

Matt. 16:13-18
2 Cor. 5:16-20

October 14, 2018

WHY CHURCH?

We Are Church

What comes to mind when people hear the word “church?” Many people think of a building used for public worship. Others may think of an organization or denomination like, the Catholic Church, the Church of England, the Southern Baptist Church, or the United Methodist Church, and so on.

The word “church” is used at least 100 times in the N.T. It comes from the Greek word εκκλησια, (from which we get words like ecclesiastic) which means a called out company or assembly. The church is a selected company, but not according to race or nation, or walk of life, or talent or looks. The church is for those who trust Christ as their Savior, and are willing to be transformed by Him. The church is not a physical building or business organization. Wherever it is used in the Bible, “church” refers to people. The church is the Body of Christ, as St. Paul says

The Bible uses the word “church” in three ways: 1) the universal group of all people who have trusted Christ through the ages (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 5:23-27); 2) the body of individual living believers around the world today (1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13); 3) and, most frequently (by far) “church” is used in reference to a local assembly or group of believers (1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:1-2).

But why is church necessary? Can’t I be a good Christian without the church (and all its troubles)? What’s church for anyway? That’s what we’ll be talking about for the next several weeks.

To answer those questions we really need to begin with three other questions. Three of the most important questions we can ask in life are: 1) Who am I ... really? 2) Where do I belong? 3) and, what is my purpose? We’ll be considering those important questions as we delve into what it means for us to be church.

Identity

One day a crowded airline flight was canceled. There was a single gate agent at the desk responsible for rebooking the long line of inconvenienced and irritated travelers. Suddenly, an angry passenger pushed his way to the desk and slapped his ticket down on the counter and said, “I have to be on the next flight and it has to be a first class seat!”

The agent gently replied, “I’m sorry sir, I’ll be happy to try to help you when it is your turn, but first I’ve got to help these folks who are in line ahead of you.” Not being put off, the angry passenger asked loudly so all could hear, “Do you have any idea who I am?”

Without hesitating, the gate agent grabbed her public address microphone and her voice bellowed through the terminal, saying, “May I have your attention please, I have a passenger here at gate 17 who does not know who he is. If anyone can help him discover his identity, please come to gate 17.” The folks in line laughed hysterically while the man gritted his teeth and returned to his place in line. Although everyone was still frustrated over their canceled flight, they handled the inconvenience a bit more light-heartedly.

Do you have any idea who you are, really? What is your true identity?

Jesus asked his disciples, “*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*” And they said what others were saying about Him. Then Jesus asked, “*Who do you say I am?*” You can almost hear Jesus emphasizing the word “YOU” in that question. It was like Jesus was saying, “It is all well and good what others might think about Me, but what about you guys? Who do you say I am?” That’s a very personal question. I wonder how long that question lingered in the air. Jesus was asking: “Do you have any idea who I am?” not to throw his weight around, or because He unsure of His identity. He asked the question to help His disciples come to the right conclusion about Him, and then come to the right conclusion about their own identities.

We know that Peter spoke up and gave an answer, but the Bible doesn’t delineate how slowly or quickly he did so. When Peter said, “You are the Christ,” he was saying, “You are the Messiah” the one whom the O.T. prophets foretold would come as Savior. But Peter didn’t stop there, he added: “the Son of the living God.” And with those words, Peter declared that Jesus was God in the flesh – Jesus was the only person to completely unite divinity and humanity into one person. If you have ever had that “aha moment” when you suddenly “get it,” then maybe you understand how Peter must have felt at that moment. Maybe Peter was as surprised as the rest of them by how clearly and emphatically he answered the question.

Jesus, however, was not surprised by the answer and said: “*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven, Mt. 16:17.*”

Even after all Peter had seen about Jesus and heard from Jesus, this revelation about who Jesus was came by divine inspiration, not by human comprehension or deduction. Jesus declared that it was a blessing that God the Father would chose to reveal such an important truth to Peter – it was not Peter’s own doing, but the work of God.

Let me pause here a moment and comment on what this revelation did for Peter in his relationship with Jesus. Recognizing Jesus for who He really is clarified Peter’s true identity. From then on Peter knew who he was following. In knowing Jesus, Peter began to know himself. Oh sure, Peter still had a lot to learn about Jesus. As you continue to read the Gospels you see how Peter grew in his understanding of Jesus and himself and he still got things wrong, but he

kept following Jesus. He grew into his true self as he grew in his knowledge and experience of Jesus. He went from being Simon to Peter, from being a fisher of fish to becoming a fisher of people. Peter learned some important first lessons about spiritual warfare, compassion, and the need for spiritual recharging. He learned that to walk on the water, you have to get out of the boat, and to keep walking on the water you have to stay connected to Jesus.

