

“The Question of God:
4) Who Needs the Church?”

a sermon by

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Text: “Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?”(I Corinthians 11:22b).

This past week I spoke at the Presbyterian Communicator’s Network regional event that took place in Charlotte. It was a gathering of Presbytery executives, denominational representatives, and a few interested ministers and laypersons who were looking at the issue of how the church communicates with its constituency and with the public in general. My job was to speak of “The Ingredients for a Successful Television Ministry,” which I was glad to do. I got to the conference a few minutes early and sat in on a discussion that was going on that quickly caught my attention. Some of the members of the national church staff from Louisville were explaining to the group one of the latest controversies that is affecting the Presbyterian Church

(USA). At the meeting of the General Assembly in Richmond this past June the Assembly passed a series of resolutions condemning the State of Israel for building the wall between Jewish territory and Palestinian territory. The Assembly also called for, as a last resort, the disinvestment of Presbyterian funds from companies doing business in Israel. These actions have created a firestorm of reaction within the Jewish community, threatening the already fragile relationship between Christians and Jews.

As I listened to the discussion, I could not help but think to myself “Who needs this?” on top of everything the church is struggling with: the ordination of practicing homosexuals, the war in Iraq, just to name a few.

Who needs the church? That is a question I hear on a fairly regular basis. But the question isn’t raised just in regard to controversial issues in the mainline Protestant church; it is raised on the local level as well.

Often people get very discouraged about the church. Some people are frustrated because the church doesn’t seem to stand for anything; others are frustrated because it seems to stand for everything. Still others find it petty, narrow, and restrictive. James Howell, the Minister of Myers Park Methodist Church, once commented that if he were to leave the ministry, it would not be because someone called him in the middle of the night who was in deep trouble. Being with someone in time of need is a privilege. “No,” he said, “it would be because of the smallness and pettiness that is too often present in churches.”

I.

One thing is certain. This is not a new problem. Often we look at the church in the New Testament as if it represented a more perfect reality, but that is simply not the case. Take the church in Corinth. The Apostle Paul founded that church on one of his missionary journeys. But sometime after Paul had left, trouble broke out. There were factions in the church that revolved around certain personalities. There was an “Apollos” party, a “Peter” faction, a “Paul” group, and even a “Christ” faction. Moreover, there were incidents of gross immorality. A man was sleeping with his stepmother. Others were engaged in numerous pagan practices. In the passage that I read from today Paul condemns the church in Corinth because of the way they were coming together in the houses of the members to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Some were rich; some were poor. The rich tended to keep to themselves, thus isolating themselves from members who were poor. In doing so they were showing contempt for the church and making matters worse. So Paul condemns them for their division.

So, who needs the church? It is a fair question, I believe, and one that deserves an answer.

II.

For one thing, the New Testament makes it clear that the life of faith and the church are inseparably tied together. The Apostle Paul uses a number of images to describe the church. It is the “Body of Christ” composed of many members. It is the “Bride of Christ,” as intimately related to Christ as a wife to a husband. It is the “New Israel” in that it represents God’s elect people. John Calvin, the great reformer of the Sixteenth Century, always insisted that church was not a human institution that came into being according to human plans. The church is established by God. It is God’s gift to humankind. The church in the New Testament was created by the life, death, and resurrection. In this sense the church differs from every other human organization. Calvin was aware that a person could be a Christian and not be a member of a church, but he was also aware that none of us would ever be as strong in our faith without the presence of a community to sustain and support us.

John Leith in his book *The Reformed Imperative* argues that the church has something to say that no one else can say. Leith notes that there are many organizations in our society that can provide social services better than the church. There are many counselors, psychiatrists, and psychologists who are better trained than most ministers for the “care of the human soul.” There is, however, one word that the church can and must speak that no one else can speak and that word is God’s saving activity that is found in Jesus Christ. That is what the church has to say that no one else can say.

III.

But the church has yet another function beside the proclamation of the gospel. It has, to use the words of the Barmen Declaration, to testify in the midst of a sinful world that it belongs to Christ and wants to live from his comfort and direction. In other words, the church has to demonstrate, not only by its words, but also by its actions, that it belongs to Christ.

