

“Core Christianity”
“Why Do We Need the Church?”

In this series of messages we are continuing to look at core beliefs of the Christian faith. Last week, when I talked about the Bible, I said that an increasing number of people in our American culture view the Bible in a more negative and skeptical way. If that can be said of people's perception of the Bible, it can also be said of the way Americans view the Church today.

Many people today do not view the church in a positive way. I can certainly understand where some of this coming from: the Roman Catholic church covering up sexual abuse on the part of priests; high profile TV preachers caught in sexual or financial scandals; congregations more self-focused on their own buildings and programs than they are in reaching out to people in need. These shortcomings and scandals have undermined the authority of the church and its credibility in our time.

While many see the church in a negative or critical light, for perhaps even more people the church is simply not important or relevant. One gauge of this is to look at how the church is depicted in popular media – TV, films. How many times do you see main characters in a movie attending church? Or church or religion presented in a positive way, if at all? Most of the time in the media and pop culture today, the church is simply ignored – as if it doesn't even exist. It's not even on the radar screen of modern life today.

Even for people who value the church, there are so many distractions today that can edge the church out of peoples' life and schedule. Just think of the number of other things available for people to do on a Sunday morning besides going to church. It wasn't that way 40 or 50 years ago.

So, when we add all of this together, what we see today is that church membership and attendance is declining. Major Protestant denominations have been in serious decline for over 40 years. Studies of Baby Boomers, Busters, Gen-X or Millenials in the U.S. have shown that each of these new generations is less inclined to go to church.

For increasing numbers of people, the church is simply not relevant to modern life. Here again, in some ways, the church shares the blame for this present predicament: many congregations *are* out of sync with how people are really living their lives. For instance, sermons that are boring, and don't deal with real life issues...church music not at all similar to the kinds of music people listen to and like...churches that act like it's 1950 in the ways they present the Christian message... or churches more interested in bake sales and bazaars than they are in the spiritual needs of those both inside and outside of the church..

Interestingly enough, many people today are ok with Jesus, but not the church! There are people who are intrigued by Jesus, and even say they believe in him, but have very little interest in the church or organized religion.

The irony here is that the Jesus whom people say they believe in was very intentional about creating the Church! When Peter boldly confessed Jesus as the Christ, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus’ response to Peter was: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). Notice, “on this rock *I will build my church*”. The church is not a human invention. It's no accident that the church exists. Jesus *intended to create the church*. “And the gates of hell (Hades) will not prevail against it” – the church will be here until the end of time. It's not going to die!

Although many people today simply dismiss the Church, or else look on it in very critical way, for Jesus *the Church is a big deal, and has an essential role to play in the salvation of the world.*

What is the church supposed to be? What can we do to be relevant to people today (and in each generation)? We get some clues when we look at what is perhaps the predominant image used to describe the church: that is, ***the Church is the Body of Christ in the world.***

The Apostle Paul wrote to Corinthian believers: "Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27). Notice what it says in Ephesians, "God has put everything under Christ's feet and made him head of everything in the church, which is his body. His body, the church, is the fullness of Christ, who fills everything in every way" (Ephesians 1:22-23).

This imagery suggests that ***the church is meant to connect people with Jesus - with God.*** Christ is the Head; believers (the church) are His body. That's the intimate connection we can have with Christ. (And since Christ is God - we are connected to God).

This connection with Jesus (with God) is also suggested in one of the other images Scripture uses to describe the church - that is, the church is the Bride of Christ. Christ is the Groom. Followers of Jesus are the bride! This union represented in marriage represents the most intimate bond between two people.

When you think about it, ***what other organization has as its prime objective to connect people with Jesus, to bring people into the presence of God?*** That's not the purpose of your civic club. Or the grocery store. Or Kohls or Bon Ton. Or the

beauty shop. Or the fitness club. But it's *our purpose* as the church! Sometimes we forget what business we're in. We can get sidetracked in the church doing lot of good things – but not connecting people with Jesus and bringing people into the presence of God.

When I served a church in Lima, PA, a suburb of Philadelphia, there was a period when Bruce Collie, a lineman on the Philadelphia Eagles, attended our church. He was a relatively new Christian, and hungry for the Lord! We had at the church a monthly men's meeting. We would have all kinds of speakers and programs - sometimes inspirational, sometimes just interesting topics. Bruce came to one of those men's meetings. That night, we went out into a wooded area on the church property, and by a campfire, we sang songs. I played the guitar and accordion, along with another guitar player. We sang a variety of songs – Country Road (Take Me Home), Ghost Riders in the Sky. It was a fun night. But I noticed that while we were singing, Bruce Collie left. I had the sinking feeling that he had come there for spiritual nourishment, and we just sang fun songs.

