

What the Church Is

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[0 : 00] We're starting a new series on the local church. Now, Liesl and I have just celebrated our 36th wedding anniversary, and we got to spend seven days in Europe, and I love history.

And so we ended up, a lot of the time, visiting old buildings and cathedrals, and I was in one of them thinking, the men and women who built this place, it took them decades.

Some of the buildings we saw, the stones were carried up by donkeys up a hillside and built, and many of the people who built the cathedrals never got to worship in them.

They knew they would never get to worship in them because they took 100 years to build. There's one that took over 600 years to build. And yet today, they stand like museums.

They're empty. And the people are all outside in the courtyard and in the marketplace. That's where the life is. And in one thought, it's so amazing that there would be people who would have such vision for the church in bygone generations, but today, there's just no understanding of the depth of church and what they were even doing or hoping for.

[1 : 41] So we know that church isn't a building or a cathedral. What is it? Well, some of us may have grown up in the Roman Catholic church or maybe another, a very sort of high church tradition where you have all the bells and whistles.

and that's what we kind of think of as church or at least when we think back. Or maybe some of us came from mainstream Protestant churches like Baptist, Southern Baptist or even Presbyterian.

And that's your idea really of church. Maybe not as cool as this building, but you know, that's really what church is. Or maybe some of you were raised in a real frothy Pentecostal charismatic break a sweat every time you meet.

You know, background, which is my background. And I love that. Or maybe you just don't have much of a church background at all.

So what I'm gonna ask you to do is take all of that, cathedral, high church, mainstream, charismatic. Just take it all for a minute and put it over here.

[3 : 01] I'm not saying throw it away. Don't throw it away. Just put it over there. And let's take a fresh look at what is church? What is this thing called church?

Okay. Now the scriptures give us some beautiful pictures. And we're gonna be reading out of Ephesians today because we're gonna use that as a case study of church. And Paul, in the book of Ephesians, says that the church is actually the body of Christ.

We'll read the text. So we're part of Christ. We're the body of Christ. All right? Hands, feet, torso.

And then a little further on in the book, we won't quite get to that because of the sake of time.

He says we're a temple that's made for God as people. And then writers like St. John, who was one of the 12, writes and he actually culminates it by saying we are the bride of Christ.

We are the bride. So these are bright, vivid, colorful, life-giving pictures. But we're gonna look at scripture today to see what is the church.

[4 : 16] Now this is the angle I'm gonna come at. There's a French philosopher who said, if you want men to build ships, don't give them plans and tools.

Show them the vastness and the glory of the ocean. And I'm not gonna come with plans and tools and try to convince you to build what we call church.

I want to show you the vastness of the ocean, the beauty of the ocean of God. And I'm hoping that'll capture you.

And we'll figure out plans and tools later. Not this morning. We're gonna be finishing. Don't worry about it. It's not gonna be long. All right. So let me, just in case you fall asleep or I fall over, let me give you the, let me give you the trajectory of where we're going.

The big idea this morning is that church is a community because God is a community. He created us in his image because we fell.

[5 : 31] We've been trying to create community outside of God from Babel right through Genesis. But Jesus came back through a promise from Abraham, for Abraham, and he established a new community, the church in Acts chapter two.

It blew up and went worldwide. But within 30 years, that early church, the church of Acts, was already in trouble.

And we're gonna finish it with a little bit of warning because it's a living story. It's not a sealed story. You've just heard my whole sermon. Let's go.

So we're gonna start in Ephesians one. Paul is writing to the Ephesians. Ephesus is like New York City to the old world.

Cosmopolitan, very secular. They had a temple to the god of Artemis. There was a rich industry of idolatry.

[6 : 39] It was very sordid. There were orgies and rituals and just a crazy, crazy city, ancient city.

Paul writes to the church there and look at how he starts. We'll start in verse three. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will.

What is he doing? He's showing them the ocean. That's where he starts. All right? He doesn't start by, I love your praise and worship, but your coffee bar's not very good.

