

Phil. 2:1-6; Ephesians 4:1-16

John 17:20-24

May 22, 2022

**Community or Disunity?
Being One Together**

Several weeks ago, I mentioned that critics remind us that the Church is full of hypocrites, and has done many awful things over the years. True. But many of those critics aren't too happy about the rest of the world either. Among those who share no warmth toward the Church or Christians, there are those who will acknowledge that it's a hell of a world out there. People are hurting, people are lonely, people are wandering through life without purpose or direction.

Church has been and still can be a place where people find genuine community and real purpose for living. The Church is the only entity that carries the good news that God has entered this hellish world, in person, and offered people forgiveness and healing for their brokenness and sin – which causes all the hellish conditions known to humanity. God has done this through Jesus Christ and through Him we find new, hopeful life and true direction for living. Even when the confusion and the acrimony of society swirl around us, even when our personal or family lives seem a mess, we can count on the fact that God is still in control and that He cares for us, for He has come to us in the person of Jesus. He is the treasure the Church carries.

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.

Last week we noted that the Church is not the buildings or a denomination. BTW I heard someone once say that their church welcomes all denominations... but mainly they prefer 50s and 100s. The Church is (and ought to be) the Body of Christ, created by the Good News of what Jesus has done in our lives, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Church is His body, not a business. The Church is an organism, not just an organization. As St. Peter said, *... you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light, 1 Peter 2:9*

The worldwide Church of Jesus Christ is eternal. But local churches are not. Local churches have their life cycle. Yet, they never retire ... they don't save up their resources for that wonderful retirement day. Local churches (like ours) either continue to serve Christ or they die and disappear. Sometimes demographic changes drive the demise of a local church. But far too often the church loses its eternal perspective and forgets its only real purpose: to declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His wonderful light, and be willing to actually do that.

At First Church it would be very easy for us to passively sit by, lamenting that things aren't as they once were, while missing opportunities to share live-saving faith in Jesus. Do you believe FUMC has outlived its purpose or usefulness to our Lord.? Jesus said, *I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear*

much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing, John 15:5. As we enter into a new day for this congregation, we better make sure we stay connected to Him. Now, anytime you talk about a new thing in church there is potential for division. So let me address that today.

The Great Scandal

Scripture reminds us to, *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace, Eph. 4:3. Jesus prayed that ...all of them may be one, John 17:21. And yet, the great scandal of the Church is its many fractured, and argumentative divisions, and it's less than peaceful existence. You read church histories and discover just how appalling that division has been over two millennia. The Bible says, *there is one body and one Spirit...* Eph. 4:4. So it is a great scandal, when we are not one!*

Did you hear about the Christian stranded on a desert island by himself for many years? He is rescued one day, and the rescuers are confused to see that he has built two churches. They ask him why. Pointing to one of them, he says, "Well, that's the church that I go to. And that's the one I don't go to."

The Apostles' Creed, a widely recognized statement of faith of Christians, says, "I believe in the holy catholic church." Many in church stumble over the "c" word. Why would any Protestant say we believe in the "catholic" church? Simply put the word "catholic" – with a small "c"- means "universal." Catholic – with a capital "C" – means Roman Catholic Church, which recognizes the bishop of Rome as their leader. We can say "I believe in the holy catholic church," or we can substitute the word "universal" and mean the same thing.

But there is a greater challenge in this phrase of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the holy catholic church." Up until this point, everything in the Creed has been either invisible or distantly historical. When the Creed says "God the Father Almighty," we understand that we cannot see God. He is hidden from our eyes. The same goes for the Holy Spirit. When we speak of Jesus Christ, we proclaim our belief in a Person who last walked on the earth 20 centuries ago. But then the Creed leads us to confess our faith in ... the church. Forget the "holy catholic" part for a moment. Just confessing, "I believe in the church" plunges us deep into the nitty-gritty of life in the 21st century. We're affirming faith in an institution that too often appears faithless itself. The historical record is checkered. Critics point out that wars took place and men killed each other in the name of Jesus Christ. Many say "I like Jesus, but I don't care for the church." "I believe in God, but I don't believe in the church." True, the church has a checkered history. Cardinal Francis George, (onetime Roman Catholic Archbishop of Chicago) commented that sometimes the church has looked more like a mob than a holy family of God. The news pounces on stories of respected Christian leaders falling prey to immorality and greed; and no matter which denomination they represent, all Christians are tarnished.

So how can we say we believe in the Church? There are two simple answers. First, "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. The Church is peopled with those who are "being saved;" redeemed yet still struggling to put off the old sinful nature for the new nature of our

Savior. The Book of Acts records how Paul and Barnabas, early Christian missionaries, *... had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company, Acts 15:39.* [Their disagreement was over whether to take John Mark with them on their next missionary journey. Ultimately God used both to spread the gospel and they were reconciled.] The New Testament does not gloss over differences and disagreements among the followers of Jesus. [John Wesley and George Whitfield differences and reconciliation.]

The second answer is, “The power of hell is strongest where the odor of sanctity fills the air” (Saint Hereticus). There is an evil one who wages war against God and His people, and will continue until the end of time. Read the book of Revelation... you know, the last book of the Bible. If Satan tempted and battled Jesus, there is no reason to think he won’t tempt and battle Jesus’ followers.

