

Radical Restoration

A Radical Redefinition of the Church – Part 2

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A RADICAL REDEFINITION OF THE CHURCH – PART 2 **Ephesians 4:7-16**

Turn to Ephesians 4. I am increasingly convinced that the “me-centeredness” that is so prevalent in our church culture is in large part due to a deficient understanding of the church and the nature of the church and the essence of the church.

Imagine this situation. Imagine a couple starts coming to the church. They enjoy the music. They like the sermons. After a few months, maybe a year, the pastor or church leader comes to them and starts to talk to them about joining the church, becoming a member of the church. Politely, the couple declines. The pastor or church leader begins to throw out some programs to entice them. “Look what we have; look what we have to offer you and your family, you and your marriage.” However, quietly, that couple decides they have had enough, and they slip away to another church where they can be a little more anonymous.

Or imagine that maybe one day they do actually decide to join the church. They say, “You know, we’re going to do that.” Maybe they have a family. They have kids, and they think, “We want our kids to grow up in church. We’re going to become members of the church for the sake of the kids.” So, they join the church, but they can hardly be described as a couple with a wholehearted commitment to the church.

Now, that scenario is being played out in thousands upon thousands of instances all across, particularly the Southeastern United States, and I’m guessing even in this room in different ways. The question I want to ask this morning is, “Why is that the situation? Why are so many people content to attend a church but not ever take the step to become a member and actually join together with that church?” Or why are so many people content to be a member of a church but just kind of with a casual commitment to the church; not a wholehearted commitment to what it means to be a part of the church?

I think there are a lot of reasons behind that. I think certainly, no doubt, part of it has to do with a commitment-phobia in our culture today. It is consumerism and individualism at its best. We talked about last week, as consumers, we shop around for the best bargain at the least price. That affects the way we look at church. Individualism: We are a people who are self-sufficient and self-reliant. We talk a lot about self-esteem and self-worth. So, the idea of mutual submission to other people or accountability to other people almost seems a little weird. It may be uncomfortable. It may even be a dangerous concept for us to get involved in. People are all to blame. I think the church has a lot of blame. Undoubtedly, there people throughout this room that, in the past, have been hurt or feel like you have been burned by the church, and so you are incredibly resistant to joining together with the church.

Then, if you look at it, I think we’ve done a pretty lousy job on a whole in the church really educating based on Scripture what the church is supposed to be about. We haven’t attached a lot of meaning to what it means to be a member of the church. Have you ever wondered how a church can have two hundred members but about fifty or sixty people show up on Sunday morning? A church can have five or six thousand members but about three

thousand come to worship on Sunday morning. That is a lot of people sick in one day right there.

What does it mean to be a member of the church? Why should I be a member of the church? Will I get to vote at a business meeting? What an incredible privilege. What does that mean? Is there anything else involved in being a member of the church? I think it is even a valid question to ask: Is membership of the church even something that Scripture tells us to do? You never see the word "membership" mentioned in the Bible. The Bible never tells us to have membership procedures or have membership roles in the church. So, is this just some legalistic tradition we have added on to Christianity that makes the whole thing a lot more complex than it is supposed to be?

I think all of those are good questions. So, what I want us to do this morning is I want us to dive into Scripture, and I want us to begin to look at what Scripture teaches us about the local church. We're going to build on what we talked about last week from Ephesians 1 and come here to Ephesians 4. Let me show you an image here on the screen. It is an image we introduced last week too. It is going to be the image that we are going to fix on for the next few weeks.

We have Christ in the center who has all authority in heaven and on earth. He is filling the earth with His glory. An avenue He is using to fill the earth with His glory is the church. So, the church is extremely important in God's economy. What I want us to do though is really dive into what that means for the local church. Obviously, we know that Scripture talks about the church as a whole, all of us as believers in Christ. What about local churches? The Scripture teaches about the local church.

So, what I did this week is I dove in to looking for a definition for the local church. I started going into church history, just looking throughout centuries of Christianity to try to find different people's definition of Christianity. There are all kinds of definitions of the church that are out there in Christianity. This is a huge issue in the Reformation. Guys like John Calvin and Martin Luther really reacting against the Catholic church and what it had become. John Calvin said, "Whenever we see the Word of God purely preached in earth, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists." So, he said, "Wherever the Word of God is being preached and heard and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there you have got a church."

Now, I thought that definition was kind of reactionary. It is really hitting on some issues that were particular to his time. So, I fast forwarded all the way to today's Southern Baptist churches in the United States. How do Southern Baptists define the church? "A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous, local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel, observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights and privileges invested in them by His Word and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth." Well, that just made me tired, okay?

