

Together We Stand

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Matthew 18:18-22

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Baptist Principles – the church

Movement 1 – The Church Today

What is the church today? What does the church look like, what is its purpose, and how is it seen in society? What is the church today?

Such a question may seem basic and obvious. Such a question may seem to be elementary, until we really think about it. Go beyond the Sunday school answers, go beyond the expected answer that the church “is the people,” and dig a little deeper. Which people? Doing what? Why do they gather and how? Look at the world, look at what we see in society today and ask the question, what is the church today?

Think about the different types of churches we find in the world. The diversity in architecture speaks to the diversity of churches; the styles of the buildings tend to correlate to the style of the congregation. There are the huge, mountainous cathedrals, looming over the houses below, reaching up to the heavens, allowing God an instant bridge to grab onto and to come dwell amongst us. There are the churches shaped like barns with crosses on top. These mega-complexes are surrounded by smaller buildings and a sea of blacktop so that all the visitors will have ample parking. There are the storefront churches, churches that often seem to be on the cutting edge of religious fanaticism, pastors who are looking to grab people off the street and drag them into salvation. There are country churches struggling to survive, and suburban churches competing with soccer, baseball and lacrosse schedules. There are a plethora of churches in our society. Churches in theaters, churches in boats, churches in malls, churches are everywhere. With this in mind, I ask you again, what is the church?

Such a question was on the minds of the early Christians as they read the gospel of Matthew. They wondered what this gathering of Jesus followers was supposed to look like. They wondered how they were supposed to conduct themselves and what was to keep them together. Church for them was the synagogue, the temple and rituals of Judaism. Yet they felt that there must be something more, something beyond the ancient practices of Judaism as they follow this new revelation of God. What was their gathering supposed to be? What was the church?

The early Baptists wondered and asked this very question of the Anglican Church. As they went to a state sanctioned, liturgically rote and routine worship service they asked themselves, what is the church. Along with the Separatists, the Puritans and others in England, they felt a discomfort with the status quo, the smells and bells, the hierarchy and false piety and asked, what is the church?

When I was looking into this idea of the nature and essence of the church I came across something that challenged all of my conceptions and perceptions of the church: the inflatable church. This exists! The inflatable church, so you can have your wedding anywhere you want. The inflatable church, so religious ceremonies can become convenient and consumable. The inflatable church, a structure that is full of hot air, but not much substance. The inflatable church, the church for today, compact and on the

move. What is the church? Is it just a blown up bundle of rubber? What is the church? Is it a barn or a mountain of stone and mortar? What is the church in our society? What is the church today?

Movement 2 – Is it Necessary?

Think about this inflatable church. Think about the statement that is being made with such a product. It is a church that can be anywhere. The bastion of ecclesial convenience, it is an opportunity to have religious ceremony no matter where or when, at your own beck and whim. The inflatable church challenges and threatens the purpose of the church in the world. It suggests that the purpose of the church is to provide a space for weddings or other pseudo-religious ceremonies, and not much more. It is all hot air and nothing more. It is plastic with no substance. It is something that can be folded up and put out of the way without much bother. You can imagine as one is deflating the church, two thousand years of struggle and conviction and persecution and perseverance leaving the walls of this faux church with the wheeze and whine that one hears as the church loses its form. The towers begin to sag, the doors fall in on themselves, and maybe you watch and wonder, what is the purpose of the church?

Today some would say that the church is just a building. Today some would say that it is not so much the people in the building, but the building itself because the people have all left. Some would claim that the church has become a museum of individuals maintaining an arcane and obsolete practice. In P.D. James' book, *The Children of Men*, the church became a place where people practiced rituals simply for comfort. It was a time when the human race had stopped propagating, children were no longer born, there was no future for humanity and everyone was looking toward the end of human existence. Where was the place for faith in God with such a culture? The church was a place for comfort just as much as a bar or saloon was a place for comfort. What was the purpose of the church?

You may claim that such a book is factious and fanciful, a work of fiction looking towards a time that may never come to pass, yet I think it does speak to an assumption and approach towards the ecclesial in our society. In a recent Gallup poll, 40% of Americans claimed they went to church on a regular basis (about 3 out of 4 weeks). Yet other sociologist, such as Robert Wuthnow, found that in such a poll about half of those who claimed to attend church on a regular basis lied. We know it is important, but we don't know why, and so we do not partake. With such a statistic cut in half, we must ask, if church is necessary.

The early Christians were still a part of the Jewish community. Those who were raised as Jews already had a place to go for worship, they had a place to go where they could experience God, and you can imagine many of them wondering if another group, another gathering was necessary. Jesus was a Jew, and so to follow Jesus, should not one follow the Jewish customs and rituals. Was it necessary to gather in a new community with a new form of worship? Is such a gathering necessary? Was church necessary?

