

## Rediscovering the Church

I felt I was to share this message with you today as part of our rediscovery series. I want to talk with you about Rediscovering the Church. I told you last Sunday that we are living in a hinge period of time, when great change seems to be sweeping the church world. It remains to be seen what the church will look like in thirty years if Jesus tarries. It's not all threatening or bad. Some poignant and penetrating questions are being asked. Clergy and laity alike are asking questions about how we do church and what's the point of the church and can I be a follower of Christ without being a part of the church?

I was visiting with Pastor Brian this week about some of these issues and I told him at some point I just get weary of the ongoing discussion about church and what it means and what it ought to look like and how do we get people to connect with the church and how do we grow the church and how do we attract the lost to the church and how do we close the back doors of the church and how do we keep morale up and how do we recruit more workers and how do we get people to give and...it's exhausting. I get invitations weekly, almost daily from some church or some para-church organization inviting us to a conference to learn how to reach people, keep people, how to grow the church, how to make the church safe, how to, how to, how to...

I looked through my library at home, I didn't even look at the books I have in my office here. You want to hear some of the titles? Here is what we read and think about and try to figure out as pastors. Here are some titles in my library right now: Quitting Church, Taking Your Church to the Next Level, Letter to a Diminished church, Advanced Strategic Planning, One Church Four Generations, The Habits of Highly Effective Churches, Brethren Hang Loose, Brethren Hang Together, Community of the King, Liberating the Church, The Problem of Wineskins, How to Break Growth Barriers, Simple Church, Built to Last, Successful Home Cell Groups, The Apostolic Nature of the Church, The Body, The Life Giving Church, The Second Reformation, Unlearning Church, The Church You've Always Wanted, The Unstoppable Church, High Expectations, A New Kind of Church, The Power of Loving Your Church, Dying for Change, Church Next - Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry, Staff Your Church For Growth, Body Life, The Church at the End of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Building People, The Emerging Church, The Open Church, A Kingdom Manifesto, Why We're Not Emergent, Stories of Emergence, A Radical Reformation, Where Do We Go From Here, God's Vision for Your

Church, Pouring New Wine Into Old Wineskins, Unleashing the Church, Full Circle, Love Acceptance and Forgiveness, Let My People Grow, The Body Style, Church, Why Bother? The Church in Mission, The Church on the Way, Liberating the Laity, What on Earth is the Church? The Very Large Church, The Equippers Guide, The Church of Love, The Bride, One Size Doesn't Fit All, The Church, The Living Church, A Prophetic Vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Surprising Insights From the Unchurched, Into the Future, What Christ Thinks of the Church, When God Builds a Church, Decoding the Church, Life After Church.

No wonder I feel exhausted. I'm tired just reading the list, let alone reading the books, and no, I haven't read them all. But we are faced with all this information and all these ideas and theories and explanations and approaches on how to be the church and how to grow the church. How do we make sure it relates to several generations at a time and how do we have something for everyone, or should we? What kind of services and how long and what kind of music and what diversity, and on and on it goes. Should we provide coffee and a bookstore? What about a café and a fitness center?

We get to the end of all the conferences and all the books and the magazines and the blogs and websites and dvd collections and we are still trying to figure out, what is the church supposed to look like and how are we supposed to be participants in the church?

Let me direct your attention to three things that I feel I am to share with you concerning the church this morning. Out of all those books I just mentioned I left one out. As my New Testament Professor at ORU used to say, "modesty prevents me from mentioning the author's name." I read some of this book again this week and you know, this is a pretty good book - a pretty thorough look at the way the church is described in the bible. Borrowing from this book, *Without Spot or Wrinkle* (copies of which are available for purchase at the information desk), I want to mention a couple of things about what I feel to be the most dramatic image of the church given to us. The New Testament writers used a number of pictures and images to describe the church. We are pictured as covenant people, part of a mystery, salt and light, the branch, a spiritual house, the priesthood, the family, the bride, the army, an inn, the sheep of his pasture, and finally, as the Body of Christ.

In four New Testament books Paul refers to the church as the body of Christ. In the opening of the book I mention five characteristics of the church that are most readily seen in this

view of the church as the body: the church is alive, dynamic, made up of interrelated parts, has a source of energy and follows an intrinsic design. “We are the body of Christ, designed and created to function as a body, related and connected to one another, interacting with one another and receiving direction from the head” which is Jesus Christ himself.

