

The Church Matters
What Kind of Church is This?
Sherwood Oaks CC John 17:20-23 October 30, 2022

You've been invited to a friend's house for supper and as you gather around the table the hostess serves a suspicious looking casserole. With your first bite, you ask yourself, "What kind of a meal is this?" It might be a question of curiosity, or concern or even fear. You want to know in case you'll be needing antacids later. Or you're attending your child's elementary school's talent show and some child prodigy sits down at the piano and plays Chopin's Polonaise in A Flat Major. You whisper under your breath, "What kind of kid is this?" Now the question grows out of amazement and admiration. You want to know so you can applaud such talent.

"What kind of church is this?" I wonder how many of you asked that question on your first visit. When I first started preaching, the only way a person could get a feel for a congregation was to attend in person. Today, I think most people attend for the first time via live stream. Visiting electronically gives one a feel for the church's culture, style of music and attire. It's also a safe way to make sure it isn't one of those snake handling churches. In my mind, snakes and church don't go together...honestly, snakes don't go with anything! The question, "What kind of church is this?" might be born out of curiosity, concern, amazement, admiration or any of a dozen other feelings.

Is Sherwood Oaks Christian Church part of a denomination? Why is the name Christian used – I thought all churches were Christian. Why do they take the Lord's Supper every week? What kind of heritage does this congregation have? Why don't they provide pillows in the pews or naps?

Before I jump in trying to answer that question, let me express how much I appreciate the current sermon theme – *Church Matters*. Scripture tells us the church is his body, his bride, his family. I don't know any human who would suggest the body doesn't matter or any husband who would suggest the bride doesn't matter or any parent who would suggest the family doesn't matter. Church matters.

So, what kind of church is this? With the 60th anniversary just around the corner, we could talk about six decades of faithful service in this community, but that really wouldn't answer the question. We need to journey back in time and pick up a bit of history. You may be thinking, "*Ugh, I don't like history, it's boring.*" Maybe not.

Governor Woodrow Wilson (before being elected the 28th US president) in a speech given at a Denver rally, in 1911, said, "A nation which does not remember what it was yesterday, does not know what it is today, nor what it is trying to do. We are trying to do a futile thing if we do not know where we came from or what we have been about." The same can be said about the church; when we as God's people do not remember who

we have been in the past we cannot know who we are today nor what we are trying to accomplish for the future. When we forget the history of our spiritual heritage, we will lose something priceless.

At the outset of the 19th century, the church in America was kind of a mess. It could be creedal, divisive, sectarian and contentious. And then something began to happen. It became known as the Second Great Awakening. Let's go to Kentucky for a minute. I know...I know...it's the last place a Hoosier wants to go, but we need to catch a glimpse of a life changing moment for some 20,000 frontier people - **the Cane Ridge Revival**. It was a week-long meeting in August of 1801, and it profoundly impacted a young Presbyterian preacher by the name of **Barton Warren Stone**.

After this event he began to rethink the way the church was ministering in frontier America. At that time, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois and Ohio were on the frontier. Stone wanted to get away from sectarian names and practices. He simply wanted to use the name Christian (which means belonging to Christ) and to take the Word of God as the only guide for church practice and doctrine; no creeds or manmade dogmas. Others quickly embraced what Stone was teaching and churches bearing merely the name Christian began to spring up throughout the Ohio valley.

About the same time, in western Pennsylvania a father and son team, **Thomas and Alexander Campbell**, also Presbyterian preachers, were coming to similar conclusions. They weren't just any Presbyterians, but Old Light, Anti-Burgher, Seceder Presbyterians, Scottish political issues non-existent in America, but the church maintained its division here. Discouraged with such contention, they too pulled away from their roots and joined forces with Barton Stone. The result has been known as the Restoration Movement. And out of this Movement came the following principles and practices:

- ...The Scriptures alone are the source of Christian teaching.
- ...Churches should function in congregational freedom - no denominational authority.
- ...Evangelism must be a major concern.
- ...Faith in Christ and obedience to Him are all that is necessary to become a Christian.
- ...Baptism: the practice of immersion unites the believer with Christ's death, burial and resurrection.
- ...A weekly observance of the Lord's Supper is central to congregational worship.
- ...Local churches were under the oversight of a plurality of elders.
- ...The name "Christian" identifies the church with the person of Jesus Christ only.

These principles rested upon the foundation of *unity* on the basis of *New Testament authority*. Unity at the expense of New Testament authority tends to accept any doctrinal belief if unity is the end result. One's interpretation of New Testament authority to the exclusion of unity tends to breed sectarianism because others who don't agree are excluded. This two-pronged foundation maintains a healthy balance. **Rupertus**

Meldenius, a Lutheran minister authored the following in a tract he published in 1626, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” That became a clear and succinct statement embraced by our RM movement. It might seem clearer today to say it this way, “In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion liberty and in all things love.” There were other slogans or catch phrases that captured the essence of this simple yet profound approach:

- “Where the Bible speaks, we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are silent.”
- “No creed but Christ, no book but the Bible, no law but love”
- “Not the only Christians, but Christians only.”