Many of us go around believing our identity is defined by what we do ... our job, career, or how we act out our passions and desires. Many of us define our identity by our preferences and orientations. Some of us allow our family, or boss, or coach, or peer group to define our identity. But God created each one of us, and loves each one of us as His own, and gives us our true identity. *'For in him we live and move and have our being.'* ... *'We are his offspring.'* Acts 17:28. That doesn't mean He loves whatever we do, for God does not define us by what we do, but by who we are becoming. St. Paul reminds us: *... if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!* 2 Cor. 5:17.

What's at the center of your life, your core? Who or what defines who you are? We put all kinds of things at the center of our lives, sports, good looks, education, intellect, drugs, sex, etc. and without thinking about it, those things become the core of our being. Is there something or someone you believe you cannot live without? If your answer is anything but Jesus, it's really ... well actually, it's idolatry. You're worshipping something that is not the true Center of life; you're allowing that thing, rather than God, to define your identity.

Peter's confession of Christ is the beginning of his true identity, and it can be yours too. Do you know Christ as the Son of the living God, the Lord of life? Is He at the core of your being? Who are you and who are you becoming? All our striving and ambition won't bring clarity to who we really are. Speaking to God St. Augustine said long ago: "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee."

Belonging

Earlier I asked, "Can't I be a good Christian without the church (and all its troubles)?" Well, the fact is you can be a Christian without being in church ... but if you're a Christian you need to be in church. Peter's declaration of faith in Christ was a launching pad for Jesus to declare a number of important truths. Here's what He said: *"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."* Mt. 16:18. The foundation of church is in the identity of the One who founded it.

Peter's confession of the true identity of Jesus is the foundation of the church. Christians are people who make the confession that Peter made and

begin the journey Peter began. If you're a Christian you need to be in church, because that's where you belong. Belonging to Jesus is belonging to His church. Remember he said: "*my church*."

Jesus also said that Peter's faith (our faith) is "... *not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven...*" This is the essence of faith. It is a different kind of knowing. Some things only make sense if the route from point A to point B comes off the page and connects with the character of God. As one begins to identify with Jesus, knowing who He is, one connects with the character of God Himself. In that state you begin to see this world more and more through the Creator's eyes and understand His word more deeply.

That faith of Peter, and our faith, is in Jesus ... Not some idea about Jesus, or some faddish notion, but in the person of Jesus. It all begins with Jesus and is completed in Jesus. The church is essentially for those who have realized the truth, as Peter did, of who Jesus really is – the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and the most true being who ever walked this earth. We confess that He is "the way, the truth, and the life" and not just one option for salvation but *the* option; salvation not just for me, or you, or some people, but salvation for all people, the whole world.

With a few exceptions, wherever "church" is used in the N.T., it always refers to the local assembly of believers – the local church. That's where God's family gathers on earth ... with its variety of people, in a variety of stages of spiritual maturity. And that's where many of us are put off. It's easy to be disillusioned about church by looking at the local congregation with all its problems and problem people, all its disagreements and disagreeableness. Imperfect as it is, the local church is the tangible expression of God's family here on earth, even as we journey together toward our heavenly home.

We can believe in the great Church universal, around the globe and throughout time; it's a good thing to know that you are part of something great and grand, consisting of all the millions of people called together by Christ. Yet, that is an abstract concept. We must have a tangible expression of church. That's where we are sharpened and shaped by Christ Himself, difficult as it may be. It is where we put into practice all that He teaches.

The church is not a museum of saints it's a hospital for forgiven sinners. Yes, sinners, but sinners with a difference: Christ-followers know that they are forgiven by God through Jesus Christ; and they seek to model their lives after Him. Christians those who are finding their identity in Christ not in their sin, because that's how God sees us. Even after his confession of faith Peter had room to grow in Christ. Who among us does not mess up, even after we've come to Christ? Who among us becomes instantly a saint upon confessing Christ? Most of us take a lifetime. The local church is God's proving and improving grounds, and it is also where we find true belonging.

Let us not forget what Jesus said: *“I will build my church.”* The church belongs to Christ ... He will build it. *“God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church,”* Ephesians 1:22.

Church Is For You

Church is for those who know there is something missing in their lives ... missing at a deep, spiritual level. Sometimes it is only when a crisis hits us in life that we realize that something deep is missing and that we need something. That’s when we’re most likely to honestly take a look at ourselves and ask “Who am I, really? Where am I going in life?” Church is for belonging with others who’ve realized what’s missing in their lives is something only God can fill and that God *has* ... in the person of Jesus Christ. Church is for those who are finding their identity in Christ. Church is for those who are finding their belonging in Christ. Church is for those who are finding their purpose in Christ.

In coming weeks we will be looking at different aspects of what it means to be a church, as we reflect on our identity in Christ, our belonging to His family, and the purpose He has for us in His church.

***And He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy.* Colossians 1:18**