

The God-centered Identity of the Church

April 26, 2015

Welcome back to our new series called, *Rediscovering the Church*. Last week we took a look at defining what the church is, and now for the next few weeks we are going to be answering the question, “what is the church’s identity?”

One of the most critical realities for any person to discover is their true identity from God’s perspective. If a person has a distorted sense of identity, it will distort how they function in life. The same is true for the church. We must have a clear understanding of what our identity is as the church of Jesus Christ. And that identity is greatly affected by our view of God.

A.W. Tozer: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”¹

Mark Dever: “How you think about God impacts the way you live, and what you want your church to be like.”²

Today’s focus is that ***the church will not live out its true identity until it is passionately God-centered.***³ Then next week we will explore how the church will not live out its true identity until it is Gospel-defined.

So what does it mean to be a God-centered church? Let me answer that from five different angles.

1. To be a God-centered church is to reflect God’s own passion for His glory.

In other words, the reason we must be a God-centered church is because our God is a God-centered God. We must make everything about His glory because our God’s greatest priority is His glory. If anything is clearly attested

in all of scripture, it is that everything God does is for the renown of His glory.⁴ For example, in Isaiah 48:9-11 He says, “For my name’s sake I defer my anger, for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off. Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another.”

- Why did God create mankind? “For my glory” (Isa 43:7)
- Why did God call Israel to be His own people? “That they might be for Me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory” (Jer 13:11)
- Why did God deliver Israel out of Egypt? “For His name’s sake, that He might make known His mighty power.” (Ps 106:7-8)
- Why did God spare Israel in the wilderness? “I acted for the sake of My name” (Ezek 20:14)
- Why did God part the Red sea? “that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, so that you may fear the Lord your God forever” (Josh 4:24)
- Why did God not forsake His people when they sinned? “For His great name’s sake?” (1 Sam 12:20, 22)
- What is sin? “Falling short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23).
- Why did Jesus go to the cross? So that the Son would glorify the Father (John 17:1).
- Why did God save His church? “To the praise of His glory” (Eph 1:6, 12, 14).
- Why does God forgive sin? “For my own sake, I will not remember your sin” (Isa 43:25)

¹ Tozer. *The Knowledge of the Holy*, p. 1.

² Mark Dever. *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, pg. 72.

³ I owe so much of my thinking about this topic of God-centeredness, whether directly or indirectly, to the influence of John Piper.

⁴ Is. 48:9-11; Eph. 1:4-6, cf. vv. 12, 14; Is. 43:6-7, 49:3; Jer. 13:11; Ps. 106:7-8; Rom. 9:17; Ex. 14:4, 18, cf. v. 17; Ez. 20:14; 2 Sam. 7:23; 1 Sam. 12:20, 22; 2 Kings 19:34, cf. 20:6; Ez. 36:22-23, cf. v. 32; Jn. 7:18; Matt. 5:16, cf. 1 Pet. 2:12; Jn. 5:44, 14:13, 12:27-28, 17:1, cf. 13:31-32; Rom. 3:25-26; Is. 43:25; Ps. 25:11; Rom. 15:7; Jn. 16:14; 1 Cor. 10:31, cf. 6:20; 1 Pet. 4:11; Phil. 1:9, 11; Rom. 1:22, 23, 3:23; Acts 12:23; 2 Thess. 1:9-10; Jn. 17:24; Rom. 9:22-23; Hab. 2:14; Rom. 11:36; Rev. 21:23. Thanks to John Piper for assembling these references (<http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/biblical-texts-to-show-gods-zeal-for-his-own-glory>)

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- Why does God answer prayer? “That the Father may be glorified in the Son” (John 14:13).
- What does God command us to do in all things? “Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31)
- What is the purpose of God’s wrath? “To make known the riches of His glory” (Roman 9:22-23)
- What will illumine heaven for all eternity? “The glory of God” (Rev 21:23)

Guess what! Life does not revolve around us. It revolves around God who does all things for His glory. “*God’s ultimate commitment is to Himself and not to us. And therein lies our security.*”⁵

Now all this talk of God doing all things for His own glory makes some people uncomfortable because when a human being only does what will glorify self, it is repulsive, and in fact evil, because he has made an idol of himself and he is utterly selfish. But when God does everything for His glory it is not selfish; it is loving because our highest good is to find our purpose, joy, and satisfaction in God who is the best and purest delight upon which we can feast our souls for all eternity. Psalm 16:11—“*In Thy presence is fulness of joy; In Thy right hand there are pleasures forever.*”

We cannot be a church with a healthy identity unless our most essential purpose is to glorify God as God seeks to be glorified. We cannot ultimately be a loving church without keeping God central because the essence of His love for people is giving people what is best, namely Himself.

