

The Church is a Farm

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[0 : 0 0] Well, tonight we are continuing a short series that we're looking at in the month of August, which is called The Church in Pictures. The reason behind this title is that the New Testament uses various images for the church in order for us to help, in order to help us understand what the church is and what the church should be doing.

Here's the five images that we're going to look at. The church is a pillar, which we explored last week. Tonight, we're going to look at the church as a farm, and over the next three weeks, we'll look at the church as a body, a mother, and a bride.

Let's turn back together to 1 Corinthians chapter three. I'm going to just read the first few verses again there. But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.

I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you're not yet ready for your still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?

For when one says I follow Paul and another I follow Apollos, are you not being merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed as the Lord assigned to each.

[1 : 2 0] I planted Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

In writing this letter to the church in Corinth, Paul has two great concerns, unity and growth. You can see that this letter, part of the reason it was written was to address divisions within this congregation.

This was partly caused by people following certain individuals. I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, I follow Derrick, I follow Thomas. Well, there won't be many of them, but that kind of thing.

And these divisions were unsettling the congregation and causing trouble. And Paul writes in absolutely uncompromising terms to say that that is utterly unacceptable.

[2 : 3 1] And it's a great reminder, 1 Corinthians is a brilliant reminder that the unity of the church was one of the most pressing and important issues in the minds of the apostles.

And for some strange and tragic reason, the church today has long forgotten that. To us, church unity is something that in an ideal world we would like, but in many ways it's just a token gesture.

For Paul, church unity was his burning passion. To us, division is inevitable, to Paul, division was unthinkable.

Part of the reason that this congregation had become divisive was because they were immature and they needed to grow. We can see that in the passage that we just read there, verses 1 to 3, Paul says, you can't go on to rich food because you can't even get the basics like Christian unity, correct?

And that's an important reminder for us because sometimes we can think that as we grow in knowledge, as we feel like we're becoming at a kind of better level, theologically, we can tend to think that that justifies us separating from others.

[3 : 59] So we can think to ourselves, well, all these people aren't really getting it and I'm understanding things better. I've got a clear, a grasp of things. I should distance myself from these people who aren't thinking in the same way.

I should do my own thing. I should leave because other people, they're not really getting it in the way I am. If you were thinking like that, what do you think Paul would say to you?

I think he would say, you need to go back to milk. You're not ready for solid food.

Division is rarely a sign of maturity. It's usually a sign of childishness.

The Corinthian church needed to be taught about unity and growth. And we are exactly the same. And so in order to address these two concerns that Paul has, he uses agricultural imagery.

[5 : 06] He describes the church as a farm. And this actually echoes many other examples of this kind of language in the New Testament. Jesus does it.

So the greatest example, I suppose, is the parable of the sower where he talks about the word being scattered like seed in a similar way. He calls for laborers for the harvest.

It's all agricultural farming language. Paul does it here in Corinthians. He does it in other places as well. Second Timothy 2, he talks about the hardworking farmer as an example for Timothy to follow.

James does it. He talks about the farmer being an example of patience in chapter 5 of his letter. John and Peter both use seed imagery in their letters, and in Revelation 14, you have very vivid imagery of a sickle and a harvest.

The image of a farm is a picture of what the church is meant to be like. So that just gives us a wonderful excuse to make a picture, which is exactly what we're going to do just now.

[6 : 15] So as Paul says, the church is a field there. That's a field as you could instantly tell. There's a field.

And so as Paul says, within that field, there's planting. He says there in verse 6, I planted. So step one, planting.

He then talks about labor. In particular, he talks about watering. A polys watered again in verse 6. The result of these things is growth, as he again, he mentions in the same verse.

The next step is a harvest, which Paul doesn't explicitly say in this passage, but it's clearly implied and it's explicitly stated in many other passages. Now, I know you didn't get combine harvesters in Paul's day, but it's a combine harvester.

I mean, it's just cool. And then last of all, there's wages. Paul speaks about wages in verse 8.

[7 : 25] These are all the stages of farming from planting through to wages. And I want us to look at each one of these in a little bit more detail in order to see what it's teaching us about the life and work of the church.

I want to do that under two headings, micro and macro. Now, I'm sure you'll be familiar with these terms. Micro is just basically talking about a specific example.

