

# Ecclesia

## An Investigative Analysis

From the book of Acts

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Good morning. Excited for another opportunity to share with you this morning in the absence of Pastor Dan and many others as they attend the adult retreat. Last time I was able to share with you the evaluation of our identity. It was a time to reflect upon whether the things we invest ourselves into is of eternal or earthly value. As I was reflecting and praying about this week's sermon, I thought. Ok, my audience will consist of the following group: silver threads, java generation, revive, youth, and those who forgot to go to the adult retreat. So how can I deliver a message that relates to such a huge gap of people. What could our oldest attender Roy Fagerstrom who will be 97 in a couple weeks and Eilee McClellan at 5 weeks of age have in common? Other than both being a part of this church. Wait a minute....thats it! They are both a part of Chisholm Baptist. They are both a part of a divinely instituted community that was commissioned at Pentecost following Jesus death.

So, what does that mean? Why does it matter? What is God's purpose in putting a 97-year-old man and a 5-week-old little girl in a community of believers and within a church body? And how do we protect and grow that community that we are a part of? Now please

bear in mind that we are not going to be able to cover the biblical truths of the church in one 40-minute lecture. The Greek term for church is Ecclesia and it means assembly or congregation. Thus, the term for the study of the church is called Ecclesiology. Some scholars have spent their entire lives dissecting ecclesiology and what the Bible teaches about the church. I also need to identify for you what are the 3 basic functions of the church: worship, edification (which is nurturing, building up or helping believers to mature in Christ), and evangelism (which is reaching out to a lost world with the Good News about Jesus). Now each of these in themselves can be complete sermon series but today I hope to take you on a unique journey through the basic structure of the early church and how that can be applied to and encourage us as believers today. I want you to keep in the back of your mind these three principles: worship, edification, and evangelism. Also bear in mind when I say Chisholm Baptist, I am simply referring to us as the church. This message pertains to and is important for any church.

As many of you know, in my career, I am a fire investigator. Called upon to determine the origin and cause of some incredibly devastating fires. It is to determine if a crime was committed,

if there was a product failure or electrical failure, if there was human error, or if it was an “Act of God”. I find it interesting that the investigative word and insurance world still considers forces of this world an “Act of God”. I personally love that they still acknowledge Gods hand in the everyday forces and acts of nature. Many times, the investigation is to give closure to the family affected by the fire. Often times losing everything in the fire and sometimes loved ones. Other times it is to determine the fault so that restitution can be made, either for insurance purposes or as mentioned earlier, criminal activity. There a couple reasons why I bring this bring this up. First is, that process of my investigations is very systematic in nature and that process is what I would like to apply to todays message as we evaluate the church. Second, the physical conditions often found in fire investigations have applications to help us remain vigilant in our church. It is an unfortunate coincidence of events that I am giving this message in the devastating wake of the fire at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. A fire that that destroyed what was considered irreplaceable even though most of the interior artifacts were saved. A devastating loss to the Cathedral that has stood for over 850 years. But ultimately, with no lives lost, the “church” was undamaged when we use the term “church” as the assembly or congregation. The community of believers may have had significant damage to the

physical building but as we will see today the true church escaped harm.

Some of you may say. Why do I need to hear this? Chisholm Baptist appears to be a vibrant and growing church? And my answer to that is similar to my last message I gave where I talked about the idea that we need to continually evaluate ourselves. In the same way, we need to be vigilant to the condition of our church. Often change and stagnation occur slowly over time. Listen to this excerpt taken from Thom Rainer’s book, “Autopsy of a deceased church.” This book studied over a dozen churches that declined and then eventually closed.

“It is rare for a long-term church member to see erosion in his or her church. Growth may come rapidly, but decline is usually slow, imperceptibly slow. This slow erosion is the worst type of decline for churches, because the members have no sense of urgency to change. They see the church on a regular basis; they don’t see the gradual decline that is taking place before their eyes. Often the decline is in the physical facilities, but it is much more than that. The decline is in the vibrant ministries that once existed. The decline is in the prayer lives of the members who remain. The decline is in the outward focus of the church. The decline is in the connection with the community. The decline is in the hopes and dreams of those who remain. Decline is everywhere in the church, but many don’t see it.”

I want you to take a look at a picture of this house. From the exterior the house looks perfect. In fact it is a beautiful house. It is a house that evokes pride and many of you would desire to live in this house. Even from the front door this home looked beautiful and inviting. But soon firefighters would be revealed the hidden damage inside. As firefighters walked into the home the reality of what lied beneath was very quickly realized as the floor collapsed beneath the tile floor. The house used a construction material known as wooden I-beams or TGI beams. And while these engineered structural components are lightweight, quiet, and under normal conditions-very strong. Its when fire is applied that the true weakness of these building components are realized. Without proper protection lab test have found that these beams can fail under fire conditions in less than 4 minutes.

