empire. And all of this city and this temple was dedicated to this pagan goddess and to worshiping her. And beside that, this little church in a rented hall felt fairly insignificant. And add to that that their leader, the one that had helped them get rolling, was now in prison in Rome; and hope was waning.

He writes them this letter, and he explains his ministry a bit. He encourages them with what's happening with him. And he describes in verse 7 of chapter 3, he'll be making this statement. He says

Of this Gospel...

...speaking of his ministry of preaching the Gospel, he said...

...I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of His power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ...

In other words, he's saying 'I'm part of something really big.'

...and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things...

...the unfolding of God's redemptive grace. And then, verse 10...

...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 has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I don't know if you picked up on it there, but there's one statement in there that is the most astounding statement, I think, in all of Scripture with respect to the church. It's the statement that reads like this: it's through the church the manifold wisdom, the multifaceted, diverse wisdom of God might now in this time, in this era, be demonstrated, be shown, be made manifest to not just people that are looking on at the church, but to rulers and authorities in the heavenly places, in the heavenly realms. Paul is saying, and this just astounds me...he's saying, in essence, that when God wants people to see His wisdom, when God wants not just people but He wants the angelic beings, the rulers and powers and principalities in the unseen realm...when He wants them to see His wisdom manifest, to see Him doing the best thing in the best way at the best time, He points at this thing called the church. And he says, 'There, there you see My wisdom. There, in that thing called the church, you are seeing Me do the best in the best way at the best time; you are seeing My wisdom in all its glory.'

It wasn't an accidental thing. It's really part of a larger-scale plan. He mentions that leading into the verse, and then he follows up on it in the next statement. He says

This was according to the eternal purpose that He has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This past year we've been tracking the story of God's redemptive grace, and we saw how the promise of grace given to a world that had rebelled in sin came to a critical point, a crucial turning point, the pivotal moment when the righteousness of God and the love of God came together in that one person, Jesus. And at the cross grace was released for all those who would receive it. And then, as we noted last week, that grace is now being extended through the message and the glory of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, forgiveness and repentance for all those who would have it. And the church...the church is what God is using to extend that grace...the grace released at the cross being extended through the church by the proclamation and the witness to Jesus Christ.

What a plan! And what a place the church has in it! In fact, the place the church has in God's eternal plan of redeeming this planet, this earth, and the wonder of the church where God would say, 'That is the manifestation, that is the display, of My wisdom for the whole universe', because the church is so central. We're gonna take three weeks to take and study it; in three just quick little focused times we're gonna teach about the church in the context of God's great plan as a manifestation of God's manifold wisdom.

We're gonna do it in three steps. The first step today as we deal with this church, and the concept and the reality of this thing that God has brought into being to extend grace...the first thing we're gonna do today is we're gonna deal with [need to click that...there we go]...we're gonna first of all deal with what I call the attitude. What should be our attitude towards this thing called the church? And we need to focus on that. We need to address it. And so we're gonna talk about that today, and this is not gonna be so instructional. It's gonna be just simply dealing with attitudes as we approach this thing called the church. The second thing we're gonna do next week is we're gonna go on and we're gonna look at the spiritual dynamic of the church. It's unlike any other...*any other* organization in the world, any other group in the world. The church is totally unique. There's a spiritual dynamic to it that is astounding. We will look at that next week. And then we'll come back the third week and we're gonna get very practical. What do you do as a church? How do you structure church life? And how do you arrange it? Think of the educators talk about going 'head, heart, hands' and instructing on all three of those levels. Today we're gonna be talking to the heart—attitude. Next week we're gonna be dealin' with the head. We're gonna be talking about the reality and the wonder of what the church is in its relationship with Jesus Christ, and the spiritual dynamic that is here. And lastly we're gonna get hands-on practical. What do we do and how do we arrange life as a church? Those are the three directions we're gonna go. We're gonna start with the attitudinal one today.