Macro is talking about the big picture. And we use this language in lots of different areas. Economics is a good example. You talk about microeconomics, where you look at maybe a particular company or a particular location or a particular industry, macroeconomics would look at the whole nation or the whole continent or a whole century.

We need, in terms of the church, to think about a micro church farm. In other words, us as a congregation.

And we need to think about the macro church farm, which is the whole church of Jesus Christ. So first of all, the micro, and we'll spend more time looking at this.

[8 : 33] And the macro we'll just look at very briefly at the end. So the church farm begins with planting, as you can see. Now, what's the one thing that you need in order to plant?

A seed. You need a seed. And the whole emergence of the Christian church is dependent on the existence of a very specific seed.

What's that seed? It's the message of the gospel. If you look back at chapter two, Paul recounts for us how he planted the Corinthian church.

How was it that Paul planted the church? What did he use? He used a message. As we read at the very beginning, he came not with lofty speech or wisdom, but he just came there to proclaim Jesus Christ and him crucified.

It was a simple, specific message. It's the news that Jesus has been crucified and that through that crucifixion, you and I can be saved.

[9 : 33] Our sins can be forgiven. Our relationship with God can be restored. Our lives can be transformed forever. That's what the gospel is.

A message of good news. The seed in God's church farm is a collection of words. And every Christian in here tonight is a Christian because of the transforming power of that message.

As we said, Jesus uses exactly the same imagery. In the parable of the sower, he speaks about the message, his message, his word, like a seed that's sown and planted.

That's where the church comes from. And in thinking about that, there's two important words that come to mind and that I want to mention.

The first word is investment. A seed is an investment. And I think that is a brilliant picture of how the gospel works.

[10 : 40] I want you to imagine that you met a gardener who came out to you and said, now, I want to show you this packet of seeds that I have. These seeds are rare and precious and valuable, and they are the seeds of an extraordinary beautiful plant.

These seeds are every gardener's dream. And you said, wow, what are you going to do with them? Oh, I'm going to put them in this drawer and keep them there because they're so precious.

And 30 years later, he takes his precious seeds out of the drawer and what does he find? Just a rotten mess. A seed cannot be kept.

It has to be invested. And that's exactly how the church, the gospel message works. Because by making that investment, there is the potential for an amazing return.

Jesus himself spoke in those terms. He says, truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.

[11 : 56] Now like any investment, there's no guarantee it will work, but it is guaranteed not to work if we keep it tucked away.

If Paul had kept his mouth closed in Corinth, the church would never have been planted.

So we have to keep that word investment in mind. The second important word that comes to mind is throwing. Now when we think of planting today, we can tend to think of big agricultural machines that drill the seed into the ground.

Or even in our garden, we can think of working away with a trowel and making sure that the seed is planted in the pot or in the tub or the tray or whatever it is you do. We tend to think of planting as this quite precise, intricate process.

But for a farmer in the days of the New Testament, sowing a seed meant throwing. You took the seed and you threw it on the ground.

[13 : 03] Jesus describes that brilliantly in the parable of the sower. And there's not a huge amount of control as to where it lands. In that parable, some falls on rocky ground, some falls among thorns, some get snatched away, but some falls on good soil and it takes root.

And the key point I want us to take from that is the fact that planting seed involves throwing. And I think that that is a very helpful image for evangelism.

We can tend to think that evangelism is like an art. And you hear people talk about perfect conversations and kind of deep intentionality and being able to give a really confident, robust defense of the gospel.

People with inspiring personalities and people who almost just have to look at somebody and they're converted. And some people are able to do that, which is great. Some people maybe kind of come across almost like they boast in that.

That's not so good. But for most of us, when we think of evangelism like this kind of specialist art, we feel like total failure because none of us can do it like that.

[14 : 21] And I think maybe, and I'm talking to myself more than anybody else here, I think I need to return to the New Testament model of evangelism, which is simply to throw it out there.

Just throw out a text message. Throw out an invitation to your neighbor. Throw out a comment of how you enjoyed church or how God has helped you at work or with something that you're doing.

Throw out a demonstration that you care. When we can be so crippled by uncertainty or fear or inadequacy, Paul was exactly the same. He came to court and scared, weak, trembling.