So what does that mean for us as we evaluate our church? Does it mean we can't have new and exciting ministries or forms of worship? Certainly not, but it does mean that we need to protect our ministries. We need to cover them in prayer and strengthen them by relying on sound doctrine and ensuring that all parts of ecclesia-worship, edification, and evangelism are focused around Christ. If any of the facets of ecclesia are not focused on Christ and covered in prayer they will fall prey and fail when they are put to the fire.

Ok, so maybe you see now the importance of looking at and remaining vigilant to the health of the church, but what does that have to do with me? My answer is right back to my opening statement. What is the church? Ecclesia.....the congregation. Each one of you in this room are a part of this analysis. We're not looking at the health of the physical building but instead the health of the ecclesia.....each of you. And we are not dissecting the visible vs the invisible church this morning. I know that there are probably those of you in the audience or watching on tv today that are not truly a part of the church. And what I mean is you have not accepted Christ as your atoning sacrifice admitting and understanding that it is nothing that we do that saves us, but instead totally and completely the work of Christ. If that is you this morning, I was praying for you this morning. I was praying that the Lord would come into your life in a radical and life saving way. I prayed that you would be convicted today of your sins and that you would pray for Christ to take hold of your life. And I prayed that through that act of submission and acceptance that you would become a member of the church the ecclesia.

So let's begin our investigation! Let's identify how we are going to protect the Ecclesia from Satan's damaging fire. So where do we start? Should we dive in to the area where the fire occurred? Should we look to examine the health of Chisholm Baptist? It seems to make the most

sense, right? Go to the source to determine the origin of the fire, right? No, when we investigate a fire it is a very systematic approach. Every fire whether a large multi-million-dollar loss or a small fire in a room of a home, they are all investigated the same systematic way. We always start in the area of least damage and work our way in to the source. We examine the exterior of the structure documenting everything we see and we slowly, room by room, make our way to the area of most damage. We interview the owners to determine what was the original condition of the home. We ask if there were any issues with the home, circuit's tripping, water leaking, and things like if the furnace or heating system was working properly. In the same way, in an effort to determine the health of the church or Ecclesia we are going to pan way out and look at the foundation of the church. And to do that we need to go back to scripture in order for us to develop a picture of what the church should like, what ecclesia looks like, and then in turn what Chisholm Baptist should look like.

Approximately 10 days after Christ rose from the dead, he revealed himself to the apostle Thomas. So, if Jesus was resurrected last Sunday he would be revealing himself to Thomas in another few days. Fast forward from there another 32 days later and we find Jesus lead the apostles out as far as Bethany (about 1 to 2 miles from Jerusalem). Let's look at the text in Acts 1:4-8. The apostles have been on arguably the

worlds most intense spiritual and emotional roller coaster. They left everything they knew to follow this man Jesus. They saw him teach, heal, and perform miracles. They had to witness the gruesome and violent death of their rabbi. And then experienced the fear and sadness of separation from their teacher and friend Jesus. He has now returned from the dead proving to be more than just a man but is now preparing them for him to leave them again. They are confused, scared, and filled with anticipation to what is to come. Now look at verse 9-11. I love this part of the ascension....we see such a beautiful example of Gods provision for the church. God still providing even before he provides.

Let's keep reading in our text in Acts where we see the apostles together. Acts 1:12-14..... They were united in prayer. The text does not simply say they prayed together but that they were united together in prayer. In Christ's physical absence prayer is what united them together. They were connected, adhered together, in prayer. Do our lives today reflect this? Remember, we are Ecclesia. Our prayer life connects and binds us together. Are we praying for our families, our friends, our co-workers, our pastors, this church, and our ministries? I am going to get real with you now. And its not because I have it figured out but because I struggle with it as well. Our prayer life can often look good on the outside. It's like the house, the nice exterior hides the damage within. Pastor did

a great job talking about the importance of prayer several weeks ago and I want to again emphasize its importance. Husbands-are you praying for your wives and your children. Wives-are you praying for your husbands and your children. Congregation-are you praying for your church and its ministries, are we praying for the community that we are a part of and the people who desperately need to hear the saving words of the gospel. Sunday school teachers-are you praying for your students...are you praying that the spirit would completely fill their lives. I am telling you that I do not pray enough. I do not allow prayer to convict my heart enough, I do not allow prayer draw me closer to Christ enough, I don't get to experience the change in ministries that prayer would effect enough, and I don't get to experience all the God intends for me because I don't pray enough. In that moment the apostles realized and experienced God through prayer. May we remember ecclesia that we are united in prayer. Whether your in Bovey, Hibbing, Virginia, International Falls, or Bulgaria.....we are united in prayer. Whether you attend Chisholm Baptist, NorthStar, Abundant Life, Open door, St. Leos, or any other church.....we are united in prayer. It is a gift, it is a command, and it is a way that God communes with us and allows us to affect change in this world. Let's not treat it as a casual conversation piece or something reserved for Sunday mornings.

