

# Purposefully Responsive People

## 1 Corinthians 1:2

### Ezra 3:10-13

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



Danielle and I have a large Shagbark Hickory tree in our front yard. See, we love old houses that have old and large trees. This hickory tree is probably 50 or 60 feet tall and has large sweeping branches. We even have a couple of swings from those branches for our kids. We love this tree. Recently, we had one of those large sweeping limbs come down overnight. This was surprising because we didn't have a big storm or abnormally strong winds that night. It was especially confusing because from every outward appearance, this limb was healthy and strong. There were no signs of rot, disease, or decay. So to wake up in the morning and see it hanging down was a puzzle, to say the least. When I climbed up to trim the limb and make it safe for our kids to play there again, I discovered the issue. The branch had come down at a weak spot, a joint. There had clearly been another branch that had been trimmed out or broken many years before. The tree had done a good job of healing itself so that it looked healthy and strong, but this small, weak spot still lingered. Over time, it allowed rot to set in that wasn't visible to the eye. See, when I made the final cut on a small section still hanging there, the problem became undeniably clear, the heartwood was all dead. The only wood that was alive was everything on the outside. It gave an appearance of health, strength, and resiliency, but it was destined to break.

Our spiritual lives can be like that, can't they? We've been studying the book of 1 Corinthians for the last couple of months, and we've been given a picture of a church that had forgotten its identity in Christ. That misplaced identity had given way to all sorts of damage and sin. This letter has given us a very honest picture of what happens when we misplace or forget our identity as Christians. But it isn't the only place in the Bible that we get an honest picture like this. In the book of Ezra, we encounter a group of people who should have been mature. They should have known better. And by all accounts, they were probably like that limb in my yard. They had the outward appearance of health, but inside, they were far from healthy. That would lead them to tragically miss a beautiful move of God. Their experience serves to warn and remind us that unless we remain purposefully responsive in following God, we can end up missing what God wants to do in and through us. We need to remember our identity in Christ and that **the Church exists because of Christ, and for the glory Christ.**

# 1. The Church

- a. Let's go back and be reminded of key identity truths that Paul has established for the Corinthian church that apply to us today.
  - i. Remember, 1:2 is the melodic line of 1 Corinthians. It roots and reminds the Corinthian believers of their identity and generates their purpose.
- b. **Church of God - "The gathering of those aligned with Christ."**
  - i. The usage reflects their deep conviction that the church is not merely one religious group among many. It is unique. Ordinary religious words will not do. And it is not any 'assembly': it is the *ekklēsia of God*. This is further defined as *those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy*. *Holy* is from the same root as *sanctified*, where the basic idea is not that of high moral character as with us, but of being set apart for God (though, of course, the character implied in such separation is not out of mind).<sup>1</sup>
- c. **What is the nature of the Church?**<sup>2</sup>
  - i. More than one hundred different terms, metaphors and images are used in the NT to describe God's people with whom he has entered into a saving relationship in Christ. In addition to these descriptions several activities are said to characterize Christian believers. Integral to Paul's teaching about the people of God is his use of the important word *ekklēsia*, a term meaning "congregation," "church," "gathering" or "assembly."<sup>3</sup>
  - ii. **The Greek term *ekklēsia*, translated as "church," simply means "an assembly," but in the New Testament it is used with a particular theological meaning in two senses. It is important to distinguish between the two, but, as we shall see, they must not be separated.**<sup>4</sup>
- d. **The Church exists because of Christ, and for Christ. – A doxological view.**
  - i. **The church exists to worship God. I.e., Give him glory. But it can only do this because of what God has done to establish the church.**
    - 1. **"The main and most glorious purpose of any person's life is the whole-hearted worship of God."**
  - ii. As with Paul's apostleship, the emphasis lies on their becoming God's people as the result of divine activity. What God has done "in Christ Jesus" makes them his new people. The verb "sanctified"<sup>21</sup> probably should be understood as a metaphor for Christian conversion (cf. 6:11 and 1:30). However, the choice of this particular metaphor is hardly accidental. **Believers are set apart for God, just as were the utensils in the Temple. But precisely because they are "set apart" for God, they must also bear the character of the God who has thus set them apart.** Thus holiness forms part of God's intention in saving his people (cf. 1 Thess. 4:3; 5:23). Paul's concept of holiness regularly entails observable behavior. **That will be particularly the case in this letter, which is addressed to a community whose "spirituality" and "higher wisdom" have been**

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 41–42.

