

A church of Christ

M. W. Bassford, 2-10-13

A couple of weeks ago, I read an article in the newspaper about a coffee shop/kids' playroom in Lisle called Grounds for Hope. According to the article, this particular coffee shop is owned and operated by a denominational church, which conceives of the coffee shop as a kind of evangelistic outreach. According to their way of thinking, moms will bring their kids to the playroom, drink coffee, develop kindly feelings toward the denominational church, and start worshipping there. The reporter who wrote the article asked one of the patrons what she thought of all that. Much to my amusement, she replied that although she enjoyed the coffee shop, she had no intention of attending services.

I thought the article revealed two things about this denomination: first, their lack of interest in obeying the authority of Christ, and second, their lack of faith in the gospel of Christ. The best thing they could think of to bring in new members was neither found in the Bible nor had anything to say about the Bible. While there's some earthly appeal to becoming the Church of Coffee, that can't be for us. Let's look instead at what it means to be a church of Christ.

What Is a church of Christ?

Before we can explore that, though, we must first define what a church of Christ is. The phrase itself should signify a church **BELONGING TO CHRIST**. It's used in this way in Romans 16:16. However, this phrase is often misused in religious discussion, so let's spend some time first talking about what it isn't. First, a church of Christ is not what we see on the screen behind me. It is not a building with a sign out front, crooked or otherwise, that reads "church of Christ". What we are in right now is not a church. It is a building. Second, a church of Christ is not a denomination. It may be true that there is such a thing as the Church of Christ denomination, but we here have nothing to do with it, and we should have nothing to do with it. There is nothing in the Bible that justifies belonging to a denomination. Third, a church of Christ is not a group of people who meet in a building that has a sign out front reading "church of Christ". There are people who belong to Christ's church who do not meet in such a building, and sadly, I believe that there are people who meet in a building with the right label but do not do the things that would identify them as His.

Instead, rightly understood, the statement "church of Christ" is a statement of ownership. It is a church that belongs to Christ. We can identify such churches because they bear the characteristics of his ownership. Let me illustrate this. The house that stands at 1217 Brentwood Place in Joliet is my house. How do we know this? My name is on the title, I live there, I pay the mortgage and utilities, I do the maintenance, and I don't let anyone else live there. It has all the characteristics of a house that belongs to me. In the same way, we can identify a church of Christ.

One of the most significant of these identifying characteristics is that those in the church belonging to Christ have been **SAVED BY CHRIST**. This is most elegantly presented in Acts 2:46-47. Although we don't have time to explore it this morning, Acts 2 has a great deal to say about what we must do to be saved. In Acts 2 terms, we are saved when we call upon the name of the Lord by repenting and allowing ourselves to be baptized for forgiveness of sins. It is these same people in Acts 2, those who repented and were baptized, who were as an inevitable result added to the church.

The Joliet church of Christ, then, can only contain baptized believers, and any organization that admits to membership those who are not baptized or those who are not believers is not a church of Christ. Since she came home from the hospital, my daughter Zoë has been here about every time the doors were opened, but she is not a part of this church, nor will she be until and unless she is baptized for the forgiveness of her sins. I recognize that this excludes vast numbers of people who claim to be Christians from membership in Christ's church, but it is nonetheless true.

This startling truth is actually part of a larger one, that a church of Christ must be **SUBJECT TO CHRIST**. Paul defines the relationship between Christ and His church in Ephesians 1:22-23. Thus, if some religious organization does not acknowledge Jesus as its head in all things, it cannot be a church that belongs to Him. On one level, this point is faintly ridiculous. After all, what religious group in all the Christian constellation would not acknowledge Christ as its head in all things? In reality, this lack of acknowledgement is quite common. I apologize for the jargon I'm about to use, but according to the theologians, there are two principles according to which a church can determine how to worship, the normative principle and the regulative principle. The regulative principle of worship is actually quite familiar to us. It holds that Christ regulates the worship of His church through His word, and anything which is not contained in His word is an inappropriate kind of worship. By contrast, the normative principle argues that a church can do anything in its worship that the congregation wants to do, provided that it isn't disruptive.