Now we are going to fast forward another 10 days to Pentecost...the have replaced Judas Iscariot with Matthias and are now in the temple together celebrating Pentecost which was the remembrance of the Passover. But this was no ordinary Pentecost. Acts 2:1-4. We see an amazing site as the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples and this was in no ordinary fashion...but instead flaming tongues descending and resting on their heads. We see the fulfillment from Acts 1:5. No tambourine, drum set, electric guitar, or lights and smoke could even compare to this site. However, this event is not unique. We also see the descent of the Spirit in the commissioning of Christ's ministry on earth. Matthew 3:16 records this event. The act of the Spirit is an essential part of Gods instituting ministry. From Jesus to you in this room today, are dependent on the work of the Spirit. Do we heed or even acknowledge the work of the Spirit? Do we depend on him to work in our lives, or family's lives, and our ministries? For many of us...the thought of the Spirit at work seems taboo or too charismatic. Too charismatic??? Do we need to re-read the scripture to see the Spirit descent? I am not here to discuss the charismatic nature of worship or what it should look like but I simply want you to understand that the Holy Spirit is at work and it should be magnificent. Without the spirit our ministries are like the house. Nice looking on the outside but easily destroyed on the inside.

From Pentecost we see the rapid growth in the church, we see them gathered together, and we see them being generous with each other, and we see them boldly preaching the word. Now there were still trials and afflictions but I want to tune into a particular set of verses. Acts 6 provides a vivid picture of what ecclesia looked like. Many of you know Stephen right? What story? As the first martyr right?...when he was stoned and when we first are introduced to Saul who later becomes Paul. But I want to reveal to you the beginning of Stephens ministry. Let's read Acts 6:1-7. The apostles knew they needed to continue the ministry of spreading the gospel news but they also knew that the edification of the ecclesia was of vital importance. God is glorified when we care for each other. The two go hand in hand. We preach the news to gather people to the ecclesia or the flock and then we sacrificially care for the flock. Some say that the choosing of the seven was the start of the deacon ministry. Do we treat that as such? I was never really interested in being a deacon of a church because I thought that I was not old enough or spiritually grounded enough to be one. Being a deacon is not just about managing the church budget, going to a meeting once a month, serving communion, or just dealing with people issues within the church. But instead its about ecclesia. Its about caring for the congregation. When you see a deacon or deaconess, they are no more spiritually acceptable in Gods eyes than you or I

but they are called and are fulfilling a very important task. And at the end of the service today there will be a deacon and deaconess up front here today. And they are here to care for you, to pray for you, to encourage you, to cry with you, or to praise God with you. They are an important part of edification.

So where does our investigation leave us? We learned that the church needs to be vigilant for the decline in the vibrant ministries that once existed, the decline in the prayer lives of the members, the decline in the outward focus of the church, and the decline in the connection with the community. We need to be vigilant in our investment into the community of Ecclesia. Each of you here this morning is a part or have an opportunity to be a part of ecclesia. Be a part of the family of Christ. Be united in prayer and edify one another in Christ. Join together for regular and Spirit filled worship. And finally, desire to share Christ with others so that they can be a part of something truly amazing.

This is not a health and wealth sermon but I would be foolish not to mention that God desires to lavishly pour out blessings upon his flock. The original church flourished because they put the needs of the ecclesia above their own. That's why when you are weak God will often strengthen you through the church. And when you are strong you should be a part of lifting up the weak. If you only come every week to be watch and observe we would call that an

audience. Don't be a part of the audience.....be a part of ecclesia. Thomas Rainer states in his book, *"It's like Paul described in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. We are members of the body of Christ. We do not exist to serve ourselves; instead, we exist for the greater good of the body. Members of dying churches did not get that. For most of the members, their affiliation with the church focused around their desires and needs. And, as the church got closer to death, the intensity of their arguments and demands for their preferences grew. A church by definition is a body of believers who function for the greater good of the congregation. In essence, when church members increasingly demand their own preferences, the church is steadily not becoming the church. It's therefore neither surprising nor unexpected, at least from an observer's point of view, when the church closes its doors."* So I want to draw you to one final verse from Acts as we prepare to leave today to try and remind you of a simple way to invest into ecclesia. Acts 2:46-47. Many of you would think that I am a very social person. And in a sense I am, but often times in my life I cannot wait until I get home and put on my sweatpants. The thought of getting together with others from church often doesn't excite me the way that it should. Now I understand the importance of having family and down time but if we truly want to have a healthy ecclesia it means we need to protect it. We looked through the different aspects of ecclesia this morning to see where we need to protect it but

protecting it doesn't come from building walls around myself. It comes from opening myself up. It comes from pouring myself into others through prayer, fellowship, discipleship, and sharing my faith. And one of the easiest ways to do that is through....what??? Food and opening my home. I know....its easy to detach....I am so busy with work, or school, or family that we don't take time for each other. Be careful what you are detaching from. Other than Christ sacrifice and the Spirits work, this is one of the most important parts of being a Christian....being part of the community...of ecclesia.