

A Fresh Look at the Church and Our Understanding

1. We come to the fifth sermon in the series out of Philemon
 - a. In actuality, we finished our study of Philemon last week
 - i. We looked at the examples of Onesimus, Philemon, and Paul
 - ii. We looked at the meaning, origin, and effects of the “fellowship of the faith”
 - iii. We looked at the nature, demands, and purpose of forgiveness
 1. The difference between forgiveness and reconciliation
 2. The difficulty of exercising wisdom in those processes
 3. The distress of unreconciled relationships, balanced by...
 4. The delight... the joy... of our relationship with the Lord
2. So, you might ask, if we are done, shall we just go home?
 - a. I “warned” you that we will use Philemon as a jumping off point to take a look at two more topics
 - i. A fresh look at the church and how we gain our understanding of it
 - ii. The place of certainty and uncertainty in the Christian faith and walk
3. This week, we will take a brief and partial look at the first; the practice and makeup of the local church with an eye to how we form our understanding of them.
 - a. For those that would like to take a deeper look at the nature of the church, there is a series of videos on our web and Facebook sites that goes into far, far greater detail than we will this morning.
 - b. Our initial “jump off point” will be Phil 1:1,2 *“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, 2 and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house.”* And from here, we can go to other verses...
 - i. Rom 16:3,5 *“Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus... also greet the church that is in their house.”*
 - ii. Col 4:15 *“Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the church that is in her house.”*
 - iii. We can take another look at Acts 2 from last week *“So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. 42 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. 44 And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; 45 and they began selling their*

property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. 46 Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

- c. It is apparent from these passages that the early church routinely met in homes to fellowship, study, worship, and pray together. They also met in public forums and the temple for apostolic teaching
 - i. Gary mentioned last week that purpose built buildings for worship weren't built for over 200 years
 - 1. Roughly as long as the US has been in existence; not an insignificant period of time
 - ii. Yet, to think of a church without a dedicated building seems strange to us in the Western church.
 - 1. There is the thought of something amiss, incomplete; of something not quite right.
 - 2. Yet it was the norm for the early church for over 200 years.
- d. So, are we, then, wrong to have dedicated church buildings for worship and ministry? Did we lose our way? Not bad questions...
 - i. Because we certainly want to be biblical in all that we do, yes?
 - 1. As a church
 - 2. In our Christian walk
 - 3. In our families
 - 4. In our other relationships
 - 5. In our vocations and work
 - ii. The Bible is our single reliable authority ... our “handbook” ... for understanding our resources in Christ, our identity, our purpose, our calling, our significance, our relationships, our roles, and our future.
 - 1. But correctly interpreting the bible, though absolutely “doable”, can be challenging
 - a. Written in different languages than our own
 - b. Written to different cultures than our own
 - c. Written in different “idioms” than our own
 - d. Written by many authors (though, really, only one)
 - i. Differing styles and perspectives

- e. Written thousands of years ago
 - i. But clearly preserved by God over that time
 - f. Requires a certain spiritual maturity to understand it deeply
2. Then there are interpretive tools and methodologies that must be brought into play
 - a. We will just look at some this morning as we seek to address our earlier question...
 - i. Descriptive verses prescriptive
 3. The verses we looked at earlier are all descriptive...they describe what was happening. And it is clear that they were meeting ... or “doing church” ... in homes. But we see no verses prescribing... dictating... that we are to be meeting in homes. So, does that conclude our examination of that question? Would that it were that easy!
 4. What if meeting in homes were the only examples we find in biblical writing and church history?
 - a. Then they tend to take on a “prescriptive” role and feel
 - i. In regards to the narratives in scripture, if we see the Spirit consistently leading the church to do things a certain way, might we assume that it is important to continue to do it that way?
 - b. Paul makes that argument in 1 Cor 11:13ff, a section of scripture we often want to avoid “Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God *with her head* uncovered? 14 Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, 15 but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering. 16 But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.
 5. We will not attempt to unpack these verses this morning
 - a. A question; How many here have a conviction that these “prescriptions” (and they are) are valid for our practice in the church today? How did we decide? We might ask:
 - i. How does it match up with our understanding of God and His purposes?

