

# TUTORIAL 9.16 Form, function, fulfilment

This tutorial looks at the fourth question 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?'

1 Corinthians 12:6: God works in different ways, but it is the same God who does the work in all of us.

## Last time

We looked at the third question from the WILD outline in the area of Life. We focused on how people use their resources based on their understanding of God's purposes, both locally and globally. In this tutorial we will discuss the fourth question in the WILD outline in the area of Life.

We'll look at the areas of form and function, with the ultimate goal of fulfilling or seeing what God does and being part of that. Form needs to serve function, but so often it gets reversed, doesn't it? It happens especially in religion and in a lot of the ministry contexts we see. But we know in the New Testament that He doesn't legislate much form really. We know that the believers met regularly, but a lot of forms and details about the Lord's Supper, or baptism, aren't legislated.

The verse above is freeing. When we go into different ministry contexts and cultures, we don't need to bring some particular form and awkwardly try to fit it into their context. We actually have all kinds of freedom because God works in different ways.

That's quite a contrast to what religion often brings, as many have forms of Christianity, but without life. They may be doing the forms of meeting together on Sundays, and having baptisms and communion, and all the things on the outside maybe look okay. To an untrained eye it would look authentic. But it doesn't mean there's life. And it's not God's intent to just follow these forms, but instead, the forms need to be coming out of life, meeting a real function, and when the function exists then the forms will then serve that. The real life of the church is generated by Christ Himself. The truth teaches and the Spirit guides us as to how we are to develop those forms in each setting.

**Are they learning to shape the form of what they do to serve whatever function they are convinced will lead to the fulfillment of God's objectives?**

**Are they seeing that God is not interested in empty, static, religious tradition but in something living, authentic and richly diverse?**

Phil describes how the church planting team was careful to address in their teaching, the difference between real life and religious tradition:

Tracing through history, the Lord has always had true believers. That's been important for us to communicate, partly because in terms of identity we're trying to stay separate from some of the denominational churches that are around here, and we're trying to say actually, "We want you to recognize that the Lord has always had His true believers, and there's always been groups that have often lost the core essence."

So when we're talking about the church, we don't use those terms. We don't say, "the church", we say, "the body of believers". They all associate the church with, say, the Catholic Church. So we're trying to keep some distance between this word that they're familiar with called "church" and what we're talking about. So we're trying to highlight that all through history, the Lord has had His people that believe the truth, that follow Him, that trust Him, but around that has grown up all of this religion.

And so what we're trying to say is that even though these guys say and do all these things that we're going to read about in Scripture, oftentimes it's simply a shell. It's a veneer, but they've lost the inner meaning of the thing. So they're going to bring up, let's say baptism, and they're going to say that baptism is what brings you salvation. It's the process that you go through for salvation. And we're saying that baptism's actually a sign of something that goes down in your heart. It's an outward sign. Because people can't see your heart, the Lord is giving you an opportunity to publicly say to people, "This is where my heart's gone. This is what it believes, and I'm doing this act as a public testimony to what you guys can't see in my heart."

And so we're saying, "You're going to see, now, all of these different groups taking elements of the truth, doing all sorts of right stuff, but it's not actually connected to the heart of the issue that God has in mind. And so we want you to know that we're constantly bringing you back to the fact that this is the true thing as revealed in His Word. This is the heart of the matter, and even though you're going to see all this stuff, what you're looking to connect with is not with this group or that group or the other group. You're looking to

connect with those people that understand and accept this core part of truth, and the Lord has always had those people throughout the whole of history. And even in these other groups in different places, you're going to find people that believe and hold to these things because they've heard from God's Word the truth. And so we're wanting you to build relationships with those guys, wherever you find them, and recognize that the Lord has always been at work and always has them. Now you guys are a part of that."

