

We Are the Church

The Day of Pentecost is traditionally viewed as the birthday of the church. The sermons for this day will typically look at the reading from Acts and ask if what was experienced that day was a miracle of hearing or a miracle of speaking. It would be noted that there is a reversal of Tower of Babel. Genesis 11 recounts how the people had built a city and a high tower for themselves. God, seeing how the people were making a name for themselves (meaning that they had forgotten/turned their backs to God), decided to confuse their language and scatter the people across the earth. That is how different languages came to be. The sermon might even focus on how the Holy Spirit is like the wind - something which we can't control where it goes or where it comes from and how strong or how long the wind blows, etc.

I would like to take a different approach today. We have all heard the reports over the last few years of how there are fewer and fewer people claiming to be Christian with subsequent decline in church membership. One of the fastest growing segments of our population is of those who identify as being 'spiritual, but not religious.' Many churches have noticed these trends as there are fewer people in the pews on a Sunday morning and of those who do attend, it is getting grayer and grayer. The questions then arise is the church archaic and for whom does the church exist?

We need to start by looking at what the church is. One may erroneously think that the church is just an organization like any other civic organization. Many elements that make up any organization can be found within the church. There are rituals that are followed, rules that guide expected behavior, a stated purpose for the organization, ways for entrance into the organization and the like. However, there is one main difference between the church and other civic organizations. That difference being that we have a divine element - that we are led by God; the church

was started by Jesus and is continued to be guided by the Holy Spirit. The church also claims the continued presence of God throughout the ages and we are led by the Holy Spirit to do God's will.

Other organizations do not make this claim, even if their mission is to help others. Even those organizations that claim to be founded on Christian and/or Judeo-Christian traditions, don't claim to be led by God. Organizations such as the Red Cross, the YMCA, and Habitat for Humanity are a few examples of this. So, we can conclude that the church (and probably many religions, for that matter) is a unique organization.

This leads us to ask, "Who is the church?" The church has many different layers, or expressions. There is the local congregation and connections to various wider expressions of the church at the area, state, national and global levels. While we all accept the teachings found in the Bible, there are many different ways of understanding it with emphasis put on different aspects of those understandings. Thus, we have many different denominations of the church.

Many times, people will talk of 'the church' regardless of which level to which they are referring. There may be a certain disconnect between a local congregation and the wider church. While a local church or congregation may belong to a certain denomination, talk of 'the church' can be tinged with a note of disdain for the wider church, that the wider church has gotten something wrong along the way. When the local congregation says things like "They don't understand our situation" or "They don't care for us they just want our money" we hear this disconnect. There becomes a we versus them kind of attitude.

However, we are the church. We are the ones who do the work of God, we are the ones who treat or don't treat each other the way Jesus taught us. We are the reflection of God's love for the world, bringing the Good News of Jesus to those who

need to hear it, either for 1st time or for the 'umpteenth' time. Each one of us contributes to the makeup of the church and each of us affects the church in one way or another. While we have been tasked by Jesus to spread the *Good News* to the ends of the earth, we, as individuals or as a local congregation, have a limited reach of how far we can spread this *Good News*. That is the one of the purposes of the wider church - to be more efficient in sharing the story of Jesus and *God's* love for creation.

But in these post-pandemic times, the question of why we need the church has come front and center. It is not a new question; it has been brewing ever since at least the *Age of Enlightenment* when the focus on humanity and the individual increased and the emphasis on *God* and connection to *God* has decreased. Many of the spiritual-but-not-religious would say that they can make that connection with *God* on their own, at a time and in a place of their own choosing. However, Christianity is more than an individual relationship with *God*. Christianity, as well as some other religions, has a community relationship and see as part of their calling by *God* to help those who are at the margins of society.

But why do we have an organization called the church? Partly, it is our desire to bring some order that is the chaos of life. By uniting people with a similar goal, we can see that we are not alone in our struggles; we see that there is a synergistic effect by combining our efforts - that is, together, a group can do more than the sum of the efforts of individuals. Also, the wider church helps to give us a broader perspective on religion and all that it entails. By having a connection with others around the world, we can see other perspectives, helping to keep us from developing a parochial attitude of 'we do things the right way and we aren't going to change.' Our perspective of the world changes when we have this connection with others around the world.

By belonging to a church, it gives us life, it renews our spirit, our will, as we meet resistance to fulfillment of mission.

Consider this story:

Many years ago, there was a man whose wife had passed away. He felt abandoned by the church and stopped going. Several weeks later, the pastor came for a visit. The man invited him in and they sat by the fireplace. Without saying a word, the pastor went over to the fireplace and took an ember out of the fire with the tongs and set it just outside the fireplace and sat back down. The two men watched the ember as it started to cool and turn from the bright red to black. The pastor then got up, took the tongs and placed the ember back in the fire and sat back down. They watched as that ember heated back to life and burned again, giving off heat. The pastor then got up and said thank-you for the visit and left. The following Sunday and each Sunday thereafter, the widower attended the service.

Besides giving us life, helping us to do those things to which we are called, the church is a place where we can admit to our faults and accept others, despite their own faults. It is a place where we can find unity despite our differences. The church is a unique organization, it provides something that no other organization can provide. Most importantly, the church will survive with or without us, because it is something that God made; and God will not let the church fail. In one shape or another, there will always be 'church' because the church is representative of God's presence here on earth. So, whether we admit or not, we do need the church more than the church needs us.

YouTube Links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/-GNZ-U3Lcuo>

Service: <https://youtu.be/OKssaZNTaZM>