

"CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY"

Ephesians 4:1-16

In their book, *The Edge of Adventure*, Keith Miller and Bruce Larson write [quote], "THE NEIGHBORHOOD BAR is possibly the best counterfeit there is to the fellowship Christ wants to give his church. It's an imitation, dispensing liquor instead of grace, escape rather than reality, but it is a permissive, accepting and inclusive fellowship. It is unshockable. It is democratic. You can tell people secrets and they usually don't tell others or even want to. The bar flourishes not because most people are alcoholics, but because God has put into the human heart the desire to know and be known, to love and be loved, and so many seek a counterfeit at the price of a few beers. With all my heart I believe that Christ wants his church to be unshockable, democratic, permissive- a fellowship where people can come in and say, 'I'm sunk!' 'I'm beat!' 'I've had it!' Alcoholics Anonymous has this quality. Our churches too often miss it." [End quote]

Do you agree with this analysis? Do our churches too often miss it?

How would you describe a health church? What is the church's identity?

What is the purpose of the church?

Before we answer the question on the purpose of the church, let me say something about the ministry of the church. If I were to ask you,

"What is the ministry of the church?" what would you say? Let me

share with you this thought- The ministry of the church is **a ministry of**

people. A ministry of people. Think about this- when a church lives, it lives

because the people within are vital and active. When a church dies, it

withers and dies not because the brick and mortar and carpet and pews get

old and begin to crack and crumble. A church withers and dies because the

people wither and die.

There is a true story told of a young pastor in Oklahoma who went to a little, though long-standing, church in hopes of reviving its ministry. He was like so many when they go to a new place- he had stars in his eyes and

great hopes for the future. He really thought he could turn it around. And he gave it his best try, week after week after week, but to no avail. And then the idea hit him- "I'll give it one more try, I'll put all my eggs in my last basket and see if it works." And so he took out an ad in the local newspaper on Saturday that the church had died, and on the next day, that Sunday, in the afternoon, there would be a funeral service for the church itself, and anyone who wanted to come was welcome. For the first time in years the little church was packed [sort of like some churches at Christmas and Easter]. Come to think of it, people were actually standing outside on tiptoes looking in through the windows to see this most unusual funeral service for a church. And to the people's shock, and because most of them arrived 20 to 30 minutes early to get a good seat, there was a casket down front. And it was covered with flowers. The pastor told the people that when the eulogy was finished they could pass by and view the remains of the dearly beloved that they were putting to rest that day.

They could hardly wait until the pastor had finished the eulogy. When he had said, "Amen," he slowly walked to the casket, pushed the flowers aside, opened the casket, and people walked by, filed by, one by one, to look in and leave sheepishly, feeling guilty as they walked out the door, because inside the casket he had placed a larger mirror. As they walked by, they saw the church that had died. (Lloyd Cory, *Quote Unquote*)

This morning we are going to focus on the last of our Spiritual Disciplines, Christian Community. What does this mean in a day and age when the church is becoming less and less important? If the statistic is true, that only 17% of all Americans regularly attend worship, then we could say with some sense of knowledge, that the church is becoming increasingly irrelevant. If only 17% of all Americans are attending worship then 4 out of 5 people do not have the need or the desire to attend church. Where have we missed the boat? What have we done or not done to get to this point in

our society? Well the first thing we need to do is get back to the Bible and understand the purpose of what we are about.

First, we need to come to terms with **what the church is and what the church is not**. The Greek word translated CHURCH-*ekklesia* in the New Testament, never refers to a building or a structure- it is a **gathering of people**. In Jesus day the *ekklesia* was understood by the people to be a public assembly of citizens. It was used when they were "called out" of the city to vote. It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word that was the counterpart meant the congregation of Israel that gathered at Sinai and assembled before the Lord. It meant those God brought together and called by His name- it was the people of God.

If you read the New Testament you will never find someone say something like, "Let's go to church." And you will not find the church referred to as a building, unless it is used metaphorically.

Any reference to the church, including the metaphorical “body” and “holy nation” is referring to God’s people.

Second, **the church is more than a gathering of people, it is a new community**. Christianity is more than you and I saying YES to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior- although that is crucial. When we say YES to Christ I believe the next step that God wants to see happen is the person become a part of the *ekklesia*. When we become a follower of Jesus Christ, we become members of His church- and our commitment to the church is impossible to tell apart from our commitment to Him. That is why it blows my mind when I hear people say they are believers and yet are not a part of a local congregation. What they are really saying is that they don’t need the church.

In our passage today we read that the church is a **corporate entity**. I did not say it is a corporation but a corporate entity. We read in Ephesians 4:11 and following about people of the *ekklesia* having different gifts,

making up the different parts of the body of believers. The bottom line is this- the church is not a social club, it is not a civic center, it is not a 12 step group, it is not even a Sunday morning meeting place. The church is a new society that Christ established for the salvation of a lost world that points people to a kingdom that is coming.

So back to **PURPOSE**. First, **the church is to walk in a manner worthy of our calling**. The King James translation uses the word *vocation*. And this calling is something that is permanent, it lasts a lifetime. There are certain expectations that God has for those who are called out. And Paul lists the signs that reflect this call and they are, beginning at verse 2- humility, gentleness, patience, love and peace.

