

The Bride of Christ

“A Healthy Church is a Well Balanced Church” – Introduction

January 8, 2016

Call to Worship:

To this John replied, “A person can receive only what is given them from heaven.²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.’²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less.” John 3:27-30 (NIV)

Scripture Reading:

²⁹ *“Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day.³⁰ But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne.³¹ Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay.³² God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.³³ Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.³⁴ For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, “ ‘The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand³⁵ until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” ’*

³⁶ *“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”*

³⁸ *Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”*

⁴⁰ *With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.”⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*

⁴² *They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common.⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.* Acts 2:29-47 (NIV)

This morning, as we are only one week into the New Year, we are starting a new series looking at the church. The title of the series is “A Healthy Church is a Well Balanced Church.” This morning is the introduction to the series. What or who is the church and what is the church supposed to be and do? Why does the church even exist and is it that important in the eyes of God? Those questions are especially relevant today, in 21st century western culture when more and more people, including many Christians, are even questioning the need for the church.

If God is the one who has called the church into existence, what are its primary functions? Hopefully we all know that the church building is not really “the church,” but why do buildings that call themselves churches occupy pieces of property in every community, about twelve just in West Liberty and the surrounding five miles alone? As Christian as we say our community is, meaning that if you were to go out and question all the adults living in the community the vast majority would say they are Christian – that they believe in Jesus Christ – yet only 20-25% of the people in the community are in a church on any given Sunday. I would also make the claim that even some of them are not there for the right reasons, maybe including some of us. I have a lot of questions for us this morning!

One of them being, why did you come to church this morning? Why do you come to church on any given Sunday? Why do you even identify yourself with this church – whether as a member or a regular attender? Is it because you grew up in the church and that is just the expectation that has been passed on to you? Or is it because you think that is the expectation of many in the culture we find ourselves in? Or do you come because you think it is the right thing for your children. I continue to be surprised by the number of adults who think church is important when they are raising their children, but when their children are grown and out of the house, all the sudden church isn't that important for them anymore. Or maybe you come for the fellowship – this is where many of your friends are. Some of those are pretty good reasons – like raising your children in the faith and fellowship, but they should not be the primary reasons. There's really only one reason we should come to church, which is why the church exists. It's the same reason that we humans exist. That reason is found in Ephesians 3:21, among many other passages as well,

To God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. Ephesians 3:21 (NIV)

The church exists for the same reason that we humans exist:

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.
1 Corinthians 10:31 (NIV)

A few chapters earlier in that same letter to the early Christians in Corinth Paul writes:

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body. 1 Cor. 6:19-20

God is concerned that we glorify Him in everything we do, even the way we treat our bodies. Paul writes towards the end of his letter to the early Christians in Rome

⁵ *May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had,* ⁶ *so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.* Romans 15:5-6 (NIV)

There might not be a better passage in Scripture which captures the essence of the church than that. Our sole purpose, our basic reason for existence, our primary calling upon our lives as God's people, is to bring maximum glory to God.

Of course throughout human history not all humans have lived up to God's calling upon their lives. In fact the sad truth is, the number of people who have lived up to God's primary calling upon their lives is in the very small minority, whether it be in Old Testament times or New Testament times.

God had and still has great plans for His people. One of our major hurdles, that which holds us back, is that we don't even realize just how big and how great God's plans are for us. In Old Testament times God's people were the Israelites and this is what God says through the prophet Jeremiah (29:11) about His people:

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

God says in 2 Chronicles 7 at the dedication of the temple built in Jerusalem:

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land. ¹⁵ Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place. ¹⁶ I have chosen and consecrated this temple so that my Name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there. 2 Chronicles 7:14-16

God's people in Old Testament times were primarily, but not exclusively the Israelites. They were all those who humbled themselves, prayed, sought God's face and turned from their wicked ways. In those times God was most present in the Temple. Not that God wasn't present throughout the entire world, but He was most present when His people gathered to worship Him in the temple.

When we get to New Testament times God's people have become those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. They are still the ones who humble themselves, pray, seek God's face, and turn from their evil and wicked ways. And He is most present with them when they are gathered as His church. Again, not that God isn't present everywhere, but He is most present with His people when they are gathered as the church to worship Him. That's one of the paradoxes about the omnipresence of God.

But unlike the Old Testament times when God was most present in the big temple in Jerusalem when people gathered to worship Him, in New Testament times He is present whenever His church gathers together to worship Him, no matter how many. In fact in Matthew 18:20, Jesus tells us "where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them." That is part of the gift of the Incarnation which we celebrate during the Christmas season.

And it has nothing to do with the building they meet in. The early disciple Stephen, before he became the first Christian martyr, spoke in Acts:

"Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness . . . and Solomon built a house for him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?' Acts 7:44, 47-50 (ESV)

The church is not a building, the church is God's people. How much does God love His people? So much so that He refers to us as His bride! The Old Testament prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, referred to God's people whom He would restore and redeem as His bride.

