

# Life Together...



CALLED INTO  
THE COMMUNITY  
OF FAITH

## The Business of the Church Matthew 28:19-20

The title of this current series is *Life Together: called into the community of faith*. In the interest of continuity and comprehension I have been spending a few minutes each week reviewing the previous sermons in the series. So far we have pointed out that while you were saved as individuals the Holy Spirit immediately placed you into a body, the Body of Christ. Into this community you were called *by* God and in this community you live out your common faith *before* God (*coram deo*). The Bible knows nothing of a freelance, private, independent, individualistic, Lone Ranger faith. Indeed, when it comes to the Church, to think correctly is to think corporately.

On July 20 I put forward an answer to the question: what is the fundamental thing you have in common? The Bible teaches that you share a common life in Christ. As those whose collective fortune is bound up in your champion; like branches whose life is drawn from a common vine, you are joined to Jesus in both a representative and a vital union. Everything else you have in common is a consequence of this single, elemental spiritual reality.

On July 27, we gave ourselves to exploring this question: What marks a local church as a genuine expression of the body of Christ? The big idea was this: the gospel alone is the essential mark of the true church. From the Belgic Confession we learned that there are three dimensions of this essential mark: the faithful preaching of the Word, administration of the Sacraments, and exercise of discipline (see Article 29).

Last Sunday, August 3, we turned our attention to the maturity of the Church. According to Paul the Church matures as she more and more reflects Jesus; as the Church more and more takes on His likeness. And so the question for last Sunday was this: What is *God's* standard for evaluating the growth and maturity of a church? Maturity in the body of Christ is measured, not according to human standards of "success" but by the presence of the enduring virtues of faith, hope, and love. Nowhere is this expressed more clearly than in **I Thessalonians 1:1-3**. *Paul and Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. <sup>2</sup> We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; <sup>3</sup> constantly bearing in mind your **work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father.*

Today we are asking, "What is the business of the Church?" If I were to ask you, "What is Ford's purpose or mission", you might hesitate a moment. But what if I put it like this: "What is Ford's *business*?" Almost without thinking you'd answer, "Ford makes cars." That's the kind of succinct and simple answer we want to give to the question, "What is the business of the Church?" There are really two parts to the answer. The first is broad and philosophical. Why does

the Church even exist? The second is more narrow and practical and flows out of the answer to the first question. What is the church supposed to be doing?

Why does the Church even exist? We're talking about the most fundamental reason for her presence on the planet. Theologians have offered numerous options. The church exists to transform the culture; to shape the very structures of human society through political and social activism. The church exists to liberate the politically and economically oppressed people of the world. The Church exists to relieve the suffering of fallen mankind; to minister to the poor, the sick, the displaced, and the disadvantaged. The Church exists to promote peace and justice among men; to fight against intolerance and exploitation. Now, while commendable, none of these four answers man's basic problem as revealed in the Bible. The reasons for the Church's presence is inexorably linked to man's most profound problem.

Here it is. The Bible teaches that God is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. He is a God of infinite perfections. He is the one living and true God, the Creator of heaven and earth. Man was created, not free to be a law unto himself but bound to keep the law of his Maker. Every man and woman is born under obligation to worship and obey the King and Lord of all that is. But in our first father, Adam, every man who has or ever will live chose to violate, to transgress the perfect law of the loving and just God who had created him. Perfect justice demands that he be punished. Our greatest problem is not poverty, oppression, injustice, or sickness. Our greatest problem is God. The prospect that ought to bring men to our knees in terror is that of facing a holy and offended God who is angry with the wicked

every day. Man's "greatest need is to escape the fearsome judgment of the wrath of God which hangs over [him]" (Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, p. 654).

The central message of Christianity and indeed, of the Bible itself, is that God has solved man's problem. Jesus Christ, the innocent and sinless Son of God came and *bore our sin in His own body on the cross*. He took upon Himself the punishment to which we were liable. On the cross Jesus endured the wrath of God, which was due to guilty sinners. Christ's substitutionary death on the cross became the only payment for man's sin. Beloved, *a righteousness from God has been revealed* (Rom. 3:21-22) and is offered to all as a *free gift* in the Gospel (Rom. 6:23). To know the forgiveness of sins and to receive the gift of eternal life one must turn to God in repentance and faith in our Lord Jesus. Jesus said, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life*" (**John 5:24**). That's the Gospel!

