

TUTORIAL
7.3

Coworkers with God

In this tutorial we ask how we can be equipped to play a role in the Church's growth and development. We will also discuss how it might be possible to evaluate effectiveness and develop strategies without becoming judgmental, or reducing the wonderful mystery of the Church to formulas.

Last Time

We reminded ourselves that God is personally invested in relating to His image-bearers, as individuals and as groups. This was shown by His commitment to a personal relationship with His chosen people, Israel, despite their frequent unfaithfulness that grieved Him deeply. During our time, the primary relationship He is pursuing on the earth is with the Church. Going beyond the level of metaphor, He describes His connection with the Church as the *Head* to His *Body*. He helps us feel something of His love for the Church deeply through the image/reality of Him as the *Bridegroom* and the Church as the *Bride* He has paid for so dearly and longs to be reunited with forever. He invites us to contribute in the construction of His Building, the nourishment and growth of His Body and the preparation of His Bride.

Being equipped for our role

Our purpose in developing these resources - and we know that your purpose in studying them - is to help you be better equipped for contributing to what God is doing in and through His Church. In the last two tutorials, as we reminded ourselves of the three primary pictures of the Church He has used in His Narrative, we touched very briefly on the implications for us. If He is inviting us to be His co-workers in building His living Temple, then we need an increasing familiarity with His blueprint so we can work alongside Him with care and skill. If, as the Head of the Church, He wants to involve us in the process of fitting together, nourishing, and bringing His Body to maturity, then we need a growing sense of what health and productivity looks like for *the* Church, or *a* church. If we are to accept the great honour of helping to prepare His Bride for Him, then we need to be developing an appreciation and intuitive feel for the Church's needs that He has.

Knowing Him

So, how do we grow in clarity, appreciation and an intuitive feel for the way Jesus views His Church? Well, first of all, because He is the wise Architect, the all-powerful Head and loving Bridegroom of the Church, our capacity for the right kind of contribution depends on how well we know Him. Our perfect example, of course, is the relationship that Jesus Himself had with His Father when He was on earth. He told the Father, just before His death, that He was sending all His disciples out into the world in the same way that He had been sent, and that He'd be *in us* in the same way that the Father is *in Him*. Jesus' close relationship with the Father and the Spirit in eternity and on the earth guaranteed that He fully understood and was invested in the purpose for which He came/was sent. He has promised that He is always with us, and so as we experience walking and collaborating with Him, our minds, intuition, will and hearts are increasingly aligned to His view of His much loved Church.

Through His Narrative

A second, very related, avenue through which we grow in appreciation for how the Lord is building, nourishing and preparing His Church, is His written Narrative. If you have already completed Modules 1 and 2 (in Biblical Foundations), you will know that we use the terminology of "Narrative" to highlight the fact that God has revealed Himself through the Story of how He has interacted with His Creation...with the human race. Even though we do find many propositional statements in Scripture, and even though we can distil the Truth we find there into helpful doctrinal systems, it's *Him* that we need to first be looking for there. When we turn to His Word to equip ourselves as Christ's co-workers, it is with the intention of being more closely aligned with His values through the experience of observing what has motivated and directed God's words and actions down through history.

One of the ways that God equips us through His Narrative to work with understanding and empathy is through the stories of people who have known Him and glimpsed what He was doing in the world during their time. We can see Abraham's walk of faith and how God drew him into His plans to establish a nation for His global purposes. We see others who also played their part, like Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. And there is such a wealth of insights to be gleaned from seeing how God recruited and worked closely with Moses in relating to and guiding the Israelites, and Aaron as they entered the land promised by God, then later, the judges. And of course the kings, most notably David, ...and also the prophets.

But obviously, in our quest to be better equipped as Jesus' co-workers in His great work of building, guiding and preparing His Church, the most directly relevant examples are those men and women He enlisted to be involved at its beginning. As we look back from our vantage point in history at Jesus relating to His followers during the years of His ministry on earth, we can see how He

was preparing them for their pivotal roles ahead. We are able to observe their growing clarity and commitment to the Body after the Spirit's promised arrival at Pentecost...how they were willing to risk everything to see people added, also their unity and common bonds as followers of the resurrected Messiah.

Then the outward thrust, the moving out beyond Jerusalem and Judea, and the dawning realisation of the great scope of God's plans for His *Ecclesia*. This received a huge added impetus after the conversion of the young firebrand Pharisee, Paul, who would prove to have such clarity and commitment to the Cause of the Lord Jesus. Luke's, often first-hand, Acts account allows us to observe Paul and his co-workers willing to sacrifice security and comfort as they travelled widely through their part of the world, planting new local fellowships and taking the responsibility of seeing them grow to maturity. As we engage with the letters that Paul, Peter, James, John and Jude wrote to individuals and local groups of believers, God's Spirit is eager to equip us with Truth, provide us with a legitimate basis for our authority as Jesus' co-workers, and change us so we can live out the values that the apostles received directly from Him.

