

The Calling of the Church

Introduction

Grace Community Church is unique. It has been the subject of much discussion throughout the years among pastors, church leaders, laymen, and even secular authorities. Magazines have written articles about us. Several doctoral students have written their theses on our church.

Many reports have tried to analyze us. We have been dissected, examined, studied, labeled, categorized, scrutinized, copied, blessed, cursed, defended, ignored, endowed, publicized, and even sued. What has caused all that attention?

The key to understanding Grace church is not to analyze its pastors, staff, programs, methods, elders, congregation, growth, size, or location. All those things are essential to what we are, but the real issue is revealed in our very name, Grace Community Church. The world has such a difficult time understanding us because they don't understand what a church is. The term church sets us and all other true churches apart from all other human institutions. We have been purchased with Christ's own blood. No other institution in the world owes its existence to such a fact.

A. The Calling of the Church Explained

Unfortunately the word church has lost its profound richness. Today it brings to mind a building of bricks and mortar on some corner. Or some think of the church as an institutional hierarchy of religious orders.

To understand what the church is, we need to look at its Greek counterpart. "Church" is a translation of the Greek word ekkl[ma]lesia. The term is derived from the verb root kale[ma]o, which means "to call." That is a good definition of the church: we are the called. In fact, Romans 8:28 wonderfully defines the assembly of believers as "the called according to his purpose." We are a group summoned together by God for His purpose. We are not a human organization. We are not the result of man's ingenuity or power. We were not built by good, religious people. Rather, we have been called by God into existence.

B. The Calling of the Church Expressed

That it is God who calls believers is emphasized throughout the New Testament:

1. Romans 1:6-7--Paul, writing to the church at Rome, said, "Among whom are ye also the called of Jesus Christ; to all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints."
2. 1 Corinthians 1:2--"Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place shall call upon the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord."
3. 1 Corinthians 1:26--"Ye see your calling, brethren." Paul described the character of those who make up the church.
4. Ephesians 4:1, 4--"Walk worthy of the vocation to which ye are called.... Ye are called in one hope of your calling."
5. 1 Thessalonians 2:12--"Walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory."
6. 2 Timothy 1:9--"[God] hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace."
7. 1 Peter 5:10--"The God of all grace ... who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus."

The entire church has been called into existence by God Himself. It doesn't exist because of the genius of man, the charisma of leaders, the power of persuasive speech, the affluence of its membership, the effectiveness of its facilities, the wisdom of its committees, or the hard work of its members. It is ultimately the work of God. The true church is led by God's Spirit through God's Word in the lives of obedient people.

That helps to explain the church's overall success and blessing. However its weakness and failures are because God has chosen to work through human agencies. When we succeed it is because of Him, not us. When we fail it is because of us, not Him. The main goal of the church is to let God work and build His kingdom as we obediently submit to His Word and His Spirit. Ephesians 1 helps us to understand the extent of what it means to be called by him to do just that.

Lesson

I. CALLED BEFORE: Election (vv. 4-5, 11)

"He hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world ... having predestinated us unto the adoption of sons by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will ... being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will."

A. A Temporal Context

The church is not something that accidentally came into being. It is the result of God's predetermined, sovereign call.

The apostle Paul reiterates God's election in 2 Timothy 1:9: "[God has] saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began."

In the hymn "The Inner Life," an anonymous lyricist wrote,

I sought the Lord and afterwards I knew
He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me.
It was not I that found O Savior true.
No, I was found by Thee.

The church is fulfilling a predetermined destiny, a calling from beyond space and time. In God's mind, there is no time frame. Everything is an immediate eternal present. The church was as real to Him before the world began as it is now. God continues to add to the church those whom He predetermined would believe in Christ.

B. A Tremendous Confidence

That should give us a tremendous sense of confidence. Before I came to Grace church, I was a pastoral candidate for a large, well-known church. However, the leaders there concluded that I was too young and inexperienced for their church.

