

The Real World Church

sermon

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Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

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Grace Covenant Church was originally registered with the State of Tennessee as *Ekklesia*, the New Testament Greek word for church. Except for two passages in Matthew, which are controversial and believed to be anachronisms, the word is missing from the Gospels, thus, from the teachings of Jesus. The word emerges in Acts and the Epistles to distinguish the Christian gathering primarily from the Jewish synagogue. The Greek origin was political and secular, meaning “called out.” In the Greek City-State *ekklesia* referred to the gathering of citizens for a political forum. Early Christians borrowed the secular word to identify the congregation called together in Christ for worship and education. Originally *ekklesia* did not refer to an institution, a denominational body, or a religion and rarely referred to the larger Christian community of congregations. Like the Jewish synagogue, the *ekklesia* was the congregation—people gathered in a particular location for worship and education in the faith.

I believe that most Christian congregations still attempt to claim the original intent of the *ekklesia* as they gather for worship, study and mission; but most of us would also recognize a down side for the word *church*. For some people the word is associated painful experiences that clearly deny the spirit of Christ. For any student of history, *church* connects with the western power struggles between the ecclesiastical authorities of the established Western Church and the political heads of state. History is bloodied with the martyrs of the Inquisition and Crusades of the Middle Ages, atrocities which Reformation Churches sometimes emulated rather than reformed. The landscape of Europe is dotted with magnificent cathedrals that cast their shadows on the poor and oppressed exploited by the wealth of the Church under the control of a powerful hierarchy.

Alfred Loisy was a French Catholic theologian (d. 1940) whose study of the New Testament led to serious questions about the nature of the church. Although many of his teachings are commonly accepted today by the best biblical scholarship even among Catholics, the straw that broke the camel’s back was Loisy’s famous statement: “Jesus came preaching the Kingdom, and what arrived was the Church.” He believed that Jesus intended a community of faith like the church, but nothing like the institutional Church that emerged in Rome. As he progressed in his heresy, the Vatican removed him from his professorship in the Catholic University of Paris and condemned his books.

History notwithstanding, our cities are full of church drop-outs, people who refer to themselves as recovering Baptists, Christians, or Catholics as if church were an addiction or disease to avoid. One might note the antics of Fred Phelps and his Westboro Baptist Church, picketing military funerals and promoting hatred of gays; the current priesthood scandals of sexually exploited children that usually make front-page news; or churches that have defended the practice of racial segregation as their forebears a century earlier defended slavery. Christians legitimately complain that church scandals do not represent *the* church, that the norm of building Habitat houses, feeding the poor, and building community usually goes unnoticed. But I have been around long enough to know that we are surrounded by wounded Christians injured in the line of fire of church experience. Kara Jean Hawthorne tells of her church in Dallas that attempted to identify with these wounded Christians, billing themselves as “church for people who have a problem with church.”

We have a tendency to speak only of the church as an ideal community. A basic problem of theology is a tendency to speak of the ideal with a blind eye to the struggles of the real world. I am as guilty as any church leader of accentuating the positive. We gather here to celebrate God in Christ and to exemplify the highest and the best meaning of church, so we end up putting the spotlight on what ought rather than on what is. But what do we do with the real world church of common experience? Do the historic sins of the church belong in our understanding of the word? Is there a place in the church to air our problems?

Actually the word *ekklesia* does not appear in today’s text, but the whole passage is about the faith foundations of church that build on the prayer of benediction that precedes it: “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

If Paul did not invent the church, he certainly is responsible for the early Christian understanding of

the word. In his Epistles, Paul projected high church metaphors like the “body of Christ.” In learning to speak Christian, the early church was as caught up in understanding and elaborating on the work of church as we are. Then as now, the term was afflicted with misunderstanding. Especially in the Greek world, political and secular images may have continued to creep into the Christian vision. If you read between the lines, the Ephesian statement of the nature of the church subtly deals with problems of conflict in the church. Paul would not have insisted that “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” had the “one” not been a problem; there must have been division over very basic faith issues. Paul would not have noted the importance of exercising the diversity of gifts if the church had not been at war over which gifts were better than others. He would not have called for Christians to speak the truth in love had the church not been guilty of speaking half-truths and falsehoods in vengeance toward one another. He would not have told the Ephesians to “grow up” had they not behaved as “children, tossed to a fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.” In short, in spite of the ideal expressed in metaphors like “the body of Christ,” the early church fell short of ideal perfection. One might well conclude that the high-toned vision of the church in the epistles is always a reflection of a background failure of the church to live up to her theology.

The human imperfection of the church is basic to her nature. Beware of the temptation to assume you are above the rank and file of humanity. The worst human failures in history, whether in religious or in secular institutions, have grown out of arrogance, the assumption that I have a divine right to do as I please. Paul encourages the church toward “humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.” The worst failures of the church have come when either popes or emperors assumed the divine right to rule the world. Although the Reformation failed to establish the perfect church on earth, the Reformation left us with a crucial principle of understanding that we cannot do without. With all of their blunders, Luther and Calvin recognized that the church is never finally reformed. Basic to the church’s nature is her human tendency toward failure. The real world church must be willing to change and must adopt the Reformation principle of perpetual reformation.

What is true of the church is true of the Christian. Beware of your own tendency toward arrogance. The only way we can come together as the body of Christ and to speak the truth in love is to meet one another as fellow pilgrims on the way to a higher plane of life. Theologian Paul Tillich identified the manifestation of the demonic in human life with the assumption of absolute authority. When Adolf Hitler assumed absolute authority over the German people, we was only a short step away from believing he had a right to rule the world. Hussein, Gaddafi, and Assad have followed suit. Marriage and family is never founded on authority; it is grounded in mutual respect and love. Thus, the church and church leaders especially must understand that there is no divine sanction of anyone’s privilege to rule over others. The priesthood, whether Catholic or Protestant, is about service not control. Just as being forgiven is fundamental to our approach to the God of Grace, forgiveness is essential in our *koinonia*, our friendship with one another.

Harvard Chaplain Peter Gomes tells of the problem of Pope John XXIII in Vatican Council II with distinguishing the U.S. Cardinals Cushing of Boston and Spellman of New York. On one occasion Pope John caught himself addressing the Cardinal by the wrong name and began to apologize profusely. To set his superior at ease, Cardinal Cushing responded: “That is all right, Holy Father; no one’s infallible.” Gomes goes on to speak of the ambiguity of perfection as something that we are more likely to wish for than to have. He cites Mae West: “I was pure as the driven snow until I drifted.” Even in Vatican II the Catholic Church had difficulty with the problem of Church failure. The bishops could acknowledge that the Church had sinned in the members; even popes had sinned, but the Vatican II documents never make the straight-forward statement that the Church has committed sin. The Roman Church continues to claim divinity for the Church. Until we recognize our humanity, our imperfection, our weakness, we can never begin to approximate the high calling of God in Christ.

Most Protestants are aware of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s opposition to his own church and to the Hitler government in the name of Christ; but we know little of Father Max Josef Metzger, a Catholic priest in Germany known affectionately as “Bruder Paul.” He drew suspicion from the SS for his efforts to

bring various Christians together around the cause of peace. More important than the government's displeasure was his commitment to the one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and unity based not on nationalism or racism but on the work of the Spirit of God. For his effort he was condemned and executed in 1944. His crime was his call for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Then as now, there is no Spirit more effective or more powerful in the life of the real church in the real world. The strength of the church has never been in the worldly power claimed by big institutions, governments, and kings. The strength of the church is in her commitment to the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, in the quiet voice that speaks the truth in love.