So, what I want to do this morning is...I want us to, maybe, do a novel thing and take look at Scripture. Let's dive into Scripture and let's see what Scripture has to teach us about the local church, if anything, and then, we will see what Scripture teaches us, if anything, about how we should be involved in the local church.

We come to the book of Ephesians. I think more than any other New Testament book, the book of Ephesians tells us the most about the essence and the nature of the church. What

we are going to do is we are going to read the first 16 verses, so we are going a long way through this. I want you to get a picture of Paul telling this local group of churches about the church and the unity in the body of Christ. Ephesians 4:1-16,

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called— one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says:

"When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men."

(What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Let me pause right there. Some of you are thinking, "Well, that is quite a run-on sentence you have got there, Paul. He just keeps adding and adding to it over and over again." Be thankful though, because actually, in the original language of the New Testament, verse 11 through 16 is all one sentence. Translators did us a favor here and split it up, breaking it up for us. So back to verse 14:

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

What is the local church?

So, what is the local church? What we are going to do is we are going to unpack a definition of the local church. The best definition I could come up with based on this passage of Scripture is, "A local body of baptized believers joined together under biblical leadership to grow in the likeness of Christ and express the love of Christ to each other and to the world around them."

"A local body of baptized believers ..."

So, let's dive in and unpack that. Let's start with, first, a local body of baptized believers. Now, unfortunately, for the sake of time, we are not even going to be able to unpack all of that statement. That whole idea of including baptized believers as a part of the local church...we're not going to have time to dive in to completely this morning. Suffice it to say

at this point that I think it is very significant in Ephesians 4:4 and 5 and 6 that we see "*one Lord, one faith, one baptism...*" I think baptism is really significant when it comes to our understanding the local church.

So, here is what we are going to do. We are going to leave that thought here, and then on August 6, we are going to come back to it. What I want us to then do together is study what baptism is all about. Is it Scriptural? How do we see its importance in the church? We are going to have a celebration of baptism that day. That is just a preview of what is to come.

This morning we are going to focus on the first part of that phrase: a local body. Here is what we need to understand from the very beginning. When the Bible refers to the church, the Bible talks about how the church is both universal and local. Here is what I mean by that: if it is universal and local, both of them together, then that means sometimes when the Bible refers to the church, it refers to all believers of all time; all who have placed their faith in Christ throughout all history; one body. That is exactly what Paul is talking about here in Ephesians 4.

In fact, there are nine times when Paul mentions the church in the book of Ephesians. Every time, he is talking about the universal body of Christ. He said it last week we saw in Ephesians 1; in Ephesians 3, he does it a couple times; in Ephesians 5, he does it over and over again. He is talking about all believers of all time. Hebrews 12 does the same thing. Look at verses 22-24 there. You will see an incredible picture of how, one day, all the saints and all those who have placed their faith in God through Christ and His promise will gather around the throne, and Christ will be in the center. All of our names are written in the book of life. We gather around. It is an incredible picture.

Just imagine. There is going to be a day when Abraham and Moses and David and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Peter and John and James and Thomas and Paul and you and I are going to gather around the throne and sing praises to Christ at the center of us. What an incredible picture of all believers throughout all history. Martin Luther, John Calvin, he will be there too. All of these guys from the past gathered together; men and women who have given their lives and shed their blood out of devotion for Christ will gather around shoulder to shoulder. What an incredible picture Scripture is giving us of the universal body of Christ.

However, that is not the only way Scripture pictures the church. Scripture also talks about how the church is local, in a certain place. Here is the deal. The word for "church" in the original language of the New Testament...I'm going to impress you with a little Greek this morning, okay? Hold on to your seats. The word for church is "ekklesia" which basically means...literally means, "called out ones"; those who would gather together in an assembly. That is the word the New Testament uses most often to refer to the church. In fact, throughout the New Testament, it is used 114 times. Now, here is the interesting thing: out of those 114 times, including the times it is mentioned by Paul in Ephesians, over 90 of them the New Testament is referring, not to the universal church, but to different local churches; over 90 out of 114, we are seeing the local church emphasized.

Let me take you on a tour. Turn with me to the left all the way back to the book of Acts. I want you to see this. I just want you to get a flavor of how the local church is emphasized in the New Testament. Look at Acts 11. Maybe you can take your pen or pencil and underline these different occurrences of the church and put out to the side "local church." This is talking about the local body of believers. Look at Acts 11:22. This whole passage right here is talking about the church in Antioch, the church that had gathered together in that local place. However, then look at it is referred to in verse 22: "*News of this [news of what was going on in Antioch] reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem...*"

So this is not talking about the universal church, all of the believers of all time. This is talking about the church where? This is the audience participation part of our program, okay? The church were? In Jerusalem...that local body of believers; not the church universal, but the church local.

