

**TUTORIAL**  
**7.18**

# Form, function, fulfilment

This tutorial looks at the fourth and fifth questions under the area of *Life*: ‘Are they learning to shape the *form* of what they do to serve whatever *function* they are convinced will lead to the *fulfilment* of God’s objectives?’ and ‘Are they growing in their commitment to reproducing the life they have in Christ, are they equipped with the resources and skills to do so, and are they prioritising opportunities where there is real need and hunger?’

## Last time

We considered how maturity for an individual or group of believers is marked by a growing clarity about why they exist in their particular place and time. We noted that it would be a very positive sign to hear them describe the reasons for their existence in terms of being part of God’s Narrative, made to be His worshippers and servants, and now disciples of Jesus. Also to observe them accurately pinpointing areas that get in the way of them fulfilling God’s purposes for them.

Following on from this, we thought about how maturity also results in people learning to make decisions on an increasingly broader basis, and how this is a gradual process of choosing to live more and more in light of God’s purposes for their immediate context and for the world.

## The fourth question under “L” for *Life*

- Are they experiencing a deepening relationship with Jesus, learning to depend more completely on Him in different areas of their lives, and gradually seeing their values and behaviour change as a result?
- Are they gaining clarity about the true purpose for which they exist, and are they increasingly able to identify those things that hinder their life in Christ?
- Are they increasingly able to make good decisions based on their understanding of God’s local and global purposes, and to use their time, money and other resources accordingly?

- Are they learning to shape the *form* of what they do to serve whatever function they are convinced will lead to the fulfilment of God's objectives?
- Are they growing in their commitment to reproducing the life they have in Christ, are they equipped with the resources and skills to do so, and are they prioritising opportunities where there is real need and hunger?

## Form and function

**Form** - the shape and structure of something; the particular mode, appearance, etc., in which a thing or person manifests itself; behaviour according to a fixed or accepted standard.

**Function** - the natural action or intended purpose of a person or thing in a specific role; to operate or perform as specified; to work properly.

**Fulfilment** - to bring into actuality; to carry something out satisfactorily; to bring something to completion.

In an 1896 article architect Louis Sullivan wrote: "It is the pervading law of all things organic and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and all things superhuman, of all true manifestations of the head, of the heart, of the soul, that the life is recognisable in its expression, that form ever follows function. This is the law." (Underlining added). It's likely that Sullivan was being ironic because his own architecture was actually quite decorative and not just functional. But his statement became something of a credo for the *Functionalism* that would impact architecture for the first half of the twentieth century.

The idea was that whatever a building is meant to be used for - its intended function(s) - should be the only consideration in design. Decisions about *form* - size, configuration, shape, even decorative style - should only serve this *function*. It fitted well with *Marxism* and can be seen exemplified in some of the rather grim buildings and monuments of Stalinist Russia and Maoist China. It also went along with *Modernism* and the assumption that science would eventually describe all of nature in formulas which technology could then use to fix all the woes of society. And of course all of this intertwined with *Darwinian* theories of evolution and a materialistic view of life that attempted to replace the Truth of a personal Designer and Creator with an entirely mechanistic model in which *form* had no purpose other than the survival *functions* of the species.

To be ridiculous for a moment, imagine what a Creator, influenced by twentieth century *functionalism*, would design if He decided there was a need for something that would produce fruit, give shade, provide a place for birds to nest, and could be sawn up for timber. You'll agree that the result would be something with far less colour, variety, and beauty than what we call "trees" in

English. Or imagine how different it would be to snorkel on a coral reef or look at a sunset in such a universe. At the other end of the spectrum, and no less absurd, would be a God who took the approach of the so-called *postmodern* architect Peter Eisenman who famously said, "I don't do function." What a chaotic and ultimately unliveable place the universe would be! Thankfully, we know from what God has revealed of Himself through His Narrative and through nature, that He seamlessly blends *form* and *function*. The Great Architect, who put into place the laws that make the universe work, is also the Great Artist who created beautiful things, and gave us the capacity to appreciate beauty.

## Form and function in the Church

We can see this too in the way He is building His Church. As we've noted elsewhere in these tutorials, He is going about His great building project carefully and purposefully, but clearly He's not aiming for drab, industrial uniformity. In Ephesians 3:10, Paul says that in this age it's through the Church that God has chosen to "display his wisdom in its rich variety". Elsewhere the apostle stressed just how many different kinds of opportunities the Lord has given us to serve Him and each other because, he said, God "works in different ways" (1 Corinthians 12:6). A little later in the same chapter he makes the point that, just like the human body, the Church is made up of a dazzling assortment of parts that are all designed to fulfil the function God intends. Likewise, Peter tells the churches he's writing to that God has given them gifts "from his great variety of spiritual gifts" (1 Peter 4:10). And if there's any doubt at all about God's delight in diversity, they are answered by John's prophetic vision of the completed Church - a vast crowd made up of every ethnic group standing before the throne of the Lamb (Revelation 7:9).