But are these principles, birthed two centuries ago, still relevant today? After all, the RM didn’t solve all the church related issues of its day and it has had its own divisions through the years. Before we casually dismiss the past, let’s take a moment to consider the lasting value of long-term wisdom. American culture has evolved greatly since the US Constitution was ratified in 1788, and yet the wisdom of that guiding document is readily apparent 234 years later. I would suggest that the ideals espoused by Campbell and Stone also represent timeless wisdom.

The plea for unity on the Bible’s authority is vital; I don’t have to agree with another’s *opinions* to work and serve together for the good of the Kingdom. In studying Campbell and Stone, they didn’t see eye to eye on some major theological issues, but they found a way to unite despite their differing opinions. That seems a pattern worth following for today.

And as to our practices, I have yet to witness an immersion that didn’t result in hugs and tears of joy. And no matter how often I participate in the Lord’s Supper it never becomes routine. To the contrary, it is central to my worship. And honestly, I cannot think of a way to improve upon the name Christian Church. The simplicity of this name seems fitting for any generation. What’s more, it identifies us with the only one who truly matters – Jesus Christ.

Our text this morning comes from the gospel of John but let me set the stage before we read the passage. This dialogue takes place in the upper room on the night before the cross just after Jesus and the disciples have shared the Lord’s Supper for the first time. Chapter 13 ends after an emotional exchange. Judas leaves the last supper to carry out his traitorous plans and Peter is left reeling over the Lord’s prediction that he would deny Jesus three times before the rooster crowed twice. Perhaps sensing all the distress, Jesus shares these words in John 14, “Let not your heart be troubled, you believe in God...”. Chapters 14-16 become his final briefing with those who would be instrumental in carrying out his work. But in chapter 17, Jesus shifts gears again and prays. It is the most extensive single prayer of Jesus recorded in Scripture. This is no ordinary prayer – many theologians refer to it as a high priestly prayer because it parallels

the high priest's prayer at that most solemn of Jewish events, the Day of Atonement. On that day the High Priest would symbolically remove the sin of the nation of Judah.

The High Priest's prayer would begin with the consecration of the HP himself, then his colleagues in the temple service and then for all the people of the Jewish nation. Jesus began with himself, then prayed for his colleagues the disciples, and then ended with his followers who were yet to come – us.

John 17:20-23 (NIV) ²⁰ “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— ²³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

This prayer reveals the Lord's heart in the last moments of his earthly ministry. What we've read is his prayer for us: “that they may be one and brought to complete unity.” Why this prayer? So the world might believe. It's hard to convince people about truth in a spirit of disunity. Since our Lord prayed for unity and since it is one of the foundational principles of our church heritage, let's consider why unity still matters.

The Barrier to Unity

I remember thirty-five years ago, when **President Ronald Reagan** stood next to the Berlin Wall, and challenged the Soviet Union, with these words, **“Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”** Two years later, the wall came down, but it took a long time to reunite East and West Germany! We'd save ourselves a lot of time, work and energy if we never built walls in the first place.

We build walls between friends, co-workers, neighbors, political parties, cultures, races, generations, and even spouses. After another nasty argument with her husband, Sally went to see a fortune teller. The old woman gazed into her crystal ball and responded, “I see bad news – your husband is going to die a violent death.” “Oh my,” Sally gasped, “Do you see me getting away with it?” So why do we build walls?

Fear and Insecurity: Our lack of confidence, our fears of being seen as foolish, our poor self-esteem cause us to build walls to protect our image.

Pride and Prejudice: Pride says I can do it better, I can explain it better, I can build it better; I have a better idea, I have a better skill, I have a better plan. In essence, I am better. So, we build walls to protect our ego. But the truth is we aren't better. Don't

forget, the graveyard is full of indispensable people who thought life couldn't go on without them.

Opinions and Judgments: We treat our opinions and judgments as true and accurate. We can't understand how someone else could see it any other way. Consequently, we build walls to protect our views. That way our thinking is never challenged. But opinions are just that – opinions; they may be good but not the only way to view life. Rick Warren wrote, “An opinion is something you hold; a conviction is something that holds you. An opinion is something you'll argue about. A conviction is something you will suffer for and, if necessary, die for.” Stand firm on your conviction for Jesus Christ, but don't build walls around your opinions.

