

“What is the Church?”

Romans 12:1-9

January 29th, 2017

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Let me challenge you with a question, “What is the church?” Does it really challenge you or ask you for a theological answer. What I mean is your spiritual identity. The question, “What is the church?” In other words, it really means to ask you these two questions; “What is your Christian spirituality?” and “What brings you here and worship with other people on every Sunday?” We often say that Church is not a building but people or people say that Church is family. It is indeed true, but this answer is not sufficient to explain all about church. Church has much more meanings and implications than those. I want to be clear with you that church is not merely a community for sharing Christian fellowship, establishing emotional rapport or attachment and building up relationships in this gathering. These are not essentials to church. Rather church exists with a clear purpose and for mission. And we join *this* church because we intentionally commit ourselves to carry out God’s mission through our baptismal confessions, membership vows, and joyful commitment to extend God’s reign. We build up God’s kingdom in our community and its beyond as citizens of heaven. We *church* together! We share our gifts, talents, attendance and witness our faith inviting our friends and non-believers.

John Wesley called the church, “a body of people united together in the service of God.” Pay attention to three ideas; “**a body of people**”, “**united together**” and “**in the service of God.**” First, “a body of people” means people of faith. John Wesley mentioned that the church is *personal*.¹ In other words, everyone is different and each of us has different personalities, political stance, worldviews and different stages of faith, but mysteriously we are here together as “one body of people” and “people of faith” who worship the one God. Isn’t it amazing? Truly, church is a unique community. John Wesley understood that faith was first awareness and characterized early on by repentance. And this faith is confirmed in “one baptism” as bestowing grace. And this grace cleanses original sin and opens the way to a future of faith and hope in Christ.² Indeed, Christian faith is the core and is basic to defining who we are as “the body of people.” Do you claim your Christian faith as your clear evidence being a person of God?

¹ John Wesley’s Message for Today, Steve Harper (Zondervan Corporation: Michigan, 1983) p.117

² Ibid

Let me tell you a little more about faith. A German Philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche (October 15, 1844- August 25, 1900) was one of the brilliant minds of modern times. He said, “The twentieth century will be a time in which”-he coined the phrase-“God is dead.” Charles Colson, a great Christian leader helped us understand what Nietzsche meant. Nietzsche could look up and see the stars and the planets and the galaxies all in perfect harmony and order and he knew that life was no accident; he knew that there was a force beyond man so not that there wouldn’t be a God. Charles argues that Nietzsche was too smart for that. What Nietzsche said is that man, because of his own desire for power, his own will, will kill God. He will kill him by living his life as if God does not exist.³

Charles Colson continues to share his great insights in his article, “This Is the Church’s Hour”. He argues that we human beings are self-centered beings without God. He writes:

Three hundred years ago, Blaise Pascal, a great philosopher and theologian once said that when man is separated from God, man either seeks to be God himself or he seeks the gratification of his senses... Robert Bellah, entitled *Habits of the Heart*, in which tried to figure out what’s happening in American life. He surveyed hundreds and hundreds of people in depth, and decided that there are two overriding life goals that Americans have. One is personal success; and the other, vivid personal feelings. And Bellah asked people what they expected to get out of the institutions of life. He asked them what they expected to get out of marriage, and people answered, personal development. No wonder marriages are in trouble. He asked them what they expected to get out of work, and they said, personal advancement. He asked them what they expected to get out of church, and they said, personal fulfillment. Find that for me in the Bible. Find where God says that if you come to church you’re going to get personal fulfillment. Precisely the opposite. You’re going to pour yourself out as a living witness of God’s work among men and women. Everything today is so self-centered.⁴

John Wesley’s first awareness exactly points out our nature of self-centeredness in both our will and action. The good news is that Jesus came and died on that cross to resolve *our fundamental dilemma*, and we name this *original sin*. We, “a body of people of faith”, are people who give to and

³ *Best Sermons*, edited by James W. Cox, (Harper & Row: 1989) p.5-6

⁴ *Ibid.*

surrender our lives to Christ. And we believe that God will renew our hearts to be a holy and righteous people.

Second, “United Together” means exactly what church means. The Church really means, “All Together Now”. John Wesley believed that authentic Christian experience had to be nurtured in community. He cared little for solitary religion.⁵ Church is a faith community built upon the collection of different spiritual gifts, talents, devotions and committed sharing in the relationships with God. In today’s Scripture reading, Paul gives us an interesting metaphor using the parts of our body. Feet, ears, hands and eyes are different parts. Each seems to be differently made and originally designed for different roles like as we are, but we need to see a bigger picture of the whole body. If the foot would say, because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body, but this would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body. This wouldn’t make sense to the body. As it is, there are many members, yet one body. Paul challenges us in this way. If all were a single member, where would the body be? On the contrary, the members of the body seem to be weak and individually separable. But our parts of the body will be authentically functioning and activating to accomplish the goal when they serve for the whole body’s purpose and movement.

Just as the body is one and has many members, there are many different interests, spiritual focuses, and diverse perspectives in our church ministries. It is natural and good, because each of us is different, special and unique. Apostle Paul was keenly aware of his church’s situation. There was some confusion with different voices and opinions inside the church in Apostle Paul’s time. But this would apply to our contemporary church context, too. He gave us spiritual advice and encouragement that church is the body of Christ and individuals are members. And we are called to be united together for the same purpose, ***God’s mission***. Then what is God’s mission?

Lastly, “In the service of God” means our mission for God’s ministries in solidarity. We are called together now as one body for God’s ministry. The Church is the collaboration of parts coming together. Pastor, Adam Hamilton, Church of Resurrection in Kansas city helps us understand the process of church’s development. He states three stages: Knowing God, Loving God and Serving God. He describes faith development using our body: we know God by our minds, accept Jesus by our hearts, and serve others with our hands and feet. This concept matches with the Apostle’s Paul’s explanation of the different parts of the body. They work and serve together for the same purpose. The final goal is God’s mission and ministries serving others.

⁵ John Wesley’s Message for Today, Steve Harper (Zondervan Corporation: Michigan, 1983) p.117

Wesley's own words are the best way to summarize his views of the church. He wrote:

In the mean time, let all those who are real members of the Church, see that they walk holy and unblamable in all things. "Ye are the light of the world!" Ye are "a city set upon a hill" and "cannot be hid." O "let your light shine before men!" Show them your faith by your works. Let them see, by the whole tenor of your conversation, that your hope is all laid up above! Let all your words and actions evidence the spirit whereby you are animated! Above all things let your love abound! Let it extend to every child of man: Let it overflow to every child of God. By this let all men know whose disciples ye are, because you "love one another."⁶

I hope that our church is aware of God's calling and mission and continue to carry on. Every Sunday, are we truly confirming our faith by rejoicing and celebrating our Sunday worship service as one body? And then we will proclaim the message of good news and hope to our community. The ultimate meaning and mission of the church and people of faith is to reach out and share God's love with others. Let us continue to *church* and claim our Christian spirituality as our church identity. Amen.

⁶ John Wesley's Message for Today, Steve Harper (Zondervan Corporation: Michigan, 1983) p.126