Phil talks about how the believers need to focus on God and his purposes as they develop forms:

They're asking us constantly, "Tell us what the book says. Pull out the Book. And what does it say about Scripture?" And it blows their mind that you can't have a chapter and verse that says, "When the person dies, then say this, wash them in this way, face them this direction, do this," all the stuff that they're used to doing. It blows their mind that there's nothing in Scripture that explains in detail how a believer's supposed to be baptized, and we keep coming back to this idea that it's because God's not interested in giving us all of these details of what to do, as if He's going to give us a new religion. He's wanting us to understand the heart of the thing, the function so to speak, and not get caught up in the form of the thing.

And so, in that sense, the struggle is constantly trying to bring them back to the sense of connection to who He is, and the sense of life, and the sense of His complete sufficiency and not in focusing on things that we do. Focusing on things that we do, but not because that earns us anything, but because that's what God saved us for: to be able to use us for His purposes. So He wants to use us for His purposes.

Bill and Kelley describe how the New Testament model was foundational as the church planting team and the believers saw forms for teaching, prayer and community meetings develop:

I think as we were right there at the start of the brand-new church and thinking through how we were going to set things up, we were committed of course to making sure that this model would follow a New Testament model rather than putting our own cultural thoughts and ideas into how this would look.

One of the things we realized early on though is that to give them nothing is to give them a form. And what ends up happening is (and it happened to us) that everybody tends to sit around like in a church service if you don't give it any form. Everybody tends to sit around and stare at each other. Just like you do with your kids, it's important to look at them in a young state, and then as they start growing, be

sure that you're evaluating what you're doing and giving more freedom as they grow.

So early on, we didn't try to give them any strict model to follow. We did give them a lot of freedom in how they were going to do the teaching, how they were going to sing, how they were going to pray in the services, how they were going to interact with each other as a community, even the number of times per week that they were going to get together and meet together. We didn't prescribe that, but we helped them work through that, and put some ideas down for them to help them walk through that.

Then as the church grew, one of the things that we did was try to help them evaluate. And in the culture that we work in, evaluating is a big no-no. You just let things go. But they actually learned to love it, in the sense of being able to stop as teachers and as believers and think through what they've done. Okay, how can we do this better? Not that we will become a stronger, better church on the outside, but that we would glorify the Lord in what we were doing.

And that really began to be the drumbeat, it was like, "Okay, we're here to glorify the Lord in everything we're doing. How does that look then in the teaching?" The teaching was longer, and I remember one of the elders was sitting there with a watch one time, and evaluating one of the guys that was teaching, and he was writing times down on the lesson paper that we had. And then afterwards all the teachers always get together and go through the evaluation period of the service that we just had. And he was just talking about how people in the congregation were falling asleep and he was already at the 45-minute mark. And just again, this was not to be ugly, or to put him down, but to just help him be a teacher that could be a good shepherd to these people that were trying to hear and understand the Word of God.

And we saw that on a number of different occasions. I remember too, some of the songs that they were singing. As we started singing them, we realized, and some of the teachers realized that some of the songs weren't glorifying to the Lord but they tended to be more praising man and what he had done. And so they took those out of the church and wouldn't let those be sung in the church.

So again, you're helping them with form a little bit, so that they can get started, but then the further they go along, making sure that you're standing further back from that and letting things happen according to what fits their culture. But then, of course through that, remember that you need to make sure that glorifying the Lord is the

goal, not to try and make this church service run smooth, or anything like that.

It has to be connected with that. They have to see the reason for wanting to evaluate is that the message is heard more clearly, that people understand and then it actually works through that function out into the fulfilment of everyday life where they're actually practicing that. And they can't practice that if they're falling asleep because the guy is going so long. So, we realized that it takes a little form. Our God is the God of order. He's not a God of chaos, so there has to be some kind of order and form that they can follow. But it doesn't have to be our form. It can be something that is indigenous to them, that they're comfortable with.