Here's what this means in practice. Let's say that we visit a church that applies the normative principle of worship. We observe that they use instruments of music in their worship, and we ask them what their Biblical authority is for such a stance. They would reply, "Why would we need some verse from the Bible to justify ourselves? We can do what we want." That's a discussion-killer right there, but it raises a larger question. How can a church that denies the need for Christ's authority in anything make Him the head in all things? We must be subject to Him instead.

Fourth, the church that belongs to Christ must be **OBEDIENT TO CHRIST**. Paul presents this point in Colossians 3:17. It's not enough for us to verbally acknowledge the authority of Christ. Instead, we must submit to it in practice as well. That's what doing all in the name of the Lord means. Let's return to our example of the instrument. There are churches out there that would agree that they need authority for their religious practices and yet would not be able to make a valid argument from the Bible that the use of instrumental music is justified. However, they make such flimsy justifications because despite their claims, they want to do what they want, not what Christ wants. The same problem arises in many other areas, and the result is a church that claims to be subject, yet is disobedient.

However, if a church is saved by Christ, subject to Christ, and obedient to Christ, it will also be **UNITED WITH CHRIST**. Jesus Himself makes this promise of fellowship in Matthew 18:20. Notice first of all, though, that even this heartwarming passage is based on authority. It isn't about people who claim to gather in the name of Jesus. It's about people who *are* gathered in His name, who assemble and worship only according to His authority. There are never going to be very many people who want to do that. Most people would rather belong to themselves than belong to Christ. However, to those who are willing, Jesus promises that even if only a few are present, He will be with them. And really, isn't that what it's all about? A version of Christianity that doesn't invite Jesus isn't worth practicing.

Why Be Christ's church?

As all of the above makes clear, genuinely being a church belonging to Christ is no small undertaking. It requires a lot of effort and a lot of doing what He wants instead of what we want. Why should we go through all of that? Why should we be Christ's church? We're going to consider this question in preparation for the Lord's Supper.

First, we should want to be a church belonging to Christ because of **HIS GOODNESS**. Jesus describes what this means in John 10:14-15. In His word, Jesus has told us who He is. However, just as importantly, He knows who we are. President Obama doesn't have the slightest idea that I exist, but Jesus knows the number of hairs on my head, because He cares about me that profoundly. In fact, He cares about me and all of His disciples so much that He was willing to lay down His life for all of us. Every election cycle, we Americans choose our political leaders, and if any of you have talked with me about politics, you know I'm not usually pleased with the results. However, when we choose Christ to be our leader and our King, we can be certain that He will do everything with our best interests at heart.

Second, we should be willing to belong to Christ as His particular church because of **HIS POWER**. When Jesus was still on earth, that power often astounded His disciples, as in Mark 4:41. We live our lives bound by the laws of nature and physics. Jesus didn't. He could do whatever He pleased, and sometimes the results were as spooky as they were spectacular. Jesus' ability to work signs and wonders is significant because it proves His claim to be the Son of God. Jesus made a career out of doing things that no ordinary human could. What's more, through Jesus, we have access to the Father in heaven Himself, and God has never known any constraint on His power. The laws of time and space don't govern Him; He governs them. That same power, that once created the universe and will one day destroy it, is the power that God places at our disposal, because Jesus loves us and has interceded for us.

Third, we should be willing to be Christ's church because of **HIS WISDOM**. This too was evident during His time on earth, as shown by John 7:45-46. My sister is a very intelligent, very attractive, very persuasive woman with a lead foot, and ever since she started to drive, she's talked her way out of any number of speeding tickets. However, I'm pretty sure that even Susan wouldn't be able to talk down a band of officers sent to arrest her. Jesus could. It's easy for us to grasp that Jesus' miracles revealed His divinity, but that divinity was equally evident in His words. Even just reading about Jesus, I often exclaim to myself, "Nobody's that smart!" Imagine how impressive it was to listen to Jesus dismantle the most well educated Pharisees with a sentence or two! He was wiser than any mere mortal can be.

