

Title: What is the Church? Pt.2
Text: John 17
Theme: The nature of the church
Occasion: 2-part series on the nature of the church end of 2024 and beginning of 2025
Prop Stmtnt: Christ has called his church to be unified, holy, universal and apostolic (faithful to the theological foundation established by the apostles).

Read Text:

A recent ABC report estimates that last year 1,000 churches in this country closed. On the face of it, that sounds alarming. But when you look at the details of the report, much of it is good news. In most of the cases that I read about, the churches that closed, were not biblically defined churches. There was no gospel being preached, and therefore, no lives being changed. For many years, they were just noise and noisy traditions cannot mask the absence of truth. They did not preach the Bible and therefore did not practice it. If you do not preach the Bible, or believe the Bible or practice the bible, then seriously, what would you do if you found yourself in leadership at a church? What would be the compelling reason that you would offer to people that would motivate them to get out of their pajamas and attend your church, much less, join, serve and give their money to support it? What do you have, apart from the Bible? Comedy? Netflix is better. Motivational talks? Podcasts are better. Entertainment? Disney, Movies, and Little Caesars Arena are better. Whatever you offer would get old and stale because underneath it, is nothing other than some organization trying to be relevant. God's Word formed creation and his Word formed his new creation, the church. God's Word is our source and sustenance, our identity and power. When a church minimizes or ignores God's Word, it will die.

For 2,000 years the church has had to answer this question: What is the church? There have been long seasons when most of the churches answered this question incorrectly and the results were devastating. In our country, it became a trend a while back for churches to survey their neighbors to see what they would like the church to be and do? I like my neighbors. I have some really nice neighbors. Cathi makes awesome cookies for Christmas and we give our neighbors trays of them. But I'm not going to ask them what the church is supposed to be any more than I am going to ask them to perform brain surgery on me. We do not look to our world to tell us what the church is supposed to be. Beloved, we don't look to ourselves. God has already laid it out. It may not be trendy or flashy because it doesn't need hype. You don't need to hype up the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls. Its presence, its reality is all that is needed. A true church is eternally relevant without trying to be. It preaches the bible which goes right to our hearts and does for us what we each desperately need, but what the world cannot offer.

Last Sunday and today, I am simply revisiting with you, what the bible says the church is. The church, rightfully understood is like the Regent Diamond on display in the Louvre, in Paris. She is brilliant and reflects the dazzling glory of her king in her countless facets. Jesus, the infinite treasure, died for the church. The infinite worth of Jesus was offered as the payment to secure his bride. What we are and what we are about, really matters and it matters forever.

Last Sunday we looked at how the NT uses the word "church." From that, we see what the church is. According to God, the church is one, holy, universal and apostolic. That means that

she is to be unified, pure, world-wide and committed to sound doctrine. I ended the sermon last week addressing the unity of the church. The church is to be unified because the church is a reflection of God and our 1 God in 3 persons is unified. We have to guard our unity. It is true that there are plenty of examples of divisive people who stir things up and pit people against one another. I've actually told some people that they need to leave because they are divisive. But most of the challenges of our unity that we face have to do with purity.

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

In verse 17 Jesus prays for us to the Father and said, "*Sanctify them* (make them holy, set them apart for holy service) *in the truth; your word is truth.*" Jesus could have used an adjective there and said, your word is true. But he used a noun. Your Word, the Bible, is truth. The Bible is the written expression of God, who is truth. Everything in life is measured by God's Word. There is a direct and vital connection between our understanding and application of God's Word and our purity. Jesus prays for us to be made holy, to look more like him, to be set apart for his beautiful purposes by means of the effect of God's Word in our lives. The people of God, are the people of the book. This is our food. This is our delight. God's Word is our treasure. Your pursuit of holiness is going to be in direct proportion to your heart engagement with God's Word. In verse 19 Jesus says, "*I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.*" The church is holy because God is holy. Obviously, the Bible is our means to purity, but look at what Jesus is praying for! He is praying for his people, his church to be holy. Our purity (your purity) matters because the church is holy. Beloved, please take this to heart. Does it matter if you use vulgar language? Yes! Does it matter if your viewing habits are dark or explicit? Yes! Does it matter if you indulge in fantasies and porn? Yes! Part of the lie of the Evil One is this: Life is hard, you need some distraction. Life is unfair, you deserve some indulgence. In other words, it really doesn't matter what you do. That is a lie! You matter to God. Your life, your heart, your mind, our purity matters to God. We are part of the people of God and the church is

a. **The church is to be 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 some of us 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. We can all relate to the utter discouragement that comes from the news of the fall of prominent leaders. We can also relate to the painful task of being the king's horses and the king's men who try to put humpty-dumpty back together again, when that fall and disqualification happens in our own congregation. We know from the fallout that purity matters, but the importance of purity is deeper than. 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. "*Strive for peace with everyone (unity) and for the holiness (holy) without which no one will see the Lord.*" (Hebrews 12.14). 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. Help others know that their purity matters. 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.

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

The point is this: our church is a local church, but it is not the entire church. Jesus said, "*I will build my church.*" 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 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. 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.

I was told that a new fast-food restaurant near Hall Rd, had a trainwreck for their drive through operation. Close by was a Chick-fil-A that was doing fabulous. The manager of the trainwreck went over to the Chick-fil-A manager and asked for help. That shows humility. What's more is that the Chick-fil-A manager offered to go over and see how if he could help him out, which he did. That is awesome. If your church is a business, it will typically view other businesses (churches) as it competitors. You don't love your competition; you want to see them shrink while you grow. How do you think the Lord of the church views that mindset? But it is more than seeing that other churches are not competitors, they are co-laborers. We are fellow soldiers warring against a common enemy and pursuing a common kingdom for a king who gets all the

glory. This means that we ought to pray for other churches and for the churches in other countries. We give away a lot of money and even people in order to plant churches and support missionaries who are planting churches. We are part of something that is universal and we want our hearts to be that big. When you have a big view of God, you will have a big view of the church, which will produce a big heart and a generous one as well.

3. **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 much of it does not stand in continuity with the apostles. Genuine Christianity is 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 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.

One – because God is one.

Pure – because God is holy.

Universal – because God's plan is worldwide

Theologically sound – because God is true.

Over and over the NT calls us to be the church. That is, live out the gospel in relationship with one another. Unity is powerful and attractive. Purity is beautiful because purity is clear and transparent. You can trust people who are faithful to their word and don't hide their lives from you. Every opening and closing ceremony of the Olympics tries to depict peoples of the world all getting along. Only the gospel can pull it off and will pull it off. Giving of ourselves that others can hear the gospel so that others can be part of the chorus of worshippers who make much of Jesus is an eternally sweet investment. There are still some languages in this world that do not have the Bible translated into them. We are exploring how we can fund a translation project to get the Bible in one of those unreached languages. We are intentionally funding missionaries to help get the gospel to them. I cannot think of anything more exciting and gratifying than one day being around the throne of Jesus and seeing in the grandstands a people-group singing, waving, cheering Jesus as King, whom we had the privilege of bringing the Bible and the gospel to.

Word-centered churches are made up of humble, gospel-loving, Christ-focused people. Word-centered churches produce word-centered missionaries and more word-centered churches. One, holy, universal and apostolic. This is who we are and who we resolve to continue to be. This is a charge to the Elders to protect this vision and promote it. This is a charge to our members to esteem the ministry and vision of this church. Many of you serve well, thank-you. Some of you need to adjust your priorities and get them aligned with God's. This church is worth it because Jesus is worth it.