



The Simple Gospel Bible Study Series Weekly Session Plan

Curriculum Written and Facilitated by Pastor Lynice Pinkard

Session 5 [Video Link]

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**Title: What is the Church? House Party? Hospice? Flypaper?
Fortress?**

SUMMARY OF SESSION CONCEPT

Humanity is created to be an organic community (“body”) of individuals who together form an intimate, powerful, glorious, representation of the love and the character of God on planet earth. God intends, through Jesus, to transform humanity from the lost, selfish, violent, exploitative, dangerous species that it is now, into the priestly body of Christ that loves, serves, and nurtures the new creation. Thus “church,” our regular gathering together, is our opportunity to practice being the new humanity that Christ is forming us into. We worship and love on God together, we love each other and have fellowship with one another, and we serve each other in mutual ministry. God intends for “church” to be far more than a kind of weekly spiritual doctor visit and filling station. It is far more than an event that individual believers attend in order to heal the bruises of the week and get juice to face the stresses of the week to come. “Church” is *us*. We worship together to love on God and be loved on by God, because intimacy and mutual love with our Creator is the natural relationship we are designed to be in--both individually and communally. And we are called to love on one another, to care for one another, to appreciate one another and serve one another, because we are created to be an organic community. We are not only here for our own sake--the sake of those of us who already know the good things of God in Christ. The Holy Spirit’s way is the way of yeast, salt, and light, not flypaper and fortresses. We are here to be an alternative that challenges and invites the world into the community of God’s life. We live in a new regime!

PASTORAL CONTEXT

We have to get beyond the notion that church is merely hospice (comfort) care for people who are (spiritually) on the verge of dying and for whom all attempts at stemming the tide of death, slowing the momentum of spiritual disease, are futile.

Jesus Christ is the head of the church. Our work together is to receive God’s gift of Christ to us and to embrace Christ’s invitation to us to join in the work of bringing new life into a humanity that is mired in deathliness. We join Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, who guides us to imitate the eternal community of God. When we see our role and destiny in this light, it becomes apparent that we spend way too much time, energy, and money on the *stuff* of church: The building, the ornaments, the budget, the committees, etc. We often, in the midst of this, fall into deathly patterns: status seeking as a dead pursuit, competition, and backbiting. We too often outsource our discipleship and ministry callings to professional “holy people.” What’s more, we get in people’s way when they try to be disciples and live out their callings. Like the dog in the manger, we don’t want the food, but we also don’t let those who are hungry get to it.

What would the body really look like, how would it function for its own health and growth, and for the society at large, if we really understood God's intention for the Body of Christ? What could we be and what could we do? The wonder of being born anew in Christ is that we find ourselves to be valuable because we are children of God and for no other reason. The body of Christ should cause in us a reversal of human worldly and fleshly striving, competition, and coercion. We should be modeling community that is not based on those things. This is the place where we practice being a body in organic harmony rather than domination and competition. People need to understand that it is not about survival of the fittest. We should not be replicating the dog eat dog setup of the world--the grasping, striving, clutching mode of faux life.

SCRIPTURES

Ephesians 4:7-16 (the church and its functions are for the purpose of building up, strengthening, and maturing us, both individually and collectively as a body, into our full humanity.)

Acts 2:42-47 (the essentials of a growing, thriving spiritual community)

1 Corinthians 12:14-31 (the local community is a microcosm of the body of Christ, which is an organic unity--every part has something unique to contribute, empowered by the Spirit)

Matthew 18:15-20 (being church in difficult practical situations. Humble and humane ways of dealing with sinful behavior. God's church--as hinted in Genesis 1--has real delegated authority to make decisions concerning the management of creation and of the community. This authorization brings with it a shocking amount of responsibility. God fully works with and supports our use of the authority given to us. And our being as community is in the presence of Christ. He is with us.)

Ephesians 3:1-6 (God has a passion to reach out and invite in, those who have no access to the good things. The church in all its variety manifests the variegated, manifold wisdom of God. In the history of all humanity, in the broadest sense, this is what God is trying to do.)