How then should we view the oneness of the Church in light of the enormous divisions in Christendom?

A. The Church Has A Common Belief.

The best way to understand the oneness of the church is that, despite our differences, we still have a great deal in common. We share a common faith in the doctrine of the Trinity – we know God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe in the Virgin Birth, in the death of Christ as atonement for our sins, and in his resurrection from the dead. We believe the Bible is the word of God and our authority for all matters spiritual and moral. We hold fast to these essentials of the faith along with all Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox Christians. The Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed are summaries of this common faith. We Methodists join other Christians in the faith proclaimed in these creeds.

We don’t deny or downplay differences that exist between Protestants, evangelicals, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox on a variety of issues. It is not a compromise to note the areas of common faith even while upholding our distinctive doctrines. We should be glad when we find others who share our faith, handed down to us from the New Testament.

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God’s curse! Galatians 1:8.

B. The Church Has One Foundation.

Before we go forward, we need to be perfectly clear about this. There is only one church because we have one Lord—not two. No matter what we may think about the incredible religious confusion of our day—that confusion does not come from God. Theologian J.C. Ryle said, “Unity without the gospel is a worthless unity; it is the very unity of hell.” The Church is one because Christ is one.

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ, 1 Cor. 3:11. (See also Eph. 2:20). Here’s a word for us: when we, you or I, take our eyes off of Jesus we invite division into our ranks. British statesmen Edmund Burke: “Whatever disunites people from God, also disunites people from one another.”

C. The Church Is Still One.

The Church has always been one. When Jesus said, “I will build my church,” he used the singular, not the plural—“churches.” Jesus promised to build one church and one church only. There is only one true εκκλησια—the assembly of those who have been called out of the world to follow Christ. The oneness of the church is the basis for true Christian unity. Or to say it negatively, without that oneness, unity would be impossible. Listen to this from Paul as he explains the basis of our unity in Christ by using the word “one” seven times in Ephesians 4:4-6. *There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.* He said “one” seven times. That’s what we’re singing about when we sing Samuel Stone’s famous hymn:

The Church’s One Foundation Is Jesus Christ her Lord ... Elect from every nation, Yet one o’er all the earth; Her charter of salvation, One Lord, one faith, one birth...

When Jesus prayed in John 17:21 that *...all of them may be one*, He was asking for believers to demonstrate on the earth the perfect unity that exists in heaven between the Father and the Son. “Believers are never told to become one; we already are one and are expected to act like it,” Joni Eareckson Tada. We don’t “create” unity. God has already done that in Christ. We are to maintain and keep the unity God has already created among all true believers. Admittedly, this is a doctrine that is easier said than done.

D. Church Includes Fallible People

Maybe you remember folding your hands together, with your fingers interlaced downward and saying, “Here is the church, here is the steeple. Open the door and see all the people.” The problem and the challenge and the blessing and the hope of the church is... “all the people.” People! If we didn’t have to deal with people, church would be a breeze. Inside every church you find ... difficult people, contentious people, mean-spirited people, greedy people, unreasonable people, unkind people, thoughtless people, critical people, angry people, cantankerous people.

I imagine several people are just now saying, “Amen.” If you doubt that these people exist in the church just take a good look ... in the mirror. We’re all sinners in need of God’s grace. If we knew the naked truth about every other person in the church, and they knew the naked truth about us, we’d all run screaming from this place.

In 1789 John Wesley (the leader of Methodism) preached on the problem of the embarrassing gulf between Christianity’s promise and its actual performance (“Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity”). The gap is attributable to the people who call themselves Christian. Another church leader said it this way:

To live up above with the saints that we love, that will be glory.

But to live down below with the saints that we know, that’s another story.

But if people are the problem, they are also the hope of the church. Take away the people and there would be no church. There are still many sincere followers of Christ who exhibit love, joy, peace, patience kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. I have known church members who had the wisdom of Solomon, the strength of Samson, and the patience of Job. So, the Apostles Creed challenges us to set aside our misconceptions and our frustrations and say, “I truly do

believe in the church.” We need to affirm that the church exists because of God and despite fallible human members, is still worth believing in because God is involved. We cannot let the foolish acts of others keep us from saying what Christians have said across the centuries: “I believe in the church.”

Heart to Heart

Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! Psalm 133:1. And how unpleasant when that isn't the case. When we observe the religious confusion and political strife in America we wonder if it means cultural anarchy. Let's remember that there is no confusion in Christ. Perhaps pressure from the secular world – maybe even discrimination and persecution - will push us to return to being “Christians first” and everything else second. This would include subordinating our political preferences to the Lordship of Jesus.

The important thing to remember is what unites us all, what Christians have always agreed on and believed together. Jesus said, *I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.* The church is one because Jesus Christ and His atoning grace is the foundation.

Our location is central to the population Christ wants to reach. He is central to the Church, and so, He must be central to all our endeavors. Let us remain steadfastly centered on Christ right here in the center of Bakersfield.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism ... Eph. 4:4-5.