

Together in Christ amid Divisive Times: Sermon 2
A Deeper Community
Ephesians 1:1–23; Acts 2:36–37

Last week we launched our fall sermon series, titled, *Together in Christ amid Divisive Times*. There we noted the divisive climate around us at this moment, and reminded ourselves that a spirit of division at work around us, may seek to sow its seeds among us, right here, inside the church.

This was not to wallow in negativity. Far from it. Rather, this was to recognize a great opportunity before us. With division around us, the body of Christ has an opportunity to explore and display the uniqueness of its own bonds of love. Now is the time for the Christian community to truly shine.

Thus, I set before us a higher calling this fall. A living into Paul's calling to the Ephesians, in Ephesians 4:3: "Be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3).

To do this, we also noted, requires us to explore more deeply just what this community is that Paul calls to unity. What's unique about the community gathered around Christ? How is it that Jesus, as we saw last week in John 17, can call this community to a unity that is so distinctly different than any unity the world around it can know? And what does this community have to do with you and me, with the Falls Church Anglican?

With these questions in mind, we'll move through Ephesians this fall, considering the *nature*, *habits*, and *loves* of the community created by Christ. In the next two weeks, we focus on the community's nature: what creates it, what maintains it, who all does it included. Two themes will emerge from the first two chapters of Ephesians, describing the nature of the Christ Community as deep and diverse.

I've been told by people who are looking for a church that they want a *deep* church. Life's been too hard and is too complex for shallow. They need more than good music, comfortable pews and a funny pastor: they need depth. I think what they mean is they are looking for community that runs deeper than the vicissitudes of feelings and popular trends. They need something that won't break apart in life's storms.

Lifting our eyes from Ephesians 4:3 and turning to Ephesians chapter 1, we discover that *deep*, is indeed an appropriate way to describe the nature of the church. As we'll see, when compared to all other communities around it, the church is a *deeper community*, and this comes through in three ways: It has a deeper (1) relevance, (2) foundation, and (3) power.

I. Deeper Relevance

Is the local church relevant to your life? Or, even if you are a Christian, is it an optional add on. Is Jesus' primary purpose in your life more like a personal spiritual guide, helping you with an inward, privatized spirituality?

An increasing number of Westerners think so. Writers who study the decline in church attendance in America have used the term "unchurched" to describe "self-identified Christians who are unaffiliated with a congregation."¹ In 2012 a cover story of Newsweek showed a picture of Jesus dressed as a hipster standing alone in Time Square with the provocative title: *Forget the Church: Follow Jesus.*²

Is the local church relevant to your walk with Christ, to your life? Paul answers yes. We can see this if we consider a relationship between two verses in Ephesians chapter 1, one coming at the end, and one near the beginning.

The Church as Christ's Body and Fullness

Toward the close of Ephesians 1, Paul moves from a prayer into a doxology, praising God for what He's done through Christ. At the close, in verses 22-23, Paul recalls that after Jesus' resurrection, God brought him back into heaven and gave him authority. The passage reads:

²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church,
²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph 1:22-23).

This is the first explicit mention of the church in Ephesians, and it tells us two stunning things.

Body: First, Paul tells us that the church is so intimately connected to Jesus, that it is his body. He doesn't say it's like his body; he says it is his body.

Fullness: Second, Paul tells us that the church is also the fullness of him who fills all in all. This is tricky to understand at first. Here is what I think it means. The Bible, in Habakkuk 2:14, speaks of a day in the future when "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14).

This speaks of a time when all the earth and all its creatures will experience the presence of God, praise His glory, and live beneath His good Kingship. God is bringing this about through His Son, and as people give their lives to Jesus, become filled with the Spirit of Jesus, and obey Him, God's fullness and glory cover a little more of the earth.

What does this have to do with the church? The Church is the only community on earth where the people gather under the Lordship of Christ, sing God's praises because of Christ, and come under the authority of God's Word. The local church is that location on earth where the glory

¹ James W. Thompson, *The Church According to Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014), 3.

² <https://www.newsweek.com/andrew-sullivan-christianity-crisis-64025>, accessed Sept 17, 2020.

and knowledge of the Lord are filling all things, even as the waters cover the sea. That's what Paul means when he writes in verse 23, "the fullness of him who fill all in all." Christ will eventually fill the entire cosmos with his palpable rule; but as of now, that rule is being poured out inside the local church, and with increasing fullness.

One who is "in Christ" prioritizes being in His Body

How does seeing that the church is Christ's body and fullness help us understand the relevance of the local church to our lives? Consider now a verse earlier in the chapter, Ephesians 1:4. Here Paul talks about the individual coming to faith, and says:

"⁴ ... God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world..." (Eph 1:4).

