

GOD'S GLOBAL CAUSE: THE MULTIPLICATION OF LOCAL CHURCHES FOR THE DISPLAY OF HIS GREATNESS

Ephesians 2:19-3:12

INTRODUCTION

My wife Jane and I and our 5 children moved to Janesville in July of 1997, sent by the Forest Lakes District of the EFCA to start this church. I came here convinced that everything is about God, that the Triune God is the goal of human existence. The reason that the Son of God became man and lived and died and rose again was so that human beings might be forgiven for preferring everything else to God and then, by the gracious work of the HS, discover that God himself is better than everything in the universe. I came here with a fairly simple plan to teach the gospel to all who would listen so that God might create a community of people who were daily repenting of preferring creation to the creator and growing in their trust in, admiration for, satisfaction with and delight in this great God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I came with the prayer that God would make a community, through the gospel, of God-besotted, Christ exalting, self-forgetting lovers of people.

I've loved what I've gotten to do these past 13.5 years and I've loved seeing what God has done among us as he has formed this church by his word and Spirit. I love you and I love being with you and I love my job, most of the time. My life is very full in a good way. I could be very happy simply doing what I am doing until I die. However, since the beginning of our church, because we have taken the word of God seriously, we have said that our church would not be all that God wanted us to be until we were involved in starting other churches in Rock County, with the same God-centered, Christ dependent, gospel based philosophy. Since the beginning a portion of every dollar that has been given to our church has been placed in a Church Planting Fund. We have had, as it were, the planting of other churches in Rock County on our mind for the past 13 years but we have done little to implement our desire. Quite frankly, the chief reason for our lack of action has been, at least for me, that planting other churches requires effort and work beyond what we are currently doing and, as I said, my life is already quite full.

This last year the Elders and other leaders in our church have begun praying and talking about and planning for our church starting other churches. We decided that one of the steps in that process is for me to do a 10 week series of sermons, here at the beginning of the year to examine what the NT teaches us about the means God uses to multiply local churches. Now before you pull out your calendars to figure out when you'll be coming back to church again, let me say something to you. I'm quite excited about this series because we are going to be looking at a variety of passages in which we will be talking about what it means for us to be the family of God, what is it that makes us God's church? These messages will not be simply exhortations for you to add more activities to your already full lives. Rather we will be talking about God's vision for us as his people. We will be talking about the ways he intends for us to grow in our delight in him and then, through us, bring others to join us in our joy.

This morning I'm going to look at a passage in Ephesians to discover why it is that God aims to display his greatness through the multiplication of local churches. The passage does not directly tell us that God's global cause is the multiplication of local churches. It is implied but not directly stated. I am coming to this text presupposing that the NT teaches that it has always been God's intention to multiply local churches of Jesus Christ. I will give you three strands of evidence from the NT that demonstrates that it is God's will that more and more local churches be established in the world until all of God's lost sheep have been found by bringing them into his one flock, his universal church by joining them to visible, local churches.

First, as Tim Keller, the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, NY says "Jesus' essential call was to plant churches." In the Great Commission, Jesus' last command prior to his ascension, as recorded in Matthew 28:19-20 he says to his church, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." Keller says that when Jesus commands

us to baptize he is commanding us to start local churches. This can be clearly seen in Acts 2 after Peter finishes preaching the first Christian sermon we are told in vv. 41-42, “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” The baptism of the newly converted 3000 people results in their being added to the local church which existed in Jerusalem. They joined the original 120 believers in all the activities that make a church a church. They regularly gathered together to hear God’s word taught, to care for each others physical and spiritual well-being, to celebrate communion and to pray. Thus, Jesus’ command to baptize converts is a command to form local churches with an identifiable membership, a shared life together and duly appointed leaders.

Second, it is quite clear from our study of the book of Acts that the Apostle Paul’s method was to start local churches. Everywhere he preached the gospel he organized the baptized converts in those locales into assemblies of believers. He did not make converts and then leave them to be individual Christians with no connection to other Christians. Just one example: after he went through the cities of south central modern Turkey we are told in Acts 14:21-23, “When they had preached the gospel to that city (Derbe) and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith... And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” Each city that Paul preached in had a church, an assembly of believers over which he appointed elders.