<sup>2</sup> The English word "church" derives from the Greek word *kuriakon*, which means "pertaining to or belonging to the Lord." This word was used of church buildings and developed into the English term which also referred to the community of people which met in those buildings. – via, EFCA. *Evangelical Convictions*, 2nd Edition (p. 224). Free Church Publications. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Peter T. O'Brien, "Church," ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 123.

<sup>4</sup> EFCA. *Evangelical Convictions*, 2nd Edition (pp. 197–198). Free Church Publications. Kindle Edition.

largely divorced from ethical consequences. Thus at the outset his readers are singularly identified as the “church of God, *sanctified* in Christ Jesus.”<sup>5</sup>

- iii. Without Christ’s work on the cross and victorious resurrection, we would not be assembled into the church of God.
  - iv. And because of Christ’s victorious work, and since we are assembled together in the Church of God, we are exist for the glory of the one who saved us!
- e. “Sanctified in Christ Jesus”
- i. Sanctification is the process of becoming like Christ.
    - 1. Vv. 4-5 - A particular quality of holiness is expected of the people of God. God had always expected Israel to be pure, or sanctified. As Christ’s bride the church must also be holy: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Eph. 5:25–27).<sup>6</sup>
  - ii. **This means that the church and its people**, certainly didn’t exist to resemble to normal values of Corinth! Nor do we exist today to resemble the normal values of Ames or America. We are to look like Christ and operate as his kingdom people.

## 2. Form and Function

- a. A key truth – Form always follows function. → The “Norman Door”
- i. A *Norman door* is a door (or other object) that is confusing or poorly designed, usually because the design sends the wrong signal about how it should be used. For example, a door with a pull handle that actually requires pushing. **The phrase comes from Don Norman, a cognitive scientist and usability engineer who wrote *The Design of Everyday Things* (1988), where he popularized the idea of “bad design” in everyday objects.**
    - 1. The picture on the screen is of a door handle that has the intuitive design that makes you want to “pull” to open. However, the instructions on the handle tell you to “pull.”
  - ii. See, the people that Ezra mentions weeping, were people who forget that form always follows function. This happened because they had forgotten their identity and thus the purpose of the Temple.
- b. Context and situation – Life after the Babylonian exile and under the Persians.
- i. Quick historical overview:<sup>7</sup>
    - 1. Israel becomes a nation during the Exodus. (1450 - 1400 BC)
    - 2. Period of the Judges where Israel is a nation with no human king. (1350-1050 BC)
    - 3. United kingdom period / first Temple period. – Saul, David, & Solomon (1050-930 BC)
    - 4. Divided kingdom – North Israel & South Judah (930-587 BC)
      - a. Israel is first to be carried off into exile under the Assyrians. (745 – 605 BC)
      - b. Judah will be carried off into exile under the Babylonians. (587 – 539 BC)

<sup>5</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 32.

<sup>6</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 959.

<sup>7</sup> Note: All dates are approximate.