Turn to the next book in the New Testament, Romans. Go with me to Romans 16. Look with me at verses 3, 4 and 5. Paul is coming to the end, and he is giving some final words to the people who were assembled there at the church in Rome. Again, a particular location...I want you to hear what he says. This is real interesting, not just a place, but I want you to see how Paul refers to the church here; not just in a particular city.

Verse 3 says, *"Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches [there it is] of the Gentiles..."* Not churches representing the Jewish people, but churches representing the Gentiles. So, that is more specific, more local. *"...are grateful to them. Greet also the church that [listen to this] meets at their house."* The New Testament is showing us the church is local enough to actually meet together in one house. So, we've got the universal church, but now, we're seeing a completely different picture of the church.

Go to the next book, 1 Corinthians 1:2. Paul writes this letter, *"To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours:"* There you have a picture of both: the local church in Corinth together with all believers.

Go to the last chapter in this same book, 1 Corinthians 16. See how Paul does kind of the same thing that he had done at the end of Romans. Look at 1 Corinthians 16. Check out verse 19. See how he refers to the church here. He says, *"The churches in the province of Asia..."* So, you have a bunch of different local churches in one province. *"...send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church [here it is again] that meets at their house."*

Now, this continues. In 2 Corinthians 1:1, *"To the church of God in Corinth..."* Galatians 1:2, *"To the church of God in Galatia..."* We see it in Ephesians referring to the universal church, but then we pick up back in Colossians and Philippians, both...chapter 4 in both of those books, we see the church referred to locally. 1 Thessalonians, *"...the church of the Thessalonians..."* 2 Thessalonians: *"This letter is written to the church of the Thessalonians..."* Over 90 times in the New Testament, the church is referred to locally.

So, here is the picture. Scripture is giving us the church on two levels: A universal level including all believers of all times, and a local level including a local body of believers in a certain place. Now, I know what you are thinking. You are thinking, "Well, Dave, thanks for that tour there. What does that have to do with us?" I want you to think about it with me. I've had many people say to me and many of us in this room may even think, "Well, I'm a part of the universal church; I'm a part of the body of Christ as a whole and that is enough for me. I don't need to commit to a local church." However, I want us to realize, based on the testimony of Scripture, that if that is what we are saying then we are trying to live our Christian lives completely contrary to the biblical pattern and the biblical teaching of the church. If we are just going to sit back and be content to be a part of the universal body of Christ, then we are going to miss out on what Christ is calling us to do as a part of His church. Overwhelmingly, the New Testament is showing us how important and how significant the local church is.

Now, I know what some of you are thinking. You are thinking, "Well, then why are we studying the book of Ephesians which always talks about the universal church to understand what the local church means?" That is a great question, because it leads us to our next point. We need to see the local church is a visible expression of the body of Christ. We see the church on two levels, but the local church is a reflection, a representation of the universal body of Christ. That is exactly what Paul is showing us here in Ephesians. He is writing this to local churches, talking about the body of Christ and how those local churches reflect the body of Christ in the world around them.

Now, many times we are content to almost think about the church in some abstract concept. "I am a part of this invisible ideal." We know, we saw it a couple weeks ago in Matthew 16, Jesus said, "I am going to build my church." He was talking about the church universal. Paul talks in Ephesians about God giving glory to the church. Think about it with me. How is Christ building His church throughout the New Testament and today? He is not building some invisible ideal. He is building visible, local churches; building visible, local communities of faith. How is Christ being glorified? He is being glorified through visible, local churches. How is Christ loving His people today? Through visible, local churches. He did it throughout the New Testament, and He is doing it today. Two levels in Paul's thinking: universal and local.

Now, what I want you to see from all of that is that we have got to come to one major conclusion then. If that is what the New Testament teaches about the church, then we would have to conclude that individualism in the church is equivalent to immaturity in the faith. I want you to hear that. Let that soak in for a second. Individualism in the church is equivalent to immaturity in the faith. Many times people say, "Well, I'm not going to be a part of the church because they will slow me down; they will keep me from experiencing all I want to experience in Christ." It is almost like we get this attitude that we are too mature in our faith for the church. That is unbiblical. Individualism in the church is a sign of immaturity in the faith.

