

Meant for More Than Sitting in the Stands (Eph. 4:7-12, 14-16)

Chris Altrock – February 21, 2010

A recent book includes two studies on why people choose a church.¹ When people who *don't* normally attend a church start attending and then are asked why they started attending, they give these four answers: they like the preaching, they agree with the church's doctrines, the church members are friendly, or a church member witnessed to them. When people who *do* normally attend church services are asked why they attend, they give these four answers: they agree with the church's doctrines, they see how church members care for each other, they like the preaching, or the church members are friendly to them.

How about you? You've chosen to attend the services of this church. Why? Your presence this morning indicates that belonging to a church is important to you. Why?

One thing which the book I mentioned makes clear is that when asked why we choose a church, many of us talk about what the church does for *us*. *We often belong to churches because of what churches do for us*. We like how the church's stance on doctrine affirms our own beliefs. We like how the preaching helps us live our lives. We like how people in the church befriend us. We often belong to churches because of what churches do for *us*.

But many of us have a deeper reason for belonging to a church. We enjoy what the church does for us. But we are also driven by a sense of what the church is doing for others. We often decide to become part of a church because we feel like a particular church is making a difference in the community or the world.

Paul points in this direction in Eph. 4: *7But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. 8Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." 9(In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? 10He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) 11And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:7-12 ESV). This passage reveals something important about the church and what the church is doing for others. But to truly feel its impact, I want to walk backward through the text. The text ends, and for our purposes this morning, begins with this image in vs. 12: for building up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12 ESV). What does Paul call the church? He calls the church, "the body of Christ." Paul imagines the church as the body of Christ which is being "built up." For Paul, the church is not a building. And it is not a place. It is "the body of Christ" which is being "built up."*

Consider that image: "the body of Christ." In his book The 100: A Ranking Of The Most Influential Persons In History scientist Michael Hart attempts to rank the 100 people who have made the greatest impact on the daily life of people around the world.² Written from a secular point of view, the book still lists Christ as the 3rd most influential person in history. Most of us

would bump Christ up 2 places. But the point is that even secular people agree that Christ had a tremendously positive impact on the world.

And when Paul describes church as “the body of Christ” he would have us recall this positive and powerful impact of Jesus. Jesus made a radical difference in the world. And now the church is “the body of Christ.” That is, what Jesus was to the first century, the church is to the twenty-first century. At its greatest potential, the church is “the body of Christ.” It carries on the same impact today which Jesus Christ did in his day.

That image touches on that deeper motive that might lead us to belong to a church. *While we do sometimes belong to churches because of what they can do for us, many of us also belong to churches because of what they do for others.* There is something within us that longs to be part of a group which impacts the lives of others in the same way that Jesus did.

And that is what Paul gives us. *He paints the church as a “built body.”* The church is the living body of Christ which is being built up, which is constantly growing stronger in its ability to do for people today what Jesus did for people in his day. Who wouldn’t want to belong to such a group?

But what exactly does this “built body” do? Continuing backwards through verse 12, we read this: *the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12 ESV).* What does this built body of Christ do? It does work of ministry. *Paul envisions a built body characterized by the work of ministry.* What do you think of when you think of Christ? You probably think of the amazing words he taught. You think of the unbelievable deeds he did. You think of a leper he cleansed, a sinful woman he protected, a child he took a stand for, or a religious establishment which he railed against. All of that is Jesus’ work of ministry. And it was Jesus’ “work of ministry” which changed lives. Paul says that what Jesus did in his body is what the church now does in its body. The church does the same “work of ministry” that Jesus did.

I recently read of a church that was recognized as the number one volunteer organization in its city. The number one volunteer organization in its city! That’s some real “work of ministry.” In the wake of the Haiti earthquake, churches have been one of the primary sources of funds, resources, and teams. In case after case, I hear of churches sending doctors, nurses, money, water, and other supplies. That’s some real “work of ministry.” Churches are capable of amazing, life-changing, and world-transforming work of ministry.

But how does that work of ministry get done? Isn’t that the real question? Most of us here don’t have to be persuaded about the value of church. We already believe the church is capable of being the body of Christ, of performing the same kind of “work of ministry” performed by Jesus. I think what most of us are interested in is “how”? How can a church like Highland do that kind of work of ministry and thus be more like the body of Christ?