2. To be a God-centered church is to be a Christ-centered church.

It’s important to understand that being a God-centered church is not at the expense of being a Christ-centered church. The most God-centered thing we can do is to make Christ the central jewel of our lives, our fellowship, and our ministry. Here’s why: God’s greatest joy, God’s greatest delight, is in His Son who He loves supremely.

If God Himself is the most glorious of all that is, then the only rightful thing for God to have supreme pleasure in, is the perfect reflection and expression of Himself in His Son. Heb 1:3—“*He is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact imprint of His nature*” (ESV). No wonder the Father would repeatedly say, “*This is My Son in whom I am well pleased*” (Matt 3:17; 17:5; 2 Pet 1:17). This is why “*God highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him that name which is above every name*” (Phil 2:9). “He is the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15).

If we needed only one verse in the NT to establish the centrality of Christ for the church, it would be Colossians 1:18—“He is also *Head of the body*, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, *so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.*” Earlier in vs. 16, we discover that “*all things have been created through Him and for Him.*” So in these two verses we see that Christ is to be our *purpose* (all things were created...for Him), Christ is to be our *leader* (He is the Head of the body), and Christ is to be our *center* or our *preeminent focus* (so that He will come to have first place in everything).

Trinity, we cannot be a God-centered church without passionately and unapologetically making Christ the very center of our fellowship and joy. He is our message! Everything we do, must be measured against its worth of honoring Christ. This is why Paul said, “*I am determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified*” (1 Cor 2:2). This is why Paul said, “*May it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...*” (Gal 6:14); because God’s glory and grace are most beautifully displayed in Jesus.

3. To be a God-centered church is to *not* be a man-centered church.

That may be stating the obvious, but the obvious is not automatic. If there is a crippling disease in the American church, it is that we have become too man-centered. We are enamored by man. We seek to impress man. We look to man for hope and help before God. We depend on man. We fear man. We

⁵ John Piper. *Brothers, We are Not Professionals*. Pg. 7.

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design worship services around attracting man rather than being attracted to God. We love the praise of man. And God is repulsed by our idolatry of man.

In [Isaiah 2:22](#) the Lord says to His people, “stop regarding man...for why should he be esteemed?”

In [Psalm 146:3](#) the Lord says, “*Do not trust in princes, In mortal man, in whom there is no salvation.*”

In [Jeremiah 17:5](#) The Lord says, “cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh His strength.”

Oh what a slippery slope this is! [John Piper](#): “*Many people are willing to be God-centered as long as they feel that God is man-centered. It is a subtle danger. We may think we are centering our lives on God, when we are really making Him a means to self-esteem.*”⁶

He’s not dreaming this up. You hear it all the time on Christian pop radio; the idea that somehow God needs us; the idea that the driving force behind the gospel is how valuable *we* are rather than how glorious God is. Without a second thought, we can easily make man the center of the gospel rather than God. Yet we have just seen that everything God does is for His glory and because of that the gospel gives us unwavering hope. How we should praise God every day that our salvation is not based on our loveliness but on God’s perfect love (Eph 2:4—“we were by nature children of wrath...But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ.”) Don’t tell your friend that they have self-worth by saying, “you are so valuable that Christ died for you,” because their very lack of self-worth convinces them that something is deeply wrong—and they are right. Rather, set their hope on God, whose love is perfect, infinite, and based on God’s unchanging character and the righteousness of Christ rather than our performance or worth.

Trinity, by God’s grace, we cannot be casual about this—we must refuse to be man-centered. We must passionately, even jealously, seek be a God-

centered by exalting Christ in all we do. But ultimately, being a God-centered church is much more than just having a Christ-exalting focus to our services and ministries. A God-centered church is made up of people with God-centered lives. It means allowing the supremacy of God to shape our perspectives on worship, prayer, relationships, money, suffering, affliction, rest, recreation, joy, work, and ministry; that all of life is lived as *from Him, and through Him, and to Him* (Rom 11:36). Do you realize that if you are not living your life to make much of God, that you are by nature prideful and idolatrous.