This was brought home to me this past week on Tuesday evening, when I participated in the celebration of the Thirty Fifth Anniversary of the founding of the Community School of the Arts, which was founded by Henry Bridges, Jr., who at the time was the organist and choirmaster of this church. The Community School of the Arts, which has enriched the lives of so many children in our community, came out of Henry’s vision to take pianos in the church that were not being used during the week and offer piano and rhythm instruction to underserved children living in the shadow of the church. Today the Community School of the Arts serves over six hundred children in Eastover and in Piedmont Courts.

The church, therefore, exists not only to bear witness to Christ in its proclamation, but also in its life. One of the great crises of the Twentieth Century was the rise of National Socialism in Germany under the leadership of Adolph Hitler. Albert Einstein once observed that when Hitler came to power, all of the great institutions of Germany acquiesced to him: the universities, the great newspapers, even the so-called “national” or German Church. But there

was one group that did not acquiesce. In May 1934 a group of pastors and theologians gathered in the town of Barmen, Germany, where they produced what would be called *The Barmen Declaration*. In that declaration they announced that the church would not bow down to the gods of Aryan supremacy but that the church would listen to the one Word of God in Jesus Christ. Einstein later said that the church he once despised became the only group in Germany to stand up to Hitler's tyranny.

IV.

The church today, however, has another important mission and it is not only to strengthen the lives of its members but to challenge those lives as well. This past week I came across an article in the *Christian Century* by William Willimon, who for a number of years was dean of the Chapel at Duke University. In this article he relates an incident in which a university student came to him to complain about his roommate. When Willimon asked the student why he and his roommate were not getting along well, the student replied that he was a Christian and his roommate was a Muslim. The student went on to say that his Muslim roommate often asked him questions that made him uncomfortable. "For example," he said, "he asked me why I never prayed." The student went on to say that he did pray, and that Christians pray all the time. "Well, that's strange," said the Muslim student, "I have never seen you pray." Then the student went on to say that the latest incident of disagreement between him and his Muslim roommate occurred when this student had returned from a particularly wild fraternity party and his Muslim roommate asked him how he could justify his behavior in light of religious faith. "Look," said the student, "I told you that I am not the best Christian in the world. You shouldn't judge the Christian faith by me." Then, his Muslim friend replied, "Well, how should I judge the Christian faith?"

You see, that is the rub for most of us, because whether we like it or not, people are going to judge our religious faith by what they see in us.

It is very easy to criticize the church. It is very easy to see things in the church that should be different. The Protestant Reformers of the Sixteenth Century understood that. That is why one of the key affirmations of the church was the Latin expression "Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda" (The Church Reformed but Always Being Reformed). They understood that reformation by the Word of God was an ongoing process.

But one should not underestimate the power of God's spirit at work in the church. The prophet Isaiah heard the call of God in the Temple in Jerusalem. Harriet Beecher was in church, when the terrible injustice of slavery confronted her and she determined to write a book she called *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It was while worshipping in a church in Chicago that a medical doctor by the name of Wilfred Grenfell heard the call of God to become a missionary to Labrador and in doing so changed the course of his life and that country.

Sometimes it is easy to despair of the church. Its errors are glaring; its pettiness is often visible to all around. But the church is God's gift to humanity and God himself sustains it. John Calvin the great reformer once said, "Although the melancholy desolation which confronts us on

every side may cry that no remnant of the church is left, let us know that Christ's death is fruitful, and that God miraculously keeps his church as his hiding place."

Today, on this Celebration Sunday, we celebrate the conclusion of a successful stewardship campaign and the hard work of all who made it successful. But we do not rest on our laurels. God has called us to be the light of the world and all of us are aware that there is great darkness around us. We are living in a nation today that is bitterly divided. We are divided between rich and poor, black and white, conservative and liberal, straight and gay. Yet, it is precisely in this time and this moment that God is calling us to send forth a light from this place so that women and men may see that light and give praise to the God who made heaven and earth.

Amen!