One of the major points that Paul mentions in verse 3 centers on **maintaining the unity of the Spirit in this bond of peace**. To maintain means to keep or stand guard over. No way can we somehow produce this unity in the body for this unity should already be obvious because of our

oneness in Christ. And we need to stand united because the world is watching and looking at us to see how we will do. And this unity always means us looking at each other through the eyes of Christ.

Let me tell you a story of the unity in the body of Christ in Louisiana in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina where several churches began making Sunday mornings the most unified time of the week instead of the most segregated. After Katrina ripped through Louisiana, displacing hundreds of thousands and demolishing hundreds of church buildings, many congregations disintegrated. But others began joining together with other congregations who did not lose their buildings in the storm. This meant not simply worshipping in a new sanctuary, but worshipping across racial and cultural lines. After the hurricane, the members of the predominantly black Grace United Methodist Church were scattered. The church building was missing an entire wall. Well, that is when First United Methodist Church, a predominantly white church just a mile down the road, asked them if they

would consider joining together as one church. Now, on Sunday mornings, blacks, whites, and Hispanics come together for a lively combination of traditional and contemporary worship at the newly formed First Grace United Methodist Church. Reverend Shawn Anglim, head pastor of the newly merged congregation, says that the church is not trying to put two identities together, but instead form a new identity. As Reverend Anglim notes, the congregants have joined together to hear "a new voice, in a new language"—the language of oneness in Christ.

Another purpose of the church is to **equip the saints for the work of ministry for building up the body of Christ.** (vs. 12) We read in verse 11 that God gave gifts to believers with the understanding that believers would use those very gifts so that the members of the body are built up to be mature Christians. The church is not to be lead only by pastors but by those who are called out- the laity, who use their gifts to prepare the Body

of Christ for works of service. The church is not to be pastor driven but it is a combination of pastor and laity working together.

And finally, the purpose of the church is to **grow up in every way into Christ**. The religious landscape in America is changing. More than one-quarter of American adults (28%) have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion -- or no religion at all. If change in affiliation from one type of Protestantism to another is included, roughly 44% of adults have either switched religious affiliation, moved from being unaffiliated with any religion to being affiliated with a particular faith, or dropped any connection to a specific religious tradition altogether. What are we to make of this? Taken as a whole, the data point to big changes on the horizon. The loss of a Protestant majority will lead to further adjustments in the cultural worldview. Clearly, America is more of a mission field than ever before. That is why discipleship and an intentional effort to encourage people to grow into Christ are huge. But there is something else we need to

be aware of. In our passage Paul is very clear in verse 14 that there are those seek to trick people, who seek to lure people away from the faith. So we must be maturing in the faith and the only way for me to mature in my faith is to be in fellowship, community with other believers- like small group studies and Sunday school.

I keep hearing about Oprah Winfrey who has become the high priestess of television in our culture today. Marcia Nelson sees Oprah as a major American religious leader. And there are some scary things that she is preaching and coming up with that could really seduce the person who is not grounded in the faith. Oprah was raised in a black Baptist church in Mississippi. It is not known whether she had a healthy exposure to Christianity or a distorted one, but she is clearly in the process of deconstructing Christianity and reframing it into a New Age perspective.

One of the most revealing examples was a recent show with guests Betty Eadie, (new age/Mormon author of *Embraced By The Light* and *The Awakening Heart*), Dannion Brinkley (new age author of near death experience books *Saved By The Light*, and *At Peace With in the Light*) and Sophy Burnham (new age author of *A Book of Angels* and *Angel Letters*).

During the show Oprah related, "I was raised a Baptist and we were too hung up on traditional ways. I was sitting in church and heard that God is a jealous God. I asked 'Why?' Come on-let's get over it!" She related a "jealous God" to an insecure God. In the program Oprah revealed that she doesn't think God is hung up on what you believe about God-whatever that "force" is, it doesn't care what you call it. He doesn't have an ego problem.

She states, "I believe in the FORCE-I call it God." She also said if you believe in a rhythm of nature and in love, then you believe in God. Oprah, in typical New Age fashion, has reduced God to human limitations, and dismisses objective absolutes, substituting emotions as the criteria of truth.

This constant refrain of a nebulous concept of love as a guiding principle is very deceptive. As Nelson understands the Oprah phenomenon, forgiveness is at the center of her message, which is great. However, she offers forgiveness without the atonement. Confession of inadequacy is presented as a sufficient remedy for sin and wrongdoing. God is effectively out of the picture as lawgiver or judge, and there is no room for the cross of Christ as an atonement for sin.

Friends, there is no substitute for the Christian Community. We need to regain our Biblical focus. We need to become relevant and take the wonderful news of a Savior desperately wants to fill the God vacuum in each person alive. Amen.

"CHRISTIANITY COMMUNITY"

Ephesians 4:1-16

Introduction: *The Edge of Adventure*, by Keith Miller/Bruce Larson
The NEIGHBORHOOD BAR...

What is the ministry of the church? A ministry of _____

A young pastor in Oklahoma...

What the church is and what the church is not

Not a building; it is a _____ of people

The church is more than a _____ of people, it is a ____ community

The church is a _____ entity vs.11

PURPOSE of the Church

First, the church is to walk in a manner _____ of our calling

A major point- maintaining the _____ of the spirit in the bond of peace

Another purpose- to equip the saints for the _____ of ministry for
building up the body of Christ vs. 12

Finally, to _____ in every way into Christ

Believer BEWARE vs. 14

Conclusion: There is no substitute for the Christian community