Scripture learning objectives:

Ephesians 4:7-16 Christ's victory and his ascension means he now has the ability to give himself to all faithful people everywhere through the Spirit. Psalm 68:18 (which Paul quotes) shows God triumphing over enemies and bringing captives to Zion and receiving tribute, but Paul reverses the direction of the giving--so that when Christ takes us captive, he gives us to the community of the faithful by *giving gifts through us*. Christ himself is the gift that keeps on giving. Apostles (literally *emissaries*), which is to say, are missionaries, gospel preachers who bring the message to new groups and found churches. They are the first level of the foundation of those churches. Prophets--who, inspired by the Spirit, discern and reveal how God wants people in each culture to honor God--also form a key part of the foundation of a new manifestation of the church. The Spirit also gifts people as evangelists, people who have a passion for preaching and living and working out the good news of God's ways in Christ. Evangelists often are gifted to work cross-culturally. Pastors are called to spiritual formation and care. They challenge and invite people to grow and mature in Christ. Teachers are particularly gifted at helping growing Christians understand the gospel and the Scriptures. They help people build their capacity to apply biblical and theological knowledge to the forming of their Christian lives in the world.

All these gifts are given so that Christians will transform from the deathly ways of their own lives into a holy community that is the dwelling place of God. It should not be that members of Christ's church simply stay in the same self-destructive and despairing ways of being from year to year to year. Through love and discipleship, with the help of the Spirit, people are to be transformed and grow out from the trap of their own needs and self-interest into service of the body and the world.

Acts 2:42-47 The church as founded by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, shows the habits of community making that give the most scope for the Spirit to work and bring more people into the good things of the gospel: committed study together, regular time spent together in worship and prayer, sharing meals--i.e. practicing real, practical hospitality towards each other. Public testimony to the gospel resulted in "signs," dramatic works of God that confirmed the gospel to those who heard the message. They shared their resources together, helping the most vulnerable, rather than hoarding. In our culture, people often put in just enough investment in church to get from it the comfort and strength they need to carry on living in the same pattern as everyone else in this society. In Acts 2 we see people going all in for the work that God was doing among them. *It was costly and risky* (see Acts 11:19 in extra scriptures), but without risking a major buy-in in this godless culture, we have no right to expect God to do major transformation in our lives or in the lives of our communities.

1 Corinthians 12:4-21 gives a vision of what our gathering together with one another can and should be--a time when the Spirit gives us gifts for one another's edification, healing, and enlivening. The Spirit, by gifting every person, proves that the church is a "priesthood of all believers." We don't need positions of visibility and status and some kind of centrality--all we need to do is be ready and usable to the Spirit, who can use each of us for the well-being of the body according to our unique capacities, sensitivities, and gifts. We ought not to be wishing that we had somebody else's gifts. Envy and jealousy are fleshy and spiritless attitudes that quench the Spirit.

Matthew 18:15-20 Practically and pastorally, vv. 15-16 show how to deal with sin and conflict in the gentlest and most humane way possible, which protects everyone from unneeded trauma and keeps conflicts from snowballing and getting toxic. This passage absolutely rules out gossip and backstabbing in the church. Jesus gives a specific set of steps, which, if individuals are conscientious in following them, act out agape love when problems arise in the community. Step 1 is humbly stating your complaint to the person who has hurt you (v. 15). Step 2, if they refuse to listen to you, is taking another person and trying the conversation again in that person's presence (v. 16). Though Jesus does not say this explicitly, it is wise to bring a person who has the respect of the person who has hurt you. Also implied is the fact that if you are wrong, and you have selected a person who is wise, they may be able to help you realize what is really going on. Step 3, if the person still doesn't listen when a wise friend bears witness to the problem, is to take it to the church (v. 17a). This is the equivalent of calling a confrontation meeting. Then, if the person still remains stubborn in self-justifying, the last step, Step 4, is to avoid the person (v. 17b). He says, "treat them as you would a Gentile or a tax collector." Jews of Jesus' day did not have dealings with Gentiles, and if at all possible they avoided having anything to do with tax collectors. The instruction, "let the member be to you as a Gentile..." is addressed to the individual who has been harmed. Others in the church, seeing the person's behavior in relationship or in the Step 3 meeting, might or might not make the same decision.