Paul writes, **“Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” Romans 12:4-5**

And again, **“The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body - whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free ...Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be...As it is, there are many parts, but one body...so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” 1 Corinthians 12:12-27**

And again, Paul writes, **“From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” Ephesians 4:16.**

What’s all this about then? It’s about who we are. We are the body of Christ, and whether we look like us here at Carbondale, or whether we look like Agora or lifechurch.tv, or Victory, or Asbury United Methodist or a thousand other expressions, the point is we are the body of Christ – each local fellowship or community in one sense is a body that collectively make up the Body of Christ, the universal church of the Lord Jesus Christ, made up of all those who have come to Christ and made him the savior and lord of their lives.

Now, just a couple of comments about being the body. Paul makes it plain, the body is

made up of all these separate parts. It's all parts - some inside, some outside, but it's all parts. But understand, if you've got a leg over here and an arm over there and a torso over there and a gallbladder up there, you've got parts, but I wouldn't say you had a body. It's the connections that make it a body. Paul called it the supporting ligament that joins it all together and holds it all together. The church is about all these separate, distinct, diverse parts that are all connected together, held together in relationship with each other and with Christ. We are all connected to the head which is Christ and because of that then we are all connected to each other. It is about relationships. The whole thing is about being connected to Christ - being in Christ, and being connected to one another. That's what the church is all about.

You see, **It's always been about relationships.** God has always valued relationship. It's why Jesus came to die upon the cross, to reconcile us to God so our sins could be forgiven and we could be in right relationship with God. It started with God being in relationship with Israel, but that wasn't enough for the awesome love and mercy of God. He wanted more. His love was so great that he wanted the whole world to be able to come to him in a holy relationship. So as we said, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself that whosoever will may come to him and find forgiveness and salvation and eternal life.

Now we are related to God, he is our Heavenly Father, but that wasn't enough. He wanted us to be in right relationship with each other. This was the sign of our being in right relationship with God, that we were rightly connected to each other in love. John declared, **"We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers."** 1 John 3:14. **"...if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us."** 1 John 4:12.

John continues, **"If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: whoever loves God must also love his brother."** 1 John 4:19-21.

**We must be connected to each other.** It is through the relationships within the body of Christ that his life and love and grace and healing flows into the church. We have to be connected to each other, in relationship with each other in order to keep that life flowing and gracing the body of Christ. Listen to *Without Spot or Wrinkle* again, "If you placed a tourniquet around your arm to stop the flow of blood and left it there, eventually your arm would become

useless. Starved for blood and oxygen the arm would in effect die and have to be amputated from the body. This is the danger in becoming isolated from one another in the church. Without relationship we are cut off from the life-flow of Christ to His body and consequently, we begin to die.” We must remain connected to one another as we remain connected to Christ.

I don’t care what the building looks like or what the pastor wears, none of that has much to do with what the church is, except to the extent that it facilitates our relationship to Christ and to each other. How do we make the connection? Here’s a place to start at Carbondale. Pick up one of these books and look for opportunities to connect with each other. Next Sunday morning the leaders of our Life Groups will be in the foyer after service. Plan to sign up and get connected. And find your way to a worship service and to our communion service next Sunday evening and make sure that you connect with Jesus on a deeper level as well.

**We must value one another.** Can you think of a part of your body you would be willing to sacrifice or do without - other than that 45 pounds of extra weight? “I don’t really use my left hand that much. Maybe I’ll just have it taken off.” It’s ridiculous. The truth is, every part is important. You aren’t willing to lose any part. We need to communicate that to everyone around us as part of the body of Christ. “You are vitally important to this body and that means you are vitally important to me because I’m part of this body. I’ll suffer if we don’t have your contribution, your gifts, your talent, your resources, your love, your prayers.” Everytime you start to think you aren’t that important or there isn’t a place for you, think about your own body. What part would you say is unimportant or unnecessary? Every part is valuable. Every part is needed. Every part is useful and has a role to play and so do you. You are part of the body of Christ.

