



CORPORATE THEOLOGY

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I saw an article the other day which was really interesting. The basic thrust of the post is that the media needs to stop trying to teach Christians theology. It happens all the time though doesn't it. We talk about marriage, they quote Old Testament laws. We talk about immigrants, they quote the teachings of Jesus. We talk about social justice, they quote the golden rule.

I think we need to become increasingly aware that we need to do two things. First we need to take back the narrative of what it means to be Christian. We should be the ones explaining the gospel-centered motivation of our actions. But secondly it means that we all need to think deeply on what parts of our belief have been passively shaped by cultural theology.

I think the area that is influenced the most by the media, movies and books is our idea of what the church is. What is its purpose? What is it made of? How should I think of it, prioritize it, serve it, view it, or support it?

We are in the season of our New Year Resolutions, but how many of us made resolutions regarding how we think about, attend, or serve the church? It is often the most thoughtless and neglected aspect of a believers life. It's easy to become mindless in regards to the church. In large part I think it's because we have individualized our theology. It's about me. But the Bible is about corporate theology, a theology which includes all of us, together as believers.

But the idea of corporate theology is invaluable to us as Christians especially as we think about the thing which is church. And to start out I want you to be thinking of your answers to two questions. 1. Why do you go to church? And 2. Where do I experience God?

I am going to argue that those of us who cannot answer that question well wrestle with a wrong or small view of church. Today we are going to look at Paul's prayer for the church at the end of Ephesians 3 (turn there) and we are going to have our corporate theology corrected in light of the gospel. Paul's prayer here is a powerful prayer because he is praying for amazing things. In the first three chapters of Ephesians Paul has challenged the church to live in some very radical ways, and this prayer is Paul's way of empowering the church to do what the church ought to do. This actually fits with what we are going through in the book of 1 John right now. We need this view of church if we want to effectively grow as Christians.

And what I want to propose to you guys today about the church, and about the idea of corporate theology is this: **The will of God is his glory through the church, and the sum of the Christian experience is God's glory in the church.**

So what we are going to do today is break up that sentence into three parts. Looking at the will of God we are going to look at the affection of God, and the work of Christ, and under the Christian experience we are going to look at the benefit to the church. **Pray**

The first thing we see in our text this morning is **The Affection of God. Eph 3:14-16.**

Paul begins his prayer by acknowledging God as the Father of all families. Now what does Paul mean when he says this and what does it have to do with the affection of God? In today's landscape it would not be

farfetched to say that this is an affirmation of what liberal theologians call religious pluralism: the idea that all religions eventually lead to God.

It's very common for both liberal theologians and for our secular culture to look at this passage say that God is the father of all religious families. But that is not the intention of Paul's prayer here. Paul is using the word family very precisely here because the overwhelming tone of the book of Ephesians so far is that of the church as family.

Let's look at **Eph 3:1-6**. (heirs, members, partakers....of the Mystery of Christ)

The mystery of God, the will of God, the affection of God is what? The unification of all men in Christ Jesus. In the Old Testament the family of God was a Jewish nationality, but through Christ non-Jews (Gentiles) are being granted access to God's family, that is the church.

God is the father of all races, nationality and tongues who are called to salvation through Christ. The greatest portrait of unity in our world today should be the church. This message is needed more today than it was three months ago. In light of Ferguson, Syrian Refugees and Tamir Rice we need to realize that the greatest hope for unity lies not in legislation, but in salvation. In Christ we are made one. In Christ we find otherworldly commonality through God our Father.

The will of God is a unified people together through Christ. God's affection is towards his church. This is the revealed will of God. Prophesied in the Old Testament, made plain in the New. God is a God over a people, a corporate whole, that is his desire.

In this prayer of Paul we see the affection of God, but we also see Paul stringing all of this together. Paul's prayer is building in power. He acknowledges the affection of God, he prays that God, according to the richness of his glory strengthens us through the spirit: So that, **Eph 3:17**

This is a big sentence in our idea of corporate theology. This is where Paul addresses: **The Work of Christ**.

It is interesting to zoom out on this text and see the Trinitarian work of God here. We see God the Father fathering, God the Spirit empowering, and God the Son dwelling through faith.

But specifically we see that Christ dwells in our hearts through faith. This affirms to us that Paul is writing to believers. He is writing to a people who have received the Holy Spirit through salvation and Christ is now dwelling in their hearts but Paul is taking the work of Christ and pushing it past the idea of individual salvation and making it corporate.

Later on in the book of Ephesians, Paul makes the basis of Christian marriage the story of Christ and the church. And while Paul is giving husbands instructions on what it means to love our wives, he also gives us a wonderful picture of what Christ has done for his church: **Eph 5:25-28**

Christ bought us, sanctified us, purified us, presented us, and loves us. For those who are in Christ's church we are rooted in this love. Paul uses that term rooted, and things grow roots organically right. Seeds sprout (lima bean/Styrofoam). In one sense those of us who have been saved from our sin through the love of Christ naturally seek to love others better. In one sense it is a natural expansion of ourselves.

But in another sense, Paul uses the word grounded. Nothing becomes organically grounded. If you have ever tried to plant trees, you know the effort it takes to get them to grow properly. Or if you have built a house, the labor it takes to level, establish and pour a firm foundation. On the cross

Christ not only gave us a natural ability to love, but he accomplished the work of grounding our love. Christ broke ground on hard hearts. Our hearts are not naturally bent towards one another, but true love requires an audience doesn't it. Love requires someone else, love is innately corporate. And Christ's act of love did more than soften the soil, it tore out the dead tree of sin, and planted a mature tree of righteousness: zealous for God and passionate for others.