This question has been asked of me many times recently in light of our relocation. We’d like to land in that new location doing a lot of “work of ministry.” We’d all like Highland to make a

difference among the people of Houston Levee. But the question is, “how?” That question is the one question I’m asked most. “Chris, how are we going to reach people at Houston Levee?” “Chris, how are we going to serve people at Houston Levee?” Whether it’s something you’re thinking about regarding the relocation or an issue that drives you in general, most of us are interested in how a church can do the kind of work of ministry that will change lives.

But, Paul’s answer to the “how” question may bother you. Because Paul’s not going to say what some of us say. I’m frequently also asked this question: “Chris, what is the staff going to do to reach people at Houston Levee?” “Chris, what is the staff going to do to serve people at Houston Levee?” Now, I understand what’s behind that question. There is a sense in which the staff and elders bear responsibility for the direction and health of this church. But Paul’s going to say something which may surprise us.

Let’s walk backward once more through vs. 12: *to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12 ESV)*. The church is capable of being the body of Christ. But how? How does a church like Highland act like a body of Christ? Paul’s not interested in *how*. He’s more interested in *who*. Who does the work of ministry? Here’s how Paul answers that question: *to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. Paul envisions the church as a built body, characterized by the work of ministry, conducted by all the saints*. Who does the work of ministry in a church? In verse 11 Paul mentions church leaders like apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers. But they are not the ones doing the work of ministry. Who does the work of ministry? “The saints.” And who are the saints? “The saints” refers to every single Christian. Who does the work of ministry? Every single Christian. That’s why Paul writes in verse 7, *But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift*. Every single Christian was given grace, an ability to do the work of ministry. That’s why Paul writes this later in verse 15: *15Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love*. When each part, when each Christian, works properly, the body is built up and thus functions like the body of Christ.

The question to ask is not, “What is the staff going to do?” or “What are the elders going to do?” but “What am I going to do?” The ironic thing about the church is that it is the one organism on earth where the most important work is turned over to the average person. As God looks out over this city, from the Enclave to Exchange, he sees the need for a body of Christ. He sees the need for some group to do among those people what Jesus did among his people. He sees marriages that need mending, children that need rescued, mouths that need feeding, hearts that need encouraging, broken lives that need fixing, and lost souls that need saving. But God doesn’t call out some small elite spiritual group. He doesn’t hand that work over to the religious equivalent of the Marines or the Seals. He hands that work over to you. And you. And you. He gives each one of you a gift, a talent, an ability that, when used properly, has a powerful impact.

What is the plan for Highland's growth and ministry at Houston Levee? Paul says it's this: you. You are the plan. Not the staff. Not the elders. You. You are the plan. God has given you a talent, an ability, a gift which enables you to impact lives. And when we all use those abilities together, we become the body of Christ.

I'll share some examples of this at work at Highland.

- Saturday's packed Hope Works breakfast with 800 people from around the Mid-South was largely facilitated by two volunteers: Debbie and Gary Simpson. Not staff members. Not elders. Just two Christians using their gifts to serve. *That's God's plan.*
- Since 2005 A C Wharton (now Memphis Mayor) and his wife Ruby have given the Ruby R. Wharton Award to honor exceptional women who have made outstanding contributions in the Greater Memphis community. Last Sunday, Highland's Marka Bennett was given this award by the Mayor of Memphis. Marka's not a staff member. She's not an elder. But she's using her talent to make a tremendous difference in the city. *That's God's plan.*
- In addition, Mendy Breeden leads the wonderful ministry to Larose Elementary downtown. She's not paid for this work. She doesn't have some spiritual elite status. She's an average Christian using her talents to serve. And she's making a difference. *That's God's plan.*
- Jimmy Welch, Lyle Bontrager and Paul Burch with sound, Gary Lemmons and Mike Whiteside with communion preparation and delivery, Russ Turman with video, Jay Bethea with signs, and Kevin Griffith with cones and members of the Praise Team arrive early every Sunday morning to set things up and allow us to experience the most important gathering of this church. None are staff members. None are elders. They are just ordinary Christians using their talents. *That's God's plan.*

Raise your hand right now if you do now or have ever taught a children's class on Sundays or Wednesdays at Highland; if you do now or have ever led a Reach Group for Highland; if you do now or have ever helped facilitate a teen Huddle; if you do now or have ever taught an adult Bible class on Sundays or Wednesdays at Highland; if you've ever served on the Youth Staff; if you've ever helped with Work Camp or Highland Summer Camp or the MUM Summer Camp. Look around. For the most part, these are not staff members or elders. These are ordinary Christians using their talents to make a real difference. *That's God's plan.*

Some of the most historic ministries of Highland have been led by people just like you.