He doesn't start there, right? Verse 15. We're just gonna jump to verse 15. For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, which is Jesus.

[8 : 09] And having the eyes of your heart enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you. What are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints?

And what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe? According to the working of his great might, that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at the right hand in heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come.

And he put all things under Jesus' feet and gave him as the head over all the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

What a breathtaking panoramic view Paul is laying out of the church. Oh my, my. So first thing we need to notice, the church started from God and looks like God, but what does God look like?

God is a community. We know this. Paul shows us in verse 16, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.

[9 : 46] Now watch this. That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Jesus.

So he's talking Father, Son, and Spirit right in the first chapter. God is a community. Father, Son, and Spirit.

I've heard preachers and others say this. God, he lived in eternity past. Nothing was ever created. And then he thought, oh my, I need to love someone. I'm almost lonely. Let's make man. No, no, no.

God isn't the desperate couple trying to save his marriage through having kids. No, no, no. He's been beautifully content. Father, Son, Spirit, three in one.

[10 : 51] The Trinity, now the word Trinity came from Tertullian, an African theologian in about 200 AD. Woo-hoo, Africa, Africa.

And the Westminster Confession states the Trinity as this. In the unity of the Godhead, there are three persons of one substance, power, and eternity, or nature.

Three persons sharing one substance. So the early church came up with a diagram that was very helpful for me.

And that's it right there. You have God is the Father, God is the Son, God is the Spirit, but the Father is not the Spirit.

The Spirit is not the Son, and the Son is not the Father. You have this beautiful mystery of three completely different person, persons, but one God.

[11:58] There's another theologian. We actually don't know his name, but he came up with a Latin term called perichorosis.

Now I'm not trying to impress you, I'm just trying to give you a new picture. Perichorosis is made up of two words. Peri means to go around, or perimeter, and choroisis is choreography.

And so the idea is to intertwine without getting identities mixed up. And some theologians have called it the dance of the Trinity.

And you see this in John chapter 14. It's beautiful. There is a dance of joy within the life of the Trinity. Listen to one of the passages we read.

The Spirit going, here's Jesus.

[12:59] Jesus is going, I only do what I hear the Father. And there's this dance. And we were born out of that happy, happy marriage.

If I may call it that. This vibrant life of generosity and joy and beautiful diversity in complete unity. That's our origin. Before creation, God had that in mind for human beings, for them to share the very God life in a real way.

Now, when Lisa and I were coming back from our trip, we're embarking on this train and then a bus and then this and then that and finally a nine and a half hour flight.

And when I go into times like that where I know I'm going to lose the use of my legs because my behind's going to be so numb just sitting in a plane, you know, I hunker down to suffer.

[14:04] And so, we all have our own little video TV screens in the seat in front of you and I'm locking into this movie called 1917.

First World War. Trenches. Bombing. These poor guys are just trying to survive. They're on a life and death mission. And I'm just locking in there.

I just, it's okay that I can't feel my legs. And I look over and on Lisa's screen, there's like 40 or 50 women dressed in ridiculously bright colors and they're dancing on this dock and there's like seagulls and water and I look and the next thing, there's 40 or 50 men coming down the hill and they wearing all these bright colors and I look at her and she's got her little pillow and her little this and her little drink and she's trying to create this little utopia and I'm in World War I.

And I look at her and I just think, who are you, woman? Like we couldn't be more different. And yet, 36 years and I can honestly say we happily married in this beautiful almost dichotomy of unity and diversity.

And sure, it's taken 36 years of sometimes nearly murdering each other to get there but perichorosis is something we're experiencing.

[15:44] It's like she's allowed to be different and I've stopped trying to change her. It doesn't work. Just let her be. She's beautiful.

She's different. And it actually adds to my life because I would be so horribly boring. Right? Amen. So, so, so this is the Godhead. We're born and we see splatterings of it in our marriage and in friendships in certain friendships.