And as we do so I need to get a definition out there, something that we can say, ok, when we say the word 'church' this is what we all agree we all mean. Ok? So I'm just gonna put a functional definition out there. This is not gonna be refined; it's not gonna be in precision detail. This is a type of definition you can use anytime you're just talkin' about the church and somebody says, 'Whadaya mean by that?' This is just very functional, gripable, what I call transferable. You could repeat this definition to anybody and not get into a long theological debate. When we talk about the church the Greek term that is translated 'church' throughout the New Testament is the word *ecclesia*. And it simply meant a public assembly, a gathering of people. That's all the term meant...ecclesia...we call it church. It meant a public gathering of people in assembly, people getting together in one place. It's used in the New Testament like a city council meeting. It just means people getting together in a place, in assembly.

Now when we move and we begin to use it very specifically in its application to the Christian church it takes on a little finer, more expanded idea. So when we talk about the church as a Christian gathering, a Christian assembly, it's used on two level. And this can get confusing when you're reading the New Testament if you're not tracking it. Sometimes the Bible will talk about the church and refer to, by that phrase, all Christians of all times and of all places as one great congregation. In other words, the Bible will speak of the church, and when it does so it's referring to all those who follow Jesus Christ from all places, all times, just considered as one large, magnificent congregation called the church. That's oftentimes the way the church will be referred to in the New Testament. It's also referred to in the New Testament on a different level, not only speaking of all Christians throughout all time and all places following Jesus as one large, great congregation; it also refers to the Christians of a specific place who meet together as a congregation. In other words, a group of people like us who come together in one place as a congregation. The Bible speaks of that as a church.

So when you go through the book of Acts one time they'll be talking about the church and referring to all the churches of that day in the Roman Empire as one grand congregation; and then in other places it'll talk about the church in Ephesus, the church in Philippi, referring to that local gathering of believers. We call the first...or, excuse me, on the second when we think of this local gathering, I'm gonna give you three just very quick kind of identifying characteristics, things that'll be there when it's a local church. Ok?

Number one is there'll be consistent assembly. The people will get together. I mean, that's what the term means...assembly, gathering. They will meet. They will also, not only will there be consistent assembly and

meeting, there will also be a functional order to that group. It isn't just a loose mob. It isn't just a fluid group. There will be an order and a structure to that local group, to that church, that assembly, that congregation. And third, and this is critical, is there will be a truth foundation. There's a lot of organizations that will call themselves churches, and they're not because they're not founded on the central truth, the common confession that the church is founded on, that Jesus is the Christ, the Lord; Jesus came from heaven, was crucified for our sins according to the Scriptures, raised again from the dead, and He's alive today. Those are what Paul calls the matters of first importance; that is the foundational truth; that is the truth foundation, the common confession of the church. And so where there's a local church you're gonna find those things: consistent getting together, assembly, meeting; you're gonna find a functional order; and you're always gonna find that truth foundation.

When we speak of the large church as all Christians across all times and all places, sometimes a term that will be used is the 'universal church'. Or when we speak of the local church...I just used the term...it's called the local church, speaking of that church that's right here. So you got the universal, you got the local. Sometimes when we talk about the universal church we'll use the term 'the invisible church'. We can't see all Christians throughout all time and every place. So what we're talkin' when we speak of the universal church...we're speaking of the church as God sees it. And it's invisible to us. But the local church, that local gathering of followers of Jesus...it's often called the 'visible church'. That's where you can naturally see a manifestation of this amazing thing called the church. Ok? Now, not everybody in that visible church is a member of the universal church. That's kind of an interesting thing. They may just be sitting in that building that day. But either level you're talking about, ok...universal, local, visible, invisible...the term 'church' applies to both. Ok?