So there's this rich variety and diversity in the kinds of people that make up the Church, in the work that it has been given and in the skills and gifts needed to do that work...in other words, in both *form* and *function*. But God is seamlessly blending all of that together so that the final result - the *fulfilment* - will be exactly as He intends. This pattern should inform the way individual believers and churches decide what to do and how to do it. And it should also be clearly in our minds when we are picturing sharing God's Word in a cross-cultural situation or if we are considering a proposed church planting strategy, or if we find ourselves in a position of evaluating how effectively Truth is impacting a context different from what's most familiar to us.

Part of a believer's growth towards maturity is learning to emotionally and consciously detach themselves from the *forms* they've grown up with: to identify and discard assumptions that things have to look and sound a certain way, to occur at a set time or in a particular place, to have a particular style and to follow a certain order. In the setting of the church, those assumptions can be particularly deep-seated. The tendency is to confuse aspects of the setting in

which Truth had a formative impact, with the Truth itself. Elevating *form* over *function* without *fulfilment* clearly in view leads to legalism, syncretism or, most often, a combination of the two. Of course a knee-jerk rejection of familiar *forms* just because they are familiar does not go along with maturity, in fact quite the opposite. Likewise, an attempt to discard *form* altogether, as some have done, is unhealthy and futile - even chaos is a kind of form.

## Principles from God's Word

Thankfully God hasn't left His children or His Church alone to decide what *fulfilment* (i.e. final goals) He is moving them towards, the *functions* to engage in, or even the most appropriate *forms* to adopt. He has provided His Word that states His intentions and demonstrates them through His actions in the Narrative. From the Old Testament, we can learn the *functions* God intended for His people then, and find very detailed descriptions of the *forms* that He knew would best serve those. Accurately viewed through the lens of Him revealing Himself and preparing for the Messiah's arrival in that historic, covenantal and cultural setting, believers today can glean guiding principles - that will emerge more fully under the New Covenant - and apply them directly to what they are doing and how they are going about it.

Jesus' life and teachings contain a wealth of instruction with direct application for believers and churches in any time or place. The perspective that led Him to willingly exchange the "form of God" for the "form of a servant" (in the terms the 17<sup>th</sup> century translators chose for Philippians 2:6-7) is foundational to any clarity and maturity His followers might reach about these issues. Also, from Jesus' polemic against the empty legalism of the Jews and its leading practitioners, the *Scribes and Pharisees*, there are incredibly valuable lessons to be learned about what God *doesn't* want. They were like tombs, He said, that hide internal decay with neat, presentable exteriors: like trees that produce foliage but no useful fruit; they were obsessed with religious activity but had no relationship with God. And of course there is endless scope for considering the spiritual and practical implications in Jesus' resurrection, and what it means - as the apostles would later explicate - to still bear the outward *forms* of sin and death while having the capacity to *function* on the basis of Christ's new life within.

But it's the Acts Narrative, with explication from the apostles' more propositional teaching in the epistles that provides God's people with the most directly applicable pattern for determining how to function. Here can be found those parts of the account God wanted told about the first groups of New Covenant believers being guided by God's Spirit as they began to decide things like; how, when and where to meet together; how to give and share what they've been blessed with; how the spiritual leading and more practical administration of the church should take place; how to pray and worship God together; how to obey Christ's specific commands to baptise new converts and

to use simple symbols of food and drink to remember His sacrifice; what to wear and how to greet each other; how to disciple others and encourage the next generation of leaders; how to witness for Him and see new outposts of His Church established; how practically to function under the headship of Christ while also valuing interdependence and the help that comes through fellowship with other bodies of believers.

Significantly, under the New Covenant, the exact *form* that the *function* took is not given in detail or laid out as bullet-point directives. There's clear evidence too that there was freedom given by the Spirit for the specifics of how things should be done to flex and morph with the context and circumstances as the Church reached out to new areas. We're reminded of the principle we've already noted: God loves to blend diversity of *form* with effective *function* in the *fulfilment* of His overall purposes.

## Forms based on purpose

Through God's Word, we understand that these are some of the most significant purposes God has given to local churches: providing a safe, caring environment for members; giving access to encouragement, instruction and correction from God's Word; facilitating worship, fellowship and obedience to specific commands and general principles; helping members to function in their God given gifts through discipleship and equipping; contributing to the outward thrust of the global Church into needy communities, nearby and distant. One measure of maturity for churches then, is how well they already have, or are developing, a process for articulating those purposes and determining how to do things in ways that best serve those purposes in light of their own unique dynamics and context.