Although I was open to wherever the Lord wanted me to go, I was disappointed. But God's plan wasn't for me to be there; it was for me to be at Grace church. Before the foundation of the world, God knew that He would use Grace church to redeem souls, and that I would be a part of that process. It thrills me every time I hear about someone being saved in our church because it is one more fulfillment of God's predestined plan.

People aren't saved by accident; the Lord is building His church.

That takes tremendous pressure off me because I don't have to build the church. Years ago a reporter asked me, "Do you have a great desire to build the church?" I said, "I have no desire to build the church because Christ said He would build the church, and I certainly don't want to compete with Him. I just want to be a part of what He's building."

Grace church is Christ's church. Consequently, there's no sense

of panic or frustration in my ministry. There's no reason to seek worldly means to get results. All we need to do is rest in the Spirit of God and be faithful to commit our lives to Christ. He will surely build His church.

II. CALLED OUT: Redemption (vv. 7, 13)

"In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace ... in who ye also trusted, after ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also after ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise."

A. Stated

Paul identified the church as those who have been graciously redeemed and forgiven. God has "delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son" (Col. 1:13). We have been called out of sin, death, and the world's system into life (Rom. 6:8-11; 1 John 2:15-17). We are a redeemed community, born-again by the Spirit of God. That is the only reason we are part of the true church. If we weren't redeemed, we wouldn't be a church in the truest sense of the word.

Unredeemed people who assemble under a religious banner with a title of "church" are not part of the church that Christ is building. There are so-called churches all over the world that appear to be alive, but they are dead (Rev. 3:1). Rather than being called out from the world, they are part of it--in spite of their religious exercises.

B. Related

Having a church membership that is truly saved is so important to me, I preached on that subject the first Sunday I pastored at Grace church. My text was Matthew 7:21-23: "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven.... Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name?... And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you; depart from me." Perhaps you think I should have waited before I hit them between the eyes with a message like that! But I was concerned there were people who thought they were part of the church, but really weren't.

A church needs to understand from the very beginning what it is so it can know what direction it should be going. As a result of that confrontive sermon, several couples left the church and we discovered that at least one elder was not a Christian. A church must do its best to distinguish between the wheat

and the tares--the true and the false, those who play church
and those who are the church.

{*} How to Play Church

The title of my first sermon was "How to Play Church." In Luke 6:46 Jesus says, "Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" Reminiscent of that verse is a painting in the cathedral of L[um]ubeck, Germany, entitled "The Lament of Jesus Christ Against the Ungrateful World." The corresponding text reads,

You call Me master, and obey Me not;
You call Me light, and see Me not;
You call Me the way, and walk Me not;
You call Me life, and live Me not;
You call Me wise, and follow Me not;
You call Me fair, and love Me not;
You call Me rich, and ask Me not;
You call Me eternal, and seek Me not.
If I condemn thee, blame Me not.

{*} He Knew the Shepherd

I read about an old pastor who had been forced to retire because years of preaching had caused his voice to crack. Although a humble man, he was invited to a high-society luncheon by a friend.

The person heading up the luncheon requested a famous actor who was present to recite something for the guests. Agreeing to do so, he asked if anyone had a specific request. The old pastor thought for a moment and said, "How about the Twenty-third Psalm?" The actor replied, "That's an unusual request, but I happen to know it. I'll do it on one condition, though: you recite it after me." The old pastor hadn't bargained for that, but for the sake of the Lord, he agreed.

The actor stood up and recited the Twenty-third Psalm with the great intonation of his lyrical voice. When he finished, everyone applauded. The old pastor then stood up and went through the psalm in his humble way with a crackling voice. When he was done, there was not a dry eye in the room. Sensing the emotion of the moment, the actor stood up and said, "You clapped for me, but you wept for him. The difference is obvious: I know the psalm, but he knows the Shepherd." {e*}

If there's any one thing that a church must be, it is an assembly of people who know the Shepherd. Anything less is not a church.