I have had people say to me, something maybe you have heard someone say before, "You know, Dave, I love Jesus, I just don't like the church." Have you ever heard that? I won't ask who has thought it or who has said it. "I love Jesus, but I just don't like the church." Now, let's unpack that statement for just a second. The Bible talks about how the church is the Bride of Christ, right? What would you think if I came up to you and said, "Dude, I like you; I like you a lot, but I can't stand your wife." Would that offend you? The Bible talks about how the church is the body of Christ, right? What if Heather, my wife, came up to me and said, "Dave, I love you, but I just can't stand your body." Is that a good thing for a wife to say to a husband? No, it is not a good thing for a wife to say to a husband at all. Would I be honored with that statement?

Ladies and gentlemen, we are kidding ourselves, and our Christianity is less than biblical if we pretend to love Christ and ignore the church. We have missed the whole point. The thing is, somewhere along the way, we get the idea that that is a sign of maturity. It is a sign of immaturity to try to love Christ apart from His bride, apart from His body. What Scripture is teaching us is that the local church is extremely important. This church as expressed locally here has huge importance. It is good to be a part of the local church. Aren't you glad to be a part of the local church?

I haven't been here too long, but I know enough to know after just a couple weeks that this church is not perfect. It has some flaws. I have only been here two weeks, but I have probably already contributed to the imperfection in this church. I know that some of you may have even been hurt in this church in the past. However, as I was studying this

passage of Scripture this week, I was reminded of what an incredible privilege it is to be a part of a local body of believers and a community of faith that is committed to loving each other and supporting each other and encouraging each other. Sure the church has flaws, no doubt.

Man, when my family came a few weeks ago, and we preached, "In View of a Call", they were all ready to join, and it wasn't because of the sermon. It was because Christ was being exalted and a community of faith was coming together to exalt Christ. It is contagious. I have met some of you and talked with some of you who have actually moved to Birmingham, moved your job and your family to Birmingham, just so you can be a part of the church. Some people think that is crazy, but I am convinced that is the way it is supposed to be because the local church is that important. The local church is important enough. I want my life to count; you want your life to count; I want to be a part of a body of believers who are making the glory of Christ known in all nations. That is what the local church is about. What an incredible picture of not just the church universal but the local church. Let's not settle for individualism and kid ourselves. Let's give ourselves to the community of faith.

"... joined together under biblical leadership ..."

So, we're a local body of baptized believers; next, "joined together under biblical leadership." What happens in verse 7 is that Paul begins to shift the thought, and he says, "But to each of us Christ has given us gifts." What he begins to talk about...I wish we had time to really dive into what verses 8, 9 and 10 mean with all the descending and ascending stuff...but basically, it is a picture of Christ descended to become a man like us. He took on a robe of human flesh and took on our sin, and He conquered sin, and He conquered death, and He conquered the grave, and He ascended into heaven where He is exalted at the right hand of God with all authority in all the universe. He is filling the universe with His glory. We saw this last week.

I want you to see the picture that we are getting here is Christ filling the universe with His glory like a military conqueror who has conquered the enemy, and now, He is sharing all of His spoil with all of his followers. He is giving gifts to the church in order to fill the universe with His glory. It is talking about how He has given gifts to us, individually, but also to the church corporately. He begins to talk about two different groups that are given gifts basically here. He says, *"It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists and some to be pastors and teachers."* He is basically talking about church leaders here.

Then, he says, basically, if we could sum it up into two statements: First of all, the church is entrusted with servants of the Word. I want you to think about those four different offices that are mentioned: apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors/teachers. Pastor/teacher is kind of the same word in the original language of the New Testament, so we will group those together.

Now, apostles; these were guys who witnessed the resurrected Christ. They saw Him; they knew Him; they testified to Him. They had a lot of authority in the New Testament church. Prophets: We know these are guys who would take fresh revelation from God, write it down. We have the Bible that is 66 books of words that we know are from God. Then, you have evangelists who proclaim and preach the gospel; and pastors/teachers who teach the gospel. I want you to think about what commonality unites all of those: apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor/teachers. The Word, right? They are all proclaiming; they are all teaching; they are all preaching the Word.

Leaders in the church, first and foremost, are servants of the Word. Everything the Word says directs how they lead in the church. They don't lead based on their own ideas and their own opinions. They lead based on the Word. This is a pretty heavy thing to study as the pastor of a church and to realize the responsibility that is on me to be a servant of the Word; and among any other leaders in this church, to be a servant of the Word, and how huge it was in the New Testament church.