He didn't have all the answers, but he just went and threw out the seed. And maybe when it comes to engaging with our unbelieving friends, whether it's colleagues, neighbors, family, I find I stress so much about what I'm going to say or that opportunity that I'm just crippled by it.

Maybe we just need to say, ah, stuff it and just throw it out. And if you throw it out, God can do the rest.

[15 : 31] And the likelihood is that most of it won't take root. If the parable of the sower is a paradigm, then three-quarters of it won't work. But some of it definitely will, even if you never see it for yourself.

As Paul says in 2 Corinthians, the point is this, whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

Let's make that investment by just chucking it out in the week ahead. The church involves planting. It also involves labour.

Paul gives a specific example of that in verse 60, talks about watering. And that is an aspect of the many different areas of labour that are required in growing crops.

You want to farm something, you need to cultivate, you need to water, you need to weed, you need to fertilize, you need to prune. There's lots and lots involved. The key point is that as a seed begins to grow, there's a lot of hard work needed.

[16 : 43] And watering is a great example of something that's absolutely essential for a plant water is life-giving. My wife left me alone for a few days this summer, and I think every houseplant is pretty much dead because I didn't water them.

Water is watering is essential, but watering is also hard work. It's time-consuming, it's heavy, and it's something that you have to do again and again and again and again.

And all the other aspects of farming are the same. Paul recognizes that in 2 Timothy when he talks about the hard-working farmer. One thing that's definitely true of farmers is that they have to work really hard.

There's two important points here that I really want us to think about. Number one is the hard work needs to come with the shoots.

In other words, when the seeds start to germinate, a lot of work then needs to be done in order to nurture it. And I think that one of the biggest mistakes that the Free Church has made in the past thirty years is that we have tended to think that the work stops when the seed sprouts.

[18 : 07] In other words, once somebody becomes a Christian, once they become a member of the church, we tended to think, Phew, job done.

The truth is, the work is just beginning, and we need to work just as hard to disciple our believers as we do to reach out to those who are still lost.

And so please, if someone you know becomes a Christian, if someone in your city becomes a Christian, someone in this congregation becomes a Christian, never ever think job done. Instead, roll up your sleeves and water them.

The hard work comes with the shoots. The second thing that's said before us very powerfully by Paul is that this hard work is all about teamwork.

So yes, we need to reach out, yes, we need to work to nurture new believers, but we do not do that on our own. We do that as a team. Paul makes that beautifully clear. He says, he who plants and he who waters are one, for we are God's fellow workers.

[19 : 18] As members of this church, we're all members of the same team. We're in it together. And it's for that reason that competitiveness between churches is appalling.

We are not competing. We're a team. And as a result, we all share in the success of one another's contributions. Jesus himself spoke about this. He says, the saying holds true, one sows, another reaps.

I sent you to reap for that which you did not labor. Others have labored and you have entered into their labor. That's a principle that has been true of the Christian church throughout its entire history.

And that's why we should be as thrilled about church growth, whether it's in Campbelltown or Cornerstone, whether it's Helmsdale or Haddington, wherever it may be, we are all in it together.

We need to work hard together, we need to serve together, we need to rejoice together. Labor is a big part of life in God's church farm.

[20 : 27] Third step is growth. Paul says, I planted a polis watered, but God gave the growth. Like any farm, there needs to be two types of growth, quantity and quality.

In terms of quantity, the church farm is always aiming to get bigger. We must never forget that the biblical view of the church is big. Lots of people, lots of numbers, lots of nations.

The church farm is to grow and grow and grow. We're to stretch out the boundaries of it all the time. Our constant prayer should be that we get bigger because that means that more people are hearing the good news of Jesus and more people are being saved.

And it should be our constant prayer for us and for other congregations that there will be growth in terms of quantity. But that growth in terms of quantity is not growth at any cost.

It's not just get people in any which way you can. It's not to do, I mean, I think there's been things in the news recently of some quite unusual ideas to get people into church with helters, skelters and stuff.

[21 : 38] I don't know, anyway, I shouldn't be talking about other people like that. It's not growth at all costs. There needs to be quality as well. Now, when I say that, I don't mean that we need to get better people through the door.

That's complete nonsense. It means growth in terms of maturity. So just like a tree, we start off as a seed. We sprout into a sapling.

