

'Passionate in reproducing ourselves'

1 Peter 2:4-12 & Matt 5:13-16

Four weeks ago I began this series by suggesting that thinking about the essential identity of Christ's church was like teaching a child to throw a ball. It's not enough simply to say, pick up the ball and throw it. You need to be able to identify the essential movements that combine to make a throw.

Miss one element or over emphasise one element and the child may actually do themselves a damage when trying to throw, or they will be really unco, awkward and ineffective when trying to throw a ball, or perhaps not able to throw at all.

Likewise when it comes to thinking about what it is to be Christ's church? It is such a familiar concept that we assume every Christian knows the answer. But too often we struggle to give more than a very general answer: Christ's church is the community of Christians, God's saved people.

And so, four weeks ago, with our general starting point Christ's commission in Matthew 28: that the essential identity of the church is in being disciples of Christ and making disciples for Christ, we began to consider four essential characteristics we need to have.

We must be a learning church, and learning begins by listening to God's word. And we know we are hearing God's word properly if we are responding and being changed by it. And the evidence of real change will be seen relationally; both with the Lord and in our relationship with one another.

This has been a real challenge to consider. And this morning as we begin to think about the fourth essential characteristic - that we must be actively spreading the gospel in our local community and beyond, not just living to ourselves as a church - I want to draw you in through a question.

Assuming we do pretty well as a church in terms of learning, responding and relating, what would it mean for us as a church if we missed this fourth characteristic? Friends, I will venture to suggest that it would reduce us to an exclusive club: A collection of people who get together for something that is good and which they really enjoy, but who are not really benefit to others around them.

This morning I will state and apply the principle that it is equally important to be a church that is actively evangelising, seeking to see others for whom Christ has died brought into his kingdom and under his rule. And before we go any further I need to acknowledge that a

majority of my material this morning is taken straight from John Stott's book, The Living Church.

1. The Principle stated: We have a God-given double identity. Look at 1 Peter 2:9 and listen for Peter's connection as I read it to you. Peter describes the identity of the church by making a very simple statement. We are a people belonging to God THAT we might declare his praises.

Notice Peter doesn't feel the need to argue the connection. Stating one assumes the other follows. Let's separate them for a moment for clarification.

We are a **people belonging to God**. Peter uses several picture words to describe our primary identity as a Christian church. We are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, which verse 5, is to offer spiritual sacrifices to God. This is the same picture of Romans 12:1-2, the picture of worship or the whole-of-life response to God's grace and mercy to us in Christ.

And it is important to note that Peter is speaking to local churches scattered throughout Asia Minor. As a church family unit and as individuals we are called to be very distinct from rebellious people around us in that we are to live in the light of God's grace and mercy that has made us his children and which ultimately will take us to be with him in heaven forever.

But an inseparable part of our identity is also that **we are to declare his praises**. In other words we as a local church are to be engaged in witness or engaged in the mission of making God known to others. Again, using the picture Peter uses, we are a holy nation whose purpose in this world is to make known to others what we have experienced first hand from the Lord ourselves.

We have a mission to get involved in the sinful rebellious world of people around us: challenging their thinking, and offering real meaning for their existence; and real hope for the future; and real comfort for their pain and hurting; and real direction for their living and lifestyle.

Matthew 5:13-16 is another powerful expression of this principle. The Sermon On the Mount is Christ's own teaching on the identity of his kingdom people. Christians are to stand out from and stand against the thinking and values of the world in which we live. Verses 1-11 we are to be a worshipping people living in the light of how God has treated us. But again we are to be a counter-culture by being salt and light in the world.

Salt was a preservative which when rubbed into meat kept it from going rotten. In the same way, Christians are to rub themselves into the world to prevent further decay from the effects of sin. But more positively we are to be light. As Christians our purpose is to dispel the darkness of sin by introducing the light of new life in Christ.

And the two are inseparable. God's intention for us as a church family unit is that we are both a worshipping community and also a witnessing community. If we truly understand and appreciate what the Lord has done for us in Christ, and continues to do in us by his Holy Spirit, then we will inevitably want to make him known to others, so that they might live obediently under his rule too. and worship him as we do.

But friends, that is only the smallest part of our task this morning. Much more important for us is to **apply the principle such that we maintain a practical balance in our God-given double identity.** I don't know about you, but I often find it relatively easy to identify a principle in Scripture than to work out how to apply it in practice. So, we need to think carefully and work hard in this respect.

The principle needs to be applied **in our thinking and self-image as a church.** Put simply, unless we get our thinking right then we will not get the balance right. If we are to be a truly living and healthy church, then we need to have a proper self-image or self-understanding about who we are and what our purpose as a church is.

But the sad reality is that many churches have not kept a balance of double identity, but tend to focus on one extreme only. Many here have been in churches where all the emphasis is on worshipping God. It is very enjoyable and very sincere, but it has been imbalanced and therefore ungodly.

They have been like a massive spotlight in a small cupboard. They have enjoyed the light and life of the gospel, but haven't seen themselves as missionaries, and have done little or nothing to dispel the darkness in their community by actively taking the gospel out.

And on the other hand some have been part of churches where all the talk is about mission and evangelism, while there is little importance given to being a learning, responding, transforming community of God's people.

