

## OUR LIFE TOGETHER

### LESSON TWO: LIFE TOGETHER - AT CHRIST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

In the last lesson, we discovered the essential truths that define our life together as Christians.

But what about this place - the gathering we call Christ Presbyterian Church?

#### WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

Let's start at the end of that phrase: "Christ Presbyterian Church." Before we can grasp anything about this church, we ought to glean a few truths about the church.

"Church" is a difficult word to define, because we use it in many different ways. Even in the New Testament, we learn most about the church not through a definition, but through an image: the body of Christ. He is the head. We are the body. As one, we live as the church.

Here are a couple of distinctions that may be helpful:

##### *1. Local and Universal.*

Sometimes the church refers to a body gathered in a local place, while other times it refers to all the gatherings of God's people.

For a "local" example, we read in Acts 11:25-26,

*Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church...*

Here, the word "church" refers to the local gathering of believers in this city of Antioch. So, in that sense, we can refer to Christ Presbyterian Church as the gathering of believers meeting at 350 Henley Road in Richmond, Indiana.

But sometimes "church" does not refer to a local body, but the universal body. In Ephesians 1:22, Paul writes that God appointed Jesus *to be head over everything for the church...*

This is not just the church at Antioch, or even Ephesus. This is the church everywhere - in all

places, at all times.

## **2. *Visible and Invisible.***

What is the *visible* church? It is *all those who profess true faith, and their children*. The visible church is the gathering that anyone can see. We come together, and we profess faith in Jesus.

Does this mean everyone who gathers is genuinely a Christian? No. In the parable known as the “Parable of the Wheat and the Tares,” Jesus teaches us that the church we see will have people who are genuine believers, and people who are not. In this season of the life of the visible church, Jesus allows this to continue, but the day will come when the true and false will be separated.

This leads to the *invisible* church. It is *all who are truly united to Jesus in all nations and generations*. While many profess true faith in Jesus, only some possess true faith in Jesus.

Only God knows who this is. We can see (and hear) the profession of people, but only God can search the heart, and know the genuineness of that profession.

As well, only God can see all of who this is. We can only see the people around us. We cannot see the people before us or after us in time, or the people around us in other places. But God does.

This is important, because we may enter the *visible* church, and expect the church to be perfect. It is not, and it will not be, until Jesus is finished building his church, and enters his eternal glory with the church in the new heavens and the new earth.

## **IS THE CHURCH IMPORTANT?**

We can discuss definitions of the church forever, but they mean nothing unless we understand the significance of the church. We live in a day when the church is increasingly seen as irrelevant, boring and useless - even by some who profess to be Christians!

I offer you two memorable quotes in response:

\* Billy Graham: *Being in a garage doesn't make you a car, and being in church doesn't make you a Christian*. I often meet people who claim to be a Christian, just because they have gone to church,

or taken sacraments in the church. You can attend church all you want, and still not know Jesus.

\* John Calvin: *How can you love Christ, and not love his bride?* Jesus loves the church. Jesus died for the church. If we are followers of Jesus, we love what he loves, and he loves the church!

Do you see the balance? On the one hand, we reject the notion that the church secures salvation. You can believe in Jesus, never have the opportunity to be part of the church, and still be saved. In some cases, people profess faith, then die. In other cases, people profess faith in locations where no church exists. In both cases, the profession is sure and salvation is secure, because the church does not save.

**BUT!** Most of the time, people do not profess faith in Jesus on their deathbeds or in a jungle. In most cases, a church is available. Maybe it is flawed. Maybe it is far away. Maybe this, maybe that.

But it is there. Jesus loves the church. Jesus died for the church. If we have a heart for him, we will have a heart for what is close to his heart: the church.

I like to capture this truth with three phrases:

1. *The church is where Jesus promises to be.*

In Matthew 28, Jesus “establishes” the work of the church when he commands his disciples to make and teach new disciples. He closes with this promise: *And surely I am with you always...*

As God’s people gather and do what Jesus has called them to do, Jesus is there. When the body is doing its work, the head is powerfully present.

Jesus does not promise to be with any other gathering. This is not to say that God cannot bless so-called “parachurch” groups. Of course he can! But who possesses the promise of his presence? The church.

2. *The church is what Jesus promises to build.*

In Matthew 16, Jesus takes a “survey” of opinions about himself. Peter, who gets a lot wrong, gets this right: *You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*

Jesus declares his blessing upon Peter. He then proclaims that *on this rock I will build my*

*church.*

This is the verse that keeps Catholic and Protestant theologians employed! Catholics believe this verse crowns Peter as the first Pope. Protestants believe Jesus is thinking about Peter's confession - not his person.

Obviously, we believe the Protestants are right. But either way, notice this: what does Jesus promise to build? His church!

Has he promised to build anything else? No. Again, does this mean "parachurch" groups have no value? No. But who receives the promise? The church.