We need to see it in the church. So, we go back to the beginning and in Genesis 1, 26 we see God. Listen to this. And God said, let us.

Can you see that? Let us. Who's he talking to? Himself. Father, son, spirit. They're having a beautiful conversation with one another. Let us make man in our image.

[16:42] Does that just mean that Bear looks a little like God and Jesse maybe a little less but nevertheless, like God? Like, is that all this means? No. Let us make mankind in our image.

They're meant to function like we do. Have our DNA. The whole of mankind should take the shape of God. And we see creation taking the shape of God. Look at the animal kingdom, the bird kingdom, the flowers, the ocean.

It's diversity and unity but we know what happened. They fell. And community was broken.

Sin separated not only Adam and Eve from God but from one another because when God says to Adam, where are you? He goes, oh, it's her fault.

This woman you gave me. And he blames her. Right? And that's a lot of guts just blaming God for the woman he gave you when you didn't have a woman.

[17:47] Right? And then she goes, well, it wasn't me. It was the devil. And we see community break down completely and it broke down because they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which simply was they were gonna be the ones who are now gonna decide what's good for us and what's not.

It's no longer God. And we know better because God's holding out on us. He doesn't fully understand our situation.

Times have changed and things are different. That's basically what they were saying. And so, we see this progression, the flood. We blow through the flood and we get to Genesis 11 and we have the Tower of Babel.

And in the story of the Tower of Babel, men say to themselves, hey, let's build a city to our glory and we're gonna build a tower that reaches to the sky so that God will never flood us again.

We can have a community without God. Our ideas are brilliant. We now have technology. We can build cities. We can do whatever we want.

[19:03] And that's exactly what God came down and said. He said, they can now do whatever they think they want. And what does he do? He confuses their language.

And they finally splinter like God intended Adam and Eve to do. Have babies and the whole garden turn that, the whole planet, into a garden.

He wanted them to fill the earth and multiply and take that garden global. But they wouldn't. And so man splinters.

He goes his own way. And there is friction to this day. You will see it on the news. I grew up in South Africa in the 80s and 90s.

And we faced apartheid which was radical, legalized racism. And I am of the persuasion that outside of Jesus we will never get there.

[20:07] Germany was the most educated nation just before the Holocaust. More people could read in Germany than any other country in the world. And the Holocaust happened. I think it takes more than education.

It takes more than prosperity. It takes more than to solve our racial problems. It takes a revelation of who God is and the fact that we are born of God and we have Him as the center of our lives.

That's what it takes. The church is the answer. And I saw it in South Africa. Before the legal guys and the politicians could even come close, the church was getting it right in South Africa.

And I've got so many beautiful stories to tell you. So, Genesis 11 is another train smash. Along comes Genesis 12 and God chooses this little Iraqi man called Abraham and He says, I'm going to choose you and I'm going to start with you and I'm going to bless the whole world through your seed.

And in Galatians 3, Paul writes and he says, that seed wasn't so much the Jewish people and God has certainly blessed the world through the Jewish people. They're phenomenal.

[21:23] But he said, it's a capital S seed. It's a one seed, one man. Galatians 3, 16. The capital D descendant of Abraham would bless the world.

and I'm going to start again with myself sending my son. And we see that happen.

Oh, it's so beautiful. And I'm flying fast because we're taking a panoramic of the ocean. And so, Jesus comes, he lives, he dies, he's raised again and just weeks after that, the disciples are like hunkering down, trying to preserve the little bit that they had.

And we have the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2. Holy Spirit falls. Boom. Like a pebble in a pond, it begins to ripple.

3,000 get saved. 5,000. The next thing, Stephen is stoned. James is killed and it starts going global and it invades the Roman Empire which is one of the most prominent empires of the world, of the ancient world.

[22:48] Nothing can stop what God is doing. You and I, our friend, are part of that. Never settle for something smaller.