So what they've practically fallen into now, how that has evolved and what they do is, they have a general greeting time. They have a short prayer, and then they do some singing. They usually sing for maybe 20 minutes or so. And then they have a time of prayer. So they usually take prayer requests from the congregation, and then whoever has had that prayer request will also pray for it. So they'll take five or six prayer requests and then they'll start their time of prayer.

And actually something that they added in was a journal. So someone is marked, one of the deacons is marked every week, and he writes down these prayer requests. Because they felt like the Lord was answering prayer requests, and they were forgetting what had happened, or just not acknowledging or giving thanks for that. So somebody writes down the prayer requests, they pray for those, and then they just have a time of thanksgiving. And actually this is my favorite time of the whole church service, because it's just so good to see what's in their hearts, what's happened that week, and what the Lord has been showing them.

And it will be things from providing food, or a mishap maybe that turned out okay, or someone being healed from malaria or whatever. But then also to the spiritual things, where they're saying, "I'm so thankful that we are one in Christ, and that our friends over there now have heard the Gospel that we're all one family." It goes on maybe for 20 minutes as well. And then they move into the actual teaching time. After the teaching time then they close in prayer, and then they have questions if there's questions.

Bill and Kelley discuss the process of the development for forms for Communion and the church meetings:

Another example is Communion. When that came up they wanted to know about it. We don't tell them, "You need to be baptized. You need to have Communion. Do these things." As you're teaching through Acts, they just come up and they say, "Well, should we still be doing that today?" And we're like, "Yeah, we should." So you move onto that next thing.

And with Communion, they asked, "How often do we do it?" And so we were able just to lay out, "Well some people say this often, once a month. Some people say every week. Some people say once a quarter. I'm sure some people do it once a year. It's just that it doesn't tell us exactly what it is." And so they met together and decided they were going to do it once a month, and that was their decision how they were going to do that. Their reasoning was because it takes a lot of work to get the bread and the coconut, and they didn't want to give the women a big hard job of doing that every week. So that's why they decided to do it once a month.

Yeah, and so they also do it with coconut water so it looks very different. But I love it. I love Communion at our place, because it's not chaos, but it's very much interactive. And so people are getting their glasses, and everybody brings their own little cup, and some of them just have lids, and some of them are sharing cups, and the elders are like, "Does everybody have some?" Or the deacons, "Everybody have some?" And then it settles back down and then they pray, and then another round of it.

**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?**

Greg explains how the form of group meetings developed and was shaped by the believers and the culture and context there:

In Siberia, because of the conditions and the life that you live in, you don't meet outside, you don't meet in places that are social gatherings. You meet in houses. And it's one of the most common things to meet in apartments or in houses and that's where you gather together.

So the group began first off just in homes, where people would just gather together in homes, fellowshiping together. Church began in the homes. And as the churches began to grow, as the groups began to develop more and more connection with one another, we had five or six or seven different groups that were existing in people's homes, and they wanted to get to know each other. They

wanted to get to know who they were as a body of believers. They wanted to get to understand who each other was.

And so we talked about a broader meeting space, a place where we could gather together, where we could actually function together and actually experience life with each other. And so the believers found a facility that we could meet in, where we gathered together and it was during the week. It was an evening during the week where we gathered together, we broke bread, we prayed together, and we had teachings going on. And the format or the style of the church was developed by the believers in the way that they felt was most comfortable to them, which identified with them. Dancing was a very big part of what they were going to do, and so they actually did their worship dances that they would do, and that was important to them to have that a part of it. It was important for them to have prayer. They felt that that was a significant part of it.

We took a lot of it, as we studied through the book of Acts and how the church existed, and as they began to see the characteristics of the church body. Meeting together, breaking bread together, praying together and teaching the Word together is what they wanted to do as a body. And they've continued that to this day.

