

Lake Cities Community Church
September 21, 2011
Pastor Craig Schill

Church Works!
Introduction to Sermon Series
Matthew 16:18

You may have heard about the man rescued after 20 years stranded alone on a desert island. His rescuer is astonished to find that the castaway has built several impressive structures. "Wow!" the rescuer says. "What's that beautiful stone building overlooking the bay?" "That is my home," the castaway says. "And what about that building over there, with the steeple?" "That," the castaway says, "is my church." "But wait!" the rescuer says. "That building over there, with the cross and bell tower. What is that?" "Oh that, says the man... That is the church I used to belong to."

Church is a funny thing. For some it is a love / hate relationship. Like the unfortunate blurb put in a church bulletin some years ago to advertise a new Sunday School class, which read: "Don't let worry kill you. Let the Church help."

So let me ask you: How do you feel about the church? How is your love / hate relationship? Are you full of love for the church? Or do you have some hate? Maybe you have been hurt in the church, and you are close to giving up on her. Maybe you a teenager and are only here because your parents made you come. Maybe you come more out of habit or obligation than devotion to Christ.

Wherever you are at this morning, as we begin this new sermon series called, "Church Works," I hope you will allow God to meet you where you are at and walk with you into His Holy Temple – the church.

So let's begin this journey with two questions. Fill in the blank: "The church is _____." And "The church does _____." In other words "What *is* the church? And what does the church do?" The first is a question of "being" and the second is a question of "doing." You may remember in the movie the *Little Mermaid* - where Ariel, collected an assortment of land-based items - she called "thingamabobs" because she didn't know what they were - and because she didn't know what they were, she had not idea what they were to be used for.

That can be just like the church. Sometimes we look at the church and we don't know exactly what it is we are dealing with. And so we become confused as to what the church is to do.

Now, I am not planning to answer fully these questions (What is the church? What is the church to do?) this morning - though we will touch on them briefly. But I want you to dwell on these questions -and they will frame our discussions throughout the series.

PURPOSE OF SERMON SERIES:

In terms of purpose of this series - first and foremost, I desire that we all grow in our understanding of **ecclesiology**, which is a fancy way of saying "the study of the church." Now this is not a new goal. Those who have been with us over the years might recall several previous sermon series that touched on "ecclesiology" In 2007 I did a series called Divine Directions, focusing on our four purposes (the "doing" part of ecclesiology). In May 2008, we had a series actually called Ecclesiology 101, which focused on what the church "is" - the bride of Christ, body of Christ, etc. (focus on "being"). Following this, in August of 2008 we had a series called CommUNITY - which explored the topic of unity in

the local church setting. In addition, at least two of our book studies Titus (2008) and 1 Corinthians (2010) were intentionally focused largely on the roles and responsibilities of the local church.

You can see that the study of the church is something of a passion of mine; but I also deeply believe it is a valuable focus for all of us. In fact, one reason we keep coming back to this topic is because ecclesiology is a significant area of weakness in the church at large. The pastor who married Tammy and I, Tim Savage, in a book (*The Church: God's New People*, Crossway, 2011) published this year recounted the following story. He writes: "Several years ago when transporting the English churchman John Stott to the place where he was preaching, I asked him what he thought was the most *neglected doctrine* among contemporary Christians. Supposing he would say, "theology" (our view of God is too small), or possibly "Soteriology" (our methods of salvation are too self-reliant), I was surprised to hear him reply without hesitation, "ecclesiology." To me the doctrine of the church seemed peripheral to other more weighty doctrines and certainly not worthy of the stature *Dr. Stott* subscribed to. But in the years since I have come to see otherwise. The church of Jesus Christ is the locus (*center*) of God's plan for creation."

It is ironic, is it not, that most churches are weak in their understanding of themselves! But I guess that is just like people – we can live with very little self-awareness or reflection. And so my goal in this series is that we would grow in our awareness of what it means that we are a church. That we would grow in our ecclesiology.

Let me provide one more reason for this study – and that is we are **fast approaching our 5th anniversary** – which is a significant milestone. I think it is the perfect time to revisit our core purposes and to affirm and clarify the elder's vision and direction

for us as a church. My sermons will have both a time in the word talking about the nature of the church, but also talking about why we are doing what we are doing. Why do we have a Sunday School program? Why do we have weekly communion? These are the types of things I hope for us to get into. And my prayer is that by the time we get to our 5th anniversary celebration we will have more unity and clarity of vision than we have ever had before.

PROBLEMATIC MOVEMENT

There are two remaining things I wish to share with you in this sermon, both still by way of introduction. First, I want to introduce you to a problematic movement (in the world of ecclesiology) and second remind you of a precious promise.

Regarding the problematic movement. Let me read excerpts from a *Christianity Today* article from January 2006. It reads: "Storm the barricades! According to researcher George Barna, we're in the midst of a "spiritual revolution that is reshaping Christianity, personal faith, corporate religious experience, and the moral contours of the nation." Who's leading the *coup d'état*? Some 20 million people, dubbed Revolutionaries, who live "a first-century lifestyle based on faith, goodness, love, generosity, kindness, and simplicity" If true, this is amazing news, the best for American Christians in generations. But before we break out the party poppers, we should note that, like every revolution, this one has a loser: the local church."

Unlike the Great Awakenings, which brought people into the church, this new movement "entails drawing people away from reliance upon a local church...." Already "millions of believers have stopped going to church," so Barna expects that in 20 years

"only about one-third of the population will rely upon a local congregation..." According to Barna (who supports this movement): "Millions of believers have stopped going to church...and chosen to *be* the church instead." (*No Church? No Problem!* Christianity Today, Kevin Miller, 2006).