Turn with me back in Galatians 1. I want you to see how important this is. I want you to look with me at Galatians 1:6. Paul basically reprimands the church because they had allowed leaders to come in who were not servants of the Word. Check this out. Listen to what he says in Galatians 1:6:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

Now, ladies and gentlemen, there is a growing trend in churches all across our country today to minimize the role of the Word of God in the church. There are a lot of people who have been commanded to preach, who are saying that the Word is not relevant to people's lives today. People are skeptical of the Word, so we have to find another avenue to communicate to them apart from the Word. People aren't seeing the power of the Word of God in their lives, and so there is a growing trend to come up and give a speech or a talk that has nothing to do with the Word. Open the Word and maybe read a verse, close it and then go on with the talk, because the Word doesn't have the power, and the Word doesn't have relevance.

I've got a lot of things to say about that, but suffice it to say this morning...Galatians 1:6-9 haunts me because I am accountable before the God of the universe for what comes out of my mouth this morning to you. That is a mammoth responsibility. It is an overwhelming responsibility. My role in the church is a servant of the Word, and if I ever begin preaching a gospel other than the Word, then you need to kick me out. Without the Word, I have nothing to offer you as the pastor of this church. The church is entrusted with servants of the Word. I want to be a faithful servant of the Word.

I want to be good at that because here is the deal: This may surprise you, but there are a lot of things I am not good at, okay? That doesn't surprise Heather, but it may surprise you that there are a lot of things that I am just not good at. I have already told you, I am not good at building things. I'm just not good at that. We've been moving in this past week. I was putting up a light/fan fixture, and you should have seen Heather's eyes as I was playing around with those wires. She thought she was going to be preaching this morning.

Even besides that, there are a lot of things in ministry that I am just not good at. Counseling, for example; I'm just not very good at counseling. I wish I was good at counseling. Let me give you a picture of my counseling expertise, okay? Recently, not too long ago, a member of our family was...she was struggling in her marriage and her family. She came to me, and she began to pour her heart out. Tears were streaming down her face. She was sharing with me all of the difficulties she was going through: her marriage, her

family, her relationship with God. All of these struggles she is experiencing. I am listening; I am listening as best as I can. I am even doing the reflective listening that you are supposed to do. I'm doing what I know how to do, but I just didn't know what to say. It just wouldn't come to me. She got to the end and wiped the tears off of her face, and she looked at me, and she said, "Counseling is not your strong suit is it, David?" I said, "No, I am sorry! It is not that I don't care. I care greatly, but it is just not what I am good at."

However here is the deal. There are a lot of people on this staff that are a lot better at counseling than I am, but that even misses the point. Here is what I want you to see. The church is entrusted with servants of the Word, but the church is also equipped to be servants with the Word. Don't miss this. This is huge. When it says in verse 12 there...it gives those people that are servants of the Word, and it says they are to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up; to prepare God's people, the church, for serving; "for ministry" is what the original language of the New Testament is saying here.

What it is giving us is the picture every member of the church, every part of the church ministering and serving. In fact, how is the New Testament body of Christ built up? Look down at Ephesians 4:16. *"From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."*

Do you have the picture in your mind here? All of us in this local church who are entrusted by grace with gifts and passions and personalities; all coming together to serve each other with the Word. These leaders are given as servants of the Word to equip us and prepare us to serve each other. That is the picture the New Testament church is giving us here. If we are honest, it is not the traditional picture of the local church that we most often see.

Think about how used this is. I am one person. This church is three, four, five thousand members. Not all of them are here this morning, but there is obviously no way amidst the tons of things that are represented in this room alone that I could ever meet the needs of every family that is in here. Some people would say, "Well, that is what the staff is for." Think about it: Whether it is 30, 40 or even 50 staff, they could still never meet the needs of that many people, and even less so if we are going to be about making disciples of all nations and this local church is going to grow. So here is the deal. The local church model that we are most familiar with, that really, I believe, goes against Scripture, is the model where the pastor or the ministers or the staff are the ministers. If that is the case, then all of the members become only recipients of ministry.

Now, follow along with me here. When that is the case, we contribute to this consumerism where people go around, and they look at different churches and the question on their minds is: How can the church meet my needs? That is what people ask. We are not asking the question when we go to a church, "How can I best love and serve a broken world?" We are saying, "What does the church have to offer me?" Everything defaults to the staff.

However, what is missed in that model is an army of servants represented in this room going out into the nations serving people with the Word of Christ, for the glory of Christ. It is completely missed. That is a model where the church, don't miss it, is a refuge from the world that is led by leaders who created a false dependence on them to meet all of their needs. Instead of the church being a refuge from the world looking like that, I believe based on Scripture, that the church is supposed to be a force in the world making the glory of Christ known, filling this community with His glory by ministering to one another, serving one another and taking the Word that has been entrusted to us and pouring it out into

others' lives. That is the picture of the church that we are seeing in Ephesians 4. If we are honest, it is just not the picture of the church that we most often operate according to.