Philip talks about how the worship, teaching and meeting forms have developed as they came to understand more of God's Word and how God's Word has the primary place at meetings:

Once we had a relationship with Christ, we began to meet together as groups of His children. We didn't just automatically adopt the religious forms that we had seen elsewhere, whether that be the way that we met together or sing or pray. We looked to God's Word to guide us. It's not just a role of a few leaders to run everything, for example. Others have responsibility for music, and other areas, or with prayer. It is not just the elders who do that in the church gatherings, because the body is made up of many different parts. That is reflected in the way the meetings are run.

So when we pray, or sing, then lots of different people contribute, because God has given those responsibilities to the whole body, not just a few. The gathering is an extension of what the Spirit is doing in the lives of His people all the time. So the prayers of the believers, or the songs that are sung, reflect the true life of the church, and the teaching of God's Word of course is a big part of it. But the most important thing is being conscious that the gathering should be about Christ Himself and His grace. And because He is holy, then we should really take seriously this time of coming together as His body, and we shouldn't do things in a chaotic way, or bring things that are

not profitable. We need to do things that remind people of the relationship that they actually have with God, and we have to avoid bringing into the church things from the wider culture, that are not pleasing to God.

**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?**

Dave tells of how the believers changed in their approach to music:

Traditionally, when the people sang, they would play their drums and they would sing traditional songs. When they came to know the Lord they carried some of those over, and created many, many Christian songs, even with their traditional drums. But they knew that there were certain drumbeats that they would not use for a Christian song. There's no way that we would have been able to make that assessment. To us, we might be able to distinguish that this is one drumbeat, this is another one, but we would have no idea which ones would be ones that should not be used, that would not be appropriate, for use with Christian songs.

They clearly knew that. They got together, they discussed it, they decided upon which drumbeats. And in fact it was quite easy for them to come to consensus on it. They seemed to all know that these particular drumbeats needed to be left behind, needed to be forgotten as a former part of their culture, and these others were acceptable and appropriate for Christian songs.

Dave describes how existing cultural forms of meeting became times of fellowship:

Also with these cultural celebrations that they used to have, which really were designed to raise the status of the leader men, the village elders, they found other reasons to get together. They would come together, sometimes maybe at Easter time, or at other times that weren't even for a particular holiday. And they would have food and times of fellowship, times of teaching together with people from other villages, and as I said, sometimes people even from other language groups would come. There was a felt need for them to have people from various villages get together.

And that's not a bad thing in and of itself. And it was very encouraging to see them still coming together as villages, but now these village celebrations are centered on lifting up God's name rather than lifting up the name of one of the village leaders.



Bill describes the church planter's dilemma in guiding the believers as they develop forms:

I think in the church service specifically, it does depend on the group that you have. If you have a larger group, you have to introduce form a lot sooner, because it's just going to be chaotic if you don't. But as a good church planter, you just need to be wise as to when to start backing off and letting them pour into that, rather than you giving them ideas. It's just a matter of learning to adjust with them, always evaluating yourself, just like we always ask them to evaluate themselves.

In this tutorial we started with the question, "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?" The form must be based on the function, and the function in turn must be based on fulfilling what God wants. People so often want to prioritize the form and make it the most important thing, and it's often associated with salvation itself. But these forms actually come after salvation, and they are supposed to help believers fulfill what God has for them.

As we look at a situation where God's Word is being shared, sometimes we can be focused on the form, tangible things such as numbers, buildings, those kinds of things. But God is looking obviously at the heart, the real function of people's lives. And so we need to have those eyes too so that we see the real change and the things that God intends, and we should celebrate that even if the appearance is small and unimpressive.



## DISCUSSION POINTS

*Form, function, fulfilment*

1. As you watch the tutorial video, note your observations about the speakers' level of understanding of the culture they live and work in. In that situation, what importance would you place on gaining these kinds of insights? How would you go about gaining cultural understanding and do you feel equipped to do that now?
2. When and how do you think a church should develop its 'forms' for; worship, music, meeting, teaching, baptism, discipleship, training, etc? How much should this development be guided by any cross-cultural church planters, or should it exclusively be shaped by the local body of believers? Please give your reasoning.