Why do we need to go to church? We can read the Bible on our own. We can pray on our own. Is church necessary? The early Baptists wondered if attending the Anglican service was helpful or if it was a disservice to their faith life? Was worship, was church necessary.

If all the church seems to offer to the world is shoddy rip-offs of music, movies and even self-help philosophy, what is the point? If all the church seems to do is add just one more thing to do in your life, just one more meeting to attend, and just one more demand and responsibility, what is the point. If the church is only a club, a place to find and make friends, what is the point? Is the church necessary?

Remember the scene from *On the Waterfront* when Father Barry was giving last rites over Dugan, a longshoreman who was going to confess the crimes of the mob and the union to the authorities. Remember the sermon he preached, calling the other workers to accountability and accusing them of crucifying Dugan and Joey Doyle's (the character who was murdered in the very beginning of the movie). In the middle of his sermon, one of the workers yelled, "Go back to your church, Father." Such a yell declares the irrelevant nature of the institution. On the waterfront, where real life happens, where people are murdered, starved, and held silent through scare tactics the church does not have a place. The church is not relevant in this world. Go back to your church.

Do we need the church? For we can pray on our own. We can read scripture on our own, and we can follow Jesus on our own. Do we need the church?

Movement 3 – Lonesome Christianity

Yet try to be a Christian on your own. Try to live out your faith in an isolated way. You may wipe the dust off of your shoes and walk away from the church claiming that it is irrelevant, that it is unnecessary and useless. You may ride off into the sunset, a sole and silent individual willing to take the world on your own, with your faith at your side. You ride off with the little boy, the church in the distant calling your name, asking you to come back, and you do not. You don't need the church; you can be a Christian on your own without any community, without any help.

It may work at first. It may seem possible at first, until that moment when you are in need. There will come that moment when you are reading the scriptures, and you come across something that challenges you and threatens your faith. What do you do now? There will come that moment when you will come across a time in your prayer when you feel empty and like you have nothing to say. There will come a moment when you face struggles in your faith and you have no one to turn to. There will come a moment when you will just be wondering about the particularities of Christianity, and you have no one to discuss with. There will come a moment when the weight of the world will be greater than you can hold and you will be alone.

It will feel like Gary Cooper in *High Noon*. You know trouble is coming, and you search frantically for someone to stand with you and help you, but you are on your own, facing your troubles, facing your dangers, facing your fears on your own. Can we be Christians on our own?

Scholars like Hauerwas and Willimon have critiqued such an approach of high individualism. Scholars have argued that when one claims that isolated Christianity is within reach and grasp in practice, one is being unrealistic. This starts with the claim that our salvation is our own, personal, and individual. The individual Christian can have an individual faith which could be very different from someone else's faith and that might not be bad. The problem arises when individuals begin to stray so far from each other that they no longer recognize that they follow the same Christ. The danger arises when independent Christians, in a need and desire to find hope, on their own contort Christ to

become the drug they need to get through the night. The individual Christian could easily fall into the trap that Fosdick warns against, the trap of worshiping Jesus instead of following Jesus. With no one to keep the individual in check, theologies can be varied and pluralistic. With no community, individuals can easily slip into heresies without knowing. Individuals can face crises and be alone. Individuals can try to do the awesome responsibility of spreading the Gospel alone. Do you think you can be a Christian on your own?

Movement 4 – Looking for Companions

We need the presence and the support of others. We need to be with others as we struggle to follow Jesus. We need others as we live out our faith. So we try to find others. So we search out the presence of other Christians. We look for someone to talk to about our faith. We look for someone to wonder with as our questions emerge. Maybe we start going to a bible study so we can share our insights with others and hear the insights that others might have. Maybe we start going to a prayer meeting so we can be lifted up in our prayers and we can be inspired by others. Maybe we start meeting with two or three other Christians and sharing our struggles in our faith. In these groups, in these gatherings you find yourself lifted up in your faith. In these groups and gatherings you find yourself strengthened in your faith.

John Howard Yoder claims that Jesus gives the example of the community in the gospel of Matthew in the fact that he does not travel on his own. Yoder claims that the individualism many hold up, the individualism that many cherish is contrary to the church – we are called to look for companions and live in community.

The early Baptists, even as they moved away from the Anglican Church, moved towards community through bible study, prayer, and song. Even as they were feeling disenfranchised from the established church, they still looked for community. The section of Matthew that we are looking at today focuses on how to live in a community. How do we forgive each other, how do we love each other, and how do we call each other to accountability? We are called to be in a community; we need to look for each other.

