

October 21, 2018

Crazy Little Thing Called Church

Ephesians 4:1-6

Who are we?

Who are we? Who are we as “followers of Jesus”? Who are we as “a church”? I was having this kind of discussion with some friends, when the comment was made, “*I want to be in a church that is a New Testament church ...*” That sounds good. It sounds “biblical.” But what is a “New Testament church”?

Gary Nelson writes, “*I have always been intrigued when people express a desire to be more like the New Testament Church. It causes me to wonder which of the messy and imperfect early churches they want to emulate. All of them were living, breathing human communities not unlike the ones we attend. So what is about those churches that people desire? More importantly, do they know what they are asking for?*”¹

Be careful what you wish for. The first Christian churches were messy places. There was conflict, controversy, disagreement, jealousy, chauvinism, heresy, amoral behaviour ... a whole host of things we’d rather not get in to!

At the same time, they aspired to be something more. They aspired to be communities of people who loved Jesus, who worshipped Him, who learned together, who served together, who were on a mission together.

The church in Ephesus

Ephesus, for instance, was an interesting place. Ephesus was the home of the world-famous Temple of Artemis (one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world). Tourism to the temple was big business. Souvenirs – miniature statues of Artemis and the temple – provided a good income to local craftspeople. It was in Ephesus that Paul was mobbed in a riot incited by business owners who felt they needed to fight to protect their livelihood (Acts 19:23-41). In the days before police forces, this chaos was a potentially lethal event in which Paul and his companions could easily have been murdered (which may have been what the businessmen and their cronies wanted!).

The church in Ephesus, however, was a dynamic community that seemed to have substantially impacted the city (Acts 19:1-22). In this very difficult, multi-faith, multi-ethnic, hostile city, God’s people lived their faith in such a way that the church grew.

¹ Gary Nelson, *Borderland Churches: A Congregation’s Introduction to Missional Living* (Chalice Press), p. 42. A native Calgarian, Gary was General Secretary of Canadian Baptist Ministries (our overseas mission partner); now he is President of Tyndale University College and Seminary (Toronto). And he is a good friend 😊.

They grew as a community. The radical nature of Christian faith in the first century was as much about the emergence of the church as it was about individual conversions. The church, a community of very different, diverse people who shared their faith in Jesus, worked together, and encouraged one another and, was unlike anything that had existed before. It was a melting pot of people of every ethnic group, every socio-economic status, every ability, every age and every gender. It was an unheard of, unparalleled, unthinkable cornucopia of humanity. They had differences of opinion around some non-salvation issues. But they were bound together by a common faith and conviction in Jesus as God and Saviour – Jesus is Lord – and as a community committed to living out the truth of His love, grace and forgiveness through their lives.

It was a community where conviction in the truth of Jesus IS Lord was partnered with a conviction to live for Jesus, Jesus AS Lord: Paul urges them *"I beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father, who is over all and in all and living through all."* (Ephesians 4:1-6)

How do we "be" the church? How do we live the claim that "Jesus is Lord" in a world where everything has changed? The answer is we display what these words mean in the way we live and worship. When we embody the character and way of Jesus into our personal and corporate life, we live the truth of Jesus is Lord in a skeptical world.

We are people of truth – **Jesus** is Lord – and people of action – Jesus is **Lord**. We live our faith. *"The church is a community of those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour (truth), who ratify that faith by baptism, and who manifest the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus, by proclaiming in word, celebrating in worship, and living in deed the Kingdom already and the Kingdom promised (action)"* (Thomas Groome).

When we truly are the ideal church we become a community as distinct in our culture as the Ephesian church was in theirs. Jesus is our Lord. Through gift of Jesus' love, faith, vision, and forgiveness, we are a community where people – of all ethnicities, economic backgrounds, ages, genders, and abilities – are one in Christ. We are a place where people forgive one another and are forgiven. We are a place where people live authentic lives, tell the truth, honour their commitments. We are a community which has compassion for the poor – in spirit and in practical needs – and reach out in love. We do not withdraw from the world, but we exist as a counterculture within the world. The Holy Spirit moulds an incredibly diverse group of people into a fellowship with a common sense of identity, purpose, and compassion. That's just as unheard of, unparalleled, unthinkable in AD 2018 as it was in AD 65!

