

The Perfect Church

Ephesians 1:15-23

Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Today we're going to look at what is church supposed to be like. What we get from the Scripture just read, the Church is made up of the head, being Christ, and then His body, being us. So what IS expected of the church of Christ and then what would make the perfect church. Some of you may already have an idea where I'm going with this message by asking the question "what is the perfect church?" but for a bit of a teaser, I'll say it right up front. On earth, in this lifetime, there is no perfect church. But, we can, as best as we know how, BE the church, which IS the body of Christ. But what is important to us is in how we go about BEING the church that God wants us to be.

Opinions people have about church are as numerous as there are people in this world, or so it seems. Unfortunatly, what we'll look at is that not everyone has the same opinion or understanding of what "The Church" is. Perhaps it has something to do as well with what Robert Lewis pointed out in his book, The Church of Irresistible Influence when he said: "Today, numerous studies confirm that the public, especially media and intellectual leaders, do not see Christianity as a dominant social force. Instead, six out of ten Americans believe the church is irrelevant." How rude of them, don't you think? I wouldn't call someone's hobby of needlepoint or bird watching irrelevant just because I'm not interested in it. But, hey, everyone is entitled to their own opinion, right? But, is that all that is there, an opinion? And where does this apparent insensitivity towards those who choose to go to church, and their apparent apathy toward church come from? I'm speaking of course about their presumably careful choice of the word "irrelevant." Or is it something other than just good old-fashioned bad manners and apathy? There are two

passages of Scriptures that we can look at to get a better view of what is happening with people's insensitivity or apathy toward church toward the things of God. #1. **1 Corinthians 2:13-14**, "These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." #2. Jesus said, in **John 3:19-21**, "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God." So then there are two issues mentioned in those two Scriptures that come into play into people's reactions to the church and the things of God. Ignorance and rebellion. Robert Palmer continues to say that the irrelevance that is claimed by the public doesn't just bring about some form of apathetic response but that it "provokes an ever-increasing cynicism and hostility." There you go—a lack of understanding of what God is doing and then a rebelling against what they don't understand "provokes an ever-increasing cynicism and hostility" from some folks. Who does that remind you of? An example of that in the Bible is Saul, who became the Apostle Paul, who wrote 13 books in the New Testament, 14 if you count Hebrews. He was vehemently opposed to the Way, as it was called back then, which was the living and preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, now what? We have people that will not understand and will be opposed (some moreso than others) to the church and the gospel of Jesus Christ. What then is our responsibility in all of that? Do we just throw up our hands and say, "oh well?" Or perhaps, we are adding to people's opinions based on how we operate as "The Church". We've already looked at the perfect definition of church in our Scripture for today that the church is comprised of Jesus Christ and then His body, which are His followers. It can be confusing to anyone who has been to more than a few church services from different churches. You will come to realize that no two churches nor church services are alike. Some churches will have very formal proceedings, where the leaders of the church may be dressed in religious garb, and they may have a variety of rituals that may pique your interest enough to get you to wonder what it all means, or you just may fail to see the point of it all. Some services will be much more lively, be it due to the music, videos that are played, the preaching, or maybe a little or a lot of all of them. Some churches you may go to you may think that you accidentally walked in on a funeral, and not wanting to cause a distraction, you wait it out until the end to leave, to which you may feel inclined to offer your condolences to the host as they shake your hand on the way out. But then in all of that it may get

one to finally ask themselves, what are they going to church for in the first place?

But once again, apathy towards such things one can possibly understand, but hostility? Alternatively, you may have gone to a church where the preacher spent thirty minutes screaming at you to where you were tempted with saying that you don't need that in your life, as you're hastily retreating to your safe place back at home. Another thing that may be noticed is the difference in the people who make up the "congregations", as they are generally called. Some churches you go into, you may get the impression that it is considered bad form to speak to anyone else. Other churches may be quite the opposite. You may have so many people trying to talk to you that you begin to get a bit suspicious of them, especially when they hand you a bucket asking you for money. Or you may go to a service where there's so much hooting and hollering, and jumping all around, you can't but wonder if that is how these people always are, or if this is some other kind of ritual that churches do. Of course it begs the question, but why?

