

February 11, 2007
Christianity 101 (part 5 of 5)
A Church on the Move
Steven M Conger

Acts 10:34-43 (The Message)

Peter fairly exploded with his good news: "It's God's own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from—if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open. The Message he sent to the children of Israel—that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again—well, he's doing it everywhere, among everyone.

"You know the story of what happened in Judea. It began in Galilee after John preached a total life-change. Then Jesus arrived from Nazareth, anointed by God with the Holy Spirit, ready for action. He went through the country helping people and healing everyone who was beaten down by the Devil. He was able to do all this because God was with him.

"And we saw it, saw it all, everything he did in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem where they killed him, hung him from a cross. But in three days God had him up, alive, and out where he could be seen. Not everyone saw him—he wasn't put on public display. Witnesses had been carefully handpicked by God beforehand—us! We were the ones, there to eat and drink with him after he came back from the dead. He commissioned us to announce this in public, to bear solemn witness that he is in fact the One whom God destined as Judge of the living and dead. But we're not alone in this. Our witness that he is the means to forgiveness of sins is backed up by the witness of all the prophets."

For the past month, Jeff and I have been trying to give an overview of just what Christianity is all about. We have looked at the book that we call our Holy Scripture — what is that book, and what roll should it play in our faith journey. We've explored how we understand God, and Jesus. Last week Jeff explored, just what a Christian is, and we are going to conclude this morning talking about the nature and purpose of the church.

Now I want to be clear about something, what we have shared over the past month is not a comprehensive study of what Christianity is all about — if anything we just began to scratch the surface. It is my hope that we have inspired and encouraged you to dig a bit deeper as you continue the journey.

I also want to make sure that I am clear about one other thing — I am not an apologist for the church. I do not believe that the church is the end all of Christianity — I believe that the church is only valuable if it is fulfilling its

mission to God through Jesus in the world. Thus, I try very hard not to see the church as an INSTITUTION or a business but rather as an ORGANISM.

What that means is — and I know that this drives some of you absolutely crazy — and maybe is even grounds to get me expelled as a pastor — is that I am not overly concerned about the “church”. Sure, part of my job is as executive of a business that includes a dozen employees, a large physical plant, and does not have a source of guaranteed income. But that is not my primary function. My primary function is not dependent on those things — sometimes they can help facilitate those primary functions, and sometimes they can hinder those primary goals of who we are called to be.

So what is the function and purpose of the church?

Before I get there, let me back up a little. I think I need to say a couple more observations about the church.

As a clergy person, I come with a very distorted, and I would argue unhealthy view of the church.

Barbara Brown Taylor, named by Baylor University as one of the 12 most effective preachers in the English speaking world, Episcopal priest and pastor of a small rural parish in North Georgia wrote a book last year that really spoke to me. It is a powerful book, that, my hunch is, if you were to pick it up — you would read it very differently than me. It is called *LEAVING CHURCH* and it is all about her decision to quit as a parish priest.

She writes:

During these last weeks at church, I received an invitation from a couple of church members to attend an annual pool party at their home. The party was legendary, involving live Maine lobsters and kegs of imported beer. I did not remember ever having been invited before, perhaps because everyone knew I spent Saturday nights at home, but this time I was eager to go.

She goes on and tells about the party, then she continues:

After my supper had settled I wandered down to the pool where I watched swimming children splitting beams of underwater light with their bodies. I had baptized many of them, and I loved seeing them all shrieking and paddling around together in that one big pool. Suddenly to my right there was a deeper yell, the sound of scrabbling feet on cement, and then a large plop as a fully clothed adult landed in the water.

I stood back and watched the mayhem that ensued. All around me

people were grabbing people and wrestling them toward the water. The dark night air was full of pool spray and laughter. The kids were going crazy. Several people hunting for potential victims turned toward me, their faces lit with smiles. When they saw who I was they turned away again so that I felt sad instead of glad. Whatever changes were occurring inside of me, I still looked waterproof to them. Like the sick man in John's gospel, who lay by the healing pool of Beth-zatha for thirty-eight years because he had no one to put him in when the water was stirred up. I watched others plunging in ahead of me. Then two strong arms grabbed my upper arms from behind, and before I knew it I was in the water, fully immersed and swimming in light.

For Barbara Brown Taylor, that was her real baptism in the church — the recognition that she belonged to the community — as she was in the midst of leaving them.

Too often, as clergy we are not truly a part of the community. We stand above, or beyond it.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

While I knew plenty of clergy willing to complain about high expectations and long hours, few of us spoke openly about the toxic effects of being identified as the holiest person in a congregation. Whether this honor was conferred by those who recognized our gifts for ministry or was simply extended to them as a professional courtesy, it was equally hard on the honorees. Those of us who believed our own press developed larger-than-life swaggers and embarrassing patterns of speech. Whole those who did not suffered lower-back pain and frequent bouts of sleeplessness. Either way, we were deformed.

So all of my comments on the church come as one who has been deformed by the church.

I acknowledge my unrealistic view of the church, but as I read the story of Jesus, I think I stand in some pretty good company. Jesus always seems at odds with the institutional religion of his day. OK, he is more than just at odds with them, he is actively trying to change the institution — so the institution killed him.

At the time of Jesus there is no Christian church. And Jesus did not create the church — that all develops later. But I think we can see what Jesus thought of the synagogue system and learn from what he felt should be at the heart of religion.

So let's take a moment and try to understand how Jesus would have viewed the church and what the purpose of the church would have been identified by him.

