

Introduction

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Church can be the beauty or the beast. When it's good there is no joy to compare with it. When it's bad – and there are many reasons why it can be – it breaks your heart.

By church, we mean the congregation of God's people united together in the Lord Jesus Christ. The purpose of this book is to show the way for local churches to fulfil what they were designed to do and become holy and happy congregations, growing in godliness to the glory of God.

When a church is functioning as it is meant to, something beautiful happens which nothing else on earth can match. We meet with God. In Spirit and truth, we meet with him in all his glory, grace and wonder.

The famous answer to the first question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism concerning the purpose of human existence rightly tells us that 'the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.' At church this happens – can happen. It is not the only place it happens, but it is meant to be the primary place. It is beautiful – wonderful beyond telling. We hear from God. We worship and glorify him. We feel a deep satisfaction in our hearts that we have been engaged in our 'chief end' – the purpose for which we were made.

The New Testament describes what we might call the church's divine encounter, in various ways.

The suburbs of heaven

The writer to the Hebrews contrasts the experience of Old Testament Israel with the thrill of the church, by insisting that through the blood of Jesus, already we are in the suburbs of heaven and have come to Mount Zion, to

God, to the heavenly Jerusalem, and to the joyful worship of a myriad of angels and the spirits of righteous people made perfect.

The apostle Paul imagines an unconverted outsider coming into a meeting of the gathered church in Corinth, and being convicted of their sins, 'so they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"' (1 Cor. 14:25).¹ God himself is in church.

The apostle John says the same thing in Revelation. The seven letters are written to 'the angels of the seven churches' (Rev. 1:20). 'Don't you usually find angels in heaven? What are they doing in church?' we ask. As he goes on to describe the worship of heaven he speaks of twenty-four elders around God's throne. Again we enquire, 'Don't you usually find elders in churches? What are they doing in heaven?' What John is doing is deliberately blurring the lines between heaven and earth. He is telling us that this happens in church!

The Lord Jesus himself says it most simply. He tells us: 'Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven ... For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them' (Matt. 18:18, 20). So it is, that a local church can be the most beautiful place on earth. We say with the psalmist, 'How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD Almighty!' (Ps. 84:1).

Churches that please God

We want that profound experience for our churches. We want churches to know the awesome excitement, not just of an accomplished music group or a masterful pulpit presentation, but of the saving presence of God. So we must ask, 'What can we do to make a local church function more clearly as God intended it to? How should churches be ordered so as to please God? What is the best structure?' In other words, we have to ask about ecclesiology.

Historically, evangelicals have shied away from asking too many questions about church. This has been for a number of different reasons – sometimes good-hearted, but always wrong-headed. Here are some classic misplaced arguments.

‘Church is a secondary issue’

It is true that church is not the gospel. In that sense it is secondary. But because something is secondary does not mean that it is unimportant and can be shelved. It can, in a way of thinking, be secondary and yet absolutely crucial. We could argue, for example, that the brakes are a secondary item for a car. Surely it is the engine and the wheels and the steering which matter. They actually make the vehicle move and get you where you want to go. But to jump to the conclusion that therefore a car doesn’t need brakes, or that we can let the brakes fall into disrepair, means that we will be heading for a crash. Secondary – yes. Unimportant – definitely not!

‘The Bible isn’t clear on church’

Some Christians seem to have the idea that, though the gospel is clear in Scripture, much else is not. They would say that, apart from a very scanty framework, God has left it up to us to decide how to run his churches. This idea usually comes from good people whose sole aim is the personal salvation of individuals. They have the attitude that as long as we get people into heaven that is all that matters. Thus they tend to have quite a low view of the church. But the Lord does not have such a view. His church is his holy temple, his beloved bride. He could not be more concerned about how his church functions, is organised and is cared for. With their ‘personal-salvation-is-all-that-matters’ mindset, the eyes of these dear Christians have been blinkered against the fact that ecclesiological concerns are found on almost every page of the New Testament. Would it not be surprising, to say the least, if God, who from eternity has loved and predestined his people and who gave his own Son for their salvation and who gives his

Spirit for their sanctification, is content for his church to get along as a DIY, lashed together, ramshackle entity?

'Ecclesiology is divisive'

A concern for the unity of local churches should be in every Christian's heart. It is this proper concern for unity which frequently underlies the arguments in favour of shelving questions about how churches are meant to be organised. Evangelicalism is very much out of fashion in current Western society. Faithful, conservative churches take a lot of flak from the media and many other segments of society. So the argument is that we must stick together as God's people and minimise our differences. Indeed we must hang in with each other and seek to help one another. But a unity which comes about through neglecting or avoiding what Scripture says is hardly what Paul has in mind when he explains that we will grow up into the unity of Christ as we speak the truth in love. The truth about the church is important. It is lovingly seeking and speaking the truth, not avoiding it, that brings about a well-founded unity.