Everybody still with me? 'Cause now I'm gonna zero in on that thing called the local church, because we can kinda get a sense of that big, universal church and understand what that's about, but we kinda struggle a bit when we start talking about this thing called the local church. And I think the thing that I run into most often is when we begin to talk about it and look at it...it's so...there's so many different ones, and they're so different from one another. I mean, you got big ones, little ones; you got ones that meet in grand cathedrals and ones that meet in rented halls. You got churches of all different styles. Some of 'em sing 'The Long, Black Train' every once in a while, and others sing, you know, grand hymns, ancient anthems; others sing modern worship choruses; other churches do like we do...we just keep rotating different song groups through and sing 'em all. I mean...it's just...everything's so different between these churches! Some are quiet and reserved, and others are so loud and raucous and expressive, and there's just some you dress up and you're very formal, some of 'em you're very casual. Some of 'em meet on a beach, and some of 'em meet in a mountain top. And they're so different. I tell people a lot of times it's like goin' into a community and you have all these different restaurants, you know? You got the big chain restaurants...Applebee's, Red Robin, Chili's, and those, and they're kind of like the denominations, you know. Ok? And then you've got the little, local, mom-and-pop diner; you've got the really fancy view place that you only go on special occasions; and then you've got the place you sit down and you bring out the brown bag lunch and you eat there all the time. I mean, it's just this wide range of types of places. And the churches are like that in any given community.

And some people get very exasperated with that, very confused by it. In fact, they'll take that and say, 'You know, something's really wrong. I mean, if these are churches and they're God's churches, they all ought to be alike!' And my response is no. All that diversity is not an indication of anything being drastically wrong. It's part of the wonder of this thing called the church that God has created. I mean, think about it. The God who created the tropical orchid and the mountain lupine, the God who created those huge sunflowers and created those tiny, little forget-me-nots...I mean, that God...I don't expect Him to turn out every church identical to the other church. And I'm so thankful He doesn't do that, because it's in that diversity and the wisdom of God the church is most effective. There are people in this community that I cannot connect with. I mean, I really want to, I wish I could, and I'd love to, but you know what? They basically find me very boring. Ok? And I can understand that. Then there's other people that 'Yeah, Larry, we just...man, when you speak it connects with me. I can understand it.' Then there's people that, you know, they hear "The Long Black Train" and they're done. You know? They wanna hear classic hymns over and over. That's fine. We're not gonna reach some people, but other churches will. And there's people we will reach and we will touch that others will never be able to. That's the diversity that God has created purposefully.

And not only that...it gives the church a resilient adaptability that, to me, is just phenomenal. You see, the church is able to survive in any culture, at any time, under any conditions. It is just amazing how it can adapt, because it is so diverse. The church is thriving in despotic, communist China. It is *thriving* there! The church does not need pluralistic, democratic America with its freedom of religion to survive. The church, in poverty-stricken villages of Africa, is thriving. It doesn't need American prosperity and wealth to survive. It's phenomenal how God has designed the church to be able to endure and go through and handle so many things because of its diversity and its

adaptability. I tell you, the church to me is a wonder. It's just a wonder. I love to think about it, I love to observe it in all its different expressions. I just love it.

But I know not everybody thinks that way. Not everybody shares that view of the church. There are some of those who are outside the church who are very critical of the church. A man named Christopher Hitchens wrote a best-seller. It was on the book best-seller list for months. It was titled "God is Not Great". And it just attacks religion of all sorts, and Christianity is right in the cross-hairs. And one of the statements he says, "Religion poisons everything." And he doesn't care if we're talking about a Hindu temple, or a Christian congregation. It poisons everything...that's the attitude. And he would look at Sunday school, he would look at what's goin' on downstairs right now where children are being taught about Jesus Christ, and he devotes a whole chapter to pointing at that and saying 'That is child abuse', that you would take a child and convince 'em of the reality of Jesus Christ. So there's people outside the church that definitely critique it, attack it.

There's others that have problems with the church, and they've stepped away because of it. They've created some distance between them and the church. Usually this isn't a rejection of the church universal. They'll still acknowledge the church universal. They just don't really wanna be part of a local congregation. It's kinda like those people that you come across sometimes that, you know, they love humanity. They just don't like people. Ok? You find people that, for whatever circumstances and reasons as they go through, they get to the point where they say, 'You know, I love the church, all God's people across all time who follow Jesus. I just love 'em. I just can't stand these local churches. I just gotta take a step away.'