God's mission in Christ is a saving mission. And the Church is called to participate in that saving mission through the proclamation of the good news, the Gospel, of redemption through the cross and resurrection of Christ. The mission of the Church is declarative. I Peter 2:9, *But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR GOD'S OWN POSSESSION, that you may **proclaim** the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light*. Acts 17:30, "*Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now **declaring** to men that all everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man who He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.*" II

Corinthians 5:19, *God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us **the word of reconciliation**.*

The business of the Church as an institution ordained by God is that assigned to it by Jesus – no more and no less. Jesus, before ascending to the Father, gave these marching orders to the Church, “*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age*” (Matt. 28:19-20). “In essence, Jesus was saying ... ‘Go everywhere and win men to Christ [that is, make Christians], and then baptize them and teach these Christians the truth that I have taught you’ ” (Getz, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church*, p. 48). Putting it even more simply they were to win them through the proclamation of the Gospel and then build them up by that same Gospel. One pastor says, “The Church therefore exists to carry out two foundational functions – evangelism (to make disciples) and edification (to teach them)” (Getz, *Sharpening*, p. 48). According to our own PCA Book of Church Order the Lord Jesus Christ has established His Church in the world “for the gathering and perfecting of the saints” (BCO, 1-2) through the proclamation of the Gospel. That this was clearly the charge and that this is in fact what the followers of Christ did is demonstrated beyond doubt in the Book of Acts. Acts 14:21-22, *And after [Paul and Barnabas] had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith.* “In other words, on Paul’s first missionary journey, he and Barnabas preached the Gospel and won many to Christ (made many disciples). Later, on the same journey, they returned ... and strengthened the new Christians (the disciples) – a

direct fulfillment of Christ's commission in Matthew 28:19-20" (Getz, *Sharpening*, p. 48).

But pastor isn't the Church to be engaged in the transformation of society, the relief of suffering, and the liberation of the oppressed? I will answer using a simple illustration. Justice, temporal relief, liberation, and all the rest are benefits that attend the Gospel. Think of it like a wedding. Who stands with the bride as part of the wedding party? Her attendants. In the processional her attendants precede her. In the recessional her attendants follow her. The Gospel is the bride. Spiritual and temporal benefits always attend her. Don't confuse the bride with one of her attendants. So, the Lord Jesus Christ has established His Church in the world exclusively for the gathering and perfecting of the saints through the proclamation of the Gospel.

Now, in the second half of this sermon I am going to quote from the book *The Enduring Community* (Habig and Newsom, Reformed University Press) rather freely. My manuscript, which will be available next Sunday, will carefully credit these quotations. What is the church supposed to be doing? The authors of *The Enduring Community* used this story to begin their chapter on "The Business of the Church." "I have an idea," said a friend, his impish smile indicating there was a point to his antics. "I want to open a used car lot at the church," he continued. Huh? "Yeah, think of it. It'll be great. We have all that parking lot space left mostly vacant throughout the week. We'll simply move the cars off the lot on Sundays for church and sell cars the rest of the week. It'll give Christians a place where they can buy their cars and give an opportunity for them to witness to lost people who come to the lot looking." I decided to play along with the game just to see where he was headed. Well, who will run the car lot? "I will,

and you can help me if you want. But we'll need to have the elders of our church oversee it."

All of a sudden, it was clear where this friend was going. Why in the world would the church take on a project like a used car lot? Why would the elders waste their time overseeing something that is so clearly removed from their biblical job description? This friend was getting at the core church issue: just what is okay and is not okay for the church to do? A basketball gym? A school? A shopping mall? (All of these are now being run by American churches.) What would keep a church from opening a pawnshop, or a legal office, or a doctor's office, or an accountant's office?" "Great question," this wise friend said, a grin spilling over his face. "Kinda makes you wonder about a lot of things the Church does, doesn't it" (*Enduring*, pp. 79-80)?