Please hear what I am about to say. Please do not hear me say that I don't care about the needs of your family, or I don't want to know about the needs in your family. On the contrary, please hear me saying that I care enough about the needs in your family to raise up an army of servants in this local church that can meet all of our needs together. That way Christ will fill this church and this community with His glory and not mine. That's the goal. That's who we are. We are servants with the Word. So, we don't just receive it, we reproduce it. We lay our lives down sacrificing for one another and helping each others' marriages; and helping each others' families; helping each others' homes; helping each other with the teenagers or the kids, the struggles; helping each other with the pressures at school. We are equipped to be servants with the Word. So, a local body of baptized believers joined together under biblical leadership.

"... to grow in the likeness of Christ ..."

Okay, we are going to have to fly through this next part. We have a long way to go. Some of you are a little worried right now looking at your clock seeing that we are about half way through. We have seen the essence of the church, the nature of the church, and now I want us to see the purpose. What does the church do? The local body of baptized believers joined together under biblical leadership to grow in the likeness of Christ. Look with me at Ephesians 4:13. All of this happens to prepare God's people for worship and service *"until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."*

Now, what happens is that in the original language of the New Testament there are three parallel ideas here. Until we all...these are the goals of the church. If we can restate those...you will have them there on your notes. Together, first, together we want to know the truth of Christ. We want to be united in the faith and in the knowledge in the Son of God. It is exactly what we saw in Matthew 16. We must know Him intimately. This is what unites us together, first and foremost, is knowing the truth of Christ; knowing who He is; knowing why we believe what we believe. This is so important because you get down to verse 14, and he says if we don't, then we will be infants *"tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming"*

See, if we know the truths of Christ, then we are going to guard together against deception. The picture Paul is giving us here is people who go to this one idea and kind of wander over here, and then they hear another idea taught by somebody else, and they go over here and they are always wandering back, almost like a hurricane or a tornado; or maybe like the bat relay you used to do as a kid. That crazy game that I don't know who came up with it, but you get a bunch of kids to go out on a field, run down, grab a bat, put it up over their head, spin around in circles until they are ready to, you know, and then let them loose to run out in the field and collide with each other? Parents, thanks for coming up with that one for us, okay? Now that is the picture of a local church that is wandering back and forth from teaching to teaching; that is not united in the truth of Christ. This was huge in the first century. We see it over and over again in Paul's letters. He is warning them to guard against false teachers.

I saw this so clearly in my time in the house churches in Asia. Those believers have so little knowledge of God's Word because they haven't had God's Word available to them. As a result, there are all kinds of cults that will come in and pull people away very quickly. I hope

I don't have to say this morning, I hope we realize, the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ is certainly being questioned in churches throughout the United States today. What it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ; what it means to follow the One that said, "I am the way, the truth, the life, and no one comes to the Father except through me." What I want to say this morning is that we have a responsibility as a community of faith to guard the truths of Christ. The gospel is too precious to us to not guard it. If we don't guard the gospel, ladies and gentlemen, we have nothing to share with a lost and dying world. We must guard the truth of Christ.

Not only that, together we want to imitate the character of Christ. The translation here in the English really doesn't do justice to what happens here. It says there in verse 13, "...*unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature...*" Literally, it says, "develop into a mature man". It doesn't say, "developed into mature men and women." It says "mature man" because the emphasis is on unity. What the picture we are getting here is, as you are becoming more like Christ, as I am becoming more like Christ, and you are becoming more like Christ, eventually we are developing maturity into one man, into the image of Christ.

That helps us guard against division. When we all look like Christ, when you look at divisive issues in the church today in local churches it is most often over methods and programs and policies. It is not over the person of Christ. Developing the character of Christ, we put that aside in many of our discussions. We miss out on it, and we become divided. We guard against division by becoming like Christ. That doesn't mean we all become like each other; we clone each other. That is not the point. God knows we don't need more of us in the church. We need more people that look different from us, act different from us, think different from us, have different gifts and passions and personalities, but are united with the image and character of Christ at the center of our hearts. That is the picture we are getting of the church here.

Together, we know the truth the Christ, we imitate the character of Christ and together, we display the fullness of Christ. Attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ, same word we saw last week in Ephesians 1:22-23, which said the church is the fullness of Him, the fullness of Christ. So, we display His fullness just like we talked about last week in that we guard against distraction because that is our purpose; that is our aim; we want to display the glory of Christ in our city and in all the world.