Finally, all of the NT letters are written to local churches or the leaders of local churches, not to individual Christians. There is simply no escaping the fact that the way in which God has planned to cover the earth with the knowledge of himself as made known in the person and work of Jesus is through the multiplication of local churches. What I want to show you this morning is why it is that God’s global cause is the multiplication of churches. Why is it that local churches are the primary place in and through which God is at work in this world? We are going to see this morning in this passage four reasons that the multiplication of local churches is God’s aim for magnifying his greatness.

MAIN POINT

God aims to manifest his greatness by multiplying local churches because...

I. Christ died to form one family (2:10-22)

We are not going to examine in detail this entire passage but I simply want to draw your attention to several of the main themes in it. This letter, as can be seen in the opening verse (1:1) is written to all the saints, all the believers in the local church that is located in the port city of Ephesus which is on the western border of modern Turkey. The first part of the letter is a declaration of God’s saving work through Christ. It emphasizes that salvation from beginning to end is a work of God’s grace. Believers are no longer dead in our trespasses and sins, we are no longer enslaved to our sinful desires, we are no longer the object of God’s fury because God, contrary to what we deserve has made us alive with Christ, forgiving our sins for his sake. This is true for every believing sinner. But you will notice in 2:11 that Paul begins to address Gentile believers. He continues to address non-Jewish Christians through 3:13. However, while he is talking specifically to Gentile Christians, yet the entire church is listening because the letter is to the entire church. Why does he do this? Paul, along with the rest of the NT has made the point that the coming of Jesus into the world and the salvation he offers is the fulfillment of the Jewish religion. Jesus is Jewish and all the first Christians were Jewish and the Scriptures of the church during those first decades were the Jewish Scriptures. Believers in Jesus, as Paul has said in other places are the true descendants of Abraham, the true Israel. Thus the question that the church wrestled with right from the beginning was this: are Gentile believers second rate citizens of God’s kingdom or equal in status in every way with their Jewish brethren? Are Gentiles to be treated as fully accepted and loved members of God’s church simply on the basis of their faith in Christ or do they need to become Jewish in some way? So what Paul has hinted at in other letters he gives full voice to in this passage.

In vv. 11-12 Paul asserts that prior to the coming of Jesus it was indeed true that Gentiles were not part of God's program. A Gentile could not be part of God's people, a recipient of all the glorious promises in the OT unless he or she became Jewish. Salvation always was by grace through faith but everyone who believed the promises of Yahweh sought to live in accord with God's law as revealed to Moses and thus had to live like a Jewish person. However, notice the difference that Jesus has made in vv. 13-22. God by grace, has united every believing sinner to Christ and thus in Christ every Gentile person who has been far away from God and from membership in his family, has been brought near through the death of Jesus. Jesus, by his death destroyed the barrier which was the law of God with its commands and regulations. That which separated the human race into two irreconcilable societies was taken down by Jesus' death. Thus through the cross of Jesus a new humanity has been created, a third race, not Jewish, not Gentile but Christian. Notice the various ways that the unity of this new race of people in Christ is described: We are one new man. We are one body. We have equal access to our Father through Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit. We are fellow citizens of God's kingdom, God's country. We are equal members of God's family, brothers and sisters in Christ and thus full heirs of all God's wealth together. We are equally part of God's temple.

Notice that what Paul is describing here are facts. This is what God has done in Christ. If you are a believer in Jesus, then you are a part of this one body, one family, one nation, one temple, and share equal access to your Father with every other believer. There are no distinctions in the family of God in regards to our standing with God or our rights as citizens or our sharing in the promised inheritance. In chapter 4:1 Paul begins the second half of his letter which is a description of how all those who have been saved by God's grace through faith in Christ should live. There is a way of life that corresponds to the gracious salvation God has performed in Christ. The first behavior that Paul declares fits this gospel is stated in 4:2-16. Here he tells all of us who have been made into one body in Christ to live in a visible, local church where we experience and express this unity that Jesus has created. Thus, every local church exists as a visible expression of the saving work of Jesus who made a new humanity, a new society when he died for the sins of his people. I know it makes many of you very uncomfortable when you hear me say this but the fact that every Christian has been joined to the one family of God in Christ is the major reason why people who claim to be Christians but who refuse to be connected to a local church are either not Christians or badly deceived Christians. The logic of Ephesians, indeed of the whole NT is that every saved person who thus belongs to the one church is eager to live in union with a visible, local church.