"For most American evangelicals, the Church's job description consists of an almost endless list of tasks that are as varied as the people who insist upon them" (*Enduring*, p. 81). I cannot tell you the number of times that I have been "hammered" because of APC's lack of involvement *as a church* in politics and the political process. The suggestion that APC *as a church* start a school has been voiced over the years. I receive mild criticism for our lack of involvement *as a church* in meaningful mercy ministries. I must admit, there's some basis for that criticism. As the old commercial used to ask, "So what's a mother to do?" Indeed, what's a church to do?

The key to making informed decisions relative to the business of the Church is found in carefully distinguishing between Church work and Kingdom work. The visible Church is an institution, an organization with buildings, procedures, members, and all the rest. The Kingdom of God includes the Church but is much

larger than the Church. The Kingdom of God has come whenever and wherever the rule of King Jesus is manifested in the various spheres of our earthly life.

At least six families in our church, including the Ferrells, live in the Woodland West subdivision. We live on the edge of; right across the tracks from the cultural heart of our city. Our neighbors include Unclaimed Freight, Discount Cigarettes, Pops Auto Outlet, and Baby Dolls. Now what if a group of believers from our neighborhood banded together and actually got that “gentlemen’s club” shut down. In that case, the Kingdom of God has come. The rule of king Jesus would have been given concrete expression over evil and sin.

Why is this relevant to our discussion on the business of the Church? It is imperative that the Church, as a visible body, know and stick to the main thing. “To maintain the integrity of her mission in the world and not forget her primary calling, [the Church] must withdraw from activities not specific to her sphere and commit herself to the jobs that God has given only to her to do” (*Enduring*, p. 84). Southern Presbyterian theologian, James Henley Thornwell said, “Other societies exist for the good of man as a moral, social, political being; [the Church] exists for the glory of God in the salvation of sinners. Her ends are supernatural and Divine. She knows man and God only in the awful and profound relations implied in the terms guilt, sin, pardon, penitence, and eternal life” (“Theology as a Life in Individuals and in the Church”, *Southern Presbyterian Review*, October 1859).

It is necessary to distinguish between what the Church does in its capacity *as a church* and what its members do in their capacities *as individual Christians*. “Responsibilities in the Kingdom ... need to remain in the hands of Christians



who inhabit those spheres, while the responsibilities within the Church need to remain at the feet of those gifted by God and ordained by the body to do so. Kingdom and Church must mind their respective business" (*Enduring*, p. 86). "And yet Christians have somehow assumed that all worthwhile Christian service that is done in the world must be funneled through the local assembly of believers" (*Enduring*, p. 87).

Should the Session of APC, *as a court of the Church*, start and oversee a dental clinic, for example? The obvious question is "Where in Paul's instruction to Timothy and Titus regarding the responsibilities of elders is [dental clinic] administration?" (*Enduring*, p. 87) ... Make no mistake; it is good and lawful for Christians to start and administrate dental clinics. "However, it is decidedly *not* the responsibility of pastors and elders *in their corporate capacity* to take responsibility for these kinds of works. Stated another way, [dental clinic] administration is Kingdom work, a sphere in which every Christian lives and is required to serve" (*Enduring*, p. 87). Our dentist in Nashville was Dr. Rick Barclay. We attended church with Rick and his family. Rick closed his office every Friday afternoon. He spent those afternoon hours providing dental care for homeless men and women at a mission in downtown Nashville. Rick was extending the Kingdom of God in the sphere in which he, as an individual Christian, lived and moved.

What difference does all this make? It has profound implications for the life and health of the Church. First, for the pastors and elders of your church. If a local church has this stuff down then pastors can focus their efforts, just as the Apostles did, on the ministry of the word, prayer, and spiritual oversight. The expectations of the congregation would be brought more in line with those

actually delineated in the Bible. Between the two of us, Tom and I have invested close to 60 hours in preparation for his Sunday School lesson and my sermon. We are trying to stay the course in terms of our primary calling. To the degree that you expect us to be the initiators, organizers, coordinators, and administrators of a bunch of other ministries, we compromise our God-given callings, everyone suffers, and the Gospel itself goes begging.