I want to suggest this morning that there are three primary functions or purposes to the church. Some of these may surprise you — you may also be surprised by what I am failing to suggest is the primary purpose of the church.

Let me just list them quickly to you and then we will spend some time looking at them.

1. To mediate or interpret God
2. To pool our talents or resources so that we can make a greater difference.
3. To send out

Let's look at them a little more carefully and try to understand what I mean by these three primary purposes of the church.

1. To mediate or interpret God

One of the functions of the church is to help people discern and understand who God is in our lives.

Now I want to be careful about this.

I am not saying that the church is the only place one encounters God — because that is absolutely not true.

If you remember my understanding of God as I shared earlier in this series, that God is the other — God is the ground of all being — God is not “out there”, but rather God is right here. And by here I do not mean simply in this room or place, but everywhere. The gospel writers give us this image of God when they tell us that when Jesus was crucified, that the curtain that kept God in the holy of holies was torn in two. God is not kept in some box somewhere.

What the church should do is help us understand and comprehend our experiences of the divine — wherever they take place. The church should be a place where we can share and wrestle with our experiences of God so that we might know what we are to do with those experiences.

On the flip side, the church must also not become a place that rationalizes our understanding of God to allow us to do injustice in God's name. We don't have

to go to far back in our history to see how this has happened. Whether it is the civil rights battles or the story that Jeff told about Gandhi last week — the church must never become a place that rationalizes our prejudices.

Going around the internet, coming from conservative Christian circles is an inflammatory e-mail about Barack Obama. And his religious affiliations. Once again the church is being used to separate and not build.

Maybe our text says this most clearly.

Will Willimon, in his commentary on the book of Acts when writing about Peter's speech which was our text this morning, observes,

"This is the way it sometimes is in the church. If Jesus Christ is Lord, then the church has the adventurous task of penetrating new areas of his Lordship, expecting surprises and new implications of the gospel which cannot be explained on any basis other than our Lord has shown us something we could not have seen on our own, even if we were looking only at Scripture."

Peter now perceives that God's chosen people includes everybody. In the church today, that is mostly a foregone conclusion, but usually with substantial qualifiers attached.

"Well, yes," we say, "of course Jesus is Lord of all, but people have to believe thus and so before he will actually be their Lord."

Or, "He's your Lord if you are willing to be baptized by immersion."

Or, "If he's really your Lord, you'll be tolerant and open-minded."

Or, "Jesus is Lord doesn't apply to — fill in the blank

fanatics
homosexuals
Republicans
Democrats
liberals
the bigoted."

We have fences to maintain, after all. We have litmus texts to administer.

While Peter's new understanding of the gospel includes no hint of universal salvation automatically granted to all, he nonetheless grasps that the gospel *can and should be rightly offered to all*.

That God shows no partiality means that nobody has the edge, that all people are equal before God and none are "more equal" than others; nor is there any hint of a "separate but equal" doctrine.

2. To pool our talents or resources so that we can make a greater difference.

I think one of the key functions of the church is its ability to bring people together toward a common goal and to pool our talents and resources so that we can really make a difference.

By yourself, what change can you effect in society?
Some, certainly! But think of what we can do together.

Last weekend our youth participated in the Souper Bowl of Caring.

It was the more important Bowl that was taking place last Sunday. The Ridge youth raised \$856.70 to help fight hunger in our area. That is pretty impressive if you ask me — but what is even more impressive is that youth across the country raised more than \$4.2 million to help fight hunger. Could our youth do that by themselves — No way — but together we can make a huge difference!

I could give example after example, but you get the point — together we are more than we can ever be individually.

One final purpose of the church and that is:

3. To send out

The purpose of the church is not to build walls and to become an island — it is to GO!

Jesus in the great commission to us says:

(Matthew 28:18-20 NRSV) And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. {19} Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, {20} and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The church is called to always be looking outward — reaching out beyond itself. When we become inward focused, worried about taking care of business, we have quit being the church.

One of the things that I love about Ridge Church is our strong outward looking focus:

- ! Soup Kitchen on Mondays
- ! State Street Center on Saturdays
- ! Mission trips
- ! Mission support to many agencies
- ! Our environmental mission emphasis
- ! Our decision to use only 'fair trade" coffee
- ! Pastors fund that annual spends close to \$3,000 to local people in need
- ! Community Vacation Bible School
- ! Open Gym ministry
- ! Winning At Life Ministry

And maybe even more exciting is what isn't on that list right now, but will be in the near future — what is that ministry? I don't know, but I know that in someone's heart out there, some of you feel the tug to help us reach out in a variety of new ways.

Those are what I believe are the three primary functions of the church. I am sure that some of you would add many others, but I think these three are primary.

What's missing? What did I exclude from this list.

Any talk about holding the keys of heaven or hell!

The Roman Catholic Church claims that salvation cannot be found outside of the church — the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, they claim one of the primary functions of the CHURCH is to arbitrate who is in and who is out.

Some of you have told me horror stories about how the church has tried to manipulate you by using excommunication or threats about salvation.

Jesus never spent much time talking about heaven as modern people understand it, instead he talked about the Kingdom of God which we are to help usher in today. We do that by being the church, people committed to God's justice and love.

Over the past 5 weeks, Jeff and I have tried to peak your interest in finding out more about your faith journey. If you have heard nothing else, please hear this — it is not about learning stuff — faith is about living with God every day, I hope that because of this series, that you will want to make your faith journey a priority in your life and will find ways that you can grow in your relationship with God through Jesus our Lord.