### ***3. The church is where Jesus promises to bless.***

The book of Hebrews is filled with "let us" statements. The writer, among other things, is calling believers to live well with one another. In chapter 10 we read,

*Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

The day of Jesus is coming! Our call is to hold on to this hope, and we will do this as we urge one another along in this journey.

When we diminish the importance of the church, and when we neglect the very body that God has ordained to help us grow, we wither spiritually, and we rob others of the blessings we may offer.

That is a strong statement, but we must hear and heed it! How can we truly glorify Jesus, if we neglect his body? The church is far from perfect - but so are you. You are a sinner, journeying in this life with other sinners. Is it not important to assist each other on the journey?

## **WHAT MAKES A CHURCH A GOOD CHURCH?**

That is all well and good, but how do we decide about the different local gatherings?

I struggle at the grocery store. There are too many choices. Think just of toothpaste. How long might it take me to sort through flavors, features, sizes and prices?

The same is true of churches. Our land has no shortage of them. Just as professing believers may not all be believers, professing churches may not be genuinely following Jesus. How do we think about this issue?

Let's start with standards that don't help. A good church is not made by:

\* Politics. Sometimes people are attracted to a church because its leaders or members possess particular political positions. The church may occasionally speak to political issues, but it follows Jesus, not a particular political party or platform.

\* Events. Sometimes people are attracted to a church because the church has oodles of programs for everyone of all shapes and sizes. Programs are nice. But are they biblical?

\* Size. In America, bigger is better. Big is not necessarily good or bad. The Bible neither commends nor condemns churches because of their size. But big does not equal good.

\* Excitement. I remember once reading the words of a woman in the newspaper: "Our church is a happening church." But what is happening?

Our culture is addicted to entertainment. The more exciting, the better. Right? Not necessarily. There is no virtue in dull, but is the church drawing people to Jesus, or just entertaining them?

Instead, a good church is characterized by two core qualities:

**1. A LOVE FOR TRUTH.**

*^John 8:31-32: If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*

*^John 17:17: Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.*

*^2 Timothy 4:1-4: In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and*

*careful instruction.*

*For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.*

I could go on and on, because the Bible goes on and on!

God's truth sets us free. We are one in Jesus because of the truth, not at the expense of truth. We may have itchy ears to hear what we want to hear, but the church is called to preach the truth.

Does a church love the truth? Here are four good questions to ask:

1. Is the Bible central to worship, preaching and teaching?
2. Are the people encouraged to be reading and reflecting on God's truth?
3. Will the leadership be faithful to God's truth, at all costs?
4. Is the biblical gospel of Jesus proclaimed and believed?

Different Christians interpret God's truth in different ways. We will see this as we progress in this study. But here is the key: God's truth is the standard. Not our opinions. Not our desires.

## **2. A LOVE FOR PEOPLE.**

Again, let's sample a few verses:

*^John 13:34-35: A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*

*^1 John 3:16: This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.*

*^1 Corinthians 13:13: And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

Enough! This is too convicting! None of us loves others as we should. No church loves people perfectly. But is the church striving to love people - both inside the body and outside the body?

Maybe you have noticed that these two qualities correspond to the two great commandments, as

Jesus declared them in Matthew 22:

\* God is a God of truth. The first great commandment is to love him - and his truth.

\* God has loved us, so we are called to love. The second great commandment is to love our neighbors.

Does this church love God by loving his truth? Does this church love God, by loving people? Never perfectly, rarely adequately...but at least, is there evidence of seeking to do this?

### WHY IS THIS CONGREGATION HERE?

Of course, every congregation will serve Jesus differently. At Christ Presbyterian Church, we believe God has led us to focus our efforts around six core commitments.

#### 1. A COMMITMENT TO A LIFE OF CORPORATE AND INDIVIDUAL WORSHIP AND PRAYER.

Psalm 100 declares, *Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.* Worship is our first duty, and our greatest delight.

But what should this worship be like? In John 4:24, Jesus tells a Samaritan woman that God is looking for people who worship him “in spirit and in truth.”

\* *“In spirit”* - Jesus is teaching this woman that she need not worship at a particular place - like a certain mountain. Worship is an issue of where my heart is, not where my body is. Although we are called to gather with other believers for worship, the “place” is not the point. To worship “in spirit” is to offer real worship. I do not just go through the motions. My inner being is heartily engaged in offering this worship.

\* *“In truth”* - Jesus is affirming that his Father is a God of truth. This means our worship must be an offering that reflects his truth. The words that are spoken, the songs that are sung...all we say and all we do should be in accord with God’s truth.

Yet worship is not just a corporate event. We should be worshipping individually. We view our

lives as an ongoing offering of praise to God. As John Frame writes, *Worship is the whole point of everything. It is the purpose of history, the goal of the whole Christian story.*

Part of public and private worship is prayer. In Paul's letter to the Colossians, he urges the Christians, *Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.*

We are to be a praying people - together and apart! We pray for our particular needs, but we also pray for the spread of the gospel - so-called "kingdom focused" prayer.

