

Title: What matters to the church?
Text: John 17
Theme: The attributes of the church: One, Holy, Universal, Apostolic
Series: The Church Fall 2020
Prop Stmtnt: Christ has called his church to be unified, holy, universal and apostolic (faithful to the theological foundation established by the apostles).

Have you ever heard someone say that Christianity is not a religion, it is a relationship? Perhaps you have said it. Is there some truth in that? Yes. Christianity is a relationship. But, is it not a religion? In other words, is it not a series of beliefs that call those who believe those to live a particular way and to be part of a group of people who identify themselves in the same way? Yes, of course it does. And is there anything in the Bible about how that group is to be identified, organized, instructed and mobilized? Yes, it does that too. But, let's acknowledge the fact that in the history of Christianity, the means that God raised up to proclaim the gospel and make it visible (the church) has far too often lost sight of the gospel and has become something that ends up being an enemy of the gospel. This series is designed to be a reality check for us and to help us reset, refocus and renew.

Read Text:

The gospel can be summarized in 4 words: God, man, Christ and response. In the beginning God created the world for his glory and he created the human race to reflect him and enjoy him and rule under him as his representative over creation. But, we rebelled. The first human, Adam, rebelled and broke God's law and his rebellion has been repeated by every human being since. Our rebellion is called sin and our sin has to be punished. God would be completely just to punish us for our sin, but that would condemn us forever because it is more than we can bear and more than we can pay. So, God sent his own Son, Jesus to come into this world and become one of us. Jesus did what Adam did not do and Jesus did what everyone of us could not do. Jesus lived a perfect life in our place and then he died as the full and final payment for the sins of every single person who would ever believe on him. When you by faith alone turn from your sin and trust in Christ alone, you become a Christian. You become a follower of Christ. There is nothing for you to pay, Christ paid it. There is nothing for you to do. Christ did it.

People who follow Christ are called to follow Christ together with other Christians and form churches. A true and healthy local church makes the gospel visible, puts Christ on display and it helps its members follow Jesus better. The church began in Acts 2 with the baptism of the Spirit. This event was the fulfillment of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel who prophesied about the New Covenant that God was going to make with his people. We are the New Covenant people of God. We are here to not only make the gospel visible but we are here, in this world as representatives of another kingdom. Jesus is going to return and establish his kingdom. God has raised up the church to be a preview of that kingdom. We are to enjoy relationships with other believers now in such a way that our lives point them to the kingdom of God that is coming.

But, faithful and healthy churches will not naturally occur just because you have a group of people who profess faith in Jesus. Faithful and healthy churches tend to be unusual because

establishing and protecting a healthy church is hard work. But the church is the bride of Christ and Jesus is worth a beautiful bride.

God's Word calls us to make disciples in order to establish churches and God has called churches to be the homes and farms that grow disciples. You simply cannot have disciples of Jesus who follow him well without churches. So, while I can understand the sentiment behind, "this little light of mine" the truth is, we ought to think, "this light of ours." Did you notice how much we sang this morning that emphasized "us" and "we" and not "me" or "I"? We follow Christ together and apart from his church, we are simply not going to follow him very well. But, that is the challenge isn't it? People trip us up. People can frustrate us. People disappoint us and hurt us. And we do not always agree on everything. Oh yea, but that is why we need each other because people reveal things about our hearts that we otherwise would not know or would not be forced to reckon with. The church is the means that God ordained for your growth.

It was Jesus who said that he was going to build his church and the rest of the NT follows the life of the apostles (Paul in particular) and focuses upon the establishing and ongoing work and ministry of a healthy church. God's plan is to have a Church that is so beautiful, so pure, so faithful, so glorious that He actively shows it off to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 3.10). So, how can we be a local church that God actively shows off to the principalities and powers as a reflection of his glory? We can be this as we pursue unity, purity, universally and sound doctrine.