We'll have more to say about this verse in a moment, but for now notice how Paul can describe being a Christian as "God choosing us in Christ." This last phrase, "in Christ," is one Paul loves, and it occurs 165 times in his letters.³ This phrase means for Paul that salvation and new life occur, in some sense, "in Christ," in a profound closeness and oneness with Christ.

Let's now put these ideas in Ephesians 1:23 and Ephesians 1:4 together. If the church is the body of Christ and the fullness of Christ, and if to be a Christian is to be "in Christ," then it seems that it would be odd to be "in Christ" and have nothing to do with Christ's body and fullness—His church. To be "in Christ" is to be where Christ is, and Christ is in His Church.

Later in the sermon we'll see some further reasons why the church is so essential, but for now let's draw one implication from realizing that to be in Christ means to be part of His body, the church.

The local church is profoundly relevant. It's relevance for your wellbeing, your life, and your future run *deeper* than the relevance of any other community. Yes, the local church has foibles. But it is the only community on earth right now where the Lordship of Christ is so real, that Jesus says it's His own body. Christ plan for you involves his body, the church. Thus, we should prioritize our relational bonds within this community.

The church has a deeper relevance for you. Next let's consider its foundation, or what ultimately creates and grounds this community

II. Deeper Foundation

What creates a community? What brings it into existence? Much community today forms around *affinities*: two or more people share an affinity, an interest, an experience and unite around it. This could be an affinity around Shakespeare or basketball. It could be an affinity around shared life experience, like when groups form around young moms, new retirees, or

³ On the "in Christ" phrase in Paul, see Sang-Won Son, *Corporate Elements in Pauline Anthropology: A Study of Selected Terms, Idioms, and Concepts in the Light of Paul's Usage and Background* (Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2001), 8–9, 187–90.

young adults. People share an interest, commitment, or life stage, and find themselves uniting around that.

Is this how the community around Christ, the church, forms? Does the community known as the body of Christ form because people have a shared interest in being religious? Or a shared passion for justice? Or a shared enjoyment of hymns or praise songs or a preacher?

In Ephesians 1:4–5, Paul gives us a first window into what creates the Christian community: it is neither shared interest nor our decision; it’s an act of God. Paul reminds the Ephesians:

⁴ God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵ He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will (Eph 1:4–5, NRSV).

This verse tells us so much about how the community comes into being. Three things to highlight.

First, **God makes** this community, not man. Verse 4 says, “God chose us in Christ.” It is neither our shared interest in religion, justice, or shared life experience, or simply our enjoyment of each other, that creates this community. God does. This is why Paul, in Eph 4:3, calls us not to create, but to “maintain the unity” of the community.

Second, this community was **founded before all others**. Verse 4 goes on, God chose us in Christ, “before the foundation of the world.” Running deeper than the community of your biological family, your alma mater, your country, your culture, is that community that was planned and chosen before the foundation of the world.

Third, this community is **personal and pleasing to God**. Notice the familial language of verse 5, “He destined us for adoption as children.” This community is not a school, an army, a club; it’s family...God’s family. This community is personal to God. Then notice how the verse ends: God did all this “according to the good pleasure of his will.”

This deeper foundation fosters a more authentic connection

How does this realization, that your local church community is a creation of God, not man, and is personal to God and for His pleasure, shape the feel of the community?

When God brings someone into His new family, it means they are brought through the process of conversion. This entails repentance, and the embrace of grace. Repentance means one has come to see they are not perfect, but deeply sinful. They need help. They need saving. The embrace of grace means that in this posture, because of what Jesus has done for them on the cross, they’ve been taken up in God’s arms of love. They realize they are objects of God’s most profound love. This produces a community fueled by both humility and dignity.

Let me try to **illustrate** why this produces a community of love.

Today, many people foster community around the idea of tolerance and inclusivity. By this they mean that we all should accept and embrace each other, just as we are. Each person's rights, ideas, and views are equal and must be equally honored. There is so much good intention behind this idea. But consider this analogy for the difference between a man-made community, founded on tolerance and individual rights, differs in feel, from a God-made community built on repentance and grace.

Imagine there is a large house with only one door. A group of people stand outside it. Each person is carrying a few bags in their hands. You want to get everyone into the house. Getting them into the house equals building them into a community. But, there is one problem. The single door is very small, and no one can walk through it, especially with all their bags.

You have two options. Option one: make the door bigger. Blow it open so anyone and everyone can stroll in, carrying their bags, standing tall. Option two: leave the door as is, but require anyone who would enter to drop his or her bags, and kneel down to crawl through. The bags and upright posture represent an individual's own ideas, their pride, and their sense of their own rights. In the first example, blowing up a bigger door represents creating a community around tolerance and individual rights. In this room, you have a bunch of people carrying all their stuff; they are so big and so full of themselves; they can't really connect with each other.