III. CALLED FROM: Sanctification (v. 4)

"That we should be holy and without blame before him."

A. The Requirement

As Christians, we have been called from the world to pursue holiness.

First Peter 1:16 says, "Be ye holy; for I am holy." We are called to be separated from the world. We are to be non-compromising. The Spirit has instructed us to keep ourselves "unspotted from the world" (James 1:27). The Lord desires a church "not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27). Paul's desire was to present the church "as a chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:2). God has called us to holiness, Christlikeness, and virtue.

B. The Responsibility

Christians are to manifest the holiness of our heavenly Father, our Savior, and the Spirit who dwells within us. We are to separate ourselves from complicity with the world (2 Cor. 6:17). We are not to practice the deeds of the flesh (Gal. 5:16-25; Col. 3:5). First John 2:15 warns us not to love the world's system, which is opposed to God. We have been called to holy lives. Therefore as a church we must emphasize the importance of humility, the confession of sin, church discipline, and worship of a holy God so we might live in reverential fear of Him.

When a group is unholy, they may call themselves a church, but they are not a true church unless they face the issue of sin.

Show me a church that doesn't preach on sin and I'll show you a church that's full of unholiness. The church must not tolerate unholiness. A pastor can't preach against sin yet do nothing about it. Otherwise people will think that biblical instruction and everyday living are unrelated.

A church must seek holiness in the lives of its leaders as well as in the lives of those who follow them.

First Thessalonians 5:23-24 is a call to holiness: "The very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it." In our pursuit of holiness, we must first recognize the holiness of God and Christ that we might appropriately fear them. In the gospel accounts, people often feared Jesus when His glory and His holiness were revealed to them (Mark 9:5-6; Luke 5:8).

We are uniquely called according to God's purpose, and part of that purpose is being holy.

IV. CALLED TO: Identification (vv. 4-6)

"He hath chosen us in him ... that we should be holy and without blame before him, in love having predestinated us unto the adoption of sons by Jesus Christ to himself.... He hath made us accepted in the Beloved."

A. Stated

The prepositional phrases "in him," "before him," "to himself," and "in the Beloved" reveal that Christians are intimately identified with God and Christ.

B. Supported

1. 1 Thessalonians 1:1--This epistle begins, "Paul, and Silvanus, and Timothy, unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God, the Father, and in the Lord Jesus Christ." The church is called to an intimate identification with God Himself.
2. 1 John 1:3--Our personal union with God is a marvelous fellowship. According to John, "Our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ."
3. John 17:22--Before His arrest, Jesus prayed that believers might be one with Him as He and the Father are one.
4. 1 Corinthians 6:17--"He that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit."
5. Romans 8:14-17--Christians have become intimately related to God, having been adopted as His sons. That makes us joint heirs with Christ. The church isn't a group you join by signing your name. It isn't some kind of a society committed merely to a system of teaching.
6. Romans 6:4-5--When we were saved, we entered into a personal relationship with the living God through Jesus Christ. We are identified with Christ in His death, and raised with Him in His resurrection so that we might "walk in newness of life" (v. 4).
7. Galatians 2:20--Paul said, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." That is a clear statement of the believer's spiritual union with Christ. In my own life I don't know where John MacArthur ends and Jesus Christ begins. (But when I sin, I know that I am responsible!) Like

Paul, I have been "crucified with Christ ... and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God." The life of Christ and your own life should be so intertwined that you can't differentiate between them. It should be natural for you to see God at work in your life, sensing His power, experiencing His answers to your prayers, following His guidance, and being refreshed by His comfort.

We don't believe God is some cosmic ogre waiting to step on us if we break one of His rules. Rather, we have an intimate love relationship with Him.

V. CALLED UNDER: Revelation (vv. 7-9)

"In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace, in which he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence, having made known unto us the mystery of his will."

A. The Practical Content of Revelation

God has filled us in on great spiritual truths concerning life, death, God, man, and eternity. He also has given us prudence, which is practical wisdom concerning earthly things like solving problems.