This is significant in many areas, but most of all with respect to His plan for the church. As we've observed, the world is full of religious organizations that think they can improve on Christ's design. They think that if they add the instrument, add various religious institutions, add a denominational hierarchy, etc., their innovations will work better than the pattern that Jesus laid out. Among other things, that doesn't display a whole lot of confidence in Jesus' wisdom! If we really believe that He is wiser than we could ever be, why would we try to mess with His handiwork? That would be like Zoë taking a magic marker and "improving" a Van Gogh. Let's trust His wisdom by obeying His word.

On the negative side of things, it's important for a church to belong to Christ because of **HIS AUTHORITY**. Jesus Himself makes a sobering statement in Matthew 10:28. In this life, the worst thing somebody can do to us is kill us. He might take his time about it, but sooner or later, it's over. By contrast, the punishments that God will hand out on the day of judgment will never be over, and if the thought of eternal suffering doesn't make something inside us shrivel up and cringe, we don't understand eternal suffering. Christ intends for the church to be His church, and when we take it away from Him and make it our church instead, He doesn't wink at that in an aw-isn't-that-cute kind of way. There is nothing cute about rebellion. It is a personal affront to the authority of Christ, and He will see that every rebel is punished. Only a fool would want to be on the receiving end of that punishment, and only obedience avoids it.

Finally, we must belong to Christ because of **HIS SALVATION**. The Hebrews writer explores the breadth of that salvation in Hebrews 7:25. Jesus is able to utterly destroy all those who rebel against Him, but He utterly saves those who obey Him as their Master. I find the concept of an uttermost salvation to be a hard one to get my mind around, but here's what I think it means: It means that He saves all faithful members of His church for all time from their sins as completely as they can be saved. Ephesians 5 discusses the way that Christ has washed His church, so that it is without any spot or wrinkle. Jesus doesn't cleanse us so that we're clean enough to pass. He cleanses us so that we are perfect and sparkling, and it is in that state that we stand before God on the Day of Judgment. No one who is outside the church belonging to Christ will experience a salvation like that. His ownership is that important.

This brings us to two meditations before the Lord's Supper. The first of these is collective. How wonderful it is that Christ has set out the pattern for His church for us to follow! How wonderful it is that we have it in our power to re-create that pattern! How wonderful it is that as we obey Him, we too can know the blessings of His covenant!

Second, though, let's consider whether we as individuals live lives that proclaim that we belong to Christ. Just as there are characteristics of a church that show it belongs to Christ, so too there are characteristics that reveal that an individual belongs to Him. Do we lead lives that show to everyone around us that He is our Master? Is the first goal of our lives to glorify Him? Or do we live for ourselves instead? Let's examine ourselves as we partake.

How Can We Be Christ's Church?

For the final portion of our lesson this morning, let's ask what we can do to truly be Christ's church. The first step in this process must be to **SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES**. Consider the words of Christ in John 5:39. Even though Jesus originally used these words to criticize the Pharisees, there's a crucial spiritual truth here for us. It is the Bible that testifies of Jesus. Nothing else does, only the word. That means that if we want to know who Jesus is and what He expects, we have to study the Bible. Lots of people have a problem with this. They want to inject their think-sos about Jesus into the way they serve Him. Once again, friends, that's only our beliefs and our desires masquerading as service. If we start down that road, we stop being the church of Christ and start being the church of us.

If we want to stay the church of Christ, the only way to do that is to return again and again to the word. It doesn't matter what we've always thought or done. It only matters what the Bible says. We only belong to Jesus if we learn what the Scripture teaches and adhere faithfully to it. There is no other way.

