

THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

1 Corinthians 10:31; 2 Corinthians 5:11-21

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How is the church of Jesus Christ to engage in society? In order to think clearly about this, we need to differentiate between the church as an institution and the church as an organism, or group of Christians.

The church as an institution is a formal organization that sets out to accomplish a specific purpose. It can do things; it can say things; it has its own voice, per se. As an institution, it has its own purposes and plans, its own structure, and its own mission. Much of how we carry out the mission of the church is based on wisdom and is not directly commanded from the Scripture.

We can also consider the church as an organism, or as a called out group of believers. Each Christian is a personal representative of our Lord Jesus Christ. Each Christian has a purpose and a call in God's plan, "...walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called..." (Ephesians 4:1).

And so there is a distinction between church work, which is the work a Christian does as a representative of the institutional church, and kingdom work, which is the work that a Christian does in service of the Lord, but not as a representative of the institutional church.

So, when I set up chairs for an ABE class, I am working for the institutional church, but when I am caring for a sick neighbor, I am doing kingdom work - although one might argue that anything I do for the institutional church could be considered kingdom work.

The question we are trying to answer this week and next is what is the difference and where are the delineations?

Part of our responsibility as Christians is to exercise our compassion and love for others in tangible ways. Christians should feed the hungry, comfort the sorrowing, and visit the sick. These are responsibilities as individual Christians, or groups of Christians, and they are all kingdom responsibilities. They are being "salt and light."

The primary work of the institutional church is not to carry out this kingdom work but is to warn people of divine justice. Its primary business is not to call society to be more righteous but to tell people of the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ.

What is the purpose and mission of the Church?
What is God's ultimate purpose for His people?
Why did Christ initially institute the church?
And how does the Spirit continue to establish the church today?

The answer to all these questions is two-fold:

1. For God's glory (1 Corinthians 10:31)

The church exists ultimately for the sake of the glory of the triune God. This is made very clear to us in Ephesians 1-3. This distinction, that the church is established for the glory of

God, is very important because many churches have abandoned that purpose (glorifying God) and has instead focused on meeting the wants and needs of society. Instead of emphasizing knowing and glorifying God, it has become an organization that focuses on man's needs.

John MacArthur writes, “A church absolutely must emphasize knowing and glorifying God. I fear that the church in America has descended from that emphasis and focused instead on humanity. The contemporary church thinks its goal is to help people feel better about themselves. It offers them nothing more than spiritual placebos. It focuses on psychology self-esteem, social justice, entertainment, and a myriad of other diversions to try and meet the attendees felt needs. I am not saying that we are to ignore people’s needs. We are to be concerned about people the same way God is. But we must strike a balance, and that begins with a high view of God that takes them seriously.”¹

2. To Reconcile the World to God (2 Corinthians 5:11-21)

Life in the church and life in the ministry of the church can become very diverse and very complex. There are many, many good causes that will benefit our society and its people. We can feed the poor, we can assist those in need, we can have clothing drives for those less fortunate. And all these are worthy causes. We get ourselves involved in all kinds of worthy endeavors, but sometimes our priorities as a church get a little skewed.

If that is true, then we must get back to the ultimate purpose and mission for the church. And that mission is to reconcile the world to God.

We are in the ministry of reconciliation. We tell sinners that they can be reconciled to God, that’s what we do. That’s the only reason we’re really here on earth, everything else we could do better in heaven. We could have purer fellowship there, purer worship there, purer lives there, purer everything there; and the only reason we’re here is because we have this ministry of reconciliation.

The Bible makes it clear that all people are sinners, by nature they are sinners, by action they are sinners, and because of that they are alienated from Holy God. This alienation, because of sin, prevents every sinner from fellowship with God, who is too perfectly holy to have anything to do with sinners, except to reject them and damn them and punish them eternally.²

The apostle Paul wants to make sure we really get this. He uses the word reconcile or reconciliation five times in the last four verses of our text. This is the great hope that the church proclaims. That is, that God and man can come back together.

- God has called the church to preach this message.
- Ephesians reminds us that the church has pastors and teachers to train its members so they can preach this message.
- This is what the church goes into all the world to do.
- This is what the church declares to every human being in every people group.

¹ John MacArthur, *The Master’s Plan for the Church*, page 25

² John MacArthur, *The Mission of the Church*, Sermon preached 3/9/97

- This is the content of the great commission.

Churches in the West are being influenced greatly by our culture. We have seen this over the past few years at an alarming rate. Yet through all this confusion, our mission remains the same.

The mission of the church is to reconcile man to God.

This is what Paul calls the ministry of reconciliation. And according to this text we do that by preaching the word of reconciliation, and that's how we accomplish our ambassadorship in a culture hostile to God.

This is the job of the church. This is the responsibility of the church. It is the word of reconciliation. Among the myths and all false teaching around us we have the truth. And that truth is simple, and clear; we live in this world for one reason, and that is to announce that God will be reconciled to sinners. God will bring the hopelessness and helplessness of simple people and through Jesus Christ reconcile them to himself. That's what he says in verse 19.

That is why the church is in the world!

What is the word of reconciliation?