The Church in history

Another source of information, education and even transformation for us as servants of the Lord and His Church is the example of others down through history, since the time of the apostles. In a very real sense this is God's ongoing Narrative that is still being written in the story of the lives of His people. As God's Word itself clearly states, His specific revelation that has been preserved within the 66 books of the Bible is complete...there's no new truth to be added. But God has continued to demonstrate His amazing power, wisdom and grace as His people have given themselves wholeheartedly to be involved in His great Temple building project. When we have opportunity to hear the stories of how He has worked with weak, flawed, very human co-workers like us to achieve some amazing things, it inspires us to make ourselves available as well. We also have the opportunity to learn from the things they have attempted that have proven to be effective or otherwise.

Evaluating effectiveness

But this last point, about evaluating *effectiveness*, raises a critical question, or rather, a range of questions, as we consider our own contribution to His purposes. As far as efforts to see a church grow, mature and be fruitful OR when it comes to initiatives to plant a new church:

- How do we evaluate effectiveness?
- Is it possible to define any *universals* given the nearly infinite range of contexts and circumstances in which church work can happen?
- Does having a plan mean that God is no longer leading us?

- Is it even appropriate to think in terms of objectives, effectiveness and strategies when it relates to the Body and Bride of Christ?
- Can we take any steps to be more effective ourselves, without being judgmental or disparaging the enormous sacrifices others have made for the Lord and His Church?

These and other related questions are legitimate. We do not want to take an approach that is simplistic or reductionist...to pretend we can write formulas for something that is so complex - even on its human scale - and that ultimately rests in the infinite wisdom and love of God. We need to keep clearly in mind Paul's concern that the Colossians might become enthralled by human philosophies rather than Truth from Christ (Colossians 2:8), or that the Corinthians might be corrupted in their pure and undivided devotion to Him (2 Corinthians 11:3). Any plans or strategies we lay out must never violate the imperative of walking daily with Him and being led by His Spirit. We should be deeply appreciative of any effort or sacrifice that is made to share the Gospel and build the Lord's *Ecclesia*, and never allow ourselves to take a judgmental, superior stance towards His servants.

But as we've noted through the Narrative a number of times, when God created us in His image, it was with the whole range of capacities that reflect His: intellect, will, emotions, etc. And His Spirit lives in us to help us use those fully to worship and serve God. The partnership that He calls us into in the building of His Church is a genuine one. So if we're walking in dependence on Him and truly seeking to know Him and to understand His Truth, we can and should use our minds to consider what is productive and what isn't. Taking the correct stance of humility and appreciation, we can evaluate the effectiveness of strategies that have been used by other church propagators and cultivators down through history, to learn from their mistakes and seek to emulate their successes. We can look at what has lasted and ask ourselves why. And we can look at current approaches and glean from what is proving to be effective.

Vision, passion, clarity, commitment

In our daily lives and every area of human initiative - whether it's exploration, scientific discoveries, medicine, technological advances, even sport - we know that nothing worthwhile is ever achieved without a lot of dedicated, focused effort. That is just the way it is: the way God has set things up as the Great Author/Creator. If anything significant is going to be done well, it takes an individual (or more usually a team of people) with the vision, passion, detailed clarity, and willingness to do whatever it takes to see it through. Strangely though, when it comes to the enormously challenging project the Lord has invited us to be part of - building His Church (we could also describe it as seeing His Body grow to full maturity or preparing His Bride for Him), there's often a reticence from believers to apply those same principles.

As we've already highlighted in this tutorial, it is most definitely our passion and love for Jesus Christ and His Church that qualifies us to be involved in His work. In Paul's eloquent words to his friends in Corinth:

"...if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing." (1 Corinthians 13:2)

But even though love is the overarching principle that must motivate our efforts, that shouldn't be seen in opposition to the pursuit of a clear vision; or asking God to guide us as we identify ways to be more effective; or even gleaning from other areas of human knowledge (e.g. linguistics, anthropology, or business principles). We should never assume that we can come close to defining everything about the glorious unfolding mystery that is the Church, but that does not mean that we should shy away from trying...in the same way that, just because we know it isn't *our* strength that will finally achieve anything, we shouldn't hesitate to *give it everything we've got*.

A note about Module 7

The rest of this Module (7) will be introducing and familiarising you with a resource that helps us pursue clarity about how God works *in* and *through* His Church, and to help us chart our course towards effective contribution in His purposes.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. Are you familiar with any tools or resources that attempt to lay out a Biblical view of what Church growth and development look like?
2. In general, have you tended to see sharing your faith with others as part of the work of *The Church* or *a church*, or is it more your own individual witness? Have you experienced being part of any concerted, planned effort of a church to reach out to those who don't know Jesus as Saviour? If so, were you (and others) equipped as part of that effort?
3. How would you describe your current role as part of your own local church? Has anyone talked specifically with you about that and guided your involvement? Do you currently

have a way of evaluating how effective you are being in your contribution?

4. If you were to visit a country which missionaries had come to a few generations ago, what would you be looking for to help understand how effective their work had been? OR, would you feel it was wrong in some ways to even look from that perspective? Please explain.