

Deep: Church
Delivered July 29, 2012

As both a person who grew up with the church as a significant part of my life, and now a person who spends much of my time working with and thinking about the local church, I should probably confess to you that at times I have had a love/hate relationship with the church. I can see our faults (locally and globally) as well as any other church leader can see them. When you work closely with the church like I do, you can't help but see the flaws in front of you. I'd liken it to the way that when you get married, you get to see all the flaws of your spouse in great detail – and vice versa! The other side of that up-close vision is that you also get to see the things that make her more beautiful and more admirable. The same is true for the church. Because I work closely with her, I can see her beautiful and admirable qualities as well, and I do my best to look past the flaws I find on the surface.

Most of the time in my love/hate relationship, I land in the hopeful, loving posture towards the church however. You might think that's just due to the fact that I work here and get paid to be loving and hopeful about the church, but I would tell you that it's for a different reason. I don't land on the hopeful perspective of the church for any reason that has to do with me, or even the other leaders who are doing such a great job in our church, or even in the church around the world. I end up in the hopeful place because I keep reminding myself that God, through Christ, has promised to build his church. He has been building this church since long before I existed, since long before New Life Assembly existed – it's a building project that has been going on for centuries and which will continue on in the generations that come after me. Ultimately the future of the church doesn't rest on me, or even on my children; it rests on God who is both architect and builder of the church from beginning to end.

It is easy for us, no matter our history with the church, to see all of her flaws. We can pretty quickly point out the ways that she has failed in her mission, and we could each share some of our own personal disappointments with the church, talking for hours about the "would haves", "should haves", and "could haves" that dot the landscape of church history. It would be easy for us to turn into pessimists about what the church could be and should be in the world, and to some extent maybe some of us already have turned into those pessimists.

But as we have been reading Paul's letter to the Ephesians through these first couple of chapters I hope we have been reminded that our vision of the church – both local and universal – tends to get a little cloudy through the progress of time. And while we might become cynical and even critical of the church, it's possible that we simply need a reformation of our view of the church. I've said before that I want New Life to be the church in our area of the world that changes what people think about when they think about the church. That the kind of change has to start first inside the church if we're ever going to change what people outside the church think.

If we want to help others look past the surface level faults and flaws of the church, then we have to be willing to do so ourselves. If we're going to see a deeper, more beautiful and admirable picture of the church, then we have to learn to focus our attention on Christ as the architect and builder of the church and less on the people and personalities

that tend to get the attention first. What if we were able to see the church like Jesus sees it?

The first section of chapter 3, which we won't read this morning, is Paul giving some more time and attention to the question of the unity between the two groups of people – Jews and Gentiles – coming together as one new humanity. He calls this the mystery that God has hidden from ages past but now has revealed to the world. It's a particular passion of his because he feels called to bring the gospel to this group of people – the Gentiles, and so on to the nations.

The end of chapter 3 is the high point of the entire letter – another prayer, which is in some respects a continuation of the prayer he began in chapter 1. We're actually going to work backwards through this passage, starting in **verses 20-21**. These two verses are the pinnacle of the letter – everything in these three chapters has led us up to this mountaintop, and everything in chapters 4-6 will be concerned with working out the application of what he says here. God in all of his glory on display is a God beyond our greatest imagination, a God of immeasurable power. That same power is at work in us, both as individuals and as a church, which makes possible things that we never would have thought possible – things we can't even dream about. But that power is always for God's purpose and glory, and is never for us and our purposes.

Through both Christ and the church God receives glory, which means that how we *are* the church actually matters. We can't fool ourselves into thinking that what we do with this expression of the church doesn't matter or reflect on God and his glory. When we get it wrong, we obscure God in all of his glory and put the attention back on those faults and flaws. But when we get it right, then we reflect God's glory through our lives for all generations to see (echoes of 2:7). As the church lives out our calling to be the church, God's incomparable power and grace are being reflected through us.

To that end, **verses 17-19** are of primary importance as they show how we get to serve the purpose of God's glory. We cannot hope to serve that purpose without the indwelling presence of Christ in our hearts by faith. The presence of Christ among us makes us the church rather than just a group of really good, friendly people. We believe that Jesus actually dwells within each of us individually, and among us as the church and people of God. As God's presence dwells among us, he creates a deeply rooted, firmly founded love for him and each other as a result of his presence with us.

So Paul's prayer is for that presence to grow stronger among us, so that we would be empowered to know what is ultimately beyond our ability to comprehend. It's a strange phrase, but an indication that there are some things, like love, that you will understand only to a certain point by virtue of your intellect and reason, but that you can know far more about by experience. As long as you want to understand love based solely on your intellect and reason, you will never grasp it in all of its dimensions – its height, depth, breadth, and length. But the church is here, in part, to invite us to allow Christ's love to be unfolded in our hearts; to take root in our lives, which will fill us up in a way that we can't possibly imagine with a love that is past finding out, and cannot be exhausted.

We know the depths of that love only through the Spirit's power at work in us, which is evidence of God's great, rich love in us. He gives us power to experience this love from

within our inner being. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, living within us from the moment of our decision to follow Jesus, we have unbounded access to the riches of the love of Christ. When we have access to that kind of love, we have a hope of fulfilling the high calling of bringing glory and honor to God in and through our lives.

All of which points back to the Father in **verses 14-15**. He is the author and the source of redemption in our lives and the one to whom we bow in praise and prayer now because he was the one who began this process in our lives. He intended to put his wisdom on display through the church. His manifold, multi-colored, multi-faceted wisdom is to show all the intricacy of his design through the variety of the church. Having redeemed us from every tribe, culture, language and nation, he brings glory to his name from this incredibly complex, but beautiful, organism called the church.

In the church, God calls together all nations, cultures, and languages into one, beautiful, God-honoring and glorifying body of Christ. When the church lives up to that calling, there is nothing quite as beautiful or compelling as she is. God's glory shines through our lives, individually and collectively, and he gets all the credit for creating this beautiful body to be filled with all of Christ's fullness – his love, grace, mercy, and power. When we live out our calling to unity in Christ's love, then there is nothing more powerful than the church – a power beyond limit is at work in us. When we live out our calling to be the church, the body of Christ, there is a depth of love that will be present among us that simply blows away any other human community, no matter how close they are.

I want nothing more than for that to be true among us at New Life, and that starts with my desire for that to be true for you personally here at New Life. I want each of you to experience the love of Christ that is deep, wide, high, and long and which fulfills every desire your heart has ever had. I want you to be able to see your life being lived for God's glory and praise as the highest purpose your life could ever attain. And I think the church is the context where you both understand that purpose, and where you learn how to live out that purpose.

I believe the church is exactly the kind of community that you have been looking for, but haven't been able to find, and I believe that's exactly why you're drawn here each week. It's not because we have the best music in town, or the best speaker, but because the love of Christ fills this group of people, there is something unique about the community created here. This is not about any one person, or personality, but all about representing Christ as King of our lives and head of our church, which means that his love fills us up, and his glory gives purpose and direction to all of us together.

To do this you have to commit to look more deeply at the church, past our imperfections to see us (and you as part of us) the way that God sees us and intends us to be: his church, for his glory, filled with his power, and overflowing with his great love.