**We must serve one another.** Can you imagine one part of your body being in pain or being incapacitated in some way and the rest of the body just ignoring that part, or giving up on that part. “I’ll tell you, I’ve had it with that right leg just dragging itself around. That’s it. We’re through with that leg I tell you. It’s over.” That’s silly. We rally around to help, to serve, we figure out ways to compensate and nurse that leg back to health. We look to heal and not to amputate or forsake. We are all part of the body of Christ and consequently each part is valuable and each part must serve the other. We all suffer when one suffers, we all rejoice when one rejoices. It’s how we function as the body of Christ.

**We must love and care for each other.** There is something wrong with a person who goes around punching themselves in the face or slamming their hand in the door. We love our body too much to want to harm it. The same must be true for the members of Christ's body. We must love and care for the body of Christ. Paul speaks of this kind of love when he talks about marriage as an analogy of the church. **“In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his body.” Ephesians 5:28-30.**

We feed and take care of our body, not harming our own body. We are to feed and take care of our wives as husbands, and we are to participate in feeding, caring for and nurturing the members of the body of Christ because that is our body, the body of which we are apart. Oh that we could stop harming ourselves by attacking and judging and criticizing and gossiping about each other.

I said there were three things I wanted to tell you about the church. The first was to simply point out that whatever else we can try to be, whatever methods we attempt to use, ultimately it still boils down to loving God and loving each other, being in relationship with God and then being in right relationship with each other. That's being the church.

The second thing I felt I was to tell you is that **the church is the last prophetic voice of truth on this planet.** Politicians can't seem to speak the truth. Newscasters can't speak the truth. Everyone has to put their own spin on everything. But we are to be the voice of truth, declaring the truth of who God is and what he has come to do in the lives of all who will listen and believe. What a responsibility we have and the truth is, we haven't always lived up to that responsibility.

The church must speak the truth. I am weary of half truths spoken under the guise of faith confessions or bait and switch evangelism that speaks of one thing and offers another. The world can't trust a church, a body of believers that can't even risk speaking the truth to ourselves, let alone what we speak to the world. Church, let's be honest about ourselves, our faith, our doubts, our walk with God, this journey of faith we are on. Let's be honest about the life we've found in Christ. Let's be honest about the cross we are called to bear and at the same time, let's be honest about the hope-filled and grace filled life to which we have been called. Let's speak

the truth about sin and its consequences, not with voices dripping with judgement and disgust, but with voices and hearts breaking with sorrow and compassion for the lost and dying. Let's speak the truth and let the Holy Spirit do his work to bring conviction - to do the convincing. Let's live the truth and let the good news of Jesus Christ bring light into the darkness of this world.

Being the body of Christ, connected to Jesus and connected to one another, speaking the truth and living the truth. Why is it so important? What difference does it really make? The answer is the third thing I felt I was to tell you this morning and that is to realize that **the church of Jesus Christ is the only hope for the world.** The church is the only hope this world has. Who do you think has the answer? Politicians? The school system? The casinos? Will more money or better education and or better health care redeem the heart of mankind? Will any of that get to the root problem deep down inside each one of us? The church is the only hope. Not preachers preaching the gospel, that is part of the church, but you can't get sinners and the unchurched to listen to preachers. The only hope is the gospel preached and proclaimed and taught and lived out and heralded in and through the lives of all of us – the church. You are the gospel being proclaimed on your job. You are the good news being told in your classroom. You are the sermon your neighbors will respond to. The church, all of us, connected to Jesus and connected to each other, building each other up, sharing our lives with each other, weeping and rejoicing together, sharing hope and life with each other and with the lost and hurting and dying, and growing up into Christ who is the head of the church, the body of Christ. That's the only hope for this world.

That's the church. That's the church stylish or not so stylish, current or not so current, but that's the heart and life of the church. There are days I'm so glad I'm a part and there are days that I think, "now why am I a part of this?" And then I remember, it's part of the process of how we do life in the kingdom of God. It's how we live and grow and function and breath and develop as the living, body of Christ. We do it together, looking to Jesus. We do it together, bearing each other's burdens and fulfilling the law of Christ. We do it together, looking to Jesus who is the Head of this Church, the author of our story of grace, the lover of our souls. He is the one who called us out and called us to himself and said of all of us - you are my body, my church and I will build my church and the gates of hell won't prevail against us. We are his church.

Rediscover it. Pray for it. Get involved in the life of his church. Be his church.