

THE CHURCH, THE GOSPEL, AND US

INTRO: When people think of the church, what do they think of? Probably a lot of things. Many people will think of a building—often a building with a steeple. Most people probably realize that the church is not just a building. So what else might people think of when they think of the church?

Some people might think of a bureaucratic organization or, actually, organizations or denominations. This might lead one to think of competing organizations with different social and political agendas. For example, some churches today are sponsoring the so-called sanctuary movement. On the other side of the political spectrum is Westboro Baptist Church which from time to time is featured in the news for its anti-homosexual and other protests.

Some people, when they think of the church, might think of child abuse, or TV preachers, charlatans, and financial abuse. A few people might think of good things like schools, hospitals, soup kitchens, and rescue missions that churches sponsor more than anyone else.

In short, the word “church” calls to mind many and varied ideas—many of them bad; some of them good. However, all these thoughts essentially are ideas or even reactions based on personal experiences or what we have read or heard or seen on TV. They don’t answer the question, “What is the church?”

For example, if you were asked, “What do you think of doctors?” one person might say: “They are quacks who don’t listen to you; my mother died because they didn’t pay attention to the symptoms she complained about.” But others might say, “No, my doctor saved my life or my child.”

The same with lawyers. One person might say, “They are shysters who just want your money.” But another might say, “No, my lawyer saved my neck when I was falsely accused or helped me through a tough business deal.”

The fact that there are quack doctors doesn’t invalidate the medical profession. The fact that there are shyster lawyers doesn’t invalidate the legal profession. And the fact that some churches have covered up child abuse and some have been intolerant or bigoted should not tar all churches or the church as a whole with the same brush. The reason is the same for doctors, lawyers, and the church, namely, quack doctors are acting *contrary* to what real doctors should be like; shyster lawyers are acting *contrary* to what real lawyers should be like; and abusive or intolerant churches are acting *contrary* to Jesus and what the real church is to be like.

O/S: So I would like to do three things today: (1) Take an overall look at how the Bible describes the church; (2) Consider how the gospel relates to this; and (3) See what this means for us practically.

I. THE CHURCH

The Bible speaks of the church in two very different ways: it speaks of the church in local, earthly terms, and it also speaks of the church in universal, heavenly terms. What do I mean? As to the local, earthly terms, **Rev 1** speaks of **“the seven churches that are in Asia.”** **Gal 1** speaks of **“the churches of Galatia.”** **Rom 16** and other places speak of churches that meet in homes.

Because the church has this earthly component, the NT gives lots of earthly metaphors or descriptions of the church. It is called God’s building or house, his field, his harvest, his vine, and the household or family of God. I would like to look at one of those descriptions—the church is the family of God—to help us see what God wants his church to be like. We all come from earthly families, and some of us have our own families. So we all know what good (or bad) families are like. Now it’s audience participation time. The question is: What are the characteristics of a good, well-functioning earthly family? What does a good family do or look like? That is exactly what the church—including Community Church—should be like.

How are we doing at this? How is the church as a whole doing at this? OK in some ways, not so well in others. This is important because the Bible is very honest about the visible, local, earthly church.

Jesus warned of **“false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves”** (Matt 7:15). IOW, not everyone who is *in* the church is *of* the church. Or, to put it another way, not everyone who calls him- or herself a Christian really is a Christian.

This brings us to the universal, heavenly aspect of the church. Turn to **Heb 12:22-23** which really gets to the heart of this [READ]. Jesus similarly said in **Luke 10:20**, **“Rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven.”** In **Phil 3:20** Paul said, **“Our citizenship is in heaven.”** All of these verses—and there are others like them in the Bible—are telling us that, in an ultimate sense, the real church is all people from **“every tribe, tongue, people, and nation”** (as **Rev 5** puts it) whose source and citizenship is heaven.

This raises a problem—actually two problems. The first problem is that probably most people in the visible, local earthly church will claim that they are also members of the true, heavenly, universal church, even though Jesus said not all of them are. And they are the ones that are giving a bad name to Christ’s true church.

But how can anyone dispute them?

The second problem is that understanding that the true church is all those whose names are enrolled in heaven can lead to an attitude of triumphalism. You know the attitude: **“My name is written in heaven and yours is not; so I’m better than you.”** That attitude leads to judgmentalism, hypocrisy, and all the things non-Christians find so ugly and off-putting about so many Christians and about so much of the church. But that attitude itself is fundamentally unChristian because it is contrary to the gospel.