Second, we must **GIVE OURSELVES**. Let's read 2 Corinthians 8:5. First, let me make the point that there is no such institution as the Joliet church of Christ. It does not have an independent existence apart from us. Any local church is composed of the individuals who are its members. It follows, then, that if we want our church to belong to Christ, we can only accomplish that if we as individuals first belong to Christ. Despite the examples I used earlier, obedience to Jesus does not consist only of keeping the piano out of the auditorium and not writing a check from the church treasury to the orphans' home. Instead, it consists of carrying out the work He has decreed for His church: edifying the saved and saving the lost. Those things aren't the work of the preacher, or, at least, they are no more the work of the preacher than they are of any individual Christian. They are the responsibility of every single member here. The work of the church is primarily carried out through each one of us. If we aren't willing to do our share in that work, it leaves open the question of whether we are actually obedient to the will of Christ at all.

Third, if we belong to Christ, we will **LIVE WORTHILY**. Paul says this in Philippians 1:27. According to this text, the first thing that makes our conduct worthy is when we are united. Christ has always intended for His church to be one. By contrast, when faction and division emerge in a church, they establish that at least some members of the church belong to themselves instead of Jesus. However, the unity that Paul describes here isn't merely a passive thing. Instead, he appeals to the Philippian church to become a church united in action. They are to stand fast as one. They are to strive as one. When we refuse to take our part in the efforts of the church, that's not only a hindrance to the work of the church. It's a hindrance to its unity. When our brethren are working and we are not, we are not of one mind with them either, and that disunity denies our claim that Jesus owns us. To restate the point that John made in his talk a couple of weeks ago, our first day on the job as Christians is the day we are baptized, and the day we retire is the day we die. Every one of us who was able to totter into the assembly this morning is capable of doing something, and Jesus expects us to do it. As always, those who don't know what there is to do can talk to me. Believe me, there is no shortage of opportunities for service! The only question is whether we are going to live worthy by serving together as one.

Fourth, we show that we belong to Christ as a church when we choose to **BE STEADFAST**. Paul famously makes this point in 1 Corinthians 15:58. Jesus doesn't merely expect us to abound in the work of the Lord. He wants us to always be abounding in the work of the Lord. That sounds hard, but Paul explains how it's possible. We will always abound in the work of the Lord if and only if we know that our labor is not in vain in the Lord. If we believe our work will be productive, we will work. This is particularly true in the area of evangelism. At the very beginning of this lesson, I talked about a denomination that judging from their actions, no longer believes in the power of the gospel. Sometimes I wonder if there are a lot of Christians who don't believe in the power of the gospel either. We're so used to the concept,

at least, of studying the Bible and learning God's will for ourselves that we don't grasp how amazing that concept is. I would imagine that there are thousands of people in the Joliet area who have never thought of that, who would be astonished and excited to learn that they can read and understand God's word. However, they don't know because we aren't telling them. Let's make an effort to tell them. If you feel equipped to study with them yourselves, great. If not, talk to me. I'm excited about studying the Bible with anybody. Let's proclaim God and keep proclaiming Him.

There's a reason why the church that is truly of Christ does all these things. It's because the purpose of that church is to **GLORIFY GOD**. Paul says as much in Ephesians 3:20-21. I said earlier that the authority of Christ is personal, and that rejection of His authority is a personal affront to Him. That's not just true of authority. Everything in the Bible is about God and personal to Him. As a church belonging to Christ, our mindset should not be that of spiritual bureaucrats, going through and checking off little Scriptural check boxes. Instead, we ought to do what we do because we love Jesus, because we want to use our worship and our obedience to show how important He is to us and how much we care about Him. When there's a conversational opening to tell our neighbor about the Lord, that's not some dreaded, harsh test of our faith. That's an opportunity to reveal from our hearts how much Jesus personally means to us. Of course, if Jesus Himself doesn't actually mean anything to us, we're not going to have much to talk about, are we? If we want our church to be a church that shows His ownership, we're going to have to make our Christianity about Christ.