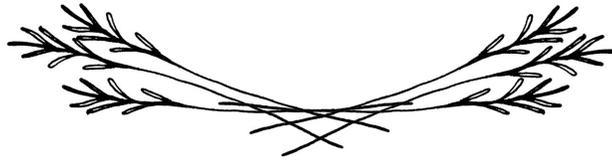


WEEK 4

# FROM ALL ETERNITY



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What do people generally think of when they hear the word “church”? They may think of several things depending on their backgrounds and comprehension. They may think of a church building, even though the Lord’s house actually consists of the people of the church, not the church building (Eph 2:19–22). The building itself is not sacred. Perhaps some people may correctly think of the church in the universal sense and imagine Christians gathering in the name of Christ all over the world. They may mistakenly think of denominational leaders, the pope, or another human leader. Some people’s only image of the church may be the pageantry of traditional religious ceremonies and special services. When others hear the word “church,” they might accurately think of the church in the local sense and think of local, autonomous congregations in a particular location. Sometimes, because church members are so familiar with congregations on this local level, they might allow petty differences to lead them to make decisions that affect eternity.

This chapter deals with the church from a different view than either the universal or local senses; this lesson considers the church in the eternal sense. The fact is the church has been in God’s purpose for all eternity. It is sad to hear some say that because the Jews rejected Jesus, the church was simply a temporary substitute for Christ’s kingdom. Perhaps even a majority of Christians has that eschatological (end times)

outlook. Nothing could be further from the truth; the church is part of God's eternal purpose. If God has had the church in mind for eternity, it is worth taking the time and effort to consider the church in the eternal sense.

Before we can consider the church, we must consider the actions of its founder and savior, Jesus Christ. Jesus pre-existed in eternity as the Word prior to creation (cf. 1 John 1:1–2, NKJV). Many think of Jesus as only coming into existence in a manger in Bethlehem. However, he exists for all eternity.

When Jesus came to earth, one of his purposes was to make preparations to build his church (cf. Matthew 16:18). Christ loved the church so much that he gave himself up for her to fulfill the purposes of God (Ephesians 5:25; cf. Romans 14:9). God's eternal desire is for a new people, set apart for communion with Him. The church shares in the Great Commission that Jesus gave the apostles shortly before ascending into heaven (cf. Matthew 28:18–20).

As members of his body, the church, we are part of God's eternal plan to save the lost. God's ultimate purpose in our salvation is that the church might glorify God's grace for all eternity (Eph 2:7–9; cf. 1:6, 12, 14). Because the church was created for reaching the lost, its primary responsibility is sharing the gospel in an intentional way. The church exists for evangelism, bringing the good news of eternal salvation to all.

One of the clearest teachings about the eternal nature of the church comes from Ephesians 3:8–13, which focuses on God's purpose for the church: preaching the gospel. Paul begins this section of Scripture by explaining how he became a minister according to God's gift of grace (Eph 3:7). Like Paul (although in a different sense), all Christians are also ministers according to God's gift of grace. We each have a responsibility to share the good news of Christ with those with whom we come in contact. If God has had the church

in mind for all eternity, it is obvious that it is important to Him. If it was important enough to God for his Son to die for the church, we should encourage others to become part of the church, the body of Christ.

Even though Paul considered himself the least likely to receive it, he received God's grace. Modern Christians may feel inadequate or unqualified to share the gospel. But if Paul, with all his personal baggage from the past, could share the gospel, what could possibly stop Christians from sharing the good news? Paul preached the unsearchable (unfathomable) riches of Christ that was made available to the Gentiles (Eph 3:8). The riches about which Paul writes are so different from worldly riches. Rather, the riches of which Paul writes are those that are eternal in the heavens. Laying up treasure in heaven must include helping others to lay up heavenly treasures as well.

Most people like a good mystery novel or movie. God's mystery is not a mystery in the sense that we have to be very clever to discover clues to get the correct answer. God's mystery was hidden for centuries before it was revealed in Christ. From the beginning of the ages, the mystery was hidden in God (Eph 3:9). Here's the mystery: God's ultimate purpose in our salvation is that the church might eternally glorify God's grace and reach out to bring the lost to Him (cf. Eph 1:6, 12, 14; 2:7-9).

Not only does the church reach out to a lost and dying world, the church reveals God's plan to the spiritual powers including angels and heavenly beings. This fact was in accordance with the eternal purpose God has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord. Rather than seeing the church as a local group made up of people we know, perhaps it would enhance our view of the church to realize that the church is responsible for educating the angels and other heavenly beings. We know from Scripture that the

angels rejoice in heaven when one lost sinner repents (cf. Luke 15:10). Paul also suggests that the angels watch the activities of the local assembly (cf. 1 Cor 11:10).

The angels learn the manifold wisdom of God from the church (Eph 3:10). Of course, the angels know about the power of God as seen in his creation. However, the wisdom of God as seen in his new creation (the church) is something new to them. As the angels watch the outworking of God's salvation, they praise his wisdom. As members of the body of Christ, we are to be faithful stewards of God's great truth. We have God's mystery in our hands.

God's eternal purpose is realized in Christ (Eph 3:11–12). Therefore, in Christ, we can approach God with boldness and have confident access to God through our faith in Him. God's eternal purpose focuses on Christ and his church. This fact should stress the importance of the church as part of God's eternal purpose. Far from being an afterthought, the church is vital for accomplishing God's plan for evangelizing the world. Never think that world evangelism is a thing of the past. As Christians, we must live according to God's eternal vision and purpose for church, and that especially includes evangelism. God is to be glorified in the church (Eph 3:21). We do this best by faithfully following his commands and obeying and practicing the teachings of Jesus.

It is easy to get distracted and think of the church as only a human institution with flaws and defects and become discouraged. Perhaps that is why Paul pleaded with the Ephesians not to lose heart about his suffering on their behalf (Eph 3:13). They should have felt honored and encouraged that Paul was suffering for their sakes. Like our ancient brethren, we must not become disheartened by the struggles of individual, local congregations. We must keep our sight on the eternal nature of the church in God's plan and purpose.

When we think about the church, we should focus on God's eternal purpose and not on our own plans for the church. If we focus on God's eternal purpose for the church, hopefully we will obey his will. Centering our efforts only on our own plans is a sure path to disappointing and disobeying God. Be challenged to think of the church as the fulfillment of God's purpose from all eternity.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. What happens if Christians lose their perspective of the church as being part of God's eternal plan for redeeming humankind and become focused solely upon local troubles and congregational issues?
2. Has the church lost focus of God's plan for the church to preach the gospel to the lost? What can be done to encourage us to get back to this purpose?
3. The mystery hidden in God for the ages was revealed in Christ. Has it again become a mystery to many? What can we as Christians do to reveal the mystery to the lost?
1. 4. How do we find the proper balance between focusing on God's plans for the church and what we know must be done in the local congregation?