II. THE GOSPEL

What is the gospel? We can summarize the gospel like this: God is perfect: perfectly just, holy, righteous, loving, and good—we are not. There is something in all of us that is warped and crooked. British writer Francis Spufford in his interesting book entitled *Unapologetic* calls the problem we all have “the human propensity to screw things up.” He says, **“What we’re talking about here is not just our tendency to lurch and stumble and screw up by accident. . . . It’s our active inclination to break stuff, ‘stuff’ here including moods, promises, relationships we care about, and our own well-being and other people’s, as well as material objects whose high gloss positively seems to invite a big fat scratch.”**

The apostle Paul talks about this in Rom 7. He says in v. 19, **“For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very thing I do not want.”** Spufford comments on this by saying, **“Wherever the line is drawn between acceptable and unacceptable, between kind and cruel, between clean and dirty, we’re always going to be voting on both sides of it, despite ourselves. Not all of us, on every subject, all the time, of course; but all of us on some subject or other some of the time.”**

This “human propensity to screw things up” is an infinitely variable continuum of thoughts, words, and deeds which are all of the same basic nature. It is, as Spufford points out, **“what flying a plane into a skyscraper has in common with persecuting the fat kid with zits. . . . It is what murder has in common with telling a good story at a dinner party at the expense of an absent mutual friend which you know will cause pain when it gets back to them but which you tell anyway, because it’s just very, very funny.”** Our problem is that we can’t change this because it is a power—a power the Bible calls “sin”—that is deep within our hearts, and we cannot change our own hearts, no matter how hard we try.

But that means God has a problem. The Bible says that God cannot abide or live with sin. So how could he ever reconcile with us, enroll our names in heaven, take us to be with him? That is what the gospel is all about. God knows that we all have this insoluble problem, so he has done for us what we never could do for ourselves. He became a man in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus lived the life we should have lived—he was tempted in all the ways we are tempted but never sinned. That qualified him to be our representative and take upon himself our sin and pay the penalty for our sin that otherwise we would have to pay but never could. He did that on the cross. But when he rose from the dead and then ascended back to the Father, that showed that the Father accepted Christ’s sacrifice of himself for us.

IOW, the gospel—Christianity—is not about what we do at all but is about what Christ did for us. What God has done for us in the person of Jesus Christ is a pure gift given to people who didn’t earn it and who don’t deserve it. But it is a gift that, once we have it, changes us on the inside and on the outside. That is the gospel. The gospel is the key to everything. Only God knows our hearts. But the gospel is the key, as best we are able on this earth, for our being able to discern who is or is not a member of the true church—IOW, whose names are enrolled in heaven and whose are not.

PROP: Putting all this together we can say: **The church is all those whose names are enrolled in heaven who demonstrate this on earth by living lives in line with the gospel.** So what does this mean for us practically?

III. US

Let me briefly highlight two implications of what the gospel means for us as individuals and one implication for us corporately as the church.

(1) If we understand the gospel—that we can only receive what Christ has done for us by faith since it is a gift given to undeserving people—we will realize that, as it says in 1 Cor 6 and elsewhere, we do not own ourselves any more but have been bought and paid for by Christ. The practical implication of *that* is that Jesus is to be the most important person, the most important thing, in our lives. Our lives are to revolve around him. As he said in **Luke 14:26, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”** What Jesus is doing there is using a very Hebrew way of speaking to make a comparison. We know that we are not to emotionally hate our parents, our spouse, or our family—after all, Jesus also said we are to love our neighbor as ourself and even love our enemies. What he is doing in **Luke 14** is saying, **“However much you love your**

family, your spouse, and yourself, compared to how much you love me, your love for anyone and anything else should, in comparison, be as if it were hatred.”

Or, as **Rom 8:29** puts it, we are to be “conformed into the image” of Christ. That means that his values become our values, his priorities become our priorities; we start thinking like he thought, feeling like he felt, acting like he acted. This will affect what we do with our money, how we treat people, everything.

(2) If we understand the gospel, we must frankly acknowledge that, while the true church is all those whose names are enrolled in heaven, nevertheless the church is a community of screw-ups, because everyone screws up actively and passively much of the time. We will understand that we are not part of the church because of anything we have done or because of any good or merit in us whatsoever. The practical implication of this is that if we take these facts along with the gospel deep within us, then it becomes absolutely impossible to have an attitude of triumphalism or to judgmentally look down our noses at *anyone*, no matter who they are or what they have done. And the flip-side of *that* is that we will start treating *all* people—regardless of who they are or what they have done—with more kindness (sort of like we’d want them to treat us)—precisely because it has finally sunk into us that we *are* no better than they are, but we’re all in the same boat.

An example of this is found in Gal 2. Back in the book of Acts Peter had been shown a vision from God of all kinds of ritually unclean animals had been lowered down in a sheet and God had said, “**Rise, Peter, kill and eat!**” But Peter said, “**Not so, Lord, for nothing unclean has ever entered my mouth.**” Then God told him, “**Don’t you call ‘unclean’ what I call ‘clean’.**” Peter then realized that God wasn’t just talking about animals but about all kinds of people—Jews and Gentiles alike. They are all equally “clean” in the eyes of God now that the New Covenant in Christ has begun.

