

"What is the Church?"

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Acts 2: 37-47

This is one of those passages I believe we should turn to and study every year. And the day of our Annual Meeting is probably the best day to do it. The book of Acts is the story of the early church, after Jesus had ascended to heaven. Acts tells us what happened next. And here in chapter two we get the first description of life in the early church.

Acts 2:37-47:

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Let me start by asking a very simple question: What is the Church? How would you define the word, "Church"? If you had to give a one sentence definition of the word, what would it be?

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary gives 5 definitions for "church" as a noun.

- 1: a building for public and especially Christian worship
- 2: the clergy or officialdom of a religious body (such as the "wider church," and the "higher church")
- 3: a body or organization of religious believers: as
 - a : the whole body of Christians (the Church Universal)
 - b : denomination <the Presbyterian church>
 - c : congregation
- 4: a public divine worship <goes to church every Sunday>
- 5: the clerical profession <considered the church as a possible career>

Well, that doesn't exactly answer the question very precisely - what is the church? To bring more focus and clarity, let me take it from 5 down to 3. I believe the church is 3 things simultaneously.

I. First of all, the church is a Community.

The church is a community of Christians, a gathering of Christ-followers.

Acts 2 says, "They devoted themselves to . . . fellowship, to the breaking of bread . . . all who believed were together . . . day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts."

The earliest Christians met together in community with one another. It wasn't just "Me & Jesus got a good thing going." Instead it was, "I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God!" Martin Copenhaver says, "*Christianity is first and foremost a religion of community.*"

In fact, the Greek word for "church" found in the New Testament is *ecclesia*. The word *ecclesia* simply means, the gathering. Where two or three Christians are gathered in his name, there is church.

Last year we sang the song, "*We are the church together.*" The refrain goes:

I am the church.

You are the church.

We are the church together.

All of God's people, all around the world.

Yes, we're the church together.

The first line can't really stand on its own - "I am the church." I am not the church, right? "I," one person, can not be the gathering. You individually are not the church, the gathering. "We are the church together."

We talked once before about the distinction people make between being religious vs being spiritual. You hear people say, "I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious." I usually reply, "I'm trying to be both." But I think a better answer might be a simple explanation that goes something like this: The real difference between being spiritual vs being religious is that religious people are spiritual people who gather regularly to practice their spirituality with others.

You can pray the Lord's Prayer in the comfort of your own home. You can read the Bible there. You can sing a hymn there. That's being spiritual. But when you do it here that's being religious because it's done with others. But most importantly, when we practice our Christianity together we are not only being religious, we're doin' church! We're being the Church of Jesus Christ. Christianity is a team sport. It's meant to be done with others. The earliest Christians believed that and modeled that because they saw how Jesus lived out his faith with his disciples.

The other word we use a lot instead of community is family - our church family. That's a favorite image for many. A good friend of mine always says his church is his second family. It's a good image as long as we're a family that always welcomes newcomers. You know how some families are just very open? They warmly welcome people into their inner circle. "Hey, please stay for dinner." "No, no, I can't." "Nonsense, you're staying! Honey, set another plate at the table!" That's the kind of family we want to be.

The other thing I like about the church as family is that like our

regular human families we put a lot of focus on children, the elderly and the sick. When you have children they become a huge thing in your life. Children are a huge part of our church. They're not just "the future" of our church. They're very much it's present. We work hard in our children and youth ministries, because in a family children are very important.

As are the elderly. I love the way our church cares for its oldest members. At Christmas time, folks received Christmas cookies from their church family and a poinsettia plant. Both of these were personally delivered. Folks also received a visit from their pastor. So in the 10 days or so leading up to Christmas, our oldest members received 3 visitors from their church. That's really good. That's being a church family.

A family also cares for each other and particularly those who are sick. When someone is sick in your home, usually they receive a lot of attention - from chicken soup, to a warm blanket, from tending to a wound to a trip to the doctor's. So, too, in our church family, we care for one another, pray for one another, send cards, give hugs, visits, pastoral care and our "Called to Care" ministry - because that's what you do in a family.

The church is a family. Church is all about community. But it's not really all about community, is it? It's more than just community.

II. The church is also a Cause.

The church is a cause. We're a community with a cause.

"You are the light of the world. Let your lights shine."

"You are the salt of the earth."

"You are God's ambassadors, as if God were making his appeal through you!"

"Go, into all the world and make disciples of all nations."

"When you helped the least of these you've done it unto me."