From God's point of view the largest division that has existed among human beings was the one he created by giving his promises, his law, his worship to one nation, Israel. Thus since Jesus has destroyed the biggest of all divisions within human society, the Law of Moses and made Jew and Gentile into one new man in Christ, every local church ought to be a place where every true Christian of every economic, racial, political, religious and cultural distinction be able to find a warm welcome. Local churches should not be organized according to sociological categories but on the basis of our union in Jesus. The powerful grace of God is most clearly revealed in those local churches where the people are working to warmly welcome every other believer into their lives because they are believers and not for any other reason. It is because God has one family, one kingdom and is building one temple that he multiplies and establishes local churches where this spiritual unity is made visible.

II. The OT is fulfilled by Christ's creating one church (3:1-9)

In chapter 3 the word "mystery" shows up four times in the first 9 verses. As you can see here this word does not refer to something that is difficult to figure out, like a mystery novel. Rather, it refers to information that was not known and cannot be known apart from God's specifically revealing it. It has particular reference to information that God did not give in the OT concerning his salvation but has now revealed to his people in and through the coming of Jesus. God made known to Paul and the other apostles and Christian prophets this mystery which he did not make known in the past to and through the OT prophets. In fact, this mystery was hidden in God for long ages past but has now been made known and a part of Paul's gospel preaching ministry is to tell Gentiles and everyone else about this mystery. What is this information that God did not make known

until after the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus? The mystery is stated in v. 6, “This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” What God did not reveal to the OT prophets was that the Gentiles were going to become equal members of God’s nation, of God’s family, equal inheritors of all God’s promises with Jewish people not for any reason other than they, like their Jewish counterparts, were united to Jesus Christ by the Spirit, through faith. What was not made known in the OT is that the people of God would be formed and known only by their faith in, union with Jesus and not through their racial identity or obedience to any external law.

It’s very important to understand that the OT was quite clear that non-Jewish people were going to be saved by God. The original promise to Abraham, the first Jew, stated that it would be through Abraham and his descendants that all the peoples of the world would be blessed by God. There are many examples in the OT of Gentile people receiving God’s favor by joining Israel: Moses’ wife, Zipporah, Rahab the prostitute, Ruth the Moabite, etc. The OT prophets regularly talk about the nations coming to Jerusalem and being blessed along with the people of Israel. In Romans 9-15 Paul quotes bunches of OT verses to prove that God always intended for Gentiles to be saved. However, in the OT the salvation of the Gentiles was always through their becoming Jewish. Being Jewish ethnically and religiously always put you on the inside track with God. There is no acknowledgement of Gentiles being fully equal in their standing before God with Jewish people in the OT. Only Israel is the apple of God’s eye. However, what Paul is saying here is that the true people of God, the true Israel has nothing to do with ethnicity or religious performance but is determined only and solely by a person’s relationship to Jesus.

Paul preaches the unsearchable riches of Christ which is to say that all the wealth of God, all the promises of God, as was clearly stated in the OT are fulfilled by and in and with and through Jesus. He is the subject matter of the OT. Thus, while the OT did not spell it out, every sinner who is united to Jesus is equally a member of the people of God because Jesus is the fulfillment of everything God ever said. It is because God’s eternal plan has always been for the people of God to be known not by their race or their religion but by their union with Jesus by grace through faith that God has established local churches. We are the living and breathing proof that all of God’s promises are true. Everything God promised to Israel in the OT is yes for everyone who is in Christ and thus every local church shows that God has been faithful to do all that he promised to do in and through his Messiah. This is an astonishing claim. Our living together as a worshipping, loving, serving, witnessing, discipling community is visible evidence that the creator of the heavens and the earth is faithful to his promises. Clearly, the multiplication of local churches across the face of the earth makes that fact more evident.