4. To be a God-centered church is to have a lofty and comprehensive⁷ view of God.

There is a grievous tendency in the church today to modify our view of God into an image of our own liking. For example, it has become common for people to personally define morality and even doctrine on a general concept that God is love. Yet God’s love is never expressed in the Bible as mere tolerance. His love is holy (intolerant of sin), just (demanding payment for sin), and merciful (taking the cost upon Himself to separate sinners from sin).

We must know and treasure God as the infinitely, all-sufficient, self-existent, eternal, all-knowing, all-wise, all-powerful, transcendent, everywhere-present, holy, just, avenging, righteous, merciful, gracious, faithful, good, sovereign God of love. We cannot simply lay claim to a God of love without including all of the attributes that make His love gloriously perfect.

How loving would God be if He were not good, and how good would He be if He did not rage against sin in holy, just, wrath? How secure would God’s love be if He were not sovereign and left even on thing not under His ultimate control that might threaten to undo His children.

Oh, may we magnify God’s love toward sinners by not only knowing, but delighting in God as *holy*.

⁶ Piper. *Brothers, We are Not Professionals*. Pg. 6-7.

⁷ Of large scope (dictionary.com)

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Hab 1:3—“Your eyes are too pure to approve evil. You cannot look on wickedness with favor”

Oh, may we magnify God’s love toward sinners by not only knowing, but delighting in God as *sovereign*.⁸

Psalm 115:3—“*Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases*”

Job 42:2—“*I know that You can do all things and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.*”

2 Sam 7:22—“*How great you are, O Sovereign LORD! There is no one like you, and there is no God but you*” (NIV, 1984)

Isaiah 40:15 ~ In light of the wisdom and power of God as the Creator of the earth and stars, Isaiah says, the nations are no more significant and a drop from a bucket.

Oh, may we magnify God’s love toward sinners by not only knowing but delighting in God as *righteous and just* (even when it requires Him to be a God of wrath).

Rom 1:18—“*The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men.*” More specifically, John 3:36 says, “*the wrath of God abides on*” those who don’t believe in Christ. Why? Because to reject Christ, who is God’s greatest treasure and the very radiance of His glory, is to defame God and His grace.

When we know God in full scope of His character, then we will truly delight in His merciful love toward us. Oh Trinity, I am so jealous for us to have a lofty view of God and to delight in His infinite greatness. Knowing God will make us God-centered.

5. To be a God-centered church is to passionately pursue the greatest commandment.

In Mark 12:30, Jesus identified the greatest commandment, the most important thing for any living, breathing human being to do, the one thing that should color every aspect our lives: “*You shall love the Lord your God*

with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

So essential is this to our purpose and to our joy, that God not only made it a commandment, but the greatest commandment, the most essential commandment. **Loving God with all our heart will maximize our joy, because we are loving what is best (and therefore most enjoyable).**

Illus: M&M’s may be enjoyable, but I maximize my joy of chocolate when I eat Dove chocolates because they are so much better.

Delighting in God with all our heart not only maximizes our joy, it also maximizes or ability to glorify God.

Jonathan Edwards (1755): “*God is glorified, not only by His glory’s being seen, but by its being rejoiced in. When those that see it delight in it, God is more glorified than if they only see it...*” (*The End for Which God Created the World*).⁹

Illus: For example, if I walk by a nice painting and say, “that’s really nice, “I have given it a compliment. But when I stop in my tracks, overcome by its beauty and I say to my kids, “Wow! Look how rich the colors are; and Oh, the detail is incredible; it looks so realistic!”—now, I have truly glorified it. In the same way, God is most glorified in us when seeing His glory causes a rupture of praise.

God not only wants us to see and grasp the magnificence of His glory in Christ, he wants us to love it with our whole being—to delight in Him and to find our joy in Him.

If our supreme delight and passion is to love God, then we will be a God-centered church.

Beloved, let it be known that the church exists for God’s glory, and as we rejoice in His glory, we discover our greatest joy. How I pray that we will love Him with all of our heart!

⁸ NIV (1884 edition) in Ezekiel alone uses the title “Sovereign Lord” no less than 210 times.

⁹ Quoted by John Piper, *The Dangerous Duty of Delight*. Pg. 13.