- i. The Babylonians usurped the Assyrians historically.
- 5. The time of exile – Life under Babylonian rule. (587 – 539 BC)
- 6. Persia comes to power and usurps the Babylonians. (539 – 331 BC)
- 7. Eventually, the Greeks would come and usurp the Persians. (334 – 150 BC)
- 8. Next, the Romans would usurp the Greeks. (150 BC – 1000 AD)
  - a. It would be then under the Romans that Israel would remain the longest, and Jesus would come as Messiah.
  - b. From the time of Nehemiah to Jesus is somewhere around 500-600 years.
- c. **Nehemiah, Ezra, and Zerubbabel. → Where do they all fit?**
  - i. There were three waves of return to Jerusalem—led by Zerubbabel, Ezra, and then Nehemiah. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe these returns, but they are not attempting to provide a complete detailed history of this 100-year-plus time span. Instead, they focus on only a few highly significant years.<sup>8</sup>
    - 1. There were several groups that departed from Persia and returned to Jerusalem to re-establish God’s people in their own land. One wave was led by Ezra, another by Zerubbabel, and another by Nehemiah.
    - 2. **Ezra was a scribe, so he helped with re-educating Israel; Zerubbabel was a priest and re-established the priesthood; and Nehemiah was the governor, who helped with social order. Each had their own place in God’s plan.**<sup>9</sup>
- d. **Reflections from Ezra 3:10-13 – The tragedy of a misplaced identity.**
  - i. A final specific point of continuity between the first and second temples is provided by a reference to the older members of the congregation whose long lives further helped to bridge the interrupted worship on this site. Based, no doubt, on Hag 2:3, some clearly found the comparison bitterly disappointing. Others, however, refused to consider this as merely a “day of small things” (Zech 4:10), but rather in faith rejoiced aloud that ever such a day of restoration should have dawned at all.<sup>10</sup>
  - ii. So the crescendo continues, to the strange close of the chapter. Once again, there are conscious echoes of Solomon’s celebrations, though there are contrasts too. This time there is no ark, no visible glory, indeed no Temple: only some beginnings, and small beginnings at that. But God is enthroned on the praises of Israel, and these could be as glorious as Solomon’s. Perhaps they were more so, for while they matched the earlier occasion, word for word and almost instrument for instrument (2 Chr. 5:13), they were sung in conditions more conducive to humility than to pride, and called for a faith that had few earthly guarantees to bolster it. The last two verses have all the unexpectedness of actuality. The spontaneous cry of disappointment, breaking into the celebrations, was a foretaste of much that was to follow. Haggai would recognize that note and preach against it (Hag. 2:3ff.); Zechariah would have to challenge those who ‘despised the day of small things’ (Zech. 4:10). But both those prophets did so with such memorable words that we can be grateful that they had to meet this mood and answer it.<sup>11</sup>
- e. **Ok, let’s meet these “heads of households” with grace. → Change is loss.**

<sup>8</sup> Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God’s Word For You)* (p. 11). The Good Book Company.

<sup>9</sup> Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God’s Word For You)* (p. 6). The Good Book Company.

<sup>10</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 48–49.

<sup>11</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 53.

- i. So often when we experience change, especially changes that come to organizations, communities, or relationships, we experience those changes as loss. And, I'm sure that is exactly what this group who was weeping was feeling.
  - ii. Quite honestly, if we truly follow God into what's next, many of us are going to feel that same thing. But, we don't have to weep bitterly over those changes and the loss we feel. We can be honest about it, but we can remain unified and excited for what the Lord is doing. So, let me give us permission to talk about loss as we move forward as a church.
- f. **Change often feels like the loss of...**
  - i. **Information** – "I know less now than I used to."
  - ii. **Influence** – "I'm not a decision maker anymore." or "I don't know how decisions are made now."
  - iii. **Impact** – "I feel less purposeful." or "What I used to be good at, is no longer needed."
  - iv. **Identity** – "I'm not sure I know who we are anymore."
- g. I'm willing to bet that we've all felt these in different seasons of our lives and at unique times.
  - i. Again, if we are going to truly move forward as a church, it is going to require change. And those changes will excite some of us and will be disappointing to others of us. That is ok and normal. How we handle our disagreements and disappointments is what demonstrates health and maturity or the opposite.
  - ii. So, why would we even endeavor to go through change if it is going to cause us to feel loss? → Because of the blue ocean of opportunity.