Two authors, again right off the best-seller lists, right off the best-seller lists who write like this. One is a writer who wrote a phenomenal best-seller; I mean, it was just phenomenal how well it has sold...William Young, writing "The Shack". He speaks in that book about the main character, which he acknowledges is a reflection of himself as the author. And he speaks of his main character as having a love/hate relationship with religion. Sometimes he shows up at the local pew-and-pulpit church, that religion, but he's not too comfortable there. Later in the book he will have Jesus speaking with this main character, in a very sharp and critical tone, of the church. He has Jesus saying this: "As well-intentioned as it might be, you know that religious machinery..." And he's speaking in that context of the local churches are included in that. He says, "As well-intentioned as it might be, you know that religious machinery can chew people up." In a review of Young's book, and it's a very, I think a very fair review, and the writer talks about the experiences that Young has acknowledged in his past that have made it so difficult for him and led to the writing of the book. But one of the comments this reviewer says, he says, "You know, when you read Young's book you have the impression that he's come away from a lot of hurt and he's made peace with God, but he's not yet made peace with the church." I think that's a fair assessment.

Another writer off the best-seller list, only this one is from a different angle, not from the pew but a person who's been in the pulpit. Wrote a best-seller, a brilliant preacher, brilliant preacher. When Baylor University identified the top...what they identified as the top ten preachers of this generation, this preacher was the only woman on the list. Phenomenal communicator. She wrote her life story in a memoir, which she simply entitled, "Leaving Church". She tells the story how she'd been on the staff at a large church in Atlanta, then kinda wanted to get away from that. It just wasn't where she was at. She went to this little country parish and she just, she thought, 'This is what it's gonna be.' And then pretty soon things began to change for her there. And I'll read what she writes at one point. She says, "Laid low by what was happening at Grace Calvary," that's the church she was ministering in, "I did not have the energy to put a positive spin on anything. Beyond my luminous images of Sunday morning I saw the committee meetings, numbing routines, and the chronically difficult people who took up a large part of my life, my time. My tiresome perfectionism, my resentment of those who did not try as hard as I did, and my huge appetite for approval just wore." Then she makes this statement. She says, "Drawn to a life of servanthood, just wanting to serve Jesus, drawn to a life of servanthood I simply became a service provider." She now spends her Sunday mornings in a chair on her porch, drinking tea, enjoying the sound of the birds alone. It's not just people outside the church. It's not just people who have stepped away from the church. There's people within the church who no longer see the wonder and the mystery and the wisdom of God in the church.

Interesting research I came across, and it's kind of...it's well done. They surveyed a huge number of churches, and they took churches that were successful and were doing good. They didn't look at churches that were floundering, and divided, and fighting, and all that. These were churches that you would look at and say, 'Man, there is a healthy church! There's a church, man...I'd like to be a part of that church.' And they surveyed these churches, and they surveyed the people within 'em, and they produced this major study. And they came out, and one of the findings was this. In these churches, and they're healthy churches, in these healthy churches what they found out that for every hundred people...for every hundred people in that church you will find at least eleven of 'em that right

then wanna leave it. You're gonna find eleven people that just say, 'Ah, I don't even wanna come back here again.' Out of every hundred people, ok?

Then they did a little further, and this was intriguing to me. They did a little further research on those eleven, and what they found is that five of those eleven are what they would call 'stalled' in their Christian experience. They come to a point, and they were just stalled. A lot of times it may have been addiction that they couldn't get past. It may have been an emotional issue that was unresolved. In some cases it had to do with, just plain simply, distraction. They had gotten really busy with business, or they had gotten some new lake cabin, or somethin' like that, and they just...there was other stuff to do and they just weren't connected anymore, and 'Boy, you know, I just don't need to be there.' They were stalled. That's about five of those eleven.

