

Christ Community: A People Who Belong

Text: I Corinthians 3: 21-23

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

... everything belongs to you ... yet you belong to Christ, and Christ to God. I Cor. 3:21-23

Last evening the Parlour was filled with people for a media event sponsored by the Reformed Church in America, and it was a very interesting evening very well done: a teleconference which linked up Chicago, New York and California. The General Synod of the Reformed Church in America is convening at the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, and the program largely emanated from the Crystal Cathedral, but within seconds there was a switch to New York and to Chicago and back again. One of the marvels of the modern world is the technology that can bind people together across the nation, across the continent. Of course, this was small compared with the world-embracing media events that we have experienced in recent months. Nonetheless, it was quite significant and for me, at least, quite a thrill and I think we all enjoyed it. It's part of an attempt by the Reformed Church in America, of which we are a part, to discover its identity in this last part of the 20th century - to discover our identity in order not necessarily to know what we have been but, in the light of what we have been and what God is calling us to be, what posture we should assume as we look forward to Century Twenty-One.

What is God's will for this church? What is God's will for the whole Church? What is God calling His people to be in this world of which we are a part? Perhaps you saw on the Church Page in the *Tribune* last evening an article about a book that has come out, a study of the world evangelization and world class cities, which documents what we really have known for a long time and that is that the Christian effort to witness to Jesus Christ is not keeping up with world growth and world population, and that the major cities of the world in the 21st century will be cities which will not only not be Christian in predominant culture, but may even be hostile to Christian faith. We simply live in Western Michigan in a kind of cocoon that does not face us with the reality of the world, a world which is not only not being conquered for Jesus Christ (I don't like to use that militaristic term and yet it's been one that has been a part of the Church vocabulary for a

long time), we're not only not winning the world for Christ, we are not keeping up with population growth, and we will face down the line, and our children and our children's children increasingly will face, a Western culture which will not be able to take for granted the things that Western culture takes for granted today, even though Western culture today is not meaningfully and significantly rooted in the Gospel of Christ anymore. There can be no argument about the fact that what we became in Western civilization has arisen very largely out of the biblical vision of things. The Judeo-Christian tradition has shaped the values that we think perhaps are part and parcel of the American way of life, and yet, if we go back, if we study the history of ideas and the development of culture, then it becomes obvious that the things that we value so highly and take for granted are things that come out of a commitment to a biblical vision. And the day will not go on forever. I suppose that someday we will wake up with a shock at that reality.

The RCA is simply one denomination that is saying, in the light of today's world, in the light of the imperative of the Gospel, what is God calling us to be? And so the event last night was one event in a series of events in a three-year period in which we are asking that question. It's a good question to ask. The whole Church should be asking that question in light of the world situation that we face.

Recently, at the Commencement of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, I with several others delivered a paper on the idea of RCA identity, and in working over that paper, I discovered that the genius of Reformed Faith is that it refused to admit to being a new faith or another faith, and the intention of the Reformers of the 16th century was not to start another church, not to start a competing institution. That actually did happen and once that happens, the splintering continues, but the name Reformed was really used almost in the sense of a verb. It's always better to use a verb than a noun. A noun states a condition, a state of being. A verb bespeaks action. And what was in mind in the 16th century was not to begin a new church, but to rediscover the one, holy, apostolic catholic church, to find that biblical faith once for all delivered to the saints, and to reshape the institution in order that that Gospel might be released in all of its pristine clarity. And so, to be Reformed was not really to be a member of a competing church organization. It was the claim to be the Church re-formed according to the Word of God. Or to be a Church, *The Church reforming*. That was the insight. That was the genius of that branch of the faith that emanated out of Switzerland particularly, took root in Germany and in the Low Countries: to be the Christian Church, the catholic Church, reforming, always needing to be reforming. Because the Church takes shape in history, and the Church is peopled by people who tend to absolutize the relative and to make ultimate that which is only transitory and partial, to take a partial insight and baptize it as though it were the whole Truth. And so, in that 16th century when they were so sensitized to the corruptibility of all human institutions and the partiality of all human insights, the Reformers of the Reformed branch of the faith called themselves the Church Re-Formed according to the Word of God.

As I worked on that paper, I realized that John Calvin had a great passion for the unity of the Church. John Calvin was in favor of calling pastors together from the whole continent in order to discuss how that unity could come to expression. John Calvin was ready to have a church council called which had been the custom of the Church in the early centuries - to call a Council of the whole Church over which he was willing to have the Pope preside, on the condition that the Pope himself would abide by the decisions of the Council. And so, it was in the early expression of the Church re-formed according to the Word of God that there was only one church, that there could be only one church, and that there must be constant intentionality to discovering and expressing the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ.