We grow into a young tree, but the goal is to reach full maturity of strength and competence. And we see that emphasising the New Testament.

There's a clear example when Paul talks about people who can become elders in the church. He says they must not be recent converts in 1 Timothy chapter 3.

And the term he uses for recent converts is a really interesting word. It's the word neophyte, which literally means newly planted. And it's conveying the idea that a new Christian is just a fragile sapling that needs to grow and grow and grow.

[22 : 46] And it is amazing to see new growth in that way. It's amazing to see people come to faith, but we're reminded that that's not the end of the story. There's still a long way to go, and we want to help each other grow further and further into maturity.

Now it's very important to remember that in order to grow, you need something very specific.

What is it that you need to grow? If you think in terms of growing into maturity, what is it you need? You need the basics.

If you look at a child, a baby, they need the basics of food and warmth and sleep and protection. In terms of our Christian growth, we need the basics, because if you look at the Corinthians, they had stunted in their growth, and Paul says you need milk, not solid food.

And it's really interesting to grow as Christians, we need to keep coming back to the basics. Life for God, love for one another, coming to church, praying, reading our Bibles, repenting, having fellowship together, rejoicing.

[24 : 05] I've been so guilty of forgetting the basics in my Christian life, and every time I do, I stunt my growth.

These two aspects of growth, quality and quantity, remind us that mission and discipleship always go hand in hand. As we reach out to bring people in, we need to nurture one another in order to reach maturity.

Now, for all of that growth to happen, the New Testament makes it clear that a particular mindset is needed. There's a particular attitude and way of thinking that needs to be at the forefront of this.

What do you think it is? Is it courage? Is it intentionality? Is it vision? Is it zeal?

Is it passion? These are all good things, but they are not, I don't think, the mindset that the New Testament attaches to farming.

[25 : 11] Do you know what mindset the New Testament attaches to farming? Patience.

It does not grow weary of doing good, for in due season, we will reap if we do not give up. And that makes perfect sense.

When a farmer sows a seed, it's out of his hands then. He has to patiently wait for it to grow. In the church, growth is not our work, it's God's work.

And so the mindset for us is to be patient, to keep sowing, to keep laboring, and to patiently wait for God to give the increase. And equally, it's reminding us that as we nurture one another towards growth, we must remain patient with one another.

The Gospels say something very beautiful about Jesus. They say that He did, will not break a bruised reed.

[26 : 18] And that's a brilliant picture of how you and I need to look after one another. We need to be patient and gentle and supportive as we seek to grow together.

Step four is harvest. In the church farm, there is a harvest. That's reminding us quite simply that everything that we're doing has a goal.

For the farmer, he plants his seed, all of that is aiming towards the goal of the harvest. And it's reminding us that working in the church farm is incredibly exciting. We're working towards that harvest.

And it's very easy in Scotland in 2019 to be discouraged and to think that the harvest is pure.

Rubbish, that is theological rubbish. The harvest is plentiful. It's all around us. Scotland is a massive harvest field for us to work in.

[27 : 17] That's our goal. That's our purpose. That's our mission. We are working for a great harvest. And then finally in the church farm, there are wages.

Paul says in verse eight, he who plants and he who waters are one. Each will receive his wages according to his labor. Now, what on earth does that mean?

What's Paul talking about there? Is he implying some kind of sort of a work-based salvation? Is he implying the idea that you have to kind of work your way up to a better place in heaven?

Is he implying that there's a sort of legalism hidden inside the Gospel? No. What does he mean then? Well, I think what he means is that serving in God's farm is rewarding.

In other words, it's worth it. And that's a crucial point for us to remember. Think about a farm for a moment.

[28 : 27] A farm smells bad. Farms are messy. Farms are dirty. Farms can be heartbreaking. Farms are exhausting. But farming is rewarding.

All of that sweat and muck and toil is worth it. A church should be smelly, dirty, messy, exhausting, and heartbreaking.

Not in the sense of being kind of casual and flippant and just not bothered, but in the sense of being a gathering of broken people.

People who've mucked up their lives, people who've tried and failed, people who are at the end of their strength, people whose hearts and lives have been broken. The church of Jesus Christ is for people like that.

And if you work away at sharing the hope of the gospel with people whose lives are in that mess, and if you see their lives transformed by the power of the cross, boy, is it worth it.

