



Sermon Notes

Term – Summer 2019

Series – Ephesians

Gathering & Date – the 10, 23 June

Title – What's the church for?

Preacher – Paul Langham

Reading – 1 Corinthians 12:27-31 & Ephesians 4:7-13

What's the purpose of the church?

To answer that question, it's interesting to consider the word Jesus chose to describe his followers collectively. There were 2 very obvious words he could have chosen

1. Temple (which primarily has to do with sacrifice)
2. Synagogue (which, among other things, had a focus on teaching)

In both, the focus is inevitably on the significance of the 'experts at the front' – either those who can perform your sacrifice for you, or those who can instruct you.

Jesus chose neither of these Jewish religious terms. Rather, he chose the word 'ekklesia' a secular term meaning 'gathering' (one of the reasons we renamed our church services as gatherings). Ekklesia was a gathering of citizens and was far more egalitarian (the term originated in Athens during its 'Classical' period, c. 550 – 350 BC).

It is also a strong indication that Jesus intended his people to be 'out there' rather than 'in here'.

And what's happened over the years? We've moved back towards the model of temple with its emphasis on sacrifice (Roman Catholicism) or the model of Synagogue with its emphasis on teaching (Protestantism).

Once again, the focus is inevitably on the significance of the 'experts at the front'. In other words, our models of 'church' exalt the few and disempower the many, leading to a 'passenger' mentality in many of our churches. Thankfully, this is now changing, with a recovery of 'every member ministry' and so on.

Ephesians 4

vv 7 – 10 see Paul use yet more secular imagery, this time from Roman military custom. When a Roman general won victory in some foreign land, he would return, with his troops, and camp outside Rome. The Emperor would grant him a 'Triumph', during which he would march into the City dragging a train of captives from the conquered territories, and make spectacular gifts to the citizens of Rome from the spoils of war, often in the form of 'Games' (athletic tournaments, gladiatorial contests etc.).

Here, Paul presents Jesus as THE victorious king – his captives are not human beings, but the great forces ranged against humanity – sickness, sin, death itself.

And his gifts are not mere trinkets or passing entertainments. Jesus gave

- Apostles
- Prophets
- Evangelists
- Pastors (scholars often prefer the term Shepherds because 'Pastor' has become a technical term for 'Leader' in many denominations)
- Teachers

Ironically, some churches interpret these terms almost exclusively in terms of leadership (as in 'Pastor'). Some church leaders declare themselves to be apostles – and indeed they may be ... but when it's only the leader who can use that term, we're yet again, if we're not very careful, exalting the few and disempowering the many.

Here at Christ Church, we prefer to see this passage as descriptive of the shape of the Body of Christ here on earth. Each one of us will be most comfortable in one (or possibly two) of the 5-fold ministry descriptors.

It's sobering to consider that our almost exclusive emphasis on 2 of the 5 ministry shapes (pastor and teacher) has meant that for centuries, the church has been out of shape and operating on only 40% of the gifts Jesus gave. Those with an apostolic, prophetic or even evangelistic calling and gift have often found themselves misunderstood, ignored and finally pushed out of churches whose focus is 'in' rather than 'out' (in a pastor / teacher model, when those terms are only applied to the 'experts at the front', it's very hard indeed for a church to be truly outward focussed.)

There is much more to say on this of course. We don't want to denigrate God's gift of leadership to and within his church. But we do want to emphasise that Jesus has given these gifts

to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up (v. 12)

Our sense is that the old model of attractional church – where the aim is to do what you do so well that people will come (and you end up with an endless cycle of Christians moving to the latest new thing – is giving way to a recovery of God's original design for the church – where all the people are empowered to see Kingdom Come.