But in Gal 2 Peter had withdrawn from Gentiles and had stopped eating with them. As a result, the apostle Paul publicly rebuked Peter. But he didn’t say, “**Peter, you’re acting like a tribalist or a racist or going back to Judaism**” (even though Peter was doing all of those things). Instead, in **Gal 2:14** Paul said, “**You are not being straightforward about the truth of the gospel.**”

The gospel affects everything: who we eat with, who we socialize with, everything. If we truly understand the gospel, we realize that *I am* the same as everybody else. I’m *not* better than them. I have sin at the core of my being. And if my name is written in heaven, it’s *not* because of *anything* I have done at all. In fact, it is in *spite* of *everything* I have done. It is all by God’s grace based solely on what *Jesus* has done for me. And if Jesus has saved *me*, he can save *anyone*. Therefore, it is *impossible* for me to have an attitude of triumphalism and judgmentalism toward anyone. If I do, that means I do not understand the gospel.

Jesus said, “A tree is known by its fruit.” IOW, our lives are the outward, visible sign of what we really believe. Therefore, we need to take the “warning” passages of the Bible seriously. For example, **Rev 21:8** says this [READ]. What this and similar passages is telling us is that persistent, unrepentant sin disqualifies us from the kingdom because it exposes our so-called “faith” as mere lip-service. So assess your life. Make the changes we need to make to bring us in line with the gospel. As we do that, our lives will be the evidence that our names have been enrolled in heaven.

And be encouraged. Jesus said he does not leave his people on their own to do this. Instead, he comes to live inside of us in the person of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who both convicts us when we go wrong and gives us the will and the ability to change. Paul summarizes this in **Phil 2:12-13** [READ].

Notice that Paul is *not* saying to “work for your salvation.” If you have Christ, he is working in you, convicting you when you go wrong and helping you to go right. So drawn on him to bring yourself in line with the gospel.

(3) With respect to us as a corporate body, the key thing is that the church needs to disciple and equip its people. Ultimately, discipleship is the process of getting the disciple to truly *believe* the gospel so that it permeates the disciple’s heart, mind, will, and all areas of life. (BTW, a “disciple” simply means a learner who accepts the instruction given him or her and makes it the rule of his or her life.) As Tim Keller says, “**All problems, personal or social, come from a failure to apply the gospel in a radical way, a failure to get ‘in line with the truth of the gospel’.** All pathologies in the church and all its ineffectiveness come from a failure to let the gospel be expressed in a radical way. If the gospel is expounded and applied in its fullness in any church, that church will begin to look very unique. People will find in it both moral conviction yet compassion and flexibility.”

My ECLEA teaching book *The Church: Its Nature, Mission, and Purpose* talks a lot about discipleship. To be effective, discipleship has to be intentional; it is most effective in a small group context and cannot be limited to just what goes on during Sunday mornings. When I’m in East Africa, I tell the church leaders, “**If you do not have a formal discipleship program in your church, you are failing at your primary responsibility.**” I recently received evidence of how true that is and that it does not just relate to East Africa. One of my professors at Trinity sent me an email and said, “**I am going to adopt that dictum.**”

Since the gospel relates to all areas of life, I suggest that discipleship should include equipping church members in all areas of life. Among other things, discipleship should include such areas as equipping church members to know what they believe, why they believe it, and to defend their faith with others; discipleship should equip people to deal with sin in their lives and to learn how to forgive others; discipleship should equip people to learn how to build strong marriages and families; discipleship should equip people to be good stewards of their bodies and their finances, and to learn how to budget; and discipleship should equip people to be effective bearers of the Good News and to reach out to those with particular physical and spiritual needs.

Here at Community Church, we already have life groups, women's mentoring & men's programs which could be adapted to form the basis of discipleship groups. A discipleship relationship could also be initiated by you. One of the most effective formats is a triad, or group of 3. There is an excellent book, *Discipleship Essentials*, by Greg Ogden, which we have used in the past. Pastor Wade has several copies if you would like to begin a discipleship relationship with 2 other people. If discipleship is taken seriously, the church can become the light of the world that Christ created it to be.

CONCL: The church is the most important institution in the world. It is the most important institution in the world because it is the only institution Jesus Christ founded; it is the only institution of which Jesus Christ is the head; and it is the only institution which God calls his family. So let us strive in our lives individually and corporately to live up to what Christ wants us to be as Christians and as a church. Let us take the gospel deep within us and start working out the implications of the gospel in all areas of our lives. This will take time and intentional discipleship. It is a high calling. But when it happens, Christ promised, **“The gates of hell will not prevail against the church.”**