We need to do and be both! But that will only happen when we truly understand the link in God's purposes. If we drop the ball when it comes to mission, then we have not listened to God properly at that point and we have not responded and been transformed at that point.

We cannot trade or substitute one characteristic for another. We often say or think as a church or as individuals: "I'm good at relating to others, and I have been changed in this way and that way, but the idea of mission or taking the gospel to others is not for me".

That doesn't mean we all have to evangelise in the same way. But the point is that if we are truly appreciative of what the Lord has done for us and is doing in us, then we will be missionary in our thinking, and we will be keen to create or take up opportunities to tell others of the Lord Jesus Christ and seek to bring them to the point of serving him.

Then the principle needs to be applied **in our structures and programmes as a church.** Once again the reality is that churches often have structures and programmes that focus on

teaching, worship and fellowship and actually overlook this whole aspect of mission and reproducing ourselves.

It is easy for church leaders, with the best of intentions, to fill every week with church-based activities. We need to hear and learn God's word. We need to fellowship, worship and pray together. We need to care for one another. But the problem is that we become so busy with good things each week that there is no time for getting involved with our local community or wider non-Christian family and workmates.

So what seems, at first glance, to be really great, is actually something ungodly if it contradicts an essential part of the church's identity. And for some Christians it is actually reflects really ungodly thinking because they consciously choose one to avoid the other. Many Christians find it easier and more appealing to fellowship and study the Bible than to take the message out to others.

Do you see the point? We must make sure that the structure of GECN is not an end in itself, but a means to the proper end of equipping us as individuals and as a unit to take the gospel out to our community and beyond. Satan has us right where he wants us - in a position where we pose no threat to his kingdom - if we are all about teaching and learning and worship and fellowship and fail to be equally committed to mission every day of the week as we have opportunity at whatever level.

So we need to make time for training programmes to help people with getting the gospel out. We need to help each other in this task recognising we are a body, a church family unit. Some will do it easier and better than others, but have few non-Christian contacts. Others will have lots of contacts, but not have the skills to argue and reason. Well, let's help each other and be smart about using each other's gifts and abilities and situations.

And we need to make sure people in our church family unit are encouraged to get involved in the community. We need to stop making people feel guilty if they don't come to all the church meetings because they want to build friendships with non-Christians through some event or through hospitality or whatever. For too long we have forced Christians to make a choice between church or community - and it has been a really ungodly pressure.

Third, we need to apply the principle **to our teaching and message**. This needs to happen at many different levels.

At the very most obvious, if evangelism is about sharing the good news of Jesus Christ - that's what the word 'evangel' in Greek means that forms the word evangelism, the process of sharing the evangel - then it stands to reason that as a church and as individual Christians we must know what that message is.

We need to know what the Bible says because this is God's voice to his world. We need to be clear about the importance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in the overall gospel message. Yet, sadly many Christians, after being Christians for years, would be hard pressed to talk through the gospel in a clear and precise way with anybody.

And taking a step further, we need to be clear about what things are a central part of the gospel message and which are cultural or generational expressions of those essential truths. For example: is having two church services on a Sunday really a law of the Lord or simply a cultural expression that may be changed if there is a more strategic alternative?

We must be absolutely clear that we are seeking to bring people to love and serve the Lord rather than take up a particular cultural or generational lifestyle that we are comfortable with. Older people, listen carefully to this point: If we are to reproduce ourselves and see GECN alive and thriving and healthy for another generation, then we must be clear about the heart of the gospel so that we can free the younger generation to serve Christ in the context of changing culture.

This is not to turn a blind eye to drifting standards or allow any practice - Younger people you need to listen here. We must guard the deposit given in the gospel and God's word. We must not allow God's word to be lost by pressure of society. But on the other hand we must make sure we do not make living for Christ more difficult than it needs be, and it is to make sure that we do not bind our young people into an expression of Christian service that is culturally old fashioned or irrelevant.

And fourthly the principle must be **applied in our church life**. Again, put simply, if we are to reproduce ourselves and see another generation of this church grow up with people coming to know Jesus and love and serve him as a result of hearing the gospel, then we need to demonstrate in our life together the reality of gospel change. Our church family unit is meant to be a visual aid to our community of what God's new people and God's new society looks like when people are brought under God's rule, forgiven, and changed from the inside out by his Spirit.

People will learn much more quickly by what they see than by what they are told in words. What we are as a church family unit will either advertise the gospel in a winsome appealing way, or it will make people turn away from the gospel as just another riot of hot air and empty words.

Again, how could we ever hope to reproduce ourselves by seeing people converted and brought under the rule of Christ if the only example of what they see the end product to be is a church torn apart by jealousy, bad relationships, angry words, malicious gossip, sinful actions, or concern only for its own selfish concerns?

Well, it is not rocket science. It is not hard. And I conclude with the first connection as a question. How important is mission for you as part of this church family unit?

Do you want to have the privilege of being 'a people who belongs to the Lord' without the responsibility of 'making his praises known'?

Are you a person who is quite happy to support people like Glenn and Beth going to other countries to proclaim the message of Jesus, while you are not prepared to do the same thing in your suburb?

Are you a person who is quite happy for non-Christians to come to us at our convenience, when we meet for church, but are not prepared to go out and get your hands dirty to reach them, even though Christ sought you out?



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