There is much mystery in prayer, but we know it is at the heart of the Christian life. At Christ Presbyterian Church, we are committed to cultivating and nurturing a culture of prayer.

## **2. A COMMITMENT TO A WARM AND WELCOMING FELLOWSHIP.**

Have you ever driven along Interstate 40 in North Carolina? At least in the far western section of the state, the road is lined with beautiful pine trees.

The story is told of a wet snowstorm which struck that area a few years ago. The snow was so great and so heavy that many pine trees collapsed under the weight of the snow.

Which ones survived? The ones that were close together. When the snow bent their branches, they leaned against the nearby trees, and they were able to stand and survive.

As we have seen in Hebrews 10, Jesus promises to bless people through the church, and his particular call is for the blessed to bless each other.

What is fellowship? It is more than food, and it is more than fun, although both may be involved! Fellowship is when we relate to each other as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. We move beyond the weather, and we talk about issues of heart and life.

In 1 Peter 1:22, the apostle writes, *Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.* You love each other? Keep loving. Love more and more deeply.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul writes at length about this image of the church as a body. He urges his

readers to remember that every part of the body is important. One part cannot say to another: "You don't matter!" All matter. All are important. We are one with Jesus, so we are one with each other.

Here is my hope and prayer for Christ Presbyterian Church: that every person who walks through our doors will be welcomed and loved, and that every person who unites in fellowship, will be sure that he or she is a vital part of that fellowship.

How far short we fall in this! But we strive.

### **3. A COMMITMENT TO SPIRITUAL MATURITY EXPRESSED IN EVERY AREA OF LIFE.**

The apostle Paul had a passion for the maturity of the people in his churches. In this, he reflected the passion of Jesus, who called his disciples to teach obedience to everything he commanded.

Here is a sample of Paul's passion:

*\* Ephesians 4:13-15: ...until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ.*

*Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.*

*Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.*

*\* Philippians 3:8-14: ...I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...I want to know Christ...Not that I have already obtained this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

*\* Colossians 1:28-29: We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy,*

*which so powerfully works in me.*

Through the preaching, teaching and fellowship of this body, we are to be maturing in Jesus, in every area of life. A writer once said it this way:

*We are the Beverly Hillbillies about ten minutes after we pull into the driveway of our new mansion. We are millionaires, yes. That is our official legal status...But we haven't a clue how to think or act - how to become what we already are. The Holy Spirit's job is to bring about that transformation in the daily details our lives.*

#### **4. A COMMITMENT TO MINISTER TO THE PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF PEOPLE IN OUR CHURCH AND COMMUNITY.**

I have never forgotten the words of a pastor from Brooklyn: *You only have to have two loves in your life: God, and the person in front of you.*

Whom will God put in front of us? Whom must we pursue, in the body and outside the body? How will we minister to them?

*\* Galatians 6:9-10: Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*

Think also of the story of the Good Samaritan. He did not know the victim, but he ministered to him, as he was able. That is our call as individuals, and as a congregation!

#### **5. A COMMITMENT TO DOING OUR SHARE IN REACHING RICHMOND, THE NATION AND THE WORLD FOR JESUS CHRIST.**

Quite simply, this is the Great Commission of Matthew 28, where Jesus calls his disciples to "make" and "teach disciples."

This involves our personal commitment to show Jesus and speak of Jesus to the people in our

lives - with our deeds and our words.

This also involves our commitment to doing our SHARE to support missionaries - both in the United States, and around the world. We...

- \* S - send missionaries out.
- \* H - help missionaries as they have need.
- \* A - ask for God's grace in prayer.
- \* R - rejoice with them as they see God's kingdom grow.
- \* E - enter the field ourselves, through short-term trips and long-term ministry.

#### **6. A COMMITMENT TO DEVELOPING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERSHIP FOR THE CHURCH.**

In Deuteronomy 6, the Lord calls his people to lead the next generation in his ways:

*These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.*

Actually, when we reach Psalm 78, we discover a vision for succeeding generations:

*O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old - what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us.*

*We will not hide them from our children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done.*

*He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children...*

In the words of Paul to the Ephesians, parents are to raise their children in the "training and

instruction” of the Lord. The church is not a *substitute* for parents, but a *support* to parents.

We are a sending church in a sending community. People don’t always stay in Richmond! But throughout the history of Christ Presbyterian Church, God has used us to develop young men and women who are serving the Lord in all sorts of vocations and all sorts of places.

Here is the end of the matter: if our life together is important to Jesus, it should be important to us. It is, and it is.

In the words of former CPC Pastor Mark Dalbey, our first identity is in Jesus, and our second identity is in the body of Jesus.

Do we see this? Will we live this?