So, when you see the purpose of the church here, to grow into the likeness of Christ by knowing His truth, imitating His character and by displaying His fullness, that is the overarching exclusive primary purpose of the church in the New Testament, to grow into the likeness of Christ. It makes sense. We have talked about a lot already here at this church about making disciples of all nations, right? Well, what is that doing? It is bringing people into the likeness of Christ in all nations. It is exactly what Jesus told us before He ascended into heaven. It is what He is telling us now about His church.

Now, I want you hear me real closely at this point. There are a lot of people, even well-meaning Christians, who come into the church and have an agenda for what they want to accomplish. A lot of people in the church come into the church with a mission that they want to promote, an agenda that they want to make sure is on the table. What happens most often is that in local churches, leadership spends all of their time catering to the different agendas. "Well, you want this? Okay. Well, you want this? Okay." We cater to everyone's different agendas.

So, if you are a member or a prospective member of this church, what I want to say to you this morning as the pastor of this church is that we don't want your agenda. It is not needed here. We have an agenda. We have a mission from the youngest person in this church to the oldest person in this church. We are committed to growing into the likeness of Christ and leading others in all places to grow into His likeness. That is what we are about. I've been around the church long enough, 27 years, some may think that is young, but it is long enough to know that it is very easy for us to get so caught up in our discussions about church and discussions about musical style and orders of worship and programs and policies that somewhere along the way, discussions about growing in the likeness of Christ completely disappear. I want to say to you this morning that if your agenda is not to grow in the likeness of Christ as a believer, if your agenda is not to make disciples in His likeness across the planet then, then this local church is not for you. We could use your seat. I prayed about whether or not to use that line, and I just wanted to.

"... and express the love of Christ to each other and to the world around them."

This is what the church is about. As pastor of this church, I don't want to spend all of my time leading a staff to cater to the agendas represented in this room and miss the agenda for which we were created: To grow in the likeness of Christ. Not only to grow in His likeness, there is one element of this passage that comes up over and over again that I think we have to include in this definition of the local church: Expressing the love of Christ to each other and to the world around them.

I want you to look in Ephesians 4:2. *"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in..."* What? *"...love."* Look down in verse 15, *"Instead, speaking the truth in love..."* Then, in verse 16, *"From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love..."* Three times in this passage Paul emphasizes how we do these things. We grow into His likeness; speak the truth; we build each other up, and we do it in love. Love is the distinguishing mark of the church. It is the distinguishing mark of the church according to Scripture, but sadly, it is not the Word that comes to a lot of people's minds when they are asked about the local church.

Even in this room, in members of this church, love may not be the Word that comes to your mind when you think about the local church. I am praying that God will help us to change that because it is the distinguishing mark of who we are. Think about it. Think about the different ways we love by committing our lives to the church. This just shows membership in the church is more than signing up and joining a club. That is not the point. We join together with the church; we commit our lives to the church. We join the church or commit to the church.

Either you are a member, or you are not a member right now, but we give ourselves to the church, number one, for the good of other Christians, building up the body in love. God, help us to stop arrogant Christianity that tries to live the Christian life on our own. There are people in this room that need your gifts and your personality and your passions to spur them on toward Christ. Believe it or not, you need them too. We're a body. We are in this thing together. Join the church. Commit yourself to the church for the sake of the men and women around you who want to know the fullness of Christ and need you to help them do that. Join the church for the sake of yourself so that you can know His fullness.

Number two: Join or commit to the church for the good of non-Christians. What does John 13:35 say? *"By this will all men know that you are my disciples."* The world will know that you are a follower of Christ when you do, what? When you love one another. A love for each other speaks volumes to the world around us. This is exactly why, when in the local church,

we fight with each other, and we bicker with each other, and we have disunity with each other, the world sits back and says, "You know, I really don't see the point." It completely stops our evangelistic witness in the community. It completely stops our ability to show the glory of Christ.

However, when we sacrifice for each other; when we lay down our lives for each other; when we support each other and encourage each other and hold each other accountable, then we see...the world sees a picture of Christ in the church, and they say, "I want to be a part of that." I am convinced that in the New Testament in the book of Acts, the greatest evangelistic strategy...the greatest strategy for advancing the gospel in the book of Acts, I believe, was the church itself. Acts 5, in one verse, it says all the people that were outside the church were in awe of the church because they saw how they loved and served each other. They were almost afraid to join them. In the very next verse, though, it says multitudes began to join them. It is a picture of people who saw Christ in the church, were awed by it, and then said, "Hey, that is something I want to be a part of." That is what I want to see in this city through this local church.