And now being rooted and grounded in love, having seen the will of God in the glory of the church we see the treasure of corporate belonging in **Eph 3:17-19**. This is **The Benefit to the church**.

In the three weeks the newest Star Wars Movie has been out, it has already out grossed the top producing movies of the past two year combined. In the past three years we have seen box office toppers like "The Martian," "Interstellar" and "Gravity." All of these movies show the wonders and mystery of space. That's because people love space because it is wildly unknowable. We love the mystery, the drama, the excitement of the unknown.

An enterprise which is gaining a lot of ground lately is that of space tourism. And people are willing to pay thousands of dollars to spend a few hours in space. Why? Because as much fun as it is to attempt to comprehend the otherness of space, it is far greater to experience it.

The same is true with the church. I have been raised in a Christian home. I been a Christian since I was 5 years old, and I have always wanted to experience God. We all do right? And yet I remember growing up, perhaps it was part of the philosophy of the day, or the flavor of Montana, that the best place to experience God is in the deepest part of the woods. Separate from everything else. Perhaps you have a different idea of where you go, but...

But did you see what Paul said: **Eph 3:18**.

The place where we can comprehend God in the fullest is not away from people, but in the midst of God's people. With all the saints.

Do you see that wonder of that? Do you see the weight of what Paul is praying for? That we may be able to comprehend the incomprehensible! That we may have a greater picture of the object of greatest beauty? That we may see Christ in ways unseeable? In the church! In this beautiful broken mess the church!

And more than comprehend, we are to, look at verse **Eph 3:19**. Know the love of God and be filled with the fullness of God.

You Christian, do you desire not simply to understand the love of God, but to know it and experience the love of Christ in a special way! Come to church! You Christian do you want to be filled with the fullness of God. The fullness of God!

For the believer the church is an experience, but it isn't blind emotionalism. For all of us who are saved, the church makes sense of our experiences. For when we experience the fullness of God, the peace which is unknowable, the deep affection of God, we push past the experience and drive it into the deep soil of the truth in which we have been grounded. The gospel in which we have been rooted.

This isn't chicken soup for the apathetic soul! This is a divine God who sent his perfect son to die on a cross so that we might have salvation and though that salvation gather together with God's redeemed to gaze at, experience and be transformed by the God who is the author of all salvation!

This is why we love the church. Because it is an unfathomable gift to us as Christians. In the church we sit under the special presence of God's spirit, in the church we are fed the gospel of Jesus Christ, in the church

we love one another with the extension of Christ's love. In the church we engage in Christ's mission. In the church we see and encounter God in a way we will not surpass until we see him face to face.

Church do not take your scheduling cues and personality suggestions from your culture, but take it from scripture. The greatest benefit to the Christian soul is the grace of the church. Where we gather together to behold the beauty of the gospel and the glory of Christ. This is the sum of our Christian experience here on earth.

Paul closes this passage with one of the greatest doxologies in all scripture: **Eph 3:20-21**.

I was recently at a church service in another state where all the pastor seemed to do was apologize for the church. For the hypocrisy, and the lack of love, and the ridged rules. And we as Christians should be the first to apologize for sin in our own lives, but I wonder if the cannibalism of the church which is often present in Christian circles is a Biblical response to the weight of the church.

The church isn't perfect, but we are being perfected. The church is often filled with hypocrites, but we are being conformed to the image of Jesus. And if we see the weight God places on the church, we might be less inclined to constantly speak negatively of it. Look back at **Eph 3:21**. To God be glory in the church and in Jesus Christ.

No one would argue that God receives glory through Jesus, but are we fully aware that God in his infinite wisdom has chosen to put similar language of affection towards the church. That's bold language isn't it? God's glory is reflected in two places: Calvary and congregation.

Is this your view of church? Perhaps you are a non-Christian in here and this sounds weird to you. And if you have not received the salvation of Christ, this is weird. But if you realize that what binds you to humanity is not your basic need for food or shelter, but for a savior, then you will realize the corporate identity we find as people who have received the salvation of Christ. I ask that this week you consider that thought.

For you in here who have attended church thoughtlessly, as you would a family Christmas party I want to challenge you to pray. If church is simply a place of gathering when it is convenient for you, you are missing out on the greatest gift God has given us inside of our salvation. If you are frustrated with your growth, if you are frustrated with your lack of worship don't attempt to escape the church to fix it, come to the church and experience Christ anew.

Pray that God works graciously inside of your salvation through the church to bring you to a greater realization of Christ. In the book of Revelation we get a glimpse into heaven: the objectively greatest place there is. And heaven looks a lot like church. Pray that God gives you a foretaste of heaven this side of death. Pray before you come to church that the Holy Spirit prepares your heart for meaningful change.

For those of you in here who get the weight of the church, I want to ask you to serve your church. Don't think of church simply as the assembly on Sunday, but think if it also as the care you give your fellow church members throughout the week, at community group, through giving, care and fellowship.

This will be hard. This will be rewarding. This will be trying, but this is also the wonderful duty which God has given us over to. Together we move towards the unbelief in our world and the sin in our own hearts. Together we gather as the wonderful will of God manifests himself in his church, for his glory and our joy.

For this we labor and for this we fight. I want to leave you with this promise Paul gives the church: **Eph 3:9-12**.