

TUTORIAL
7.1

God is building His Church

This tutorial introduces Module 7 and some of the key foundations for the Church; what the Church is, and how God, the Author, is working to build His Church.

God as Author

If you have already completed other parts of the *AccessTruth* resources (and we hope you have at very least been through Modules 1 and 2) you will know that we are very consciously trying to present a cohesive picture of God as Author. Hopefully that has come out clearly as we've followed His Narrative and seen Him at work in Creation and as He's interacted with that Creation, especially with His image-bearing race. Implicit in the metaphor of God as Author is the concept that He does not act randomly or arbitrarily. And even though He is *responsive* this does not mean that He is *reactive*, in the sense of being dictated to by circumstances or by the actions of others. He is the Initiator, and what He initiates or creates, is according to His plan and perfectly aligned with His being, His character.

In this Module (7), we want to introduce a picture of the Church - and churches - that fits very clearly with this view of God as Author. We believe, and want to clearly demonstrate, that He has carefully planned His Church in a way that is consistent with who He is and the way He has always functioned. He has specific intentions for each local church that are intended to play a unique and indispensable part in His overall Plan. He puts within those local churches, people with the gifts and abilities to do what He wants that church to do - within its local context and beyond.

What we mean by “church”

Before we go any further, we should probably take a moment to define this term we are going to be using a lot in these tutorials - *Church* and *church*. Our western history has embedded a number of meanings into the word “church” that are not necessarily helpful. English dictionaries commonly include these definitions:

- (1) A building for public worship - “They renovated the *church*”

- (2) The clergy or officialdom of a religious body - “The *church* laid out its doctrine”
- (3) A body or organisation of religious believers - “It’s on the *church* website”
- (4) Public worship - “They attend *church* on Sundays”
- (5) The clerical profession - “He went into the *church* as a career”

In these resources, when we talk about “the Church” (big “C”) we are referring to all those who’ve trusted Jesus as their Saviour in the period between the day of Pentecost and the future day when we are reunited forever with Him. This is the group or *body* that the New Testament writers usually called the *ecclesia* (sometimes spelled *ekklesia*), a term borrowed from Greek culture for a gathering or *assembly* of people who’d been called out from their normal activities for a specific purpose. And when we speak of *a church* (small “c”) we are referring, of course, to a specific group or body that is a part of the universal Church or *Ecclesia* - still a “gathering or *assembly* of called out people”, but in a specific place and a particular time. So by *church*, we are not referring to a building, or a group of officials, or something that someone goes to or does on a particular day.

Hopefully this amazing thing that we’re struggling to describe here in words, or *propositional* terms, will continue to emerge much more clearly as we look at it in *Narrative* terms - in the way God has actually brought it into being, given it life, interacted with it, equipped it, expressed His love toward it, and given it purpose. Because when we spend too much time defining the Church in bulleted points it tends to “flatten it” and make it seem like something cold and theoretical. So even though we will sometimes define things about the Church and its purpose *conceptually*, we don’t want to ever lose sight of the reality that for God the Author, this whole subject is very real and personal and even, can we say, *emotional*...but more about that soon.

What time is it?

So, God the Author has carefully laid out the plot for His real life Narrative of how history will play out...and He’s arranged it so that most of this last period we’re in now is the *time of the Church*. There are, of course, other ways of describing this period since Pentecost... it is the *time of grace* and the time of the *New Testament* (or Covenant). But the thing that God is doing right now is completing His Church.

Temple building

One of God the Author’s favourite metaphors that He uses in His Narrative to describe His Church is that of a *building*. More specifically, it is a *temple* that is being built. This of course ties into the enormously important Narrative threads from the Old Covenant with its Tabernacle, and later Temple, in Jerusalem.

When Jesus came to the earth and died and rose again, the Old Covenant with its priesthood, sacrifices and Temple, was fulfilled and superseded... something the book of Hebrews makes clear. Now the Spirit of God is living in His people.

In the first of Paul's letters to the believers in the southern Greek city of Corinth, he challenges the *ecclesia* to live in light of the reality that they are *God's temple* (1 Corinthians 3:10-17). A few years later he extends the image when he writes to the believers in Ephesus, famous for its temple to the goddess Artemis (Ephesians 2:20-22). He says that all believers are God's house, a holy temple for the Lord and a dwelling place where God lives by His Spirit. This building is structurally bound together by Jesus Himself, and is being built on the Truth-foundations about Him that He revealed to us through His designated storytellers - His apostles and prophets. Picturing stone masons carefully choosing, shaping and then placing individual blocks into a public building, Paul says that we are each being added into God's temple like that.