III. The gospel is preached to form one people in Christ (3:7-9a)

In vv. 7-9a Paul explains how his calling to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ was an act of God’s grace, not only towards him personally but towards the Gentiles as well because he was given the assignment of being the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul views himself as having a particularly key part to play in the story of God’s salvation of all of his people in that he was assigned the responsibility of making the good news about Jesus known to the Gentiles so that the mystery of their equal standing with the Jews in Christ might be revealed. His telling the good news of Jesus resulted in congregations of Christians made up of both Jews and Gentiles and thus being the visible expression of the one people of God. This is what the preaching of the gospel always does, it creates communities of Christians, not simply individual Christians.

I think this is very hard for us as Americans to accept and to understand. Salvation in the Bible is always a corporate salvation. We are saved as members of the church, as members of God’s family, not as individuals. To be saved is to be joined to the church. Consider this one simple fact, almost all of the 2nd person pronouns in the NT letters are not singular but plural. For example, in this letter to the Ephesians the pronoun, “you” is used 48 times. 45 of those times it is plural. It is the same in every letter. Of the 42 times Paul uses the 1st person pronoun in Ephesians, 30 of them are the plural “us” or “we”, not “I” and “me”. These counts don’t include all the unstated plural subjects of the plural ending verbs. I’ve probably given you too much grammar at one

setting, but the point is that the language of the NT applies God's saving work to a group, not to individuals. Just think about the Lord's Prayer. What pronoun is used in it? "Our" Father in heaven. Give "us" this day "our" daily bread. Forgive "us" "our" debts". Lead "us" not into temptation. Evangelism, the proclamation of the good news of Jesus always creates converts who are part of the church. If evangelism does not create communities, if it does not lead to people identifying with the visible, local church then it is not truly evangelism for God is saving a people, a body, a family, a church.

God aims to manifest his greatness by multiplying local churches because...

- *Christ died to form one family*
- *The OT is fulfilled by Christ's creating one church*
- *The gospel is preached to form one people in Christ*
- *And because...*

IV. God's wisdom is put on display through the church (3:10-11)

Verse 10 begins with "so that." In other words, we are being told that the reason God has made a new humanity, a new society out of both Jews and Gentiles is for the purpose of showing off, of revealing how wise he is to all the angelic hosts of heaven. The equal standing of Gentiles in the family and nation of God on the basis of what Christ has done shows off how smart God is in greater ways than any other work that God has done. 3:10 is not saying that God is only interested in displaying his glorious wisdom to the angelic host. Rather Paul is using a greater to lesser argument. If the hosts of heaven are able to see God's wisdom in the church then all intelligent beings, including all human beings are meant to see his wisdom there as well. God's delight in God is the motive for all that he does and we see here that his delight in revealing his manifold wisdom stands as the ultimate reason he has formed his family not based upon any racial or religious consideration but entirely upon the work of Jesus.

God's manifold wisdom is not chiefly revealed in the complexity of creation or in the law he revealed to Israel but his manifold wisdom is chiefly revealed in the existence of every local church which is an expression of his one great, universal church. This again is an astonishing claim. Angels marvel at God's great wisdom when they see us living together as the people of God. This is because, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:10, we, together, as a church, "are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do." Among my favorite TV shows to watch are those that explain how things are made. The shows that show a massive bridge or building being built or show how a product is made amaze me. I am always impressed and astonished by the things that engineers and mechanics and construction workers are able to design and build. I am impressed by the wisdom and knowledge of the builders as I see the complexity and wonder of that which is built. In exactly the same way but to an infinitely higher degree the vast, unlimited wisdom of God is revealed in how he has been able to reconcile sinners to himself in one body through the person and work of Jesus applied to sinners by the Spirit. Here is a reason to be excited about being a member of this local church and a reason to be excited about the prospect of helping to start other local churches. We show the world; angels, demons and the whole human race how smart God is by our life together as his redeemed and forgiven people. The more such churches that exist the more the glorious wisdom of God is made known in the world.

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