Most new churches go through an initial period of establishing *forms*, but it is often surprising how quickly these can become entombed in tradition. Cross-cultural church planters have to take great care that they are not inadvertently imposing their own cultural preferences (or even their disillusionment with certain *forms* that may not be inappropriate) on the new group. Churches, new or old, that exist within a denominational structure, or who identify with a particular ecclesiological stream, face unique challenges when it comes to feeling the freedom to regularly evaluate and adjust *forms*. Generational change, a general drift away from Biblical "proficiency" (especially in the West), shifting demographics, trends in worship styles (particularly in today's connected world), new technologies, and changes in the larger community...these are just some of the factors that churches have to wrestle with as they seek to function in relevant, authentic and appropriate ways.

As we project into the future or observe an existing context, we would be confident of a church moving towards maturity in terms of *form*, *function* and *fulfilment* if it was led by those who are:

- seeking the Spirit's guidance together,
- able to articulate God's purposes clearly for the Church from His Word,
- drawing out regular input from the rest of the body,
- willing to face the challenge honestly, acknowledging their own preferences and even areas of "baggage",
- keen to retain what is healthy from the past,
- aware of current trends that are impacting the way the church functions,
- able to come up with creative, practical and effective strategies for the church to function according to God's intentions.

## Some extra questions

To go along with the fourth question under *Life*, 'Are they learning to shape the *form* of what they do to serve whatever *function* they are convinced will lead to the *fulfilment* of God's objectives?', we can also ask:

- *Are they seeing that God is not interested in empty, static, religious tradition but in something living, authentic and richly diverse?*
- *Are they learning to see threads in God's Narrative and to draw current applications of how He leads His people to develop forms for their function that are appropriate to the time and place?*
- *Are they open to the Spirit's guidance and input from others as they regularly evaluate and adjust their activities to serve the church and facilitate its witness?*

## The fifth question under "L" for *Life*

- Are they experiencing a deepening relationship with Jesus, learning to depend more completely on Him in different areas of their lives, and gradually seeing their values and behaviour change as a result?
- Are they gaining clarity about the true purpose for which they exist, and are they increasingly able to identify those things that hinder their life in Christ?
- Are they increasingly able to make good decisions based on their understanding of God's local and global purposes, and to use their time, money and other resources accordingly?
- Are they learning to shape the *form* of what they do to serve whatever *function* they are convinced will lead to the *fulfilment* of God's objectives?
- Are they growing in their commitment to reproducing the life they have in Christ, are they equipped with the resources and skills to do so, and are they prioritising opportunities where there is real need and hunger?

## Producing fruit

As we noted in Tutorial 7.15, the ability to reproduce is considered one of the primary distinctives of anything that is living. Plants, for example, reach a stage where they self-propagate by dividing or producing rhizomes (shoots and runners) or by broadcasting seeds. The ability to do this demonstrates vitality and maturity. A similar principle applies to all other forms of life, including human life. And it is no stretch to make a direct link between spiritual maturity with how committed, equipped and intentional an individual believer or church is about seeing the life they have in Christ reproduced in others.

We've reflected elsewhere on the fact that authentic life in Christ produces the fruit of the Spirit such as Paul lists in Galatians 5:22. This kind of fruit is no doubt what Jesus had in mind when He said that His true disciples "produce much fruit" (John 15:8). But it seems likely He was also including another kind of yield - the "plentiful harvest of new lives" that He said elsewhere is produced when a "kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies" (John 12:24). In certain situations that He knows are conducive to a harvest, Jesus asks His disciples to follow Him in physical death, but in that same Galatians 5 passage, the other seemingly less dramatic kinds of fruit; "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness," etc., are also related to dying with Him on the Cross.

These regular, daily moments - "small deaths" - are not an end in themselves. Jesus didn't go to the Cross in some kind of spiritual ecstasy in the pursuit of sainthood. The very intentional commitment that took Him there was to His Father and the great Purpose for which He'd been sent into the world - opening up the way to Life for "those who are perishing". Likewise, as His followers go through the pain of "putting to death" their natural inclinations, and instead show love to people who might not be immediately loveable, when they are patient with those who try their patience, as they discipline themselves to take on challenges they wouldn't normally dream of, it should certainly be with the goal of pleasing Him, but along with that, to share His life with others. This kind of commitment - to *doing* what they need to do, *learning* what they need to know, *going* where they need to go and, most importantly, *becoming* who they need to be, in order to see His life reproduced in others - is the very essence of growth and maturity for believers.

When people with that kind of growing commitment interact with others, it is infectious. And if a number of people sharing that commitment bring together their spiritual gifts, their skills, their creativity and other resources as a church, they represent enormous potential for bringing in a "plentiful harvest of new lives". If we picture sharing God's Word in a new context, or want to form an accurate opinion of something already in process, this is obviously a key area of growth and maturity to factor in.

