

**TUTORIAL**  
**7.4**

# Clarity in church building work

This tutorial discusses how systems and frameworks can be used to bring clarity to church building work as long as they are “translucent” enough to allow God’s Narrative to show through clearly. It talks about the enormous and complex challenge before us and how important it is to be able to measure progress in the way God sees it.

## Last time

We asked *how* we could be equipped to play a role in the Church’s growth and development. We noted that first of all, we need to keep growing in our knowledge of the Lord Himself by walking with Him daily and learning more about Him through His Narrative. We see how He related to His servants under the Old Covenant, how Jesus related to His disciples, and how the apostles and early believers were led by the Spirit as they began building the Church. We can also glean from others down through history who’ve sacrificed and given so much for the sake of the Lord, the Gospel and His Body. We also discussed how it might be possible to evaluate effectiveness and develop strategies without becoming judgmental, or reducing the wonderful mystery of the Church to formulas.

## Narrative-based frameworks

As you’ll know very clearly if you’ve completed any of the Biblical Foundations modules, we believe that God intends us to see His written Word from a “Narrative” perspective. In other words, relating to the Bible as His Account of His actions and interactions with His Creation - most importantly with His image-bearing human race. This Narrative forms one complete and coherent *Body of Truth* - God’s true description of reality - that can only be truly understood if Jesus Christ is in focus; each part points to Him and He makes sense of the whole. This perspective does not negate doctrinal systems or theological frameworks, but we treat them with great caution and always try to see “through” and “beyond” them to the *Biblical Narrative*. We’re highlighting this view of God’s Word one more time here because we are about to present a tool or resource that is a conceptual framework not actually present in the Narrative. We want to recognise right up front that we don’t believe that any

systems we come up with - no matter how well thought through or “Biblical” - should ever eclipse God’s own Narrative.

But why do we need any kind of tool like this - a framework or model... whatever we might like to call it? We have the Bible, we have the book of Acts and the Epistles, shouldn’t that be enough? Why do we need any kind of theoretical framework anyway?

## **We all have some picture in mind**

Well, for one thing, we need to realise that all of us already have ideas about the Church and the part we can play in it. Even if those thoughts are not well-formed or something we can write out in bulleted points, we will all have some picture in our minds of *the Church*, and *a church* and related things like: the role of God’s Word, how a church should interact with the community, what should go on in a church, and how it should be reaching out, just to name a few. Our views will have been formed by a whole network of factors: our own formative experiences, gifts and abilities, even our preferences; also our interactions and relationships; then there’s the specific teaching we’ve heard, the reading we’ve done, the websites we’ve looked at, etc.

So again, the point we’re making here is that even if we don’t have a carefully defined stance we can articulate, there’s an inbuilt flaw in saying, “Oh, I’m not into all that theory about the church, how it grows and matures, how churches should be planted and so on. I just read the Bible, go to Church to worship, and witness to anyone who’s interested.” Well, we can of course do that, but what we have to recognise is that that approach - a common one - is itself built on many assumptions. In other words, there’s no way to avoid having a perspective on these important issues, it’s just a matter of how closely it lines up with God’s Word. We’re not saying that we can have it all neatly defined or that we have to have everything pinned down before getting involved in God’s purposes. Not at all! This is a journey that we’re all on towards understanding and effectiveness. It’s not all about formulas and theories - it’s about living out His love for His Body and for the World. But just as Jesus was “full of grace *and* truth”, for us to love the Church and others on His terms, we should be asking Him to help us find ways to align our perspective with His Truth so that we can be part of effective efforts by His Body to grow, develop and share that Truth effectively with others. And this framework we’re going to share is just intended to help us in the journey, to point the way forward perhaps, but in no way to be more than it is, or to replace His Narrative. But because we already have assumptions, it’s important to have some help in stepping back and evaluating which ones align with His Truth and which don’t.

## **The greatest challenge there is**

Another reason it is necessary for us to keep working towards greater clarity - and this tool we'll present can help with that - is because of the complexity of what faces us. It is very important for us to recognise the fact that in the entire universe, in all of Creation, there is no more important or more challenging thing that humans can be involved in than building, nurturing and extending the Church. Please, hear what we're saying here. We are not trying to make this an academic exercise, or to say that everyone involved has to be superhuman or super-saints. As Paul reminded his friends in Corinth, God delights in calling and using people in His purposes who might not be highly visible in the community as intellectually brilliant, dynamic or powerful (1 Corinthians 1:26). In fact, it's against the backdrop of human weakness that His power can be seen most clearly (2 Corinthians 12:9). So by saying that this Task He's called us to is incredibly complex and challenging, we're definitely not saying that a fruitful contribution depends on our cleverness or abilities.

