

"What Is the Church For?"

What is the church? What is the church for? How we answer that question has a lot to do with what happens in our congregation or any church. When any congregation has no *clear* understanding of what God created the church to be or do, that that congregation will probably drift along week after week, year after year, with no central purpose that drives and guides the church, and will perhaps be going in many direction, doing a lot of things, that may have little or nothing to do with what the real purpose of the church is. Often what's done in a congregation is more a result of *customs and traditions* established there, or the *personal likes and preferences* of those in the church, than it is wrestling with the Scriptures to grasp their *identity* and *mission* as the church of Jesus Christ. Someone has said, "Before the Church can act as the church, it must understand what it is."

Today I want to explore with you what the Bible says about the church, and what God created the Church to be and do.

There is no one simple definition of the church in the Bible. Rather, you have an array of varied images that describe the Church. Someone has remarked, "The New Testament idea of the church is not so much a technical doctrine as a gallery of pictures." (This topic would make for a good in-depth Bible study. But today let's just try to get an overview and summary of these many portraits of the church).

We'll do this by speaking of the church as a community. In the New Testament, the church is not a *building*, but *people*. The Greek word for church is "ekklesia". It means a group of people *called out* and *called together for a specific purpose*.

Biblical faith is never an individual, private, isolated thing! You don't have a relationship with God aside from being a part of a faith community, a covenant community. One of the worst things to happen for Hebrews was to be banned from this covenant community. They had a term for it: it was to be "outside the camp". We Americans often have a problem with this because of the rugged individualism that's ingrained in our culture. It's reflected in the common statement that "I can be a good Christian without going to church."

The Apostle Paul powerfully trashes this false notion that you can be a follower of Jesus without being part of the Church. Hear what he says: "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason stop being part of the body...the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'" (1 Corinthians 12:12-16, 21).

Imagine having a part of your body separated from the rest of your body. "Gee, I'm missing a finger. I wonder if it dropped off at Walmart when I was there!" "Where did my big toe get to?"

It was attached when I got dressed this morning!" "Oh my goodness! My left ear is missing. I'm sure I had it when I came into the church building! Anybody here notice an ear floating around. If you see it, it's *mine*!" This is grotesque! Paul says Jesus followers are part of the body of Christ, and every part of the body is needed. And those saying, "I don't need the Church to be a Christian" are like a person's head saying to the rest of the body, "I don't need you!"

The life of faith is a "we" thing, not a "me" thing! So let's use the imagery of a *community* as we look at what the church is meant to be. **First, the Church is a community of faith! (A believing community).** The Church is made up of those who confess Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. To confess Jesus as "Savior" means we've turned from our sins (that's repentance) and put our trust in Jesus to save us from our sins! To confess Jesus as "Lord" means that we've begun a journey to try to make Jesus the center of our life, and strive to obey Him and serve Him in everything we do.

We use these terms "Savior" and "Lord" so often in the church that they can easily lose their meaning and power. But if Jesus has saved us, and we are striving to make Him Lord every day, it will radically change our life!

Are there people in congregations who really haven't begun that Christian journey? Absolutely! To be blunt, there are people in our churches who aren't yet saved. Just having our name on a church roll doesn't make us a true follower of Jesus. But when we commit our life to Christ, trust Him to save us, and seek to make Him the center and Master of our life, we become part of the Body of Christ, the Church.

At Caesarea Philippi Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do people say I am?" Then He said to them, "Who do *you* say I am?" Remember Peter's response: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus says, "On this rock – on your confession of Me – I'm going to build my church!" The Church is not just a human organization, nor just a social institution, but a community of believers who have put their faith in Jesus – that He truly is the Christ, the Son of the living God!

The Church is also a sharing community. It's life together. The first Christians had a special word to describe this. It's the Greek word "koinonia". This is a Greek word rich in meaning, but very hard to translate into English. It's most often translated "fellowship". But the word "fellowship" has kind of gotten a watered down meaning. We talk about having fellowship at church, but often it's little more than shallow socializing, casual chit-chat.

