

The Heart of Christ – the message of the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17)

“...having loved His own who were in the world, He love them to the end”(John 13:1.)

The Praying Savior – John 17

The Lessons from Jesus’ Prayer – John 17:1-26

Seven Characteristics of the Church (John 17:13-26)

John 17:13-19

13 But now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that they may have My joy made full in themselves. 14 I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. 15 I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. 17 Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. 18 As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. 19 For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth.

Many have heard me say what I am about to say again from this pulpit – the Church has an identity crisis. The modern evangelical church does not really know who she is and what her purpose is according to the Word of God. The other day while I was driving through one of our local towns, I passed a church, seemingly an evangelical church. And what caught my attention was not its name, or its marquee or even its sanctuary. What caught my attention was this huge building with tall glass windows that housed a children’s play area complete with one of those play structures like you find in McDonald’s, only about three times as big. Outside the building was an invitation to have the children come and be a part of this experience. Now don’t get me wrong. I am not against having appropriate areas and equipment for children, but the size and extravagance of this structure, the amount of money and resources needed not simply to build it, which I am sure was quite costly, but also the resources needed to simply maintain it as I would hate to see the heating and cooling bill alone for that structure was overwhelming. And I asked a question of myself and my family as we drove by it, “At what point in church history was it deemed by the church as appropriate and necessary to spend such exorbitant amounts of money and to use such tremendous amounts of resources simply to have a place for children to play? When in church history was the focus and purpose of the church to cater to children, even in the name of outreach?

Now, I am not picking on children’s ministries alone. For the church has found a number of ways to lose her identity. If you asked 100 church-goers the question, “What is the Church?” I have no doubt that we would have at least 30 or more answers. And the sad thing is, that many of the answers would not be based upon what God says is the Church, but rather on what those individuals want or perceive in their own minds as the purpose of the Church.

Let me ask you, if you were pressed to give an answer to the question, “What is the Church?” how would you answer? Is the church simply any gathering of people? Is the church a gathering of people who want to study about God or religion? Is the church a support group, designed to help people through various difficulties in life? Is the church a headquarters where social and political activism might begin? Is the church a place of specialized programs for the young and old, the singles and married, the joyous and despondent? I pose such questions because too often this is what the church is being reduced to and while some of these things might find a place in a true church, these do not present the definition, at least the Biblical definition of what is the church?

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So, before looking at the biblical definition of the church, let me tell you why we need to look at this question at all as well as how it relates to our Lord's High Priestly Prayer and specifically verses 13-26. The reason why this is so important and imperative is that we are inundated today with “churches” that are not really churches at all. One of the subtle attacks of the enemy is to confuse and confound the “Christian” community with what their purpose is to the point of watering down and marginalizing the true message and intent of the Church.

The way this all will relate to the final half of our Lord's prayer and why I am going to such great lengths to set this up is that in these final words, we can identify at least seven characteristics of the church, specifically of the people of God. In other words, in answering the question, what is the church? We can look to what Jesus prayed to the Father and indicated to His disciples as the characteristics or marks of those who belong to Him. So let me give you these seven characteristics that you might note and consider them as we will spend the next few weeks defining them and prayerfully challenging ourselves to see these things in our own congregation. I submit to you that Jesus identified the church as a people who are characterized by....

1. Joy (17:13)
2. Holiness (17:14-16)
3. Truth (17:17-19)
4. Mission (17:17-19)
5. Unity (17:20-23)
6. Hope (17:24)
7. Love (17:25-26)
- 8.

These are the characteristics Jesus offers up to the Father. These are the characteristics that Jesus prays for His disciples; that He prays for you and for me to exhibit in the context of church. As you look at that list of traits, what do you notice? You ought to notice that each of these are simply manifestations of the character of Christ; for Jesus is joy, Jesus is holy, Jesus is truth, Jesus has a mission, Jesus is unified with the Father, Jesus is hope, Jesus is love. And so, if I might offer you a concise definition and answer for what is the church, I would say that the church is *a collective community of believers committed to manifesting (communicating) the character of Christ*. Let's break this down...