The authority that God in Christ has given to the church is the restoration of the authority that God gave to humanity in Genesis 1. God really intends to share the management of this world with us, and Jesus is stating that in the strongest words possible “I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be (simultaneously) bound in heaven (by God). If, in faith and sensitivity to God’s Spirit, you allow or forbid something, God--and Christ, v. 20--backs you up.

Ephesians 3:1-6 Why is it that we are obsessed with our own creeds and our own preferred worship styles? When we are full of the Spirit, we want to be cross fertilized, affected, and transformed by other people and cultures. Really coming into relationship with people who have different presuppositions and assumptions. We should have a deep desire that people who think the Gospel is hogwash come to a revelation of what God has on offer. We preach the alternative to the dead-end promises of the death culture, which can never deliver. We don’t just become relativized and cave in, so we have no heritage--being exposed to other cultures causes us all to plumb our own tradition more deeply, to the point where our well connects with the same spiritual water table that feeds other people’s wells. What I have I can only back up existentially with my life. I must take the challenge to live the gospel that I preach about. We don’t allow anyone to make us ashamed of our faith. We prove it with our lives.

Paul is saying that at the core of God’s revelation are God’s radical *inclusiveness* and level-ground solidarity. God’s action in Christ and in us results in a wide variety of styles of being full of God. Christ’s wisdom, as manifested in humanity, is *manifold*, it is *variegated*, full of variety and color.

OVERALL SESSION OBJECTIVES

1. We want people to understand what the *ekklesia*, the church is, and God’s intentions for the church as revealed to us in Scripture.
2. We want to give people tools for shifting the dominant paradigm of what the church is and what being church is about.
3. We want to challenge people with the revelation that the Body of Christ, the church, is not exclusive.
4. We want to excite people about the fact that the church is for us, but it is not only for us--we are called to join God in the risky process of calling the world to fullness of life through agape love.

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES

Mark 10:35-45 (being the body isn’t about jockeying for high position but serving one another)

Acts 11:19-30 Persecution forced the believers in Jerusalem to spread far and wide. This illustrates that sometimes persecution and suffering is used by God to bring us to new places. Catalyzed by that first big persecution, a church sprang up at Antioch in Syria, which ended up inviting Gentiles into full fellowship with Jews. The Antioch church followed the Spirit in radical inclusiveness and became a model for the missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas.

Romans 12:3-8 (ministry is not about acting out of grandiosity but about discovering, by faith, and with the discernment of the community, what our service gifts are)

Revelation 7:9-17 (a picture of the church which has strengthened itself and endured in this mortal age, and has come out the other side in triumph and joy)

Revelation 22:1-5 (we should live now together as though we are training to be what Rev. 22 describes. It is the last vision John gets--when the new humanity in Christ is seen as a glorious city in which the tree of life is freely accessible to all, and all function as priests to the new creation--when humanity gets to come into its full giftedness in ministry. We don't know what gifts God will have for us in the new creation when we have finally come into the servant character of Christ as a community. Service is our destiny, because Christ, our Lord and maker is the Servant)

KEY WORDS FOR FURTHER STUDY

ekklesia, pronounced ek-clay-**see**-ah, Strong's #G157 (sometimes seen in English as "ecclesia" and pronounced uh-**cl**ee-ziah). This is the Greek word that lies behind the word "church" in English Bible translations. It is defined in everyday language as "a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place for a public assembly." When the apostles used this word, they imagined God's people gathered together like a great town meeting. Ekklesia does not refer to buildings. In the NT it often means a local group of believers that meets together regularly for worship and fellowship.

The *ekklesia*, the church, is also called the Body of Christ (see Colossians 1:18, 24).