If you were to ask the general public, "what is *THE* church?", you will probably get differing responses based upon their own experience, such as might be like the examples I just gave, and then they also will likely have their own opinions about what it should be or should've been like, based on their own knowledge and understanding. Hopefully, as a Christian, they will respond that, as they believed on Jesus Christ, that He died on a cross for their sins, and that He rose from the dead, and then when they confessed Jesus as Lord, meaning repenting of their sins, turning away from their sins and letting Jesus reign in their lives, then they received Him, meaning they were given the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit, to dwell in them and so thus, they became, as Jesus said, "born again" to where they became part of "the body of Christ", which is then THE CHURCH. So if you ever hear a preacher shout out the question, "Who's the church?" The answer would be, "We are the Church!" The foundation that it all rests on is what Jesus said in **John 3:16-17**, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."

So, getting back to our initial question, why is there amongst the majority of people such an emphatic negative response towards church, or as Robert Palmer put it, *the* church. As we already gathered from Scripture, ignorance plays a part, yet that wouldn't seem to be a reason to garner a reaction of hostility. Rebellion on the other hand, as Jesus said, is certainly a reason that one would react in such a way. But is there anything else going on that can be a contributing factor? It's time then to dig deeper and get at the

heart of what makes churches be, well, churches. For as I mentioned earlier, to which you may have also experienced, each church seems to operate differently. But then, the deeper you dig, what ends up being at the roots of how churches function is the Bible itself. At the very least, that it is what initially inspired them to become a church. Undoubtedly, some churches have expounded upon the Bible to the point that there is no recognizable resemblance of their operations, that at one point had supposedly sprung forth from a Biblical origin, but now instead is seemingly coming from some other book. It may give the impression that it came from a Hollywood Director's Guide, where it's packed full of drama and excitement with even an emotional anticlimax that will bring you to tears (that may have been when they yelled at you about being a sinner and that you're going to hell). From the other end of the spectrum, the church service may seem to be coming from a really bad play script that never had a Snowman's chance in Hawaii at Broadway. That one may have a lot of "Praise the Lord's" and "can I hear an amen" and pleas from the preacher to repeat everything he says. Then after all that, they start at the beginning and do it all over again. And again, and again. By now, it may appear as though I have a rather cynical view of churches as well. Not really. The point I am reaching for is not to pick apart different churches here. In fact, for those examples above I like to think that I would still most likely go home from their service considering myself blessed to have gone. But to be real, in a way you could probably make humorous observations about almost any church. But what I am attempting to get to ultimately, is to get to the cause of why churches can be so vastly different, while each church seems to lean in a particular direction, and to some with exaggerated distortion, and how that can end up being a contributing factor in people's bad opinions and negative reactions—some even hostile, about The Church. For some it could very well be the reason they are turned off to church—in the fact that they all seem to be grounded and focused on something different. In a way, each church then could be potentially viewed by an invitee as just another weird church where they do weird things.

In Jim Peterson's book, Church Without Walls, he says about churches: "Every church I know of has distinctives that greatly increase its effectiveness. Distinctives bring focus to action, and thus are very powerful. Their weakness lies in the flip side of focus: the tendency to ignore other truths of great importance that bring balance. So we can lose a part of the Bible because of a narrow focus on our distinctives." So, each church in one way or another ends up focusing more on certain, as Jim Peterson calls them, distinctives. I guess it makes sense, if your church has a talented worship leader to have a bit more emphasis on the worship time, or if your Pastor is a gifted speaker, your church service may devote more time for his message. But in Jim Peterson's quote he mentions

the importance in having balance in a church. After all, a church isn't operating just to glorify worship leaders or preachers, right?

So what sort of things would a church need to do in order to be balanced? The place to look for that answer would undoubtedly be in the Bible, right, since that is why one becomes a church to begin with? In a book called Systematic Theology by Wayne Grudem, lo and behold, there is a chapter on "The Church." He lists three primary purposes of the church. First, is worship of God, second, nurturing the believers or teaching them how to live as a Christian in a life that is pleasing to God, and third, reaching out to others outside of the church through evangelism and helping to meet their needs. There are many Scriptures in the Bible to support those three purposes.