## **A careful and disciplined approach**

Unfortunately, it's not uncommon for churches to be encouraging serious commitment and action from members in sharing the Gospel, but not providing any clear pathway for them to be equipped. Members are often involved in different activities and ministries, but without any real accountability to the Body as a whole. There might be prayer requests shared at a mid-week meeting or a mention in the church bulletin, but little sense of this outreach or program coming under the oversight of the leaders or being evaluated according to defined and shared Biblical values. And even for those activities that are church-sanctioned, it's all too often just a matter of looking for anyone who's willing to take it on and run things pretty much as they see fit.

If this sincere but rather haphazard approach towards local ministries is all too common, how much more so for anything that comes under the title of "missions"? Even where church leaders and their congregations are sacrificially supporting efforts to reproduce their life in Christ "out there on the mission field", it's sadly all too rare for them to feel they can or should have clearly defined benchmarks by which effectiveness is measured. Not very many have defined any theological or practical criteria for determining levels of need locally, regionally, nationally or internationally and then, in light of that, determining priorities for the use of resources entrusted to them. The "calling" of members to cross-cultural ministries is usually viewed as more a personal thing than a direct outworking of the call that Christ makes to His Church, local and global, to be vitally involved in His harvest.

The long-standing model in the West - although one which thankfully has been challenged in recent decades - is to "sub-contract" out to mission agencies all aspects of discipleship, training, sending, member care and guidance of members into overseas roles. Overworked pastors and elders are often glad to delegate the missions portfolio to others who see their role more as cheer-leaders than coaches or advisors. The further that church-supported ministries are geographically from the home area, the less likelihood there is of accountability and informed guidance being given.

None of these common weaknesses in the process of believers and churches seeing their life in Christ reproduced is inevitable or beyond repair. They can be avoided in a new context, or remedied in an existing one through the ample opportunities provided by the teaching of God's Narrative; also by a conviction from those guiding the church that clarity, thoroughness and accountability go hand in hand with enthusiasm, creativity and self-motivation. Health for an individual or group of believers is measured by their passion for Jesus and willingness to see themselves as living sacrifices for the sake of the lost. But it is also demonstrated through a careful and disciplined approach to sharing the wonderful treasure of Christ's life in ways and contexts that are most likely to bring in a harvest of new lives.

## **Some extra questions**



To go along with the fifth question under *Life*, ‘Are they growing in their commitment to reproducing the life they have in Christ, are they equipped with the resources and skills to do so, and are they prioritising opportunities where there is real need and hunger?’, we can also ask:

- *Are they realising that their willingness to associate with Jesus’ death is directly linked to them having a part in His life being reproduced in others?*
- *Are they seeing that, whatever other helpful relationships are involved, the primary accountability structure for equipping, caring for and guiding members in ministries should come from their local church?*
- *Are they evaluating and aligning their efforts to share Christ’s life (local or international) with the priorities, values and ministry strategies that the leadership team has clarified for the church as a whole?*



## DISCUSSION POINTS

*Form, function, fulfilment*

1. Describe some of the ways that you feel the *forms* in your home church (e.g. the style of worship and other aspects of the services, smaller gatherings, the building and different ways it is used, even the degree of formality vs. casualness in interaction, dress, etc.) serve the important *functions* (e.g. equipping of members with God’s Word, communal worship, discipleship, outreach of the church). Can you think of any ways the *form* could be adjusted to better serve those *functions*?
2. How directly do you believe we are meant to try to replicate the *forms* used by the early church and how much latitude is there to contextualise? How should we view any direct instructions that the apostles gave about the form of service, dress, etc.?
3. Share anything you care to about what “dying to self” looks like (areas of progress, challenges etc.) as you try to be part of seeing Jesus’ life reproduced in others.
4. Carefully avoiding criticism or judgment, describe any defined frameworks or set of guidelines you know of that your church uses for determining priorities, equipping,

caring for and evaluating effectiveness of church supported ministries, particularly in overseas missions.



## ACTIVITIES

*Form, function, fulfilment*

1. Picture yourself on a team that has been able to share God's Narrative with some people who are part of a large influx of refugees to your country from a strongly Islamic cultural background. Around fifteen have been saved after hearing God's Narrative from Genesis to Christ and you've taught them through Acts as well.
  - Pinpoint 3-5 specific parts of the Narrative that would so far have provided Truth foundations for an understanding about *form* and *function*.
  - Would you and your team (a) encourage them to integrate into an existing Bible teaching church in your area whose membership is otherwise ethnically homogenous and traditional (for your culture) OR, (b) encourage them to form their own fellowship with a distinct flavour of their original culture?
  - If (a) would you encourage them adopt some/most/all the lifestyle and family practices of Christianity in the church they are joining?
  - If (b) would you encourage or discourage them from bringing any of the *forms* related to their original culture/religion into their fellowship and Christian lives?
  - If (a) or (b) would you encourage them to remain part of their refugee community if that included activities related to the mosque?