We've got work to do! We've been given sacred assignments, sacred because they come from Christ himself!

Last Fall we sang a new hymn, "*As a Fire is Meant for Burning.*"

*As a fire is meant for burning with a bright and warming flame,
So the church is meant for mission, giving glory to God's name.
Not to preach our creeds or customs, but to build a bridge of care,
We join hands across the nations, finding neighbors everywhere.*

I once had a Golden Retriever who wouldn't retrieve. I tried everything - tennis balls, sticks, those short ropes, He'd sometimes go and get it, but he refused to bring it back to me. I'd say to him, "Nicholas, you're a Golden Retriever! Retrieve!" The one thing he was bred to do he wouldn't do. The church of Jesus Christ is born and bred for mission. As a fire is meant for burning, so the church is made for mission, for outreach to others.

Imagine if someone comes into our church this week and says, "We have no heat in our home. And we have no groceries. Is there any way you can help us out? Imagine if I said, "No. We don't do that any more. We decided it was costing us too much money." We send a team every month to Cor Unam to help feed the poor in Lawrence. Imagine if we called up and said, "We've decided we're not going to help out anymore. We starting a bowling league on Tuesday and Wednesday nights instead."

I was talking to Bill Pickles, the chair of our trustees about our budget woes. Bill said, "We can't eliminate from the budget the money we spend on our ministries and mission, because without those things we're just a club. We'd be just a club." He's right. The church is not just a club, a community, a gathering. We're a Cause. Our Cause is the Kingdom of God. Or as the Blues Brothers said so well, "We're on a mission from God." Yes, we are.

The Church is a Community. The Church is a Cause. And you know what else?

III. The Church is also a Corporation.

The church is an organization. We actually are a corporation. Incorporated in 1969. All churches are automatically 501 (c) 3 tax-exempt non-profits. We're not just a family, and not just a cause, we're an

organization - an organization with by-laws, budgets and boards. And these things are important, very important.

We read a passage from Acts 2. In Acts 6 we read of the church had a vibrant ministry of feeding the widows. And the Disciples were getting burnout from all the work. So they decided to elect Deacons, so that the Deacons could help serve the meals, so the Apostles could devote themselves to teaching the faith. This was the start of their "HR" department! St. Paul was heavily into personnel matters and listed specific job descriptions for the early church. They're found in Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12.

"And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues." (I Cor. 12:28)

In his First Letter to Timothy he spells out the qualifications and job descriptions for pastors and deacons. So the great St. Paul was not just concerned with the church as a community, a fellowship. And he wasn't just concerned with the church as a Cause, as a Mission Outpost for the Kingdom of God. Paul was also concerned about organization - job descriptions, assignments and deployment of personnel based on their skills.

The Truth is we need all three images for the church - community, cause and corporation. If there's no community - people feel used, valued only for what they produce for the cause. If there's no cause, no mission - then there's no juice, no excitement in the air & we'd be unfaithful to our Savior. And if there's no organization, then there's chaos and ineffectiveness and often people's feelings get hurt.

Let me leave you with two thoughts:

1. The first is a question - **Which one of these image moves you the most?** Which one did you say, "Yeah! That's it! Preach It, Brother." Community? Cause? or Corporation? Most of us have a favorite and a least favorite.

Think about this: we had over 60 people participate in "BE the Church Sunday," enjoying the fellowship and service projects of that day. By contrast, we had 10-12 people come to the informational meetings about the by-laws revision. Yet, we can't have effective outreach without effective organization. We need to keep all three aspects of the church before us at all times. But knowing which is your favorite and least favorite is helpful in knowing what you might lean towards and enjoy getting involved in, and what you might neglect, for better or for worse.

2. One last point. It's this: **the best activities of the church involve all three aspects of the church's calling - community, cause & corporate.**

For example, on Feb. 12 we'll have our first annual (I hope) Evening of Love Songs. It's a church social, a coffeehouse concert, a chance to spend a lovely evening with your church family. That's the church as a community, right? But the Evening of Love Songs is also a fundraiser for the youth mission trip. By coming and paying the \$5.00 suggested donation, you're helping the church do mission, your helping our young people travel to Owego, NY and make God's love visible to the residents there. You will bless the poor, lift up the lonely and encourage the weak by coming to this event. That's the Cause piece, right? Mission. Outreach. And if you're an organizational type person, I need you to help organize the darn thing!

So we need all three!

Community, Cause, Corporation.

Fellowship, Outreach, Organization.

Let's strive to do them all well!