For worship, in **Colossians 3:16** it says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts **to the Lord**" and likewise, in **Ephesians 5:19** it says, "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart **to the Lord.**" Worship isn't meant to be just *about the Lord* but *"to the Lord"*. So, with those Scriptures in mind, I went looking for examples of worship in the Bible. The first one I'll mention is probably one of the most dramatic examples, found in **2 Chronicles 5:13-14**, "indeed it came to pass, when the trumpeters and singers were **as one**, to make one sound to be heard in **praising and thanking the Lord**, and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and **praised the Lord**, saying: "For He is good, for His mercy endures forever," that the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not continue ministering because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God." Incredible isn't it? As they all became as **one in worship**, the glory of God filled the temple. As they worshipped to the Lord, they became as one in their worship. They weren't all just doing their own thing, they weren't singing *about the Lord* but *"to the Lord"* and they were all worshipping God together. The Apostle Paul wrote, in **Philippians 2:1-2**, "So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any **participation in the Spirit**, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, **being in full accord and of one mind** (ESV). It certainly appears as though being of one accord pleases God, for here is another example in **Acts 2:1-4**, "When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with **one accord** in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and *one* sat upon each of them. And they were all **filled with the Holy Spirit** and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance".

I don't want to appear presumptuous, but it certainly seems that when God is given the praise and glory by His people who are of one accord, He tends to make an appearance. It would be hard to imagine someone then not wanting to attend such a service where God made an appearance and His glory filled the place. One more thing, Jesus Himself said that God the Father must be worshipped in spirit and truth. "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24). To explain worshipping God in spirit and truth I went to gotquestions.org where they explained, "True worship must be "in spirit," that is, engaging the whole heart. Unless there's a real passion for God, there is no worship in spirit. At the same time, worship must be "in truth," that is, properly informed. Unless we have knowledge of the God we worship, there is no worship in truth. Both are necessary for God-honoring worship."

This takes us to the next essential purpose of the church, the nurturing or teaching of the people of the church. Without having the unity and then the foundation of truth instilled in your congregation, there isn't likely to be a worship experience together with the filling of the church with the glory of the Lord. You can be pretty sure about that. It can be as the folks of Athens who Paul was ministering to, who worshipped the "UNKNOWN GOD." (Acts 17:23) He certainly isn't going to bless their worship if He isn't even being acknowledged. Paul explains the importance of teaching by saying, "for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the **unity of the faith** and of the **knowledge of the Son of God**, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the **fullness of Christ**" (Ephesians 4:12-13). It sure is important to God that we are in unity with one another and to know Who and what we believe in and are worshipping. So much in fact that the last prayer of Jesus' before He was to be crucified on the cross He prayed to God the Father for His disciples but then he also prayed, "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that **they all may be one**, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be **one in Us**, that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:20-21).

The third essential purpose of the church is in reaching out to the people in your community. When speaking of evangelism, the Scripture that usually gets mentioned is what is called the Great Commission which is in **Matthew 28:18-20**. "And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and

lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." We are all called to be evangelists on some level. But, it is most important to remember what our role is and what responsibility the Holy Spirit has. We are to present the message of the good news of Jesus Christ. That is it. J. I. Packer in his book, Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God explains it succinctly: "Evangelism is just preaching the gospel...in which Christians make themselves mouthpieces for God's message of mercy to sinners...the way to tell whether in fact you are evangelizing is not to ask whether conversions are known to have resulted from your witness. It is to ask whether you are faithfully making known the gospel message." To go along with sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ is the showing the love of Jesus Christ. Those two are inseparable. As the Apostle Paul said, "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal", and if I "do not have love, I gain nothing." (**1 Corinthians 13:1,3**) Another thing to keep in mind is that, just as it is the Holy Spirit that brings you into His saving grace to the believing in Jesus Christ as your Redeemer, it is the same for other people as well. That goes also in trusting God that "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (**Philippians 1:6**). We all play a part in BEING THE CHURCH. In worship, in encouraging and helping one another, and in sharing the love and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

"Beloved, now WE are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what WE shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, WE shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is " (**1 John 3:2**) Notice the emphasis on WE? WE are the Church!-in Christ Jesus our Lord & Savior! One day God will create a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem. That city is described in **Revelation 21:22-27**, "But I saw no temple in it, for the **Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple**. The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light. And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it. Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there). And they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it. But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life." While we are to continue to BE THE CHURCH, there will always be some who will declare us insignificant and there will be some who will increase in cynicism and hostility but WE are to keep "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (**Hebrews 12:2**), and let him/her who glories, glory in the Lord. "For of Him [**Jesus**] and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen" (**Romans 11:36**)