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First Belton
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Series: We ARE Church
Title: We Are Central to God's Plan
Text(s): Eph 3:8-11, 1:7-10, 3:6, 3:10, 2:19-21; Gal 3:28-29

INTRODUCTION

Good morning, great to be with you all this morning! How many of you survived the first week of school? The first week always feels like a whirlwind, doesn't it?

I have always loved the first day of school. Summer is great, but there is something special about the rhythm of a new year – new clothes, new shoes, new teacher, new friends, and a fresh perspective. This week, I watched my own kids head off to their first day and snapped a photo that pretty much captured the personality of our household. And as I stood there watching them drive away, the Lord hit me with a fresh perspective: They are growing fast, and I have to be intentional to live out my purpose as their dad.

In a similar way, preparing for a new building is an opportunity for us to gain a fresh perspective on the role and purpose of the Church. Which is why we are in this new series called "We ARE Church."

Last week, we kicked the series off by asking the question: "What does it mean to be a Christian?" And here is the answer: ***A Christian is someone who belongs to God through Jesus, is being built into a spiritual community, lives in continual worship and service, and proclaims God's greatness through a life transformed by His grace and mercy.***

Today, we are taking it further and asking another big question: **"WHAT IS THE CHURCH?"**

If the Church is not a building or an event but a people, what exactly is it? And what is its purpose?

Let's take a look. Grab your Bible and meet me in the book of Ephesians. The Greek word for "church," Εκκλησία (Ecclesia), appears 115 times in the New Testament. It literally means "gathering" or "assembly." It refers not to where we gather, but who we are when we gather: the family of God.

So, what is the Church? ***The Church is a gathering of people who belong to God through Jesus, who are being built into a spiritual community, who live lives in continual worship and service, and proclaim God's greatness through a life transformed by His grace and mercy.***

That is the Church. Now, let's consider another question. **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH?** Let's begin in Ephesians 3:8-11. Paul writes, *"To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and*

to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord...

In this passage, Paul is reflecting on his own calling, but he also reveals God's eternal purpose for the Church. In v. 9-10, he says the role of the Church is *"to bring to light for everyone... the mystery of God... so that through the Church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known."*

Have you ever been stuck in darkness? A few years ago, during a bad winter storm, we lost power for five days. Living in darkness can be very humbling and lonely. I remember the first night without power; we were unprepared. As we scrambled to find a flashlight or a candle, we kept bumping into furniture and other things. When we finally found a flashlight and turned it on (thank God it had batteries), suddenly everything changed – not because the obstacles were gone but because we could see them for what they were. That's what the Church is meant to be: *a steady stream of light in the house of a dark world.*

That is the picture Paul is painting for us. As a Church, we are placed in this community to turn the light on in the darkness around us so that people can see with clarity the truth about God, man, and God's plan to make all things new. Specifically, Paul says that we are to bring to light the mystery of God that has been hidden for ages.

WHAT IS THIS MYSTERY?

1. We ARE reunited with God

In Ephesians 1:7-10, Paul tells us: *"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight (here it is) making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."*

In chapter 2, Paul unpacks this further. We were once in Adam – dead in sin, following the world, driven by our desires, and deserving of wrath (2:1-3). But God turned on the light through Jesus (2:4). Now, in Christ, we have been brought near (2:13). We are no longer strangers but fellow citizens, members of God's household, being built into a dwelling place for God (2:19-22).

The Church is a people who have been reunited to God through Christ, who have the responsibility to proclaim this truth to the world. As the Church gathers each week, we are agreeing with Paul - that by His grace and mercy, even when we were dead in our sin, God made us alive together with Christ. And when we gather, we are proclaiming to our community that we believe this to be true. Our very gathering affirms and proclaims our belief in the gospel to the community.

That is one aspect of the mystery, but Paul deepens the mystery in 3:6. He writes, *“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.”* In other words, the mystery is that, in Christ, humankind can be reunited with God, but also in Christ...

2. We ARE reconciled to each other

As a bit of an illustration, in Ephesians 3:10 Paul refers to the mystery as the *“manifold wisdom of God.”*

This is to illustrate that, like a beautiful tapestry or a bouquet of flowers, the Church is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-generational display of God’s wisdom. No other community is quite like it. The family of God transcends all natural barriers of life and centers on Christ. So, while we may have nothing in common, in Christ, we have everything in common.

Paul writes in 2:19, *“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple of the Lord.”*

The Church reveals God’s supernatural power to unify diverse peoples in Christ. In Galatians 3:28, Paul reminds us in Christ, *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”* In Christ, God is actively creating a new society of people who display a peculiar unity in diversity.

3. Restored to a Family

In Galatians 3:29 and Ephesians 3:6, Paul continues this thought. He writes, *“And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”* In Ephesians, Paul says that all who are Christ’s become partakers in the promise through the Gospel.

This can be tricky. When he is referring to “heirs of the promise,” Paul is referring to the promise God gave to Abraham that was for Israel alone. Now, God is inviting all who are in Christ to become partakers of this promise. Some have taken it to mean that the Church replaces Israel, but really, it is that God has fulfilled His covenant in Christ and created one new family made up of those who trust Christ. It is no longer two peoples, but one family in Christ who become the heirs of God’s promise.

You might say, “Well, what is that promise?”

In Genesis, God made a promise to Abraham that He will be his God, and his descendants will be His people. As a part of that covenant, God promised to make Abraham a great nation through offspring, offered rest in a place (land), and to bless the nations through him.

In Christ, God has fulfilled this promise to Abraham. The offspring of Abraham are the countless thousands of Christians all over the globe, and many more to come. We have an eternal land we are looking to, and Christ as our rest. Through Christ, we are a blessing to the nations. For us,

that means that we are the family of God, heirs of this promise, sent to be a blessing to those in our neighborhood and around the world.

APPLICATION

So, what happens when we gather? Each week, our gathering is a family reunion where we are reminded of God's work to redeem us in the gospel, our unity with one another, and of our inheritance that awaits us in the Kingdom of God, as we work to be a blessing to those around us.

The Church as a tangible demonstration of God's plan to unite and redeem all things in heaven and on earth through Christ.

Think of it this way: Imagine standing on a mountain top watching the sun rise over a new day. That's what the Church is: a preview of the beginning of God's eternal Kingdom. It is a representation of what John tells us to expect in eternity - that every tribe, every nation, every language will gather around the Lamb and worship as ONE.

SO, WHY DOES THE CHURCH MATTER?

- 1. Because it is central to God's eternal plan to make all things new,** which means you are essential to God's eternal plan to make all things new in heaven and on earth.
- 2. Because the church is not just a place we attend** – it's the family that we belong to and need to thrive in the world. You were not designed to go at it alone.
- 3. Because the Christian life is not about me, it's about we.** The church teaches us that life is less about me and more about Jesus and others. It is not about our preferences but about serving Jesus and one another.