

Who Needs Church?

Church: Who Needs It?

Judging by the choices that millions of Americans make every Sunday, there are plenty who don't see any need for church. I recall one person I met years ago telling me, "I can worship God on the golf course. That's my church." There are plenty of others like that, maybe people you know who say, "I'm spiritual, I believe in God, but I'm not religious and don't need church, or anyone telling me what to believe." Some say, "I believe in my own way, and organized religion doesn't help. Besides, churches are full of hypocrites and just want your money." Other people say, "I like Jesus, but I don't care for the church." Still others say "What's so special about Jesus? There's plenty of religions to choose from."

In my childhood we looked forward to the color comic strips in the Sunday newspaper. One of my favorites was a Western comic strip created by Stan Lynde in 1958, called Rick O'Shay." The stories are set in the Western town of Conniption where Rick O'Shay is the deputy sheriff. His best friend is gunslinger "Hipshot Percussion." Hipshot is frequently referred to as an "outlaw." I can still picture the image where he is shown alone, on horseback, looking out onto a breath-taking, beautiful mountain vista, and he says "Hello Boss." That's Hipshot's religion (and perhaps the comic strip author's as well). His God is seen in the beauty of nature and of course he never attends church. Who needs church, right? **Church doesn't appear relevant, even to some who identify as Christian** or claim church membership.

There are plenty of critics of the church and history will give you plenty of ammunition to fire at the church. So why bother with church? Yet, many who share no warmth toward the Church or Christians, will acknowledge that it's a hell of a world out there. People are hurting and people are lonely.

People Need Community

You know why prisons use solitary confinement as punishment? Because it hurts. We were designed for community and relationships. **People** – even introverts - **have a yearning for community**, or more truthfully, **a dislike of isolation**. That's why people join or create communities. If old ones seem unsatisfactory, then people find or create new ones. People want to belong. It's too boring or too frightening to be alone all the time.

At the same time, there is a desire in the hearts of people for something better ... better than what they themselves have or are ... a better world than the one they live in ... better people than they know or know about ... better family, or community than they presently live in ...

People also yearn for meaning in their lives. Many find it in a cause ... a cause aimed at self-improvement or improving the world. Meaning is found in giving yourself to something greater than yourself and a belief that you're helping others in the process. When you join a cause, you are no longer alone and you share a goal (and maybe a secret) with others. You belong.

As people eagerly search for community and belonging (isn't social media a part of that search?), it makes sense to talk about the Christian community. (This doesn't mean that peoples' need for community will bring them flocking to our churches.) It is clear that from the very beginning Christian faith meant a community of believers, rather than the faith of scattered individuals. In St. Paul's letters, where the phrase "in Christ" appears, he's not talking about some kind of private mysticism. To be "in Christ" is to be "in the Church." There really is no such thing as solitary Christianity. Sure, Christians may at times find themselves alone, but the essence and practice of Christianity is in community. Anyone who takes Christianity seriously must take the Church seriously. I've said in earlier messages that God Himself is community: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We were made in God's image and made for community. **Being in Christian community, then, is integral to God's work.**

As I speak of Church today, and in coming weeks, most of the time I am using "Church" with a capital "C" – meaning the Church established by Christ, the worldwide Church through the ages. Of course, most of us know Church through a local congregation – like this one (and sometimes that's the problem). Christ's worldwide Church through the ages fulfills His call, and that call is passed on and extended through the local church.

Called Out

Church doesn't exist primarily because of our needs. It exists primarily because of God's purposes, and secondarily because of the need of all people. The word "church" is the English translation of the Greek word *ἐκκλησία*, used in the Bible to describe the community of Christ's disciples. That Greek word is made from two other Greek words: *ek*, meaning "out of" and the verb *kaleo*, meaning "to call." *Ἐκκλησία* then, is the assembly of those called out of the world by God, together as followers of Jesus Christ. So the church is a "called-out assembly of believers."

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, Ephesians 1:13.

Why did God choose to continue the message and ministry of Jesus through the Church? Now I've often wondered why Christ chose to extend His kingdom through such a weak, and often faithless means... that is, through a gathering of humans, who are so prone to selfish and sinful behavior, and riven with dissension and strife. The Church is full of fallible individuals – you know, all those hypocrites, who talk about God but sure don't act like Him. Why did He do that? ... I think the answer is that it is part of His redemption plan.

One of the reasons there are curmudgeons and miscreants in the Church, who seem to stay on forever, is that so often the local congregation is inclined to practice grace and forgiveness, and so indulges such behavior. That's not a good thing – it's like enabling bad behavior. A lot of times we don't know how to tell one another the truth in a graceful manner, so we err on the side of grace. Perhaps we think of the phrase from St. Peter's letter, ***The Lord is ... patient ... not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance, 2 Peter 3:9.*** Erring on the side of grace at least shows a connection to the God of all grace.