But "koinonia" is so much deeper. It's an intimate sharing of our lives with our sisters and brothers in the Lord. It's praying together, studying and learning together, being honest and vulnerable and sharing our struggles with each other, taking communion together. We get a picture of this in Acts 2:42: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and prayers." Notice, they "devoted" themselves to *studying* together ("the apostles' teaching), to *sharing a meal* with each other ("breaking of bread" - communion in the early church included eating a meal together), *praying* together (they

devoted themselves to "prayers"). God intended His Church to be a safe place where we can be accepted and loved as we are, where we can encourage and help each other to be more like Jesus. Our slogan at Community UMC is that we are "a place to believe, to belong, and to be loved." If that happens that is certainly consistent with what God intends His Church to be about!

Then too, the Church is a worshiping community. We human beings have always worshiped something – even if it's a diminished or false god. All religions worship some kind of a god. But for the Hebrews of the Old Testament, and Christians of the New Testament, we worship Yahweh or Jehovah, the God who not only created us but *redeemed* us. God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt and made them His people. God sent His Son Jesus to die for our sins, and claimed us as His daughters and sons.

In worship together, we hear once again the Story of what God has done for us! We are challenged once again to acknowledge God's claim on our life, and respond by loving and obeying Him! Casual, half-committed Christians may look on worship as an option – come to worship if they feel like it or if its convenient. But in *Biblical faith*, worship is central to the life of God's people. Giving God the glory due His name! The Book of Acts, again, gives us a peek into what those first Christians in the early century church did: "Every day they continued to meet in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, *praising God* and enjoying the favor of all the people" (Acts 2:46-47a). *The Church is a worshiping community!*

Finally, the Church is a witnessing community. In 1 Peter, chapter two, the Church is described in words that were first used to speak of Israel: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

Our mission, our task, is to proclaim the mighty acts of God, who called us out of darkness into the marvelous light of Jesus Christ! We are to be the light of the world, Jesus said. One of the last things He said to His followers before being taken back to heaven was, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). He said, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15). *The Church never exists just for itself!* Never just so we can gather to enjoy one another's company! It's not all about us; it's about a world in need! One theologian said "The church exists for mission as fire does for burning."

As in the early church described in the New Testament, this witness involves telling lost people the story of how Jesus came to forgive them and give them new life. It involves reaching out in compassion to the poor and needy. It includes standing with the ancient prophets in identifying and opposing the evil and injustices of our day.

So what is the church? What is the church for? The church is a community: a *believing* community, a *sharing* community, a *worshiping* community, a *witnessing* community. And everything we do in the church and as the church should align with at least one of those four

essential purposes.

So, how are we doing here at Community UMC, or your church? How much does this describe us?

How are we doing in being a believing community? Are we truly a community of fervent believers? What are we doing to help one another have a solid, life-transforming faith in Jesus? To proclaim the message of salvation to those who still may be lost within our congregation? To challenge nominal church members to become dedicated followers of Jesus? I love the mission statement of the Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, where Adam Hamilton is pastor: "To build a Christian community where non-religious and nominally religious people are becoming deeply committed Christians."

How about being a sharing community? What kind of opportunities can we offer to pray together, to learn together on Sunday mornings and weekday Bible studies? What about the learning and sharing that can take place in small groups? And how many of us even want to grow in our faith and learn more about God's Word? How can we be that safe place where we can open up and talk about our struggles in life (we all have them)? What opportunities can we offer as a church for us to truly care for each other and be there for one another?

What kind of a worshiping community are we? Is the story of God faithfully told each Sunday morning in a way that challenges us to say, "Here I am, God, I'm yours!" "Here I am, Lord, send me and use me!" Does our worship touch the mind and heart in such a way that we feel the presence of God, and are moved to praise the God who loves us and redeemed us?

How much of a witnessing community are we? We can bear witness of our Lord Jesus in many ways. *In personal ways:* Sharing our faith with someone (several embarrassing questions for a lot of Christians are: When's the last time you talked with someone outside of church about the Lord, and, Have you ever led someone to new life in Christ? We witness by loving and caring (being there for people in need, praying for them, encouraging them). By going to bat for someone who's been put down or short-chained. By serving in the community (service clubs, being a fireman or being part of the fire company auxiliary, etc.).

Then there is the collective witness of the congregation: Giving to mission work (like Kenya). Doing online services and using social media to get the message of Christ out. Supporting a local food bank or hosting a used clothing store in the church. Offering groups and seminars for parents, those going through a divorce or grief. Reaching out beyond ourselves to address the physical, emotional, spiritual needs of those beyond our doors.

When the Church really *is* the Church, it will be a believing community, a sharing community, a worshiping community, and a witnessing community!

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Community United Methodist Church
August 7, 2022