A mystery revealed

So this careful building process is what God is fully committed to in this time of history and He's doing it - of course - in a way that is perfectly consistent with who He is. All the things about Him that He shows us through His written Narrative are also playing out in this time through the building of the Church. When you stop and think about that, it's absolutely astounding. In fact, Paul, the former Pharisee who was recruited so dramatically by Jesus Himself for His Cause, calls it a *mystery...a mysterious plan*.

It is not a mystery in the sense of something unknowable - God did reveal this plan to Paul and the other apostles as he said in his letter to the believers in Ephesus (Ephesians 3:3-10) and in the capital of the Empire, Rome (Romans 16:25). It's also because it is something that is in the process of being demonstrated more fully each day - each time God's Truth penetrates a human heart or a new community; when someone listens to His Narrative and believes it instead of their own story; when they respond in faith and His Spirit joins them to the *Ecclesia*; when a scattered group of believers in a town begins to come together to worship Him; when His Word is translated into a language that speaks right to the heart of His people; when His children submit to the authority of His Word; when a worldview assumption is realigned to His absolute Truth; when someone takes on the task of discipling a younger believer; when His children are willing to sacrifice and even suffer to share the Good News with someone or to make it available in a new area - this is the Mystery of the Church being revealed, the Narrative of who God *IS* being written in the hearts and lives and gatherings of His children.

Reflecting His glory

And why is He doing this? Why does He choose this means for writing the latest installments of His Great Narrative? Paul gives us the answer in what he wrote to the Ephesians. He is using the Church to display His wisdom in its rich variety. As God's Spirit gives life and all the necessary resources for His Church to survive and grow, God's glory is reflected and made known to everyone who sees this happening, both now and also outside the bounds of this physical world. When God's purposes are achieved through His image-bearers who were corrupted by sin, but now are new creations because of Christ, that demonstrates just how amazing He is. And when His people unite their hearts in praise, their wills to please Him, and their efforts to achieve His purposes...then it becomes an amazing picture that even the most powerful spirit beings can only wonder at.

An invitation to be involved

But this is not something that God achieves by just doing it to the Church. Amazingly, He chooses to involve us - His Church, His churches, and His people - in the process itself of the building of His Temple. Again, this fits with a thread we've traced through the Narrative - an extension of who He is. He chooses to involve, even to work as partners or co-workers with, people who will humbly follow His lead. He never abdicates responsibility - "Oh, you just do it how you see fit". Through the Narrative; with Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, the craftsmen building the Tabernacle and Temple, the kings of Israel, even with the Lord Jesus Himself...God has always been directly involved, clearly stating how things should be done so they line up with who He is, then giving the patience, strength, wisdom, etc., to get the job done. And it is a genuine collaboration. He wants His human co-workers to use their minds, their time, money, energy and wills... to really give themselves as wholeheartedly to the Task as He does.

So God is indeed building His Church, but He invites us to be vitally involved in the building project. And because, as we've noted, He's following a design that in every way reflects who He is, we have a responsibility to, (1) understand that design, and (2) work accordingly. This is something that hasn't always been sufficiently appreciated in the Church, even by those who are committed to being involved in sharing the Gospel with others. The Lord's apostle, Paul, was one who obviously did have a real vision for this *clarity* and *care* that should characterise our participation in God's building of His Church.

Careful master builders

As we followed the Acts Narrative, we saw this come out in the way Paul approached his role of planting and strengthening churches in places like Antioch, Thessalonica, Ephesus and Corinth. In the letters Paul writes to individuals and local fellowships, it becomes even more obvious that he is working according to a "blueprint" that God's Spirit was showing him. And he uses this imagery specifically with the church in Corinth, describing them as

God's building project that he, as an expert carpenter, began right at the foundations (1 Corinthians 3:9-10). Anyone else contributing further to this project, he warns, needs to be careful that their work lines up with the foundation, that is Jesus Christ Himself.

Following the threads

The intention of this Module (7) is to bundle together key Narrative threads that run all the way through God's Word and label them in ways that help us to understand more about how God works. As we'll see in the next Tutorial, this is not so that we can pretend we totally understand all there is to know about the wonderful mystery that is His Church. Nor do we want to reduce to theoretical formulas something so precious to Him as His *Body*, His *Bride*. But to really contribute something of lasting value to His Building means investing our whole being, like God does. It involves our wills and emotions, but it also requires that we engage our intellects and our minds, and ask Him to give us real clarity and insights so that we can be adequately equipped as His building co-workers.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. What do you think of the idea that God is building His Church according to a careful plan? As you look at what you know of the Church and churches, does that appear to be the reality? If you do see a gap between the idea of God's careful planning on the one hand, and then the reality on the other, reflect on why that may be.
2. As you've thought about serving the Lord, how much has the idea of working with Him and others to build His Church featured in those thoughts? Do you tend to see your service for Him that way, or is that a relatively new concept for you? Please share any observations you have.