We are under the authority of the Word of God, which calls us to obey. Paul said, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Col. 3:16). Christians are called to submit to the Word of God--we don't chart our own course. When we meet together to plan, pray, and serve the Lord, there's one thing that is central in our minds: What does the Word of God say about the matter? That should be the focus of everything we do.

B. The Personal Commitment to Revelation

On a particular occasion I was unable to attend a pastors' luncheon I had been invited to. Someone made the comment that I didn't go because I couldn't find a biblical route to get there. I took it as a compliment!

The church I pastor has the same kind of reputation for having a biblical perspective. It also is thoroughly committed to the Word of God. My commitment to Scripture led me to seminary because although I knew what the Bible said, I didn't know what it meant. In seminary I learned to understand the Bible. That prepared me to teach the Bible, which is a great joy for me.

{*} Having a Mind to Submit to God's Word

When I came to Grace church following the untimely death of their pastor, my candidating sermon was an exposition of Romans 7. Because I had a tremendous burden to explain that difficult chapter and was oblivious to all else, I spoke for one hour and thirty-five minutes. Afterwards, some of the people came up and said, "That's what we want--but could you shorten it a little bit?" I thought, "If I get to preach here more than once, I can shorten it up all you want!"

One of the elders said, "We are ready to serve. We want to know what God wants us to do." That has been the commitment of Grace church throughout its history. I discovered in those first few days that the people had a mind to submit to God's Word. Since that time, the motto of the church has been "[equipping] the saints for the work of the ministry" (Eph. 4:12).

Christians mature by studying and applying Scripture: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God ... that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Church leaders are to equip people with "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph. 6:17).

More than merely owning a Bible, we're to understand the Bible so we can use it as a weapon (cf. vv. 10-12).

A minister attending a pastors' conference told me, "If I told my people to do what you have told yours to do, they'd throw me out of the church." I said, "But it's biblical." He said, "It wouldn't matter to them." His church doesn't have a right perspective on the authority of God's Word. A church must be committed to biblical teaching and willing to serve under its authority.

VI. CALLED WITH: Unification (v. 10)

"That in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ."

The ultimate purpose of God is to gather all things together in Christ at the completion of redemptive history. The church is the symbol of that now. We are called to be one in the family of God. I grew up in a day when spiritual isolation was common.

Everyone kept his spirituality to himself. It was something you didn't talk about. You smiled the Christian smile, carried the zipper Bible, and went to Sunday school. People didn't let anything out, or let anyone into their inner selves. Fellowship for most Christians was little more than red punch and stale cookies, and little old ladies with buns on their

heads serving doughnuts and coffee! There was little depth to it. But we have been called into a marvelous fellowship of unity.

In Philippians 2:2 Paul says that Christians should be "of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose" ([sc]NASB). Our love for others must be based in humility. That's why Paul said, "Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others" (v. 4), which was beautifully exemplified by Christ, who humbled Himself (vv. 5-8). To have unity, we must love one another with a spirit of humility. As long as everyone looks out for himself, there's no give-and-take relationship. When we recognize the reality of sin in our lives, we will realize how needy we are. Genuine humility is the result. That's why I don't preach the "self-help gospel," which says, "You're all right; think positive, be somebody." Show me a church where that kind of message is preached and I'll show you a church that doesn't know the meaning of fellowship. Everyone's there for himself--not for the benefit of anyone else. On the other hand, show me a church where you talk about humility and I'll show you a church where people can love each other.

Love borne of genuine humility is not the result of people trying to improve their self-image. Rather, it comes from giving to others who have needs. A church is a group of people called to interact with each other. Christians are not spectators. They are accountable to minister to others in love. They are committed to teaching others to minister because ministry to others is a goal of the church.

VII. CALLED UNTO: Glorification (v. 11)

"In whom also we have obtained an inheritance."