A collective community of believers

What comes to your mind when you hear the word “collective”? It is a collection, a gathering together of something. I have a coin collection. Over the years I have gathered together a collective of coins. I don't keep every coin, but only those that I have chosen to make a part of my collection. The church is a collective – a called out and chosen group of people. And this collective is a “community” – community coming from the word “common” – we hold something in common – our relationship to one another is build upon a common reality. That reality being that the Father has chosen us to be part of His collective, that the Son redeemed us, purchased us with His blood so that we might belong to God and that the Holy Spirit indwells and

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seals us – God in us – enabling us to know, to love and to obey God. We see this truth of being a collective community summarized so well in 1 Peter 1:1-2 -

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood:

The church is a collective community of believers – of those who believe, who know, who trust that God has saved them from their condition in sin; and all three members of the Godhead, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have their role in our salvation – this is what we believe, this is what makes us a community; this is what collection of people we belong to.

Committed to manifesting the character of Christ

This collective community has a purpose and in one sense a singular purpose. We are committed, we are determined, we are resolute in wanting to manifest; to make known, to reveal, to show forth the character of Jesus Christ; those truths about Jesus that show Him to be unique, to be special. Those traits that reveal Him to be Lord, to be God in the flesh, to be the one and only Savior. In this sense, the church is an extension of the ministry of Jesus. Why did Jesus Christ come? I know that we are tempted to say, “to die for our sins, for Jesus came to save His people from their sins.” This is true, but we are told more than this. In John 1:14 we are told that the “Word” – this One who was both with God and was God according to John 1:1, became flesh – He became man and dwelt with men. Why? He came to reveal the glory of God and specifically, according to John 1:18, to make the Father known; Beloved, God became man to show men, to reveal to men who God is and what God requires of men.

And consider this – to whom did Jesus reveal or make God known? In a general sense, all of the first century community who came into contact with Him. But specifically, Jesus revealed the essential nature and purpose of God to His disciples, to His followers. Why did He do this? Because after His death, resurrection and ascension in to heaven, He wanted to use these men to communicate the truths about Himself as God and what God has done to others. Remember what Jesus Himself prayed in John 17:3 –

This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

We have been given the revelation of who God is, and what God requires, and what God has done for sinners who believe and repent and trust in the Son as their Savior and Lord. Where did we get this revelation? We got it from men and women who were taught it by faithful preachers and teachers of the Word. And if we could trace it all the way back we would find that this revelation was given by the apostles after it was first given to them by the Lord Jesus Christ. As Hebrews 2:3 reminds us...

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how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard (the apostles)...

And again, look at what Jesus said in John 17:6 concerning this, **“I have manifested (made known) Your name (the essence and character of God) to the men You gave Me out of the world.”** Jesus taught the apostles the teaching, the doctrines of God and the salvation of man. Then Jesus commanded His apostles to “go therefore and make disciples (followers/learners of Jesus – who taught about and revealed God) of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...” What did Jesus teach and command? Jesus taught repentance of sin; of loving the Lord God with all one’s heart, mind and strength; of worshipping God alone and of the very nature of God Himself. This is the revelation of Jesus to man. And I submit to you then that the purpose of the church then is to communicate the truth of God – and Jesus is the truth. This is what the church is – a communicator of the truth. This is to be the purpose. This is to be our priority. Even as Jesus is truth and communicated the truth, the church is to be committed to the proclamation of truth.

Consider Paul’s exhortation to a young preacher named Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:15. This is perhaps one of the clearest statements as to what the church is. Here the Word of the Lord,

but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

The Church is **“the pillar and support of the truth.”** It does not get any more basic than that and yet – based upon this definition, we are surrounded by so many churches that are not really churches at all – because programs have replaced preaching; drama has replaced teaching; ministering to the perceived needs of people and culture have replaced the precepts and principles prescribed by God for His church. We are to proclaim the truth – the truth about God and therefore the truth of God as found in His Word. The great Reformer John Calvin noted:

“Let this be a firm principle: No other word is to be held as the Word of God and given place as such in the Church than what is contained first in the Law and the Prophets, then in the writings of the apostles; and the only authorized way of teaching in the church is by the prescription and standard of His Word.”

And yet how easily is the prescription of God’s Word replaced by the pragmatism of man. Rather than founding our ministries and teaching on the Word of God, we find churches abandoning what God says is to be taught and frantically searching out and applying new techniques and new forms of entertainment to attract people. The driving philosophy of the church today is not what does the Word of God say, but rather “does it work?” The philosophy of pragmatism is the thinking that one’s actions are to be judged by their practical consequences and results. A pragmatist believes that an action or practice is right if it brings good results and wrong if it doesn’t bring results. The problem is that more often than not, what seems to work

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stands in opposition with the Word of God. Beloved, spiritual truth is not to be determined by what works and what doesn't work.