Join the church for the sake of other Christians, for the sake of non-Christians and join and commit to the church ultimately for the sake, for the good, of God, to display His fullness and to display His glory. Let me ask you a question. How are we going to display the glory of the One who sacrificed His life out of love for the church, if we sacrifice nothing out of love for the church? I am not pretending to say this morning that it is easy to love the church, that it is easy to commit to the church, but I am saying that it is worth it. It was worth it to Christ. It is worth it for us if we are followers of Christ.

The Biblical Truth...

This brings it all to kind of a head, a biblical truth that I think sums up this whole idea of local church and membership. We said at the very beginning that membership is not mentioned in Scripture. Membership certainly is not signing on a line and joining a club...that is not what we are talking about here. However, based on what we have seen about the local church in Scripture, I think we can say pretty confidently that membership involves this: It involves committing your life in a covenant. I use that word because that was the word in the Old Testament that talks about how the people of God assembled together before Him. It means a promise or a commitment or a bond; a covenant with other believers to accomplish the mission of Christ in the world. When we talk about being members of this church, that is what we mean. It means we are committed to each other. We are bonded with each other in a commitment to accomplish His mission in the world.

Why would you not, as a believer in Christ, want to commit yourself to a local church if that is what the Bible says about the local church? We saw this last week so clearly. We came to the end of the service where I shared with you about Indonesia, about the needs for homes there. You can buy a house in Indonesia for \$400. You responded. I gave an invitation and you responded; came down to the front. You weren't expecting to give. There were husbands and wives sitting in different parts of the room looking at each other as if to say, "Are you going to give? Am I going to give?" For some, both went down; didn't know the other was giving, so it worked out really good. Over \$91,000 to display the glory of Christ in Indonesia. I told somebody this week, "I am convinced, if the Lord took me away at this point, I would be happy to have been the pastor of this church because of what is going on in Indonesia to display His glory at this moment."

I told you at the end of the first service last week when somebody had come down and said, "My business, financially, I have hit rock bottom. I really don't have anything. I used to have something I could give, but I don't have anything right now." So, he said, "I want to give this." He took off his Rolex watch and said, "I want to give this instead, and I want you to use it however you can to display the glory of Christ in Indonesia." So, I preached the second service with a Rolex watch in my pocket; closest I've ever been to a Rolex watch.

Afterwards a couple from the church came up and said, "We want to buy the Rolex watch so that you can give it back to that man." So, this couple writes a multi-thousand dollar check and buys the Rolex watch. This week we go back, and we give it to this brother. With tears in his eyes, he says, "I won this watch at a conference a while ago, and I promised myself that when my son graduated from high school, I was going to give it to him as a gift. What a coincidence, you know? Who would have thought?"

Somebody else came up to me after the second service and handed me two gold, valuable earrings and said, "These were given to me by my mom. I want to give them. I want you to use them to display the glory of Christ in Indonesia, but I also want us to pray that my mom, who is not a believer, will come to faith in Christ, and I want to give this sacrifice." Somebody else said, "I've got a ring that my grandmother gave me that I want to give."

You don't have to turn to it, but let me just read you something in Acts 4:32-35.

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

This is a picture of the New Testament church displaying the glory of Christ. I am excited to be a part of it. The local church is that important. I am convinced that...we can dive into this another day...but I am convinced the local church is the most powerful force in the world today. Millions of believers represented around this world, in villages around this world, in cities around this world, representing the local church, the body of Christ, visible expression of His body. We have the potential to impact nations for the glory of Christ. Let's come in line with what He says we need to look like. Let's give ourselves to Him in that. Let's grow into His likeness; make disciples in His likeness; and let's let Him express His glory through us in this city and all the world.

I want to invite you this morning, based on this Word, if you are not joined together with a local church, if you are a part of the universal body of Christ, but you are not committed to a local church, then I want to invite you this morning to say, "It is time to commit my life to the local church." Here at this church you can do that in a variety of different ways. You can note it on the celebration guide to put in the offering basket.

This morning I am going to give you an opportunity. I am going to ask some of the leaders of the church to be up here at the front. We don't require that you come down the aisle to become a member of the church, but I am going to give you the opportunity to do exactly that this morning, to say right now, "I want to put feet to this. I want to be a part of this local church." I'm not even saying that you need to be a part of this local church. Just get committed to a local church that is displaying the glory of Christ and experience what Christ has for you and for the church.

I want to challenge you, if you are connected with a local church, whether it is this local church or another one, I want to challenge to think this morning based on the Word, how you can better serve. Commit yourself to the church. There are many opportunities to serve the needs of the local church. Maybe it is not committing to do another program or something, but maybe it is committing to just start serving and loving the people around you. Start laying down your life for them.

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