Peter described our inheritance as being that which is "incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you" (1 Pet. 1:4). Christians are committed to glorification. Our focus is future. We are not citizens of this world. Philippians 3:20 says, "Our citizenship is in heaven." We're not earthbound, tied to the evil world's system. We have been made heirs of a boundless, eternal inheritance. That's why I don't preach purely political or social messages, for they have only temporal relevance. Christians belong to the kingdom of God, which is cutting its path by the power of the Spirit through the world of darkness. We look for a coming kingdom of glory.

Colossians 3:1-2 says, "If ye, then, be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above.... Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth." We look for Jesus to return and

His kingdom to be fully established. Consequently, we're not investing our lives and all our assets into this passing world.

A church can have effective ministries only when people generously give instead of hoarding their resources to waste them on this passing world's system (1 John 2:17). They await the fullness of God's kingdom and a glorious eternal inheritance. In the words of Hebrews 11, we look "for a city ... whose builder and maker is God" (v. 10).

VIII. CALLED FOR: Proclamation (v. 6)

"To the praise of the glory of his grace."

We have been called to proclaim the glory of God's grace. The world should look at us and say, "Look at that group of people! What a gracious God they have!" God should be glorified in how we live and in what we say. There's a sense in which we proclaim God's glory to Him and His holy angels, as well as to the world around us. We have been redeemed to the praise of His glory. Consequently, the world cannot understand us unless it understands the glory of God, for we are its primary manifestation.

The glory of God is the greatest theme in the Bible and our most important checkpoint in life. Ask yourself this one question when you come to a crossroad: Will my decision glorify God? The church was established to be to the praise of His glory. Our Lord put it this way: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father, who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

Focusing on the Facts

1. Define the meaning of the word church as determined by its Greek counterpart in the New Testament (see p. 1).
2. Explain how the true church has always been led (see p. 2).
3. What is the main goal of the church in relation to the kingdom (see p. 2)?
4. When were the people who believe in Christ chosen by God (Eph. 1:4; see p. 3)?
5. What have redeemed people been called out of? What have they been transferred into (Col. 1:13; see p. 4)?
6. For what purpose have Christians been called from the world (see p. 6)?

7. What must a church emphasize so its people might live in reverential fear of God (see p. 6)?
8. With whom are Christians intimately identified? Support your answer with Scripture (see pp. 7-8).
9. What has God filled us with and given us (Eph. 1:8; see p. 9)?
10. When Christians meet together to plan, pray, and serve the Lord, what should be their central concern (see p. 9)?
11. How do Christians mature (see p. 9)?
12. How can a church experience unity? What happens in a church where a self-help message is preached? Why (see pp. 10-11)?
13. What have Christians been called to proclaim (see p. 12)?

Pondering the Principles

1. Colossians 1:13-14 tells that the Father has "delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" ([sc]NASB). That act of mercy is something we will be eternally grateful for. Thank God for having graciously redeemed you from the "domain of darkness" and granting you entrance into "the kingdom of His beloved Son."
2. Meditate on Luke 6:46-49. When you find that the Bible says you should be doing something that you aren't, or that you shouldn't be doing something that you are, do you immediately attempt to make the necessary changes in your life? Or, do you procrastinate until the action you need to take no longer seems important to you? Commit yourself to applying biblical principles to your daily life so that you will have a solid foundation. Is Christ the foundation of your life, or is this passing world (1 John 2:17)?
3. The Christian message is one of hope. Jesus is coming to usher His people into the glory of His kingdom. Knowing that, as well as the fact that He has saved us from sin and empowered us to live for Him, be sure to seek "the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Col. 3:1, [sc]NASB). Is the majority of your time and energy put into things that have relatively little lasting significance, or do you spend your time on things that have eternal value? Are you a law-abiding citizen of heaven? Meditate on Philippians 3:17[ma]4:1. Are you following a godly example so that you might become a more loyal citizen (v. 17)? Are you eagerly awaiting our Savior (v. 20)? How should your hope in Christ

affect your life now (4:1)?

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