And at New Brunswick, in the paper that I shared, I used our experience to say that the local community of God's people could be a genuinely ecumenical community. I used that opportunity to say that in 15 years we have experienced the possibility of becoming a body of Christian people from a diversity of backgrounds and traditions, finding our unity in Jesus. It is hardly possible on the level of the large Church structure. Frankly, there are too many popes, cardinals, bishops, executive secretaries and all other kinds of officialdom with too much vested interest who piously say, "We are concerned about the Church and the Truth," but who are really concerned about their positions, so it is almost impossible on that giant Church level ever to affect unity. Structural unity will probably for a long time to come evade the grasp of the Church because people really don't want it. I mean, if I have position, power and prestige in the RCA, why should I want that merged into one great body in which I would become just, you know – I mean, if I'm a Chinook swimming in Lake Michigan, why do I want to become a perch in the ocean? Right? And down deep, that's what keeps the Church in its separate compartments.

But when I came back here 15 years ago, I had had an experience of the possibility of genuine ecumenicity in a local fellowship. The four years that I was in the Netherlands, I worshiped sometimes in the Dutch Church, sometimes in the American Protestant Church of the Hague. In the APC, at that time, well in The Hague at that time, there were 4,000 Americans back in the late 60s. There were many of them who were oil people prospecting off in the North Sea. A lot of them came out of Oklahoma and Louisiana and Mississippi. They brought great, large, red Bibles to church, floppy Bibles. Southern Baptist folk. And then, there were also a few High Church Episcopalians, and there were all assorted kinds of Methodists and Baptists and Presbyterians.

When you were an alien in a foreign land, you seek out a community of people with whom you can fellowship. Then theological distinctions are not quite so important. And I found that in that American Protestant Church in The Hague, there was a conglomeration of people of every stripe and every background who found something being together, united in Jesus Christ. And it was simply impossible for me to come back here and to squeeze back into the narrow

confines of a church with a specific confessional background and a specific ethnic caste. And as I was reflecting on this, I suppose that it was that experience that was the background for the experience of going out to the Institute of Church Growth and Leadership in California, which some of us attended in '71 where we recognized the possibilities for the church and came back and within a very short time we had changed the name of this church. It was May 3, 1971 when I preached on the text of this morning, suggesting it was reasonable and responsible to change the name of this church. And after 101 years of history, the First Reformed Church of Spring Lake became Christ Community Church. The vote on a rather warm, weekday evening at a special congregational meeting was 120 yes and 4 no. We also that night called Gordon VanHoeven. The vote was 117 yes to 7 no. He searched out those 7 and dealt with them.

All kinds of people have written to me since that time to say, "How in the world did you ever effect the name change?" because people seem so glued to that which is traditional and familiar. And I have to say I don't know, but there was a momentum that was generated which we really believe was attributable to the Spirit of God, and that name signaled to us all a radical departure, a movement out of a narrow, confessional track, a movement out of a narrow ethnic background, and an intention of becoming a genuinely ecumenical community. And at this point, Christ Community has become as diverse as the American Protestant Church of the Hague.

Now, how do you find your identity with all of that diversity? How do you find unity amid all of that pluralism? Well, it's very simple, because thank God that, in the inception of the Reformed Faith, the intention was not to begin another Church, but simply to be the one, holy, catholic Church, and simply to let it be reformed by the Spirit of God through the Word of God. Add, in so doing, the reformers were recognizing the essential unity of the Church. In our denominational structures we give witness to the unity of the Church, but our practice denies it. What we have done in this local community is simply not waited for the huge Church structures to move at their snail's pace, but we have become here genuinely Christ's Community; we have become the holy, catholic Church.

Now, this movement toward unity reflects the biblical imperative and at its very inception the Church had to wrestle with the question of divisiveness. We read it this morning. Paul founded the Church at Corinth. He spent some time there, and within a little time, people came to him from the congregation and said, "We've got divisions. We've got jealousy and strife. We've got a party that meets out in the parking lot and they claim to be the people of Cephas or Peter. We've got people that meet in the Parlour. They claim to be people of Apollos. The First Apollos Christian Church. We've got people that even claim your name, Paul. And then we have that special group that meets around the altar. They say, 'We're Christ's people.'"

Paul said, "Is Christ divided? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? " And then he goes on to deal with Jesus and the cross and so forth, and he comes back and says, "You know, I would really like you people to move on and to get into spiritual depth, but I can't even deal with the things that are really important. The world needs to hear about Jesus, and you're arguing about whether it's Paul or Apollos or Cephas. I'd like to feed you meat and all you are really ready for is milk!" And then he goes on at the end of that chapter to say, "Look - Apollos is yours, Peter is yours, I am yours. All things are yours. Everything belongs to you. The world. Life. Death. The past. The future - all is yours. But you are Christ's, and Christ is God's."