The church is full of hypocrites because it gathers imperfect people seeking something greater than themselves. You don't have to be perfect to get into Church. But you should be willing to allow Jesus to be your Savior and your Lord. Last week I said, "He takes our brokenness, and if we let Him, He teaches us and heals us and restores us, and then uses us to bring His grace into the lives of others who are broken." In that sense, the Church is filled with "wounded healers" who are vessels of Christ's grace to others, even as they themselves are in need of His healing.

"The Church is both holy and sinful. This is the fundamental root of the whole problem of the Church, that it is a union of sinful souls with the Holy God," Lesslie Newbigin, Anglican Bishop. Yet Christ chose it to be this way ... He calls sinful people to come to Him to be cleansed and to go for Him to be His witnesses.

Called To A Person

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "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 that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it, Matthew 16:15-18.

The Church has its foundation in this confession of faith in Jesus, the Son of the living God. **We are called to a person**, not to a set of philosophical ideas, but **to Jesus Christ who is God with us**. And we, who were not with Him when He walked this earth as a man, find Him in the testimony of those who did. ***Because you have seen me you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed, John 20:29.*** **Through the Scriptures the Church has known Him and how to follow Him** through the ages, around the globe, and across national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. Christ calls people to Himself and in Him they become one people.

In our UMC hymnal under "The Baptismal Covenant III" it says this: "The church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time, for the conduct of worship and the due administration of God's Word and Sacraments, the maintenance of Christian fellowship and discipline, the edification of believers, and the conversion of the world. All, of every age and station stand in the need of the means of grace which it [the church] alone supplies." Now that last sentence sounds like a very audacious if not arrogant thing to say - "... the means of grace which it [the church] alone supplies." Really?

Well, yes. The Church carries the most precious of things: the good news (gospel) of God's great grace to us in Jesus Christ, and no other organization, religion, or association on earth does this. The Church is the only organization on earth that carries the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. So church isn't just about "what's in it for me?" **Church is also tasked with proclaiming God's truth - principally Jesus, Son of the Living God.** He told them, This is what is written: *The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things...* Luke 24:46-49. [He also said, *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...* Matt. 28:19 and, *...Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation...* Mark 16:15]

Now the truth about Jesus is often bad news before it is good news. That's because the gospel doesn't always make people feel better just as they are. It may make them feel worse when they realize they aren't as good as they thought they were. Sin is the problem. The gospel carries the message that God is good, yes, and that God loves you and forgives you of all your misdeeds. But He forgives you so that you can quit doing the bad stuff. You see, the gospel is really about starting again, being changed, and a number of other inconvenient things, all of which demand admitting that you're not so great the way you are. That's the real reason people are often offended by the Church, or avoid Church – because its message is bound to offend as well as to heal. Poet T. S. Eliot said it in his poem, "The Rock" – "Why should men love the Church? Why should they love her laws? She tells them of Life and Death, and of all that they would forget. She is tender where they would be hard, and hard where they like to be soft. She tells them of Evil and Sin, and other unpleasant facts."

An authentic encounter with Jesus brings us to our knees with the truth about ourselves, and humanity. The truth that we are awash in sin. And healing comes when we fess up to our sin and turn it over to Jesus. That is the message the Church is given to share. That is the message the Church must never lose. We must not be ...ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes... Romans 1:16.

"I can relate to God in the beauty of nature, I don't need church..." Sure you can. But when you face the malevolence of nature, what then do you say about God? You won't see a burning bush nor hear the voice of God. "I can have a relationship with God without church..." Sure you can, it'll be with the god of your own making, but not the God to whom one says, "Thy will be done on earth as in heaven." The Church is God's chosen vessel to communicate His truth and purpose to us.

A Special Community

The Church is a community in a very special sense. It's not just a voluntary gathering of people who think it's a good idea to get together. It's not a group of activists gathered around a cause, bent on reshaping society (although authentic Christianity will indeed shape a society); it's not a social service agency (although the Church helps those in need materially and spiritually); it's not a stage for preachers to exhibit their eloquence nor musicians and to showcase their talents; neither is it a rally for community organizers, self-help devotees, or celebrity speakers. **The authentic Christian Church is a community created by God and dependent upon Him for its very life and energy.** The head of the Church is not a pope, nor a bishop or District Superintendent, or a pastor, or even the congregation, or it's Church Council. Christ alone is the Head of the Church. **And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, Ephesians 1:22.**

Those who love the Church, do so despite all its failures and foibles. They love it because the Church has power in their lives. Too many overlook the relevance of the Church because they are looking for instant solutions to their problems or immediate relief from uncomfortable feelings. They miss the big things of life that Church addresses ... so as to avoid many of those problems.

The Church has been a community of grace, a place where men and women have come to know God's love, and have been given power to love others. *For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us, 2 Cor. 4:5-7.*

The Church has been the place where the barriers of race, nation and color have been overcome. **The Church has been the place where people have discovered that "all are one in Christ Jesus" and that in Him "there is no East or West."**

The Church has been the place where men and women have experienced what it is to be forgiven, and not only that, have learned what it is to forgive. Have you learned that? Where forgiveness is real, no limits can be placed upon the creative power that will be unleashed.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the corner stone, Eph. 2:19-20.