1. **Unity matters because the Church is One.** (John 17.11, 21, 22, 23)

Unity matters because the church is one because God is one! In this beautiful prayer of Jesus for us, he repeatedly prays for our unity because our unity is an expression of the unity that God enjoys as God. So, our unity is not only a desire of Christ for us, it is a reality that will be accomplished in us. This is a prayer that is guaranteed to be answered. How should we understand this and why does this matter so much?

a. **The church is a people because God is TRIune.**

God's plan from the very beginning of time is to have a people that he would live with and enjoy forever. The church is a people. A man was telling me one day that he didn't need the church because he was the church. He said, "I am the church." But, that is not true. The church is not one person. Jesus did not say that where you are, there's the church. The NT church always refers to a people because God is a 3-person God. A plurality of people displays the character of God better than one person. But, this 3-person God is one God. Therefore,

b. **The church is one because God is triUNE.**

God is a unity of plurality. The unity of God is the loving, joyful, harmonious relationship that God enjoys as God because the Father, Son and Spirit each delight in the others and in the relationships of the others. That is why Jesus keeps appealing to this unity in his prayer as the cause and motivation for the unity of his church. Unity matters because God is one and God is our source, our goal, our pattern and our means. That is why in our membership class we point

out that one of our values as a church is unity and we follow a process in order to address problems because that process reflects our commitment to unity. Joining the church is based in part on a promise to protect the unity and we reaffirm this every time we repeat our church covenant when we say, “We will work and pray for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” We say that because unity takes work. It does not happen naturally. Disunity happens naturally. There is nothing supernatural about not getting along. But, when people who are natural born enemies love one another, delight in one another, serve one another, prefer one another, honor one another, help one another, pray for one another, understand one another, have empathy for one another, and even sacrifice for one another, then we are living out what it means to be the body of Christ. The body, the reality of Christ, the visibility of Christ is displayed by our protecting and pursuing our unity. When we fail to guard the unity of the church we are failing as a church because we are misrepresenting God. Now, here is some encouragement.

c. Already the church is One.

What I mean is that positionally we are one. Just as, already you are fully justified in Christ. Already, you are seated with Christ in the heavenly places. Eph. 2.6. Already the church is one. Jesus said so. There is one flock. John 10.16 “There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” In Galatians 3. 27-28, Paul said that it doesn’t matter whether you male or female, whether you are rich or poor, whether you are this ethnicity or that – “you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Already the church is one. However,

d. Not yet is the church experiencing all of that oneness.

We will experience that oneness perfectly one day. But we are not home yet. This prayer that Jesus prayed for our unity will be answered. Therefore...

e. How should this affect our thinking about the church?

Since unity puts God on display in such a beautifully attractive and compelling way, we should expect that our unity to be attacked. Here is a timely opportunity to be radically different from our world. Our culture is very polarized. We shout one another down and attack on social media and look for reasons to distrust one another. We assign guilt by association and appoint ourselves, in the name of discernment as judge, jury and executioner. Love is not naïve. Love is discerning. But, love believes, it hopes, it bears and it does not assume, but seeks clarification. If you have some questions about one another, do the godly thing, the loving thing, the right thing and instead of writing the person off, seek understanding. The brother or sister may benefit from you and you may benefit from them and in so doing help one another look a little more like Christ. I am inviting trouble when I think of “me” versus you. I am attacking the unity when I refuse to address problems that others have with me or that I have with others. I need to be engaged in relationships. I need to be gathering (remember last week) in order to encourage others. I remind you that church is not “good” unless you have been encouraged and you have encouraged others to press on. So, what is the church supposed to be? She is supposed to be one. And the one of the attacks to our unity is sin. Therefore, the church is supposed to be holy.

2. **Purity matters because the Church is Holy.** (John 17.17, 19)

In verse 17 Jesus says, “*Sanctify them (make them holy, set them apart for holy service) in the truth; your word is truth.*” In verse 19 Jesus says, “*I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.*” The church is holy because God is holy.

a. **The church is holy because God is holy.**

1 Peter 1.14-16 says, “*As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance (what you were like before you came to faith in Christ), but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’*”

b. **Already the church is holy because we are in Christ.**

This is what Paul told the church of Corinth (of all churches!). 1 Cor. 1.2 “*To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus....*” Already you are sanctified. Already you are holy. Meaning, because you are in Christ, you are positionally sanctified. However,

c. **Not yet is the church experiencing that complete sanctification.**

2 Cor. 3.18 says, “*And we all, ... are being transformed into the same image (the image of Jesus) from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*” Isn’t that encouraging? All of us are being transformed by the Spirit into being like Christ. That means that you are going to get there and so are the rest of us. It’s going to take people like me a little longer, but we are going to get there. In fact, the love of Jesus for his bride is so powerful and so persistent that his love is going to remove every wrinkle and every blemish. We are not home yet. But, because Jesus made this promise to us, we are going to get there.

d. **How should this affect our thinking about the church?**

Your purity matters. What you watch, what you browse, what you think about, what you imagine, what you do, all matters. Your thought life matters because it affects us all and if sinful, it gives a wrong view of God. Your behavior matters and if sinful, it affects us all and gives a wrong view of God. God is holy and his people are holy. Live that way. Don’t give up in your fight against sin. Satan wants to convince you that it doesn’t matter, that everyone else is doing it, ... you know the lies. It does matter. Let me encourage you to let the word of Christ dwell in you richly so that when you dream and imagine it is of beautiful things that we have in Christ.