And unfortunately, the church is not immune to this unity issue, either. In Acts, the first deacons were appointed in the church as a solution to the *wall* between Grecian Jews and Hebrew Jews. It seems the Grecian widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food and it became a point of contention. I know of a church in southern Indiana with purple carpet because the congregation couldn't agree on a color for the new carpet. Purple was installed because *no one* picked that color.

When we build walls, unity is impossible.

The Basis for Unity

With names like that the United Nations, or the United Center in Chicago one might think those would be good starting places to find unity. However, given the seeming corruption and constant discord evident in the UN, unity seems a distant dream. And whenever the Chicago Bulls are on the court or the Blackhawk's hockey team takes the ice, they have an opponent not very interested in unity. Even our United States aren't so united.

So, what about the church? When one is searching for unity, shouldn't the Church be the first place to look? Jesus prayed for it and the New Testament writers encouraged it but unfortunately, because we humans can be cantankerous at times, unity can be hard to come by even in the Lord's family. Unity always breaks down when *me* matters more than *we*. I suspect there are many in this room who would disagree with me on several issues. And if you want to be wrong that's your privilege. Here's the truth, *we* must become more important than *me*. How then do we find unity? Let's try something. On the count of three, everyone say your first name out loud. What a jumble of sounds! Now, on the count of three everyone say the name of Jesus. I could understand that clearly, there was unity in that moment. A.W. Tozer wrote in, "*The Pursuit of God*," “Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all turned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow.” So, it is in the

church – unity will not be found in our opinions, our talents, our styles, our accomplishments, our generation – it is found in Christ alone.

Building Unity

How, then, can we join in building unity on the basis of biblical authority?

Bear with each other (Col. 3:13): This is the ability to put up with people's quirks, oddities and idiosyncrasies. It is realizing while you are enduring their quirks, they are also enduring yours. Unity demands that we bear with each other. I like the little poem, To live above with the saints we love;
Oh, that will be glory.
But to live below with the saints we know;
Well, that's another story. *Anonymous*

I think "bearing with each other" is more than merely putting up with someone, I believe it is a positive approach to others. It is thinking the best of them, it's giving them a second chance to make a good impression. It's being positive about that person when it would be easier to be negative. We all need to do our best to get along. **Psa. 133:1 (NIV)**
How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!

Be Humble to each other: Humility is not a cringing, groveling servility. It's not viewing ourselves as the scum of the earth. Rather, humility is the absence of self-exaltation. It is always keeping a proper perspective on God's place and our own place. It has been said, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less." Early in the summer, I watched as a big John Deere combine made its way through a wheat field near our home. I'm always reminded that it is not the heads of grain which stand tall that produce the most grain; the most productive are the ones with heads bowed low. So, it is with the harvest of our virtues – the humblest among us is generally the most productive in spiritual matters. Unity grows out of humility.

Encourage each other: William Arthur Ward said, "Flatter me, and I may not believe you. Criticize me, and I may not like you. Ignore me, and I may not forgive you. Encourage me, and I will not forget you." Every generation in the church is valuable and contributes to the good of the body. Therefore, each generation should encourage the other. When we focus on self, unity suffers; when we encourage one another, unity blossoms.

In these last couple of years as I have been mentoring and coaching other ministers and serving in interim capacities with other congregations, I have witnessed firsthand the devastating results when people in the church stand firm on their opinions, or pridefully insist on their own way or become critical instead of encouraging. Unity is fragile but oh so important. If it was a major theme of our Lord's most extensive prayer, one of his last

prayers, then don't you think it should be a priority for us. Remember, our unity can only be found in Him and in his Word!

I came across this letter in the Christian Record published in Indianapolis, 1867. A preacher Wm. F. Mavity, who had moved to Indiana for ministry, wrote it. After being in the state about 18 months, he penned this letter about a handful of preachers. "I have confined my labors to Southern Indiana from motives of benevolence. The churches here are more destitute of efficient proclaimers than any other part of the State. But, thank God, this dark corner is illuminated by the faithful teaching of B.T. Goodman, Ira and Sylvester Scott, Abner and Leheu Conner, Wood, Mitchell, Lang, McKinney and Miller; a self-sacrificing band, who, in devotion to the cause they have espoused, would have been an honor to the Grecian heroes who bled and conquered at Marathon...They have no such word as "fail" in their vocabulary, but are worthy to be pleaders of the cause plead by Barton Warren Stone...and many others now in Paradise."

When I read that letter that is now 155 years old it was like finding buried treasure. My great-great grandfather was in that list of preachers. Those men were responsible for establishing the church where I found Jesus; what they did over a 150 years ago, changed my life. If not for them, I might not know the Lord! And I was also reminded that our efforts do live on after us – what we do today will impact the next several generations; 150 years from now I want others to say that because we were united on the basis of God's Word, they found Jesus! Let there be no such word as fail in our vocabulary because the church matters!