In the second example, the small door represents God-made community, where to enter you must repent—meaning, you drop your bags, and forsake your pride, you bow before God in humility. Now, inside the house is a group of people who have been humbled, who are carrying nothing except God's grace and God's call. This group is then lifted up, not by themselves, but by a realization that they've been chose by God—they are his children, they are the object of his good pleasure, his love.

Which community would you rather be a part of?

The foundation of the Christian community, the way it is created and built, is utterly different than all other communities. It is not built around man's interests of affinities; it is not built around our rights, it is not built around tolerance; it is built by God, and founded upon repentance and grace. It is infused, therefore, with a unique quality of humility and dignity before God and each other.

The church community has a deeper relevance because it's Christ's body, and a deeper foundation, because it's created by God. Finally, let's consider its power.

III. Deeper Power

Communities have power. By this I mean there is something about the groups or family or association that we belong to that holds and shapes.

*We look to community because we need to **be upheld**. We need to know we are not alone and that this group can bear us up in trial. We also realize that our communities **shape us**. They have the power to change us.*

You have watched your children be influenced by the group they're in; we've all been shaped by our family of origin; we continue to be shaped by the ideals and ways of the groups we belong to.

This is what I mean when I say community has power—power to uphold and power to form.

Word and Spirit

There is a deep power at work within the Christian community, and we see it when we read Ephesians 1:13, which reads:

In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13).

Essential to the nature of Christian community is the Word of God and Spirit of God, and together they are the most powerful force at work in the world today.

Most of you are familiar with the word of God—the Bible. Many are familiar with the Spirit of God. But what do they have to do with each other? In this verse there is a link between believing in the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. I want you to see something important here. Notice the little word, "**Promise**," that comes before holy spirit. Paul says that this spirit was promised.

There is a background to this verse that is key to grasping what the power is and how it works. Hundreds of years before Paul wrote to Ephesians, a prophet named Ezekiel declared God's promise to one day do a new work that involved God's Spirit, the revivifying of human hearts, and obedience to God's Word. God declares in Ezekiel 36:25–27:

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules (Ezekiel 36:25–27).

This promise has been fulfilled in the church. The Spirit has come and revivified our hearts—turning them from hard to soft, from rock to flesh. Only with these new hearts can we "walk in and obey God's statutes and rules," meaning keep His Word.

The Christian community, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, lives "**under the word**." But not just anyone can read the Bible and feel they are coming under God's Word. Only those who have been revivified by the Spirit of God, can engage the Word of God in this supernatural way.

We have a sustaining and shaping Word to speak to each other

For many communities, truth is relative, fluid, changing. Communities formed around relative truth live around a vague and dull word—not a powerful word. A well-known thinker and social critique comments:

We live in a relativistic culture ... were many people have no firm categories to organize their thinking. They find it hard to give a straight yes-or-no answer to tough moral questions. When they go in search of answers, they generally find people who offer them comfort and ways to ease their anxiety.⁴

Communities built around human opinion and the human spirit have very little true power to uphold us and finally shape us into the people God calls us to be.

However, those who sit under the Word of God and engage it by the Spirit of God commune around a certain and sharp Word. Here, the community comes under the voice of God the Father and is cared for by the careful touch of God the physician. In a posture of prayer and humility, we have fellowship together around the Word of God, relying on the Spirit of God, and through this experience the power of God to uphold and transform us.

When compared to any other community or group we might be part of, the church is a deeper community. It has a deeper significance, a deeper foundation, and a deeper power.

Let me conclude by posing a few questions this raises for us.

1. Are you taking the local church and your relationships there seriously enough? Or, is there another community you are prioritizing? Of course, the nuclear family, moms and dads, husbands and wives, children, are a top priority and blessing from God. However, the nuclear family is not what Paul say God made Christ the head of; it is not called the Body of Christ, and it is not what you are saved into. In God's plan for your eternal wellbeing, the Church is most relevant.

2. Does our Christian community reflect a creation of God or a creation of man? Is our community built around affinity groups, or is it explainable only as a work of God?

3. What community exerts the most power in your life at present? What community, group, party, or association holds the most sway over your heart? Which community is shaping how you see the world and see yourself?

4. Are we treating or brothers and sisters in Christ like they are chosen by God according to the pleasure of his will? When you interact with a Christian, you interact with someone for whom Christ died (see 1 Cor 8:11; Rom 14:15). They are worth so much.

Let's pray.

⁴ David Brooks, "The Arduous Community," *NYT* Dec 20, 2010.