- For example, at our former location on Highland Street, Gary McCormack began and sustained the Parent's Night Out ministry. From the early 1980's and on, this ministry provided childcare for special needs children so their parents could enjoy some time alone together. Numerous families from the community were significantly impacted. It wasn't due to a staff member or elder. It was due to an ordinary Christian using his gifts. Once we moved out of that facility, we could no longer host that ministry. But this morning we celebrate the way in which Gary used his gifts. I'd like Gary to stand and I'd like you to join me in expressing appreciation for Gary.
- For more than a decade, Ken Garner oversaw the visual elements of our contemporary services. From selecting background slides to typing the words of songs to fixing computers

and projectors to running the slides each Sunday, Ken was responsible for much of the way God moved in and touched people in our contemporary services. This ministry wasn't run by staff or elders, but by this sacrificial volunteer and his wife Brenda. Ken has recently stepped down from that ministry to focus on his family and on his other ministry as a co-teacher of the Home Improvement class. I'd like Ken to stand and I'd like you to join me in expressing appreciation.

- Finally, for many years Susan Turman and Linda Hutcherson ran the popular Highland preschool, kindergarten, and Mother's Day Out. Dozens of children from the community came to this Christian school and were strengthened in their faith. Dozens of families from the community were blessed. This wasn't a ministry run by staff or by elders. It was run by these two amazing women. I'd like Linda and Susan to stand and I'd like you to join me in expressing appreciation for them.

Each of them exemplify the truth of Paul's words: *you* are the plan. You are the way in which this congregation becomes the body of Christ. God has turned over the most important work—the work of ministry—to you. He's called you to get out of the stands and on to the field.

What then is the role of church leaders? Let's listen once more: *11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-12 ESV)*. What's the role of the church's leaders? It's this: *to equip the saints for the work of ministry*. Paul envisions *a built body characterized by the work of ministry conducted by all the saints coached by all the leaders*. The primary work of the church's leaders is to equip you to do the work you've been gifted to do. This word "equip" is important. In its use outside of the Bible, it could refer to setting a broken bone.³ Some of you may know young Jay Curtis, son of Brett and Amy Curtis. Jay was walking around with a cast on his foot. His ankle snapped during a basketball game. Think of what Jay's life was like in the moments between the time the ankle broke and the time the doctor set the bone. Jay was broken. He was incomplete. He was not whole. He couldn't live the life he was created to live. This word "equip" was used in ancient times to describe what the doctor did to Jay's bone. The doctor took something broken and restored it. He made Jay whole once again. He enabled Jay to live the life he was created to live. And the word suggests that when you don't use your talents, it's like you have a broken bone. You're not whole. You are incomplete. You're not living the life God created you to live. But when you get involved in the work of ministry, when you put your talents to use, it's like that broken bone is suddenly healed. You become whole. You become complete. You start living the life God created you to live. And it's the wonderful task of the church's leaders to equip you for ministry, so that you might become whole and then help others to become whole.

Saint Teresa of Avila once wrote these words⁴:

*Christ has no body now on earth but yours;
yours are the only hands with which he can do his work,
yours are the only feet with which he can go about the world,
yours are the only eyes through which his compassion can shine forth upon a troubled world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

Jesus longs to use your hands, your feet, and your eyes. Will you be his body today?

¹ Thom S. Ranier, Surprising Insights from the Unchurched (Zondervan, 2008).

² Michael Hart, The 100: A Ranking Of The Most Influential Persons In History (Citadel, 2000).

³ Vincent, Marvin Richardson: Word Studies in the New Testament. Bellingham, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2002, S. 3:390

⁴ Quoted in Monica Furlong, Women Pray: Voices Through the Ages, From Many Faiths, Cultures and Traditions (Skylight Paths Publishing, 2004), 136.