3. **The world matters because the Church is Universal.** (17.18)

I am not going to spend much time on this because I pounded this drum and beat this horse throughout the book of Acts and in our mini-series from Romans 13-15. But the point is this. Cornerstone Baptist Church is a local church, but we are not the entire church. Jesus said, “*I will build my church.*” And in Rev. 5.9 Christ is receiving universal praise because “*you ransomed people for God from every tribe, and language and people and nation.*” The people who are ransomed are Christians. And God is calling people unto himself from every ethnicity. This

means that no ethnicity, country, city or territory can claim to be head of the church. She is universal because our head is the King of the ages. And as the King of the ages and the King of all Kings he has commanded the church to go to all ethnicities because he has people that he has chosen to follow him from all of those ethnicities. And, I believe that when the last one comes to faith in Christ and the people of God are now complete that the Father tells the Son, go get your bride. It's time to celebrate! Not yet has the church completed her mission, but she will. Every person who comes to faith in Christ takes us one step closer. But this truth also helps protect us from an American first mentality. You can love your country and should, but not at the expense of loving the real kingdom and the ultimate nation that will never die. The church is one, holy, universal and apostolic, meaning, she is faithful to the sound doctrine that the apostles taught.

This means that we ought to pray for other churches and for the churches in other countries. We are part of something that is universal and we want our hearts to be that big.

4. **Sound doctrine matters because the Church is Apostolic.** (17.20)

In John 17.20 Jesus is praying for us. We are those who believe the message of the apostles. The message of the apostles is the message that Jesus gave them. It is the Word of God. The word reveals Christ to us and the gospel. The Word tells us what to believe about God, what to believe about the Word, what to believe about people, what to believe about Christ, the Spirit, Salvation, the church, the end times, and eternity. What we are to believe is called sound doctrine. To say that the church is apostolic is to say that the church believes the same things that the apostles taught. We stand in theological continuity with the apostles.

“Christianity” has it has been known in times past and many parts of it today, is not true Christianity because it does not stand in continuity with the apostles. I am referring to the true church and the true church is built on the foundation of the apostles.

a. **The church is built on the foundation of the apostles.**

This is inherent in John 17.20, but is explicitly taught in Ephesians 2.19-20 which says, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.” What is that foundation? It is what the apostles taught and what they taught is the Word of God. Therefore, whenever the church has denied parts of Scripture, ignored parts of Scripture, changed parts of Scripture, or added to Scripture, it is no longer on the foundation of Christ and the apostles. That is why..

b. **The church is historic only as it is faithful to the teaching of the apostles.**

In the last couple of centuries, there has been a lot of effort to reinvent the church and do things that make the church more attractive to others. Some have done this certainly with good intentions, but the results have not been good. One of the results is that when you look to what is trendy to tell you how the church is supposed to function, then you have to keep changing things because trends come and go all the time. One of the complaints about many protestant churches is the lack of reverence and the lack of liturgy. Of course there is no reverence when your goal is

to be cool. And liturgy? That sounds stuffy and impersonal. So for some, the liturgy of the Roman Catholic church or the Greek Orthodox church is comforting because they feel like they are in a tradition that is older than this week's newest Netflix release. However, we are not linked to the true church organizationally or even liturgically. We are linked to the true church by sound doctrine. The true church is built on and has always been built on sound doctrine. You can only be a follower of Christ if you understand and believe the gospel. In order to understand the gospel you have to hear it (sound doctrine) and believe it.

c. The church has apostolic authority only as it is faithful to God's Word.

As the church faithfully and accurately teaches the Word of God, she is the voice of God in this world. Our responsibility to teach and our responsibility to live out this teaching in how we live is the kindness of God and the visible presence of God in this world.

We exist to make God known as he is. There is no higher calling. We do it as we are one, holy, universal and apostolic. When you read the gospels, you realize that most of the people who saw Jesus and heard him speak completely missed who he really was. I do not want that to happen to you, not only about Christ, but about his church. He died for the church. She matters forever and that should matter to us.