But here's the thing - God wants us to make ourselves entirely available for His use - a "living sacrifice" was the vivid image Paul used (Romans 12:1) - and that includes our minds as well as our mouths, feet, hands, time, money, energy, gifts, etc. The fact that a sovereign God can use a child to share Truth with someone doesn't mean that we are excused for being childish or sloppy about His work. Just because the Good News at heart is a simple message, we mustn't take a simplistic view of the challenges involved in communicating Truth. People have been saved by reading something they found lying in the gutter, but none of us would feel that our responsibilities to the community can be fulfilled by dropping scraps of verses around the streets.

There is a prevalent viewpoint that downplays the challenge that has always faced believers and the Church in fulfilling the Task given to it by the Lord. Generally this shows up as passive carelessness, but there's also quite often an active resistance to anything that brings greater definition or implies more responsibility. This ignores the reality of what God's Word tells us about the extent to which the human race has fallen; the depth of darkness and deceit in which Satan has trapped people; the challenges faced by the early Church; the experiences of God's servants down through history; and the evidence of what we can observe in ourselves and around us. All of this adds up overwhelmingly to the conclusion that this is, in fact, an enormously complex and difficult challenge we face. Acknowledging this should not lead us to despair. It should make us want an even closer connection with the Head of the Church...and along with that a desire to understand the challenge better and to use all of our abilities and whatever tools we can, to help us head in the right direction and stay on track.

## **Measuring progress**

One result of something being so complex and challenging is that it is often difficult to evaluate progress. How can I know that what I've done today has really contributed to God's purposes? How can I be confident that I'm not

involved in things just because I enjoy or feel comfortable doing them? What mileposts can we use as we look back or project forward? How do we define “growth” or “progress” in relation to a church? What does health and fruitfulness look like from the perspective of the Head of the Church? Is there any appropriate way to measure *results* or should we only be interested in the *process*?

Unless we’ve considered carefully and described adequately how God intends for His Church to expand, grow, multiply and mature, our tendency will be to measure progress in superficial ways. Our default is to look for the outer *form*, the tangible things like church attendance, size and quality of buildings, dollars in the offering plate or even programs that are running each week. In another kind of ministry it can become books sold, clicks on websites, the number of ‘likes’ or ‘follows’. With our personal evangelism we might focus on how many people we’ve witnessed to or been able to bring along to church. If we’re involved in cross-cultural church planting we may count how many teams are out there, socio-economic programs, people groups who’ve been “engaged”, cell groups established, or even translation projects underway.

Now we’re NOT saying that any of those things in themselves are bad: in fact, they might represent a real cause for gratitude and be one of the ways we measure effectiveness and progress. But if we’re preoccupied with these more tangible signposts we can mistake them for the goal itself, and fail to do what Paul described to the believers in Philippi - to “press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.” And even in the short term, if we confine ourselves to very limited categories for gauging results, we can fail to recognise the amazing things that God is doing through and around us. Also, if we have unchallenged assumptions about what progress will look like, it’s almost inevitable that we’ll unconsciously direct our energy and resources towards outcomes that may not be the things that God sees as most important.

You don’t need many conversations with people or to read lots of books or check out many websites to realise that there are a lot of different perspectives out there about the Church. There are endless ideas, strategies, models and programs, some of them developed for specific contexts and others with more universal aspirations. It can be overwhelming and confusing trying to sort through them all. The last thing we want to do is add yet another one. Instead, what we hope to present is something that is more fundamental, something that actually helps us assess different approaches and come to conclusions about whether they move us toward God’s purposes in and through the Church or not. Having said that, we recognise that the way we describe things, the issues that we give prominence to, even the categories we choose, all represent some theological and methodological conclusions...that’s impossible to avoid, and we don’t want to pretend that we can find some neutral, detached place to stand and describe these things. In fact, if we are not

passionate about and committed to these things, then we probably shouldn't be talking about them. But our hope is that what we present is actually founded in His divine being, it accurately traces threads from His Narrative, and that it helps us project those out into real-life contexts in valid and helpful ways.