This is the church. Messy as it is. The life and love of Jesus permeates so that our first

love is to be His people, to do His will, and to follow where He leads.

OK, this is the ideal of the church

Back to reality

Like all churches, the church in Ephesus had its problems. There is this disturbing comment in Revelation 2:4, "*You have forsaken your first love ...*" Somehow something had gone wrong. They had lost their passion. "*People who live in the passionate purpose of their first love will risk anything and do anything for what they believe. Nothing is too much and nothing is too inconvenient. When we lose that passionate love, however, we also lose the radical purpose of our existence ... John's revelation depicts a people who once felt deeply about God's purpose and now those feelings are foreign. The 'first love' once had been the catalyst for everything they did, but somehow it disappeared, replaced with the safe, unrisky, and internally focussed institutional community life.*" (Gary Nelson)

There's a real challenge here for us. Is there something missing? Personally and corporately have we forgotten our first love?

"We have been transforming congregations into audiences, proclamation into performance, and worship into entertainment. Quantitative growth has too often been the measurement of choice without the balancing tension of qualitative growth that evaluates the character and depth of the gospel's incorporation into the lives of individuals and their lives together. Saying 'yes' to Jesus is only one decision on a long journey of discipleship. Living as kingdom people is much more difficult. It means living daily both individually and corporately as if God is in charge." (Gary Nelson)

Here is another challenge to think about. Do I live, daily, individually, and do we live corporately as if God is in charge? Is Jesus MY Lord? Do I see my life as a long journey of discipleship?

Paul knows living our faith is not always easy. It's not convenient. It can even be dangerous. It can evoke hostility from the world around us. But that is the path we are called to walk. We don't live our faith on our own. We do it in community, as part of a church. As a mission station (it certainly was in Ephesus; and as our city changes to be more and more multi-ethnic and multi-faith, we find this very true of ourselves), we gather to encourage one another, build one another up, help one another, learn from one another, pray for one another, worship our Lord with one another ... and then move out into our everyday lives wiser, supported, encouraged, and equipped to follow Jesus.

I draw tremendous encouragement from Peter's words. Peter writes, "*You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once*

you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”(1 Peter 2:9-10).

We know this, but it is hard to live out! It is a real challenge to think through what this means in my life. But just because it is difficult, does not mean I shouldn't do it!

Being a messy church

Do you want to be in a “New Testament Church”? Welcome among us. As a “New Testament Church” we’re a hodgepodge of different people from every ethnic group, every socio-economic status, every ability, every age and every gender. It is an unheard of, unparalleled, unthinkable cornucopia of humanity.

We may have disagreements around some non-salvation issues. But at the core of our being, we are bound together by a common faith and conviction that Jesus is Lord – He is our God and Saviour. One of our sister denominations expresses it this way:

- *In Essentials Unity: We are called to embody and proclaim the essential truths of Christianity as articulated in the Word of God, expressed through the centuries in the great creeds of the church and defined for us in our Statement of Faith ...*
- *In Non-Essentials Charity: We are called to a generosity of spirit that frees us to embrace a wide variety of Christian brothers and sisters — “simply believers” — some with whom we will not agree in matters that are outside our Statement of Faith. Our spirit is one of warm welcome to all believers who share our commitment to our Statement of Faith and who seek to follow Jesus’ command to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves.*

We are community in which Jesus is our first love. We are committed to living out the truth of Jesus’ love, grace and forgiveness, proclaiming in word, celebrating in worship, and living in deed the Kingdom already and the Kingdom promised. In the Spirit’s power, we are trying to be the people of God, with Jesus as Lord. God is in charge!

It’s messy. It’s challenging. But that’s what makes us strong and resilient, it’s what makes us dynamic and relevant. As we keep our first love – as we keep our eyes on our one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all – we can declare His praises and be His radically inclusive good news in our divided, broken, fractured world.

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