(Now to be honest, at times I thought Bruce came across as “holier-than-thou” and was kind of narrow minded in his zeal for the Lord – but I've always been uneasy about that night - that Bruce Collie had come there with a hunger to get closer to Jesus, and we just gave him some secular music he could have gotten elsewhere).

The church is alive and well and relevant when it is bringing people into a relationship with God! There is a book titled *Love, Acceptance and Forgiveness*. It's written by a pastor named Jerry Cook. Jerry led a very large church that experienced phenomenal growth. One of the hallmarks of his congregation was that they accepted all kinds of people and saw God changing them. Jerry tells of getting a phone call from a nearby pastor who was upset, because some of his parishioners were going there. The angry pastor charged, “You know what you are out there? You're nothing but a bunch of garbage collectors.” Jerry says that pastor was right. But what were *all of us* before Jesus found us? Jesus finds us, then recycles us and makes us into something beautiful! He says accepting all kinds of people doesn't mean you approve of their behavior, but you invite them to come so that God can begin to change them.

I want this church to be a church where all kinds of people can connect with Jesus and be brought into the presence of God!

We're looking at the Church as the Body of Christ in the world. ***This imagery also suggests that the church is meant to be a setting where people can connect to one another in deep, meaningful ways.***

Look at what Scripture says about the church: " For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are *many* members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'" (1 Corinthians 12:12-21). Do we get what this is saying? We're all connected to one another. We all need each other.

Further on in that chapter it says this: "God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:24b-26). In other words, we are to be there for one another.

So many people today are feeling isolated...broken...lonely. People are hungry to be connected to others in meaningful ways. We see this in the proliferation of Internet chat rooms, and Facebook, and online dating services.

Jesus created the church to be a community where there is warmth, and laughter, and honesty and openness, and love and acceptance - where we can take off our masks and be ourselves, and still be loved and accepted.

Gordon Cosby, founding pastor of the innovative Church of Our Savior in Washington, D.C. tells of preaching at a Lenten mid-week service one evening in a New England town. It notes that the worship was especially dull and uninspiring. Nobody sang the hymns, no one smiled. The only thing that moved, he said, were offering plates! After he and his wife left the service they both felt depressed. The church had reserved a room for them in a roadside inn, above a tavern. Gordon says he couldn't help comparing the sounds of laughter, music and camaraderie beneath them with the lifelessness experienced earlier in that church. He says, "I realized that there was more warmth and fellowship in that tavern than there was in the church. If Jesus of Nazareth had his choice he would probably have come to the tavern rather than to the church we visited."

When a church makes members *and strangers* feel *accepted* as they are, when a church enables people to feel like they *belong and matter*, when a church helps hurting, discouraged people find healing and hope, that church will be alive and well and relevant to people!

The church is the Body of Christ in the world. As Christ's Body, we are meant to connect people to God, and to each other in a warm, caring community. Then too, as Christ's Body, we continue to carry out the ministry of Jesus in the world. Think about that – that is awesome! *Believers are Christ's actual body and presence in the world – continuing to do what He did when He was here on earth physically!* We are to be what Martin Luther called “little Christ's” for the world!

When the church is alive and well and relevant, it is always reaching out beyond itself. One of the problems with a lot of churches and a lot of Christians is that we spend too much time in the church building, enjoying each other's company, rather than developing relationships with non-Christians, and seeking to win them to Christ.

I read about something called “ManChurch”. It's an all male service held once a month on Saturday mornings in a *country and western bar* in San Dimas, California. It draws as many as 170 men – doctors, lawyers, laborers, bikers. First, men watch sports bloopers. Then a rock band of longhaired as well as clean-cut musicians cuts loose with praise music, including Christian rewrites of classic rock tunes. Then a pastor leads the men in discussion of topics such as battling lust and pornography – things they can't talk about in front of women. The goal is to learn how to be better husbands and fathers. Then they pray, feeling free to open up in this non-threatening setting. Why meet in a nightclub? John Doss, 46, a carpenter says, “There's a whole lot of people down on church and Christianity but they're really not down on Jesus. A guy might be willing to go to a bar for an hour and a half – you can't drag him to church for anything.”

Church leader Reggie McNeal makes a point that if the church is to regain respect and credibility, it will only happen as we get out beyond walls of the church, and humbly serve people and their needs in our communities and beyond, in unselfish ways. I agree with him! The good news is that many congregations are realizing this - and reaching out beyond their doors to be the Body of Christ in the world!

"On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). The church isn't going to die or go away. Jesus created it, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it! And where parts of the Church become decadent, or self-centered, or unwilling to change...where the church becomes just a religious institution that no longer addresses the real needs of real people...the Holy Spirit just moves elsewhere and does God's work through someone else.