And on the basis of that text, this congregation didn't dare vote to continue to be calling itself the First Reformed Church. How could we? How could we disobey the Word of God? How could the Church with all its self-righteous pronouncements and its pious affirmations continue in its division when there can only be one holy, catholic Church? Now, it was true already in Corinth. No wonder that we've got a Lutheran Church. No wonder we've got Calvinists rallying around the banner. No wonder we've got Wesleyans all over the place. And how can you be *Roman* Catholic? That's like being a particular universal. It's a contradiction in terms. You're either Roman or you're Catholic. You can't be Roman Catholic.

We don't hear the Word of God, and we perpetuate our divisions and our self-righteous assurance that we have a corner on the truth. Friends, there is no form of church government that is biblical as opposed to others. It doesn't really matter if we're Congregational or Presbyterian or Episcopal in our government. There are glimmerings of all of those in the Scripture, but there's not any scriptural justification for being separate churches because of the way we organize ourselves. There is no correct liturgy over against some other form of ritual. All of them arose in historical circumstances ministering to specific needs in concrete situations. There is no final confession of faith that has said it all. The Apostles Creed is probably the most unifying symbol in the Christian Faith, largely because it avoids theological definition and simply points to the historic life of Jesus.

But even the Apostles Creed doesn't say it all. It, too, has a history, a context. The problem with the Church throughout all its life is its absolutizing of that which is relative, its claim for ultimacy for that which is transient and partial. Because there's something in us all that wants to say, "My church has got it. Every i dotted, every t crossed. We say it better than you do. We do it better than you do. And we're closer to the Scriptures and to the will of God and all of that." And it is simply not true.

So, what we have tried to do on a local level is be simply Christ's, belonging to God. What we have tried to become here is a community of people who recognize that we are brothers and sisters of one another because Jesus Christ is our Elder

Brother, and God is our Father, and so we're members of the family together. What we've tried to bear witness to here is the one holy, catholic faith, that faith in Jesus Christ which has taken various historical forms and various institutional forms and had its faith come to expression this way at one time, and this way at another time, all of which is for us to learn from, to appreciate, to give thanks for, and all of us together, simply, to attempt to be Christ's who is God's.

So, this community has only a relative grasp of the Truth, and we're open to continue to learn what God has to say to us. This church happens to be Presbyterian in government, but if they could ever get the whole thing together, I'd be willing to give that up if there were a way in which the whole Church could be united in a form of government that would get us together. We have certain ritual forms. If we could just stick with the biblical forms everything else is negotiable. We haven't got it all together. We're pilgrim people, of limited insight, of partial vision. We're just a pilgrim people on the way. We belong to Jesus, through whom we belong to God, and because we do, we belong to each other.

Maybe the calling of the Reformed Church in America in the century before us is to give up its life, for the whole Church to become truly catholic again. Maybe the calling of Christ Community Church is to be a catalyst in the midst of the Reformed Church in America that the RCA may be to the larger Church what we have become. Maybe God is calling us in deep humility and deep commitment simply to model out that it is possible for people of diversity to become one in Jesus.

I love ethnic festivals. I love mostly the food. I have roots. You have roots. Some of us share the same roots, some of us have other roots, but I love to enter into the roots of others. I was in New York a few weeks ago and we worked late on this theological journal and we went out to eat and then someone said, "There is an Irish tavern where they sing Irish music," and so we all went. In the back room, filled with people, all these Irishmen. I didn't say I was Dutch; I just sort of slipped into a booth. They bring their piccolos and their flutes and their drums and their fiddles, and they sing and they make music and drink beer, and sing and make music and drink more beer. The Irish are marvelous people. Their country's blowing up, and they sing. I love shish kabobs from the Greeks, and Hungarian goulash, and the beer halls of Munich. I love the English and I love my old wooden shoes. The Church of Jesus Christ doesn't have to be some bland, lowest common denominator. It can have all of the richness of a diverse community of people who say with many tongues and many tunes, through many expressions, "Jesus Christ is Lord." And out of all of the richness of that diversity which we can celebrate together, we can recognize that all of that diversity is relative to the only thing that matters – that we are Christ's and Christ is God's.

Thank God that we belong. Maybe we can become that catalyst because our most famous, most meaningful confessional statement has no confessional or ethnic bias. It begins with this question, "What is your only comfort in life and in

death?" And the answer is, "That I, body and soul, in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ."

Why, if you can say that, you are my brother, you are my sister. We're one in Jesus Christ. So, what else matters? So, what's the big deal? So, why don't we get smart and love each other in Jesus' name, to the glory of God?

Let us pray. Thank you, Father, for forming us into Your family. Enable us to live in love, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.