How can church ever be about, I like the worship and it has a great youth group. That may be true but that's like falling in love with a girl because of her earrings.

Right? I don't know where that came from. And one of the places, this new community, life-giving community of God jumps like a fire in a storm that just jumps freeways and waterways and is in Ephesus.

And I told you a little about the Ephesus, the city of Ephesus but in Acts 19 we see the birth of the early church in Ephesus, far from Jerusalem.

And in chapter 19 it says that God, verse 11, was doing extraordinary miracles at the hands of Paul so that even the handkerchiefs or aprons that touched his skin were carried away to the sick and their diseases left them and evil spirits came out.

[24 : 11] And then he tells this cool story of some fake ministers who were trying to cast out a demon and the demon possessed person beats them up. Okay, it's pretty amusing.

Sort of a bit of a UFC moment in scripture and then it goes on to say and also verse 18 and also many of those who were now believers came confessing and divulging their practices and a number of those who had practiced magic art brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all and they counted the value of them and found it came to 50,000 pieces of silver which one commentary says is probably 7 million dollars today.

So the word of God continued to increase and prevail. People were coming and if you study revivals of old the Welsh revival when God started moving the church wasn't ready for it people were getting saved they were being so convicted they would come to the police stations and start confessing their crimes to the police and bringing the stuff they had stolen to the police and the police were going you shouldn't come to us go to your priest yeah God doing wonderful things so we have this church in Ephesus where the literal economy changed it's like Las Vegas just like shutting down the gambling industry because no one's coming to gamble anymore they're having to turn casinos into places of meeting and bartenders are becoming hosts hosting people at church I mean this is like this is the kind of thing that happened in Ephesus right but that's not the end of the story the last picture we get of the church of Ephesus is in the book of Revelation and

St. John who was actually one of the pastors in the church of Ephesus writes to them a message from Jesus while he's in exile and he says in verse 1 to the angel of the church in Ephesus write so the angel is basically the leader or the leadership of the church that's how what it means the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand who walks among the seven golden lampstands that's Jesus that's the way John is describing Jesus here this is what Jesus is saying to you I know your works your toil and your patient endurance and how you cannot bear with those who are evil but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not and you have found them to be false I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake and you have not grown weary but I have one thing against you now this is only 34 years roughly give or take a year after we the

Acts 19 part that I read I have something against you you have abandoned the love you had at first remember therefore from where you have fallen repent and do the works you did at first if not I will come to you and I will remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent this is a warning this is a great church this is a historic church I love the way Jesus is not afraid to go you're awesome you've done well done well done well done but there's some things I don't like I love how Jesus is not afraid to do that so what are the solutions to reviving this church well maybe we know that they persevered they had a lot of perseverance let's not just go to the negative let's just watch the positive a little a lot of perseverance do you know that

[28 : 50] Nero was the emperor at the time he would literally take Christians stick them on poles dip them in tar and use them as ticky torches for his garden they persevered what about holiness he says you cannot bear with those who are evil they had maintained and held the line of holiness what about doctrine they had cared for doctrine Paul is writing this letter to them and if you read further in Acts 19 Paul remained there and started a school a Bible school called the school of Tyrannus and taught every day for months these guys had their doctrine down and they worked hard it says enduring patiently in verse three and bearing up for my name sake and not getting weary they were a gutsy church but what is the solution well maybe they just need new leadership you know everything rises and falls on leadership right you guys need a new pastor a guy who can really teach the word and feed the people and someone who's dynamic and possibly got a bit of a national profile we need a new pastor let me remind you