Here are some current books titles you will find in your Christian bookstore: *Life After Church, Quitting Church, So you Don't Want to Go to Church Anymore, Pagan Christianity, They Like Jesus but Not the Church.*

In case you missed it – people leaving the church is what these Christian leaders want and desire. They argue that not only are organized churches with budgets and bulletins ineffective in our culture, but they are unbiblical, based on pagan practices. The sad reality is that the greatest attack against the local church is not coming from Satan or new atheists, but from our own Christian leaders. It is my opinion that this is a misguided and dangerous movement.

Scriptures tells me that even though there are many problems in any church, we must not forsake assembling together, as is the habit of some. Popular Christian writer Philippi Yancey who himself struggled with disappointment in the church wrote the following: "Christianity is not a purely intellectual internal faith. It can only be lived in community. Perhaps for this reason, I have never entirely given up on church. At a deep level I sense that the church contains something I desperately need. Whenever I abandon church for a time, I find that I am the one who suffers. My faith fades, and the crusty shell of lovelessness grows over me again. I grow colder rather than hotter. And so my journeys away from church have always circled back." (*Church Why Bother?* 23)

PRECIOUS PROMISE

We need the church – and so I would like to end with a precious promise. Turn with me to Matthew 16:18. Jesus is speaking and says: **“I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.**

What is the church? **The church is the precious possession of Jesus Christ.** Jesus “This is MY church.” “I will build it up.”

The church is Jesus’ idea. It is His plan and His responsibility. He decided in the eternal wisdom of the Godhead that a gathering of God’s people with elders and deacons, songs and sermons, men and women, young and old, married and singles, white collar and blue collar, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor – that from such a diverse gathering the very glory of the gospel would be displayed and the world would be transformed.

The church is the precious possession of Jesus. What does the church do, based on who it is? “The church **does endure and thrive in spite of hardship.**” Jesus says, “the gates of Hades will not overpower it.” Jesus knew His church would withstand evil, sin, Satan, opposition and even death itself. There is nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing that will stop the church of Jesus Christ! The church works. And that IS a precious promise.

A few points of **application.** First, if your CLG group uses sermon response questions – spend a few minutes at your meeting today brainstorming answers to “The church is” and “the church does.” Appoint a secretary, and please e-mail me your ideas. I would like to collect them and use them in future sermons.

Second, during next week’s sermon we begin talking about the purposes of Lake Cities, starting with worship. To prepare for this, I would encourage you to take time this

week to either listen to the sermon or read the manuscript, on the church website, titled, "Priority of Worship" dates 4-15-07. We are going to spend the next three weeks on the topic of worship, and this would be a good introduction and refresher to prepare your mind for this study.

Closing Illustration

In closing, let me share a story about an old monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Centuries earlier, it had been a thriving community of faith where many dedicated monks lived and worked and had great influence on the realm. But now only five monks lived there, and they were all over seventy years old. This was clearly a dying order. A few miles from the monastery lived an old hermit who many thought was a prophet of God. One day as the monks agonized over the impending demise of their order, they decided to visit the hermit to see if he might have some advice for them. Perhaps he would be able to see the future and show them what they could do to save the monastery. The hermit welcomed the five monks to his hut, but when they explained the purpose of their visit, the hermit could only sympathize with them.

"Yes, I understand how it is," said the hermit. "The spirit has gone out of the people. Hardly anyone cares much for the old things anymore."

"Is there anything you can tell us," the abbot inquired of the hermit, "that would help us save the monastery?"

"No, I'm sorry," said the hermit. "I don't know how your monastery can be saved."

But I can tell you this: one of you is a powerfully anointed leader of God's people. Specially chosen by God."

For months after their visit, the monks each pondered the significance of the hermit's words. One of us is a powerfully anointed leader? Did he actually mean one of us here at the monastery? Specially chosen by God?! That is impossible. Just look around! We are too insignificant. On the other hand, what if it is true? And if it is true, the which one of us is it?

Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant the abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man-a man of wisdom and light. He couldn't have meant Brother Elred. Elred gets crotchety at times and is difficult to reason with. On the other hand he is almost always right. Maybe the hermit DID mean Brother Elred? But surely he could not have meant Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, so shy-a real nobody. Still, he's always there when you need him. He is loyal and trustworthy. Yes, he could have meant Phillip. Of course, the hermit didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet, suppose he did? Suppose I am an anointed leader? Perhaps God has chosen me? No – certainly not! Or perhaps!

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one of them might actually be such a powerful leader. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the One spoken of by the hermit, each monk began to treat himself differently as well, with a quiet confidence and

assurance of faith. Each task, each day was done with a little more pride and a little more enthusiasm.

Since the monastery was situated in a beautiful forest, many people came there from time to time to picnic on its tiny lawn and to walk on its paths, and to go into the tiny chapel to pray. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed a growing aura of extraordinary respect and spiritual power that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out of them, permeating the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling about it.

Hardly knowing why, people began to come back to the monastery more frequently for picnics or meditation and prayer. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends. As more and more visitors came, some of the younger men started to talk with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join their order. Then another and another. Within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the hermit's gift.

The hermit's gift, of course, was to show them who they were in Christ – specially chosen leaders. And out of their identity – the work thrived and grew.

May God allow the church to work like that with us. Let's pray.

Father,

Thank you for your Bride – the church. Your body – with its diverse members. Your temple that contains your very presence. Your family with so many brothers and sisters.

Thank you for your church. Grow our knowledge and appreciation for her during this series. Help us to learn who she is and what you have called her to do. For your glory.

Amen.