'Being too definite can be off-putting'

Imagine a small church which is eager to attract extra members. Along comes a new family. They begin to attend regularly. They are impressed by the faithful preaching of God's word and the children love the Sunday School. The little church is full of hope they will join. But it turns out that they are from a different church background, with a different way of doing things. Wouldn't it be better not to be so definite about church, be more flexible, and somehow try to accommodate their wishes so they can join? Being too definite about how the church is run might put them off. We sympathise very much with this situation. Certainly some kind of church membership classes where questions can be asked and the church's position explained from Scripture might help. But we can all surely see the absurdity of changing our principles in order to accommodate different

people. Suppose you do change the church rules to suit them. What happens when another couple turn up of yet another persuasion? The church will be all over the place. Adopting such a policy will drive a church to a lowest common denominator approach to church and away from Scripture, which is bound to lead to more problems later. We must follow principles not people. Ultimately, the church belongs not to us but to Christ. We must treat people graciously and with patience, but we must be faithful to what we believe the Lord Jesus has revealed in *his* word about *his* church.

'Love is all that matters'

We understand this sentiment. Without love the church loses all its beauty and becomes a beast. There is a supreme need for Christ-like love in local churches. The new commandment of the Lord Jesus to his disciples was that they 'love one another as I have loved you' (John. 13:34). The apostle Paul warns us in the most eloquent but devastating terms: 'If I can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge ... but have not love, I am nothing' (1 Cor. 13:2). So we have to acknowledge that even the truths about the church declared and explained in this book will be of no help without love. Applied without charity and kindness they will ruin churches rather than renovate them. Of course, that is the case. But this is not an either/ or situation. The 'love is all that matters' argument presents a false dichotomy. The New Testament wants love in the church, but it also wants truth. We need both, not one or the other.

These arguments and others like them have held sway in evangelicalism for long enough. They won't wash. It is time to look at Scripture afresh and be ready to embrace what the Holy Spirit has to teach us about the way local churches ought to operate.

The sharp church

The local church is God's means of reaching out to a lost world. It is the instrument for playing the winsome, arresting, life-turning tune of the gospel to those only accustomed to the death march of a world on its way to the grave and to hell. It is God's scalpel for cutting out the cancer of sin and restoring people to spiritual health in Christ for everlasting life.

The following chapters seek to spell out the New Testament's teaching on the local church. They will show us how the church is to be a loving community, growing in holiness and to be contrasted with the world. The church should be the shop-window for the gospel of Christ. Local churches should happily proclaim loud and clear, 'Look at us – this is what Christ can do!'

When we neglect ecclesiology, God's scalpel becomes a blunt instrument. We no longer make the people of the world feel embarrassed by the emptiness and superficiality of their lives. We often wonder why the church seems to have lost its cutting edge in the twenty-first century. Could it be because churches have become too relaxed, and no longer disciple and care for their members so as to become vibrant communities of Christ-like people whose lives challenge our society with their joy and purity? Could it be that the way many churches are run does not lead Christians to see their Christianity as much more than a Sunday hobby? Could it be that our churches are not providing the heaven-bound community and deep sense of Christian identity that is needed in these days? Could it be that we have lost the weight of glory?

As the apostles' teaching on the church is explored and put into practice, our churches will be given a gospel edge. Individuals will be honed. Churches will be sharpened for God, the surgeon's, use.

The joined-up church

Over recent years there has been a growing concern for the health of gospel churches. This is to be applauded wherever it is found. But very often that concern has come down to the introduction of a few new items to the church agenda – a Christian foundations course here or a discipleship course there.

However, the agenda of this book is different. The vision of this book, which we believe is a New Testament vision, is that the whole way a church should be formed, run and led should work for the health of all its members and for the thriving of the church as a community of God's people. It is a church with an intentional mindset throughout. It is a church where all the dots are joined-up.

In such a community God's own presence will be manifest. It is not simply about an extra activity or a few extra one-to-one Bible studies bolted on to the existing structure. The church needs to be rethought in a joined-up way, so that the whole organisation and organic life of the church works for building up God's people to his glory.

In his book *The Kingdom of God and the Glory of the Cross*, Patrick Schreiner picks up the biblical picture of God's kingdom as a growing tree. It is strong. It is fruitful. People find shelter and shade under its branches. In a word they find life. He says this: 'Power is not about coercion; it is about structures for flourishing. God created the tree of life out of his power so that Adam and Eve could flourish as human beings, but they turned to the forbidden tree.'²

A church ought to be structured so as to make its members thrive. A church which patterns the whole of its life on the premise that, under God and through Christ, it is to be the means by which God's people are to flourish, will be a community which brings people back to the tree of life. It will lead people back into the presence of God.

It is the collective aim of the authors of this book that churches will be shaped by Scripture to grow strong and true. Every local church could be a beauty not a beast.

¹ Scripture quotations in this chapter are NIV.

² Patrick Schreiner, *The Kingdom of God and the Glory of the Cross* (Crossway, 2018), 19.