- ii. How does it match up with our understanding of other scripture?
 - iii. Is it addressing a problem in the culture of that day that is irrelevant in our culture? If so, what is that problem?
 - iii. We can bring these same and similar considerations to our earlier question about how we should meet.
 - 1. Do we see only this pattern of meeting?
 - a. No, public as well, in the temple
 - 2. Might it result from the cultural and historical situation? Yes...
 - a. There were no other options early on
 - b. Resources were likely aimed at spreading the gospel, not building meeting places; stewardship
 - c. Persecution would make a known, public presence less desirable
 - 3. But might it come from an understanding of God's purpose for the church meeting...perhaps illustrated in other passages of scripture?
 - a. Back to Acts 2; What do we find the early church doing? What characterizes their fellowship?
 - i. Devotion... deep love and caring... sharing... intimacy... dining together... taking communion together...
 - b. We may conclude that there is wisdom in meeting in homes; that it was divinely inspired in order to facilitate the kind of deep fellowship and love that God desires
 - i. We have the instinctual , experiential knowledge that intimacy and closeness of fellowship takes place more easily and completely in a small group, do we not?
 - 1. Sparked the small group movement
 - c. So, while we may well conclude that meeting in homes is not a scriptural mandate, we might also conclude that it is a valuable form that would allow us to recapture and maintain the intimate fellowship that God desires
- e. Let's look at a different area of church structure discussed at length in scripture... that of church leadership
- f. Three terms used in scripture for those given ongoing spiritual oversight of the local churches
 - i. Elder (presbutyros), overseer (episcopos), and shepherd (poimano)

1. Here again, we see terms and structure that seems strange to us.
 - a. Wherever in the biblical narrative we see leadership being set in place in the local churches, we see it comprised of men... biblically qualified for the task... and in plurality. Without exception.
 - b. Yet, the contemporary practice in the Western church is to:
 - i. Appoint one man or woman to authority (the senior pastor), often qualified by education and eloquence rather than by character and giftedness.
 - ii. Most often under the democratic authority of the church membership
 - c. And, in this case, we do it in spite of an essentially prescriptive passage as well. Tit 1:5 *“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you”*
 - i. “directed” *diatassō* ; to command; and the command to appoint elders is to “set in order” ...to set up properly.
2. So we encounter the same questions that we faced regarding the church meeting place...
 - a. Do we see only this pattern? Yes.
 - b. Might it result from the cultural and historical situation? Yes and No
 - i. It could be an influence from the OT elder...the authority that hopefully came with age, experience, and wisdom
 - ii. But there was nothing preventing God from instituting a different system
 - c. How does it match up with our understanding of God and His purposes?
 - i. It matches up with God’s practice of speaking and “ruling” through godly men. Prophets... Priests... Kings (grudgingly)
 - ii. It tends to protect leadership from pride and error, things that God hates
 - d. How does it match up with our understanding of other scripture?

i. Ecc 4:9ff *“Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. 10 For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. 11 Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? 12 And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.”*

4. So what is the purpose of this sermon...this time together?

- a. Not to come to a conclusion regarding how we are to meet
- b. Not to come to a conclusion about the structure of church leadership
- c. CERTAINLY not to debate whether men can have long hair or women’s heads should be covered. So why??
 - i. It opens up the question (I hope) of what it means to be biblical... to be biblically based in our practices ...and our thinking... and our planning.

When we talk about being biblical...about being committed to following the word of God... it demands that we pursue a deep knowledge and understanding of God and His purposes. It demands that we examine the word of God against itself so that we do not fall into misunderstanding. It demands that we carefully and diligently examine our practices and traditions against our understanding of His word. And it demands a willingness and desire to question... to test... our understandings and conclusions.

We will continue next week by looking at the blessing... and curse... of tradition. But for now, let us seek to incline our hearts to understanding... understanding His word...His ways... and His will. And do not think it is too hard to find... that it beyond you. I close with these words from Prov 2 *“ My son, if you will receive my words And treasure my commandments within you, 2 Make your ear attentive to wisdom, Incline your heart to understanding; 3 For if you cry for discernment, Lift your voice for understanding; 4 If you seek her as silver And search for her as for hidden treasures; 5 Then you will discern the fear of the LORD And discover the knowledge of God.”*

Let us pray