### 3. A blue ocean of opportunity.

- a. The value of purposeful responsiveness. → **What if the best and most fruitful years are ahead of us?**
  - i. A fishing story. → My cousin Marty lived in Miami, and he loved to fish. Specifically, he loved to go and catch large sport fish like Marlin, Sailfish, and Mahi-Mahi. These are fish that live way out offshore that you have to go and find.
  - ii. In the picture, I am holding a King Mackerel that my brother actually caught. I didn't catch anything that day. When Marty would take us out fishing, we would go out away from shore, but not too far, and then we would chum the waters around the boat. This would bring the fish to us. This is known as the red ocean. But the fish that Marty loved to catch, were out in the blue ocean. The waters that weren't chummed.
  - iii. For a long time, the church in America was in the red ocean as our culture and neighbors were largely inclined towards Christianity and had a favorable view of the local church. That is not the case anymore. We can think of it this way, we used to have homefield advantage, but now our everyday is like an away game.
    - 1. Even if you don't experience this, I promise you that you kids and grandkids are. Christianity is costly to Gen Z and Gen Alpha.
    - 2. This is why we need to be purposefully responsive.
- b. **Purposeful responsiveness is not: Meeting every possible need or doing everything.**
  - i. Just pause and consider the attitude and posture that must come along with thinking that you or I could meet every possible need that comes our way.
    - 1. It is either blind arrogance or total naivety.
    - 2. Blind arrogance is living with a posture of outsized ability and capacity. I.e., thinking and acting as if you are the savior.

3. Total naivety is essentially the good-intentioned but harmful action of living without rest or boundaries.
- c. **Purposeful responsiveness is:** Seeking and seizing the opportunities God provides every day.
  - i. Living within my God-given calling as an ambassador of reconciliation. (cf. 2 Cor. 5:16-21)
    1. V. 20 - <sup>20</sup> **Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.**
    2. **If God is making his appeal through you and me, how does that inform my day-to-day life and my priorities?**
  - ii. Considering how I might use my resources (time, talents, and treasure) for the glory of God and the good of others.
  - iii. Trusting the Holy Spirit to guide, prompt, and exhort you towards righteous action.
- d. **What are the opportunities in front of us?**
  - i. **25k+ Ames residents are not connected to a gospel church.** <sup>12</sup>
    1. Of the 36,000 permanent residents in Ames, a generous estimate is that 25k+ are not connected to a Bible believing and gospel preaching church. This is not to say that those who are not connected are not Christians or not going to a church.
    2. How will our neighbors experience the abundant life of Christ if they are not in fellowship with other believers?
    3. What needs to change in our lives to reach those who are far from Christ?
  - ii. **50%+ of pastors in our district will retire in 5-7 years.**
    1. The Central District (EFCA) has 135 churches primarily in Iowa and Missouri. Of those churches it is estimated that 50% will have a pastor retire or become of retirement age in the next 5-7 years. At the same time, seminaries are reporting the lowest levels of enrollment in the last twenty years.
    2. Who will become the next generation of pastor and global worker?
    3. How will small (under 150 in attendance) churches find their next pastor when it takes 24-36 months on average even with a search firm?
    4. Our district has the goal of planting five new churches every year. Where will they find the church planters?
  - iii. **1.9 weeks per month - Gen Z leads in church attendance.** <sup>13</sup>
    1. This works out to be about 2 out of every five Sundays. And is ahead of the 3 out of every 8 Sundays for Baby Boomers and Millennials.
    2. What is exciting in this trend is the spiritual hunger that young people have right now. In a world of excess and permissiveness, they are hungry for something that lasts and actually offers hope.
    3. How can we be formed in the image of Christ if we are present to the body less than half of the time?
    4. How do we need to grow as a church in order to reach the next generation?
  - iv. The truth is that is we want to be a purposefully responsive church over the next ten years, we need to be purposefully responsive individuals now. This is not a call to do everything, but to take intentional and purposeful next steps.
    1. What is your next step?

<sup>12</sup> This number was estimated from aggregated attendance data from local Ames churches and compared to demographic surveys.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/gen-z-and-millennials-church-attendance/>