[29 : 45] And the whole idea of wages also means that what you are doing in the church is worth something. The image of wages tells you that God values what you are doing.

It's a great reminder that you are a crucial part of God's church farm, whether you're doing Cres or money counting or GDPR or PVG or door duty or fixing a leaking window or kids church or having someone to stay with you for a few days or doing tea after the service no matter what you are doing, God values that work.

We can so easily devote our time and energy to stuff that will prove worthless. Paul speaks about that in the second half of the chapter that sometimes we can be standing on the foundation of Jesus Christ but then do all sorts of pointless stuff that doesn't matter.

But if we do the things that God asks us to do, if we are working on His farm, then what we are doing is worth it. What we are doing is so valuable.

And that should be a great motivation for us. So in this farm, in this congregation farm that we are in, we have a message that we plant.

[30 : 57] We have members who are here together as laborers. We need to do that with a mindset of patience as we look for growth. We have a mission to bring in a harvest and we are motivated because serving is rewarding.

And all of that is because we have one master, as Paul said, you are God's field. And the fact that you are God's field is reminding you that our micro church farm here at St.

Columbus is part of something much, much bigger. There's a macro church farm as well. And the unity and growth that we seek is not just about being united and growing as a congregation, although that's important.

It's about us being part of God's big farm, about being part of the whole church of Jesus Christ. And this pattern that we have set before us here doesn't just remind us what we need to be doing as a congregation.

It actually conveys to us the theological truth about God's plan for His church. If you think about, if you want to summarize God's plan for redemptive history in the post-apostolic era, in other words, the story of the church since it was founded by Jesus Christ, that's telling us what the story of the church is going to be.

[32 : 16] It begins with planting a message sown from the New Testament onwards. It grows through labor. People are raising it up to serve, working together across history, across the nations.

Growth takes place and the church is still growing. In quantity, we go from 120 people at the beginning of Acts to millions and millions and millions today. We grow in quality as we all start with a simple childlike faith growing up into theological giants.

There's a harvest as many people have come in and many people are still to come in, and there's a reward at the end of it when Jesus returns and we are brought into the new creation.

Then the farm will no longer be battling in a wilderness, then the farm will be flourishing in paradise. The final point that I want to set before you tonight is that every single one of those steps is all about Jesus.

It's not about Paul or Apollos. It's not about St. Columbus or the free church. The story of the church is all about Jesus. In other words, the macro is far more important than the micro.

[33 : 30] We're not here to be a successful church farm ourselves. We're here to be one of the many, many fields in Jesus' giant church farm. That's because every single step in this process is completely centered on Jesus.

The seed is the truth revealed in Jesus. He is the Word. He is the wisdom from God, as Paul writes in his letters to the Corinthians.

He is the mind. His is the mind that we seek to have. The message we proclaim is all about him. The labor is a team assembled by Jesus and empowered by Jesus.

He sends the Holy Spirit to equip us to serve him. As Paul said, as we read, what we do does not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

Growth is growth into Jesus. When we talk about sanctification, we are simply talking about a process whereby we become more like him. Maturity in the faith simply means to be more like Jesus.

[34 : 31] The growth is growth into him. The harvest is a gift to Jesus. He sends out the laborers. We bring the harvest to him.

And the reward, the wages, is an eternity with Jesus.

And if you like, we can sum up that story like this. In the Old Testament, it says it's coming. At the cross, Jesus said it's finished. In the New Testament church, they said it's just beginning.

In the last days that we're living in now, the messages, it's not done yet. And at the new creation, it will never end.

God is building a big farm. And being on that farm and working in that farm is brilliant.

[35 : 32] So in the week ahead, let's go for it. Amen. Amen. Father, we thank you for the work that you're doing in building your church.

And we know, Lord, that we are full of weakness, fear, and trembling. But we so want to work for you and to work well for you.

Help us to be those who will sow the seed of the gospel in the lives of the people around us. Help us to nurture one another as we work and strive together.

Please in your mercy, bring growth. And may the people in our family, the people we work with, the people we know around us, may they become the harvest who are gathered in.

And in all of that, we look for the amazing reward of being with you forever. Please have mercy on us. And pray, Lord, that as one, we would work together for you.

[36 : 43] In Jesus' name, amen.