Lift up your eyes and look around; all your children gather and come to you. As surely as I live," declares the Lord, "you will wear them all as ornaments; you will put them on, like a bride. Isaiah 49:18 (NIV)

When we get to the New Testament God's people, the church, is referred to as the bride. Our Call to Worship this morning from John the Baptist:

To this John replied, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven.²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.'²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less. John 3:27-29

And in the Book of Revelation when the disciple John is prophesying about the end of time, as we know it here on earth:

⁶ Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns."⁷ Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. ⁸ Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." Revelation 19:6-8 (NIV)

God has redeemed His people through the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ. All who acknowledge their sinfulness, repent and confess Jesus as their Savior and Lord become the church. I've said it before and I'll say it again, for one to be a true Christian and say that he or she just doesn't want to be part of a church, or the church, it's not possible. They already are a part of the church. The only question is, "is that person an active participant in the church?" And in order to be an active participant in the church, one has to be a participant in a church.

As I mentioned last week, some of you probably have already made New Year's resolutions. For many it probably has something to do with fitness and your health. Perhaps it's eating better, losing some weight, or exercising more, or if you're like me, it's all three! The beginning of the New Year is when many assess their health. What we want to do over the next couple of month is to assess our health as a church.

Most who have studied the church throughout its 2,000 year history say there are four primary purposes of the church. They don't define them with the exact same words, and there is quite a bit of overlap between the four purposes, but most agree there are four essentials:

1. Worship
2. Discipleship
3. Mission or Ministry
4. Fellowship

Rick Warren, the author of the The Purpose Driven Church, which was the driving force to his very popular book, The Purpose Driven Life, identifies five primary purposes, separating ministry from mission, saying ministry is what we do in the church and mission is what we do outside the church. I'm not sure they need to be separated.

Charles Swindoll, in his book titled "The Bride of Christ," lists them as four major objectives, all found in our passage of Scripture this morning from Acts 2, using the acronym WIFE, which is pretty creative since the church is supposed to be "the Bride of Christ."

Worship
 Instruction – Discipleship
 Fellowship
 Expression – Ministry, Mission, and Evangelism

The four, or five, primary purposes of the church, depending how you classify them, are found in our Purpose, Mission and Vision statements, found on the back of your bulletin most Sundays, specifically the acronym SHARE –

Sharing the Love of Christ in our community and around the world or Sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with our neighbors and friends – which are kind of the overall umbrella

Helping Each other with Mutual Care and Support - Fellowship

Aiming to Worship God in Spirit and in Truth - Worship

Responding to the needs of hurting persons in our community and around the world - Mission

Equipping children, youth and adults for Christian Discipleship

Most churches seem to favor one or two of the primary purposes at the expense of the others. The problem is that when we do that we are no longer the church which God calls us to be. We become an unhealthy church. With my very limited creative ability, the only thing I have been able to come up with comparing it to is a four legged stool. Yes, a three legged stool can stand on its own if it is built for three legs. But if it was designed as a four legged stool, take away one of its legs and it will not stand.

God designed the church not with three purposes, but four! No matter how big or small the church, those are the four primary purposes. For every individual Christian those are the four primary purposes for which God created us:

Worship –
 Discipleship –
 Mission and/or Ministry –
 Fellowship –

So as we go through this series looking at the four purposes, not only can we evaluate ourselves as a church, we can evaluate each of us as individuals. We don't want you to evaluate others, we want you to evaluate yourself.

So when it comes to Worship –

How much time do you spend alone with God, in prayer, giving glory to God, reading the Scriptures, and worshipping Him collectively as a body of Christ?

Discipleship –

Are you a committed follower of Jesus Christ in every area of your life?

Are you growing as a Christ follower?

Mission and Ministry –

Do you know what God's calling is upon your life both in the world and in the church?

Are you doing those things?

Fellowship –

Are you committed to a group of Christians to encourage one another, support one another and to hold one another accountable?

For all the attention, time and money we put to our physical health, it has only limited and temporal value. Not that our physical health is not important because we are told that everything we do is supposed to be for the glory of God and that includes how we take care of our bodies.

But the apostle Paul tells us in his 1st letter to Timothy:

“For while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and for the life to come.”

1 Timothy 4:8 (ESV)

This is the way Eugene Petersen puts it in *The Message*:

Exercise daily in God—no spiritual flabbiness, please! Workouts in the gymnasium are useful, but a disciplined life in God is far more so, making you fit both today and forever. You can count on this. Take it to heart. This is why we've thrown ourselves into this venture so totally. We're banking on the living God, Savior of all men and women, especially believers.

Next week we start with the primary purpose of Worship, because Worship is the primary purpose of the four primary purposes of the church. Charles Swindoll writes in his book, *The Bride of Christ*, “First, the church is a worshipping community. If your church is not engaged in worship, you have to stretch the truth to say it is a church.” When it comes to God, it is not good to stretch the truth!