The other six intrigued me, 'cause what it said about those, they find out that those six tended to be people who love Jesus, who are following Jesus, who are growing in their relationship with Jesus, and they're frustrated because the church is lagging behind. And it's almost a 'I'm done with you losers.' I'm sayin' that a little sarcastically. I shouldn't. I mean, it's just sayin', 'I'm ready to get movin', and you guys are draggin' your feet here.' And that's a strong, powerful feeling. Ok?

It's not just people outside, it's not just people who stepped away; it's people right in the middle of it. And listen, you need to understand, I've read enough church history, I've heard enough personal stories, and I myself have been through enough pastoral failures to know that the critiques and the criticism are often on the mark. So it's very important, before we go any further in this study of the church, that you hear my attitude with respect to the church. And I'm gonna press you to adopt this same attitude. And I'm not talkin' about the universal church only. I'm talkin' about the local church.

Go to Acts chapter 20 with me. You're sayin', 'Larry, you're just gonna start preachin' a passage now?' No, relax. I'm just gonna highlight one aspect of this. Acts 20...Acts 20. This is that same church of Ephesus. Paul has passed close by, but he's not able to stop in. And the leaders of that church have come to see him. And they're concerned; they're concerned that they may never see him again. In fact, this is before he wrote that letter we read earlier. This is before that, before he was in prison. But they're still worried. They're sayin' goodbye to him. And he meets with them at this little town. And when he's there...(boy, I'd better find my place here, excuse me)...when he's there he gives them some final instructions before he leaves, because he's not gonna be with them. And he wants to give these leaders, this small group of elders, instruction. And we're gonna pick it up at verse 28. Ok? Verse 28. Paul starts to talk to this small group of leaders that have come to say goodbye to him. And he says

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood.

He goes on to say

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, and remember that for three years I didn't cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.

And then he goes on, says

I now commend you to God,

...and he goes on with his departure message. He's very aware that as he leaves them they're going to face some real dangers. And the danger he's most concerned about is people that come in and wanna make the church theirs. They want the Christian disciples to follow them. He's sayin', 'Be on top of that. Don't let it happen. It'll even happen among you; you can get caught up in that. Don't!'

But the key phrase, and this is the one that I wanna isolate, this is the one I wanna leave with you, this is the one I want you to focus on and never forget, as he's warning these men, 'Don't ever let anyone take over the church and try to make it their own!' he makes this statement. He speaks of "the church of God." This church belongs to Him. It's His possession. It doesn't belong to any man; "...the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood." It's interesting...I think it's the only place in the New Testament where the blood of Christ is referred to as God's own blood.

Some time ago a newspaper reporter wrote a description of our building here, our church building. He drove up, and he was from the New York Times, and it was eventually on the front page of the New York Times...a description of our church written by this reporter. And he's describing the church, and he describe how unadorned it is, how plain and ordinary it appears, how it looks pretty much like a Costco. The guy's a good reporter. Ok? He makes a comment. He's talkin' about how there's just nothing...I mean, he put's it there's nothin' that stands out...*except* the cross. He says it's the one thing that gives you a sense of the purpose of this building and what it's about.

I have a little different twist on that cross. I view it a little differently. When I drive up and I see that cross I'm not thinking purpose, I'm not thinking mission. When I see that cross I see our price tag. I see what God paid for this group of people...not the building, not the property, but I see what God paid...not just individually, not just the grand scheme of the church universal; I see what God paid to have this congregation. I see that. And whenever you drive up here and you see that I want you to recognize it for what it is. That is our price tag. It's what God paid to have us be His congregation. And as a result of that, not matter what the criticism is, no matter what the critiques are, I will enter into this group of people choosing to believe in the reality of Jesus in our midst, living with the hope that we are gonna see good worked by God in us and through us, and running the risk of caring. I'm gonna encourage you to do the same.

Let's stand.

We do have a mission. We do have a purpose. We do have a calling...to be salt, to be light, to be witness, and we don't wanna lose that.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go in that truth, extend that grace. Amen.