We struggle with our doubts, we face moments of despair and we look for someone or some ones to lean upon to rest upon and to lift us up. We look for a community to tell us that we are not crazy when we feel the Lord is calling us to go across the world for mission work. We need a community to tell us that are still staying within the bounds of faith when we wonder about the questionable aspects of faith. When we feel that we can no longer pray, we need to rest on the prayers of others. When we feel that we are out of hope, we need to rest on the hope of others. When we feel that we are out of grace, then we look to others for signs of grace. We need a community; we need each other.

You cannot follow Christ alone, because Christ may lead you to something that will require help. Can you imagine if only one person decided to go to Kensington, hoping to make a difference. How much work could that person do? Yet we go with a community, and we now know we can do more, have a greater impact in the neighborhood. We need community.

Movement 5 – Finding Jesus

You may say I get it pastor; we need the community of the church so we can lift each other up and support each other. This is true, but the church doesn't stop there. The church is not merely a gathering, it is not only a support group, but it is something more.

Look at the verse, look at the verse that Jesus offers, verse twenty in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew. When we gather with other Christians not only are we supported, not only do we have the opportunity to share, but we are at that moment, in the presence of Christ. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." When we gather with others for a bible study, Christ is there among us. When we gather for prayer, Christ is among us. When we gather for worship, Christ is among us. Mirsolov Volf claims that it is in the relationality of Christian fellowship that the church is actualized. This reflects the relationality of the Trinitarian God we follow. It is in fellowship with other Christians that we come to know and experience Christ, just as it is in the fellowship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that the divine is realized. So our gathering is more than simply a support. Our gathering is more than simply a bible study, a question and answer and a time for exhortation. We are gathering as D. Hare says to meet with the mind of Christ.

One of the arguments that Baptists have had and continue to have with other Christians is concerning the presence of Christ. Some, like the Catholics, the Lutherans and others claim that Christ is present in the Eucharist. Christ is present in the bread and the cup at the table, thus they tend to have Eucharist every week. But as Baptists we do not believe that Christ is present in the bread and the cup. We do not claim that the bread becomes the body and the wine becomes the blood, it is a memorial. Instead, we practice and we believe that Christ is present in our gathering. When we gather in the name of Christ, there Christ shall be. We don't need a big crowd, we don't need multitudes, but two or three and there Christ shall be present.

I remember one time in seminary on Maundy Thursday I gathered with some other students. There was not any official service. There was not any official gathering, and it felt like the majority of students were just going to go through the day like any other. Yet I felt that on that particular day, I should do something. I felt that I should take some time for some kind of worship. So I gathered with two other students in the chapel, late at night. The wind was howling, the lights were not working, and we gathered together. We gathered together, lit a candle and sat in silence. After a while, I read some scripture and we discussed the events of the evening. We did not have a formal worship service. We did not have a sermon. We did not sing hymns, but Christ was present. Christ was present in that small and simple gathering, and it was powerful and it was church.

In our fellowship, in our gathering we encounter the presence of Christ.

Movement 6 – Where two or three...

This is the church. This is the foundation, the focus, and the basis of the church. Not the gathering of people, but the presence of Christ amidst the gathering of people. Remember this, for it is important. Anyone can gather together for any reason, but when we gather for the sake of Christ then we are the church. When two or three gather, we are in the fullest, the church. We are not an aspect of the church, or a smaller part of a larger church, but the fullest visible aspect of the invisible church. As Francis Wayland said, all "ecclesiastical relations are limited to the church to which he belongs." The church in the fullest is when Christ is present.

The gathering of believers is the church. John Smyth, one of the first Baptists said that “the visible church is a visible communion of saints.” Thomas Helwys, another one of the early Baptists said that the church is, “the company of faithful people... separated from the world by the Word and Spirit of God... being knit unto the Lord, and one another by baptism... upon their owne confession of faith.” The church is the gathering of believers in the presence of Christ.

As Baptist we believe that this is a voluntary gathering. E.Y. Mullins claims that the church must be voluntary, reflecting our soul freedom, and each church must be free and independent. When the church is based on the gathering of two or three, then it is independent and free.

What is the church? What is the church today? It is not a building, or a steeple. It is not a blow up façade or a plot of land. It is not liturgy done correctly or sacramental acts. The church is the presence of Christ amongst the gathering of believers in Christ’s name. The church is the gathered community knowing the mind of Christ, and living out, following Christ.

Where two or three gather together to read scripture, there shall be the church. Where two or three gather to pray, there shall be the church. Where two or three worship and praise, there shall be the church. Where two or three serve those who are struggling, work to house the homeless and feed the hungry, there shall be the church. Where two or three follow Christ there shall be the church.

AMEN