There is a philosophy of ministry today called the church growth movement, a movement which believes that whatever it takes to grow the church is essentially good and legitimate. Consider what the leading and most influential spokesmen for this movement (C. Peter Wagner, professor of church growth at the Fuller School of World Mission) said of movement's inherent pragmatism: *“We ought to see clearly that the end does justify the means. What else possibly could justify the means? If the method I am using accomplishes the goal I am aiming at, it is for that reason a good method. If, on the other hand, my method is not accomplishing the goal, how can I be justified in continuing to use it?”*

And we wonder why the church is losing her identity? Consider what would have happened if Moses or the prophets of God had practiced such a philosophy. In Number 20:8-11 you remember the story of Moses being commanded by God to speak to the rock before the congregation of Israel so that it might bring forth water to the grumbling and thirsty Israelites. And Moses seemingly gets riled up and evidently wanting to make a more dramatic point than speaking to the rock as God commanded, we read beginning in verse 9 –

9 So Moses took the rod from before the Lord, just as He had commanded him; 10 and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, “Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?” 11 Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank.

Now, I don't pretend to understand exactly what Moses was thinking by not speaking to the rock but rather striking it twice, but it would appear that Moses got the results he wanted, right? So we could say that the ends, getting water, justified the means, striking the rock rather than speaking to the rock as commanded. Is this the case? No, for read with me Numbers 20:12.

But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.”

The ends did not justify the means for Moses. The standard was to be God's Word and Moses violated God's Word. Beloved, take as well the example of Jeremiah the prophet. For forty years he faithfully preached the Word of the Lord and it would appear that the whole time was without any positive response. In fact, rather than conversions and praise, Jeremiah was repeatedly threatened with death from his own countrymen if he did not stop preaching (11:19-23; 18:20-23), and from his own family and friends (12:6). He was not allowed to marry and so found himself exceedingly lonely (16:2) and found himself at times so depressed about it all that he even cursed the day he was born (20:14-18). Jeremiah was falsely accused of being a traitor to the nation (37:13-14), was beaten, thrown into prison and eventually into a muddy cistern or well and starved many days (37:15-21). If an Ethiopian Gentile had not interceded on his behalf, Jeremiah would have died there. Tradition states that Jeremiah was exiled to Egypt, where he

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eventually was stoned to death by the Jews. He had virtually no converts to show for a lifetime of ministry.

If Jeremiah had adopted the philosophy of pragmatism, I suspect he would not have been so confrontational. Perhaps he would have done better to use some comedy to make his point before King Zedekiah; or to have put on a drama to win over the hearts of the people in order to make his point. Jeremiah might have been more popular and useful with the people, but he would have without esteem and useless to God.

I share for fear that the church has lost her identity because she is more concerned with results rather than with glorifying God; with doing things that bring immediate pleasure rather than seeking the lasting joys of laborious patience that is according to God’s word. We must be committed to manifesting the character of Christ as revealed in the Word of God, not to what men want their ears tickled with. The identity of the church is to be defined by the Word, not the world. The reformers, including John Calvin would not tolerate the subjection of the Word to human authorities. The mark of the church for the reformers was the hearing and heading of the Word. As Calvin declared:

“Since the church is Christ’s Kingdom, and He reigns by His Word alone, will it not be clear to any man that those are lying words by which the Kingdom of Christ is imagined to exist apart from His scepter (that is, his most holy Word)?”

Calvin goes on to say, *“From this the face of the church comes forth and becomes visible to our eyes. Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists (cf. Eph. 2:20).*

What is the church? The church is a collective community of believers committed to manifesting the character of Christ. The church understands that the character of Christ is known through the committed and fierce proclamation of the Word of God. What the church is to look like and act like then is to be based upon what God says and as we will have the joy to consider over the next several weeks those characteristics, what we are to be looking for in ourselves and in our church are joy, holiness, truth, mission, unity, hope and love.

Let us repent where we have had a low or diminished view of God’s Word, knowing that such a low view of God’s word results in a low view of God as well as a low and diminished view of the Church of God. Let us know that Jesus came to make God known and if we know Jesus, we know God; and if we know God we are to make Him known even as Jesus made Him know – through manifesting the very character of God in His life. Let us be that collective community of believers committed to manifesting the character of Christ.

Soli Deo Gloria

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