Another reason why it is very helpful for us to have some defined categories for our work with the Church is simply to give us shared terminology. We accept that when we use a word or phrase in a conversation, we never have 100% correlation of meaning, but if we've defined those terms together previously then we have a much greater chance of communication. We don't have to start from scratch and redefine terms every time we want to talk...that is what words and language do. And so when we're talking about something as complex and challenging as all the different aspects of the work that relates to the Church, and churches, it is valuable to know we've previously agreed on some definitions and broad categories.



## DISCUSSION POINTS

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Read the following article and then discuss the questions below.

1. Honestly trying to put yourself in Ufa and Ilke's situation do you think you would consider that it had been worth it? Do you think you'd be tempted to wonder if it wasn't God's will for you to be there?
2. Do you think there would be a point at which you could legitimately say that it was time to consider moving on? How do you think you would go about making that decision? What would you be basing it on?
3. Do you think that a church (a true New Testament *ecclesia*) could have been said to exist at the six-year point when the story begins? What about after nine years when the story ends? What are you basing your perspective on? Please explain.

### **Success or failure in tough soil**

We're sitting in the house on the ridge looking out over the dry mountains, sparsely covered with stunted pines and fir trees. We flew in a few days ago

and landed on the crazy airstrip at the head of the canyon...we've seen other strips that are steeply sloped, but this one also had a significant sideways bend in the middle! We're visiting a couple who moved from another country to live in this area about 6 years before. Ufa and Ilke (not their real names) have learned the national language and then the minority language of these people who grow their crops - often illegal drugs - wherever they can in the stony red earth. It hasn't been easy to become part of this community spread out in little hamlets. After experiencing tyranny in one form or another for generations, the people are understandably suspicious of outsiders. But through patience, kindness and practical help, and now being comfortable in the language that's spoken around the fires in homes, Ufa and Ilke have gradually won trust and built real friendships.

As we talk with them now though, they wonder out loud if the six years have really been worth it. It was the vision of planting a church in this very needy area that brought them, but they can hardly say that has happened. There have been some real blows, many disappointments. A number of friends have died in alcohol-fueled violence. There are ongoing feuds between clans, and abuse in families is rife. So what can we see that God has done? Well, there's the guy they pay to bring firewood and do some work around the place. He's a believer now and has gradually separated out from the worst aspects of the culture. Now he's trying to share his faith with his wife. Oh, and there's the teenage girl who lives just over there on the next ridge...she too is now saved and comes around two or three times a week to study the Bible. She has been taking food regularly to the only other believer, a crippled older man who loves to sit in the sun outside his hut and talk about Jesus with anyone who comes by. But there's no church to see for six years of effort.

Or is there? Sure, it might be a stretch to claim there's a full-blown church functioning in this community, but how should we measure the relative value of what God has done, what He's allowed Ufa and Ilke to be part of? Now, including the two of them, there are five children of God here, all of whom speak the language of the community. Ilke has made a start on translating God's Word into that language. They have made mp3s of Ufa sharing from God's Narrative which all three believers listen to regularly and sometimes play for others to hear. They are seeing understanding and gradual changes in the lives of all three. There's a feeling of something in common between them, even a growing sense of responsibility to share the Good News about Jesus with their community. The young girl's care for the old crippled man to whom she is not related is unheard of. And the other middle-aged man is trying to be patient with his wife even when she is drunk and mocks him for his faith.

So is there really nothing happening? How do we measure success? The value of sacrifice, disappointments and patient effort? Most importantly, how does God measure success? How does this line up with who God is? And Him creating beings in His image? His redemptive purposes after the Fall? With Him building His Church, leading His Body, preparing His Bride? When we measure

by that scale, rather than by the tangibles like numbers, buildings and programs, surely a great deal is going on. What a privilege to be here. To witness first-hand the small, frail beginnings of what God is doing in this very unpromising soil.

We fly out the next day, knuckles white as we hold straps as the 5 seat aircraft bounces down the gravel runway, finally struggling its way into the air metres before the 3,000-foot drop at the end. Four months later we get an email to say that the wife of the one guy is now saved...then later his grown son. Two years later we hear that there's a small group of about 20 believers meeting regularly. They get together at the hut of the crippled man so he doesn't have to walk on the steep slopes. A couple of the men are beginning to teach God's Word to their own people. While Ufa and Ilke are away for six months in their home country, people from a cult that's sprung up in the regional capital come through trying to entice the believers with promises of prosperity. But they stand firm and send them away, "Our lives are tough but we have received the unbelievable wealth of God's grace."

Twenty believers meeting in a ramshackle hut after nine years of work? What scale will we use to measure that as a success or failure?