Paul was their pastor Priscilla and Aquila at one time was pastors there not Aquila was not Priscilla but they worked together at Dynamica I bet they did some great stuff with marriages in that church I can imagine that couple kind of preaching together maybe we know that they helped Apollos along who was a great teacher what about Timothy Timothy Paul's right hand man trustworthy man and even John the apostle John Jesus best friend he walked with Jesus he put his head on Jesus chest

he was intimate with Jesus he had written the gospel he'd written the gospel of John imagine that guy being your pastor and historians say that Mary the mother of Jesus was in that church because John looked after her for the rest of her life I mean this bench is loaded I don't know I don't know if that's the answer or what about we gotta get miracles back remember the handkerchiefs we need more handkerchiefs man maybe maybe not handkerchiefs maybe I don't know bandanas young people love I'm being silly now okay I don't know if that's it I think we need to focus on cultural impact cultural we gotta become relevant to the culture and make an impact well they did they were burning books the literature they were they overturned the whole economy the idle economy and then of course some of us go just good doctrine good doctrine good doctrine they had that too what is Jesus' solution hidden right there in verse 5 and this is where I end right there he says number one I want you to remember not just

Acts 19 how this church started I want you to go back back to Jesus back to Abraham back to God I want you to remember what this is about this is not just you me and our thing second thing I want you to repent the word repent is to allow your mind to change and then change your actions don't just walk out of here going that was convicting hey no twofold change of mind change of action that's repentance where do we need to change my friend I've been in church for 36 well man I first started going to church when I was seven there comes a point where you just have to quit rehashing the past change your mind and change your ways move on this is bigger than you and that guy who hurt you it is don't allow yourself to become small and live in your little canoe God wants us to build ships and then he says redo redo I have been just rethinking how I do and walk with Jesus what makes my life different from the guy down the street besides going to church on Sunday and he doesn't what can he see that makes him realize my life is completely shaped around this beautiful Trinitarian God so as the band comes up if you're not a follower of Jesus today there's a message coming through for you I'm not inviting you to up your church attendance [34 : 51] I'm not asking you to start giving money to the church I believe God's inviting you back into God life life with him and life how he intended it to be I'm unashamed about saying to you this is the only way to live to be completely human fully human like Jesus was I invite you in a little while we're going to be having communion and I don't have mine but this is in essence what we're doing when we have communion this identifies with the death and resurrection of Jesus

Christ his body and his blood shed for us what we're going is I give everything of my life in exchange for this I give all my achievements my resume and all my failures my rap sheet I throw it away it counts as nothing Paul says but for Christ that is my hope that's my righteousness that's my justification that's my everything this is really what people are doing in the room when they do this so don't don't fake it don't walk up to any girl give her a ring and say I'm in love with you make sure you know who she is don't just do it because rings are being handed out or you feel like getting married know what you're doing you're giving up everything all your best and your worst and you're taking him as your only source of hope and life it's a complete surrender that's really what I'm asking you is give up everything for him if you're not ready don't be pressurized just keep coming keep listening and take your time but for you who are believers here in the room today

I want you to remember actively repent where does my mind need to change Lord Jesus help me this week through conversations through reading the Bible through whatever Lord I'm asking you to challenge my thinking where do I have stinking thinking there are so many Christians today and I'm going a little longer I'm sorry but they go I'm I am the church I don't need to go to church I podcast now I thank God for podcasts and I thank God that people who can't meet for whatever reason have access to but if you can the Bible actually says you are a member of the church and if you say I am the church I don't need to go you're going and when your little finger lies on the floor the longer it lies there the greener it gets and the more it smells and that's what happens to us when we go I am the church

I don't need the church and we go green and we smell now that's very deep theology but remember repent and then redo what did you used to do when you were hopelessly in love for those of you who are married or you are in a relationship sweet nothing's on the phone till one o'clock right drive across the country what did you first do when you were in love with Jesus start those things again redo amen so on that note we land when you're ready Jesus on the last night with his disciples broke bread and said this is my body broken for you take it and eat it as often as you do this in remembrance of me take it and eat it this is the body of Christ thank you

Lord and then after the meal he took the cup and he said this cup is my blood which is shed for you for your sin thank you Lord for making provision for our sin in Jesus name thank you for shedding your blood we take it now in gratitude and in faith thank you Lord thank you worship Lord thank you thank you thank you