“Second, church members just might be roused out of their slumber when it comes to activity within the Church ... [This concept of the Kingdom ought to energize the fire out of you guys!] For a man to shake his head and say, “Someone ought to do something about those poor homeless men downtown,” is to admit that he has seen a need and not taken the responsibility to meet it. Instead, he attends the next [congregational] meeting and suggests that a committee of the church be formed in order to “look into” the “possibility” of “considering” something being done about the poor in his neighborhood! ‘Do it yourself!’ ought to be the Church’s cry. ‘Band together with the believers with whom you sit side by side, Sunday after Sunday, and do something about bringing justice to the world’ “ (*Enduring*, p. 89), relieving the suffering, transforming the educational, judicial, and political structures of our society, fighting the exploitation of the environment. In other words, get out there and bring the Kingdom of God to bear on all areas of life.

“The responsibility to relieve suffering around [you] rests squarely in the lap of all who name the name of Christ. It is the *sine qua non* of Christianity. But it is decidedly not solely the responsibility of pastors and elders, *as pastors and elders*” (*Enduring*, p. 90).

What's the risk of ignoring all of this? Back in 1963 a sign was attached to the door of University Christian Church in New York. It said this: "Gone out of business. Didn't know what our business was." What's the business of the Church? The Church exists for the gathering and perfecting of the saints through the ministry of the gospel. What are we to actually be doing? The Church, in its corporate capacity, is to be about the business of making disciples through the proclamation of the Gospel - being diligent to maintain the marks of the Church and to equip the saints for the work of service. You, the individual members of the Church, prepared through and armed with the Gospel, are to extend the Kingdom of God into the spheres of activity in which you, by the providence of God, find yourselves. Beloved, may God have mercy upon us, frail children of dust, as we seek to conform ourselves to His design for our life together.

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## The Business of the Church

Matthew 28:19-20

### Review of first four sermons in this series

When it comes to the Church, to think correctly is to think \_\_\_\_\_.  
The Bible teaches that you share a \_\_\_\_\_ in Christ.  
The \_\_\_\_\_ alone is the essential mark of the true church.  
Maturity in the body of Christ is measured, not according to human standards of  
“success” but by the presence of the enduring virtues of \_\_\_\_\_,  
and \_\_\_\_\_.

### This week: What is the business of the Church?

#### Question #1: *Why does the Church even exist?*

Theologians have offered numerous options.

The Church exists to \_\_\_\_\_ the culture.

The Church exists to \_\_\_\_\_ the politically and economically  
oppressed people of the world.

The Church exists to \_\_\_\_\_ the suffering of fallen mankind.

The Church exists to \_\_\_\_\_ peace and justice among men.

**The reasons for the Church’s \_\_\_\_\_ is inexorably linked to  
man’s most profound \_\_\_\_\_.**

God’s mission in Christ is a \_\_\_\_\_ mission. And the Church is called to  
participate in that saving mission through the \_\_\_\_\_ of the good  
news, the Gospel, of redemption through the cross and resurrection of Christ.  
The mission of the Church is *declarative* (I Pet. 2:9; Acts 17:30; II Cor. 5:19).

**Matthew 28:19-20**, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

**The Lord Jesus Christ has established His Church in the world  
for the \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ of the saints  
through the proclamation of the Gospel.**

Justice, temporal relief, liberation, and all the rest are benefits that  
\_\_\_\_\_ the Gospel.

**Question #2: What is the church supposed to be doing?**

Distinguish the Church and the Kingdom.

It is imperative that the Church, as a visible body, know and stick to the  
\_\_\_\_\_ .

"To maintain the integrity of her mission in the world and not forget her primary calling, [the Church] must withdraw from activities not specific to her sphere and commit herself to the jobs that God has given only to her to do" (*The Enduring Community*).

"Other societies exist for the good of man as a moral, social, political being; [the Church] exists for the glory of God in the salvation of sinners. Her ends are supernatural and Divine. She knows man and God only in the awful and profound relations implied in the terms guilt, sin, pardon, penitence, and eternal life" (J. H. Thornwell, "Theology as a Life in Individuals and in the Church", *Southern Presbyterian Review*, October 1859).

It is necessary to distinguish between what the Church does in its capacity as a  
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**What difference does all this make?**

It has profound implications for the life and health of the Church.

First, for the pastors and elders of your church.

Second, for the church members themselves.