It begins with what it means to be a Christian. And many do not understand even that. One author writes, "What do I consider to be the greatest weakness of contemporary evangelical Christianity in America? Did I say weakness? It is more. It is a tragic error. It is the idea, wherever it came from, that one can be a Christian without being a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. It reduces the gospel to the mere fact of Christ's having died for sinners, requires of sinners only that they acknowledge this by the barest intellectual assent, and then assures them of their eternal security when they may very well not be born again. This view bends faith beyond recognition – at least for those who know what the Bible says about faith – and promises a false peace to thousands who have given verbal assent to this reductionist Christianity but are not truly in God's family."³

So, what is the true word of reconciliation?

It begins with a call to repentance. Our discussion regarding the word of reconciliation begins with repentance because that is where Jesus began. Matthew chapter 4 tells us that following the temptation of Jesus, "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" (Matthew 4:17)

Jesus described his objective plainly in Luke 5:31, 32, "And Jesus answered them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'"

Later in Luke, as Jesus was addressing multitudes whom he had just called hypocrites, he said, "I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish!" (Luke 13:5)

³ James Montgomery Boyce, In his foreword for *The Gospel According to Jesus*, page xi

When repentance is talked about in the New Testament, it calls for an abandonment of the old life and a turning to God for salvation. It demands radical conversion, a transformation of nature, a definitive turning from evil, a resolute turning to God in total obedience. And so there are three elements of repentance: a turning to God; a turning from evil; and the intent to serve God. No change of mind can be called true repentance if it does not include all three elements.

Second, it defines the nature of true faith.

Many, many years ago I was saved in a church singing this simple hymn written by Charlotte Elliott,

Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, and that Thou bids me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come! I come!

Just as I am, Thou wilt receive, will welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve, because Thy promise I believe, O Lamb of God, I come! I come!

The truth these words convey is a glorious biblical reality: sinners may come to Christ just as they are – solely on the basis of repentant faith – and he will save them. This truth is clear from scriptures such as John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” and John 6:37, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.”

One author writes, “Not all faith is redemptive. James 2:14 – 16 says faith without works is dead and cannot save. James describes spurious faith as pure hypocrisy in verse 16, mere cognitive assent in verse 19, devoid of any verifying works in verses 17 and 18. He says it is no different from the demons belief. Obviously, there is more to saving faith and merely conceding a set of facts. Faith without works is useless (v 20).⁴

True faith, as with repentance, is granted by God. It is not a human work. Faith is a supernatural gift of God. B.F. Westcott calls this supernatural gift, “the saving energy of faith.”⁵ the Bible is consistent in that it teaches that faith is not something that we conjure up but is a sovereignly granted gift of God. Jesus said, “no one comes to me, unless the father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44).

Thirdly, it includes the promise of justification.

As we have studied the sermon on the mount these last few weeks, we were confronted with people listening to Jesus that day who believed that the scribes and the Pharisees were the embodiment of the highest of human righteousness. And if you were a Jew, in a sense they were because they held to the strictest imaginable legalistic standards. Do you remember how Paul described himself in Philippians chapter 3, “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” (Philippians 3:5, 6). Jesus response was simply, “unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20).

⁴ John Macarthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, page 186

⁵ B.F. Westcott, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, page 32

If you understand that to mean that Jesus establishes an impossible standard, you have understood the message correctly.

When the rich young ruler walked away disappointed, and Jesus told his disciples it's hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, what was the response? They asked Jesus then who can be saved? Jesus reply was "with men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

The word of reconciliation must include the fact that salvation is impossible for sinful men and women. We have no redeeming qualities of our own. We must pay the penalty for our sins because the cost is higher than we can pay. Martin Luther understood this as he contemplated and meditated on the perfect righteousness of God and the perfect standard for mankind that was absolutely unattainable. He later wrote, "That expression, righteousness of God, was like a thunderbolt in my heart. I hated Paul with all my heart when I read that the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel. Only afterward, when I saw the words that follow, namely, that it is written that the righteous shall live by faith, I was cheered. When I learned that the righteousness of God is his mercy and that he makes us righteous through it, a remedy was offered to me in my affliction."⁶

What was this remedy? It was the doctrine of justification by faith. That justification includes forgiveness of sins, yet the cornerstone of justification is the imputed righteousness of Christ to every believer's account. The believer is given a new standing. Justification is the opposite of condemnation. Justification is a legal transaction. It is a one-time event where we are declared righteous by God and our sins are forgiven.

Man never initiates reconciliation with God. It is what we embrace, not what we do. You must understand that. Reconciliation is a divine provision by which God's holy displeasure has been appeased, the hostility removed, and sinners restored to him. To put it another way: reconciliation with God is not something we accomplish when we decide to stop rejecting him, it is something he accomplished when he decided to stop rejecting us. God then is the source of reconciliation.

One author writes:

If this is all God's plan and it's all God's action, why are we bothering with these people? Why don't we just say, "God, just zap them. Zap those folks, zap that guy"?

Because there's a marvelous, inscrutable component in the work of reconciliation, and that is our obedience of faith. And it's implied here rather than explicitly stated.

So we go out, and it's like God begging through us that sinners be reconciled to Him. Now I admit, that's inscrutable to me. If God knows it, and it's all predetermined, and it's all settled and it's all done, why in the world are we going around begging everybody to be reconciled to God? I don't think I will ever be able to reconcile that, probably not even with my glorified mind. But it's no problem to God.

⁶ Martin Luther, *Table Talk, Luther's Works*, volume 54, pages 308-309.

We go to sinners, that's what we do, and plead with them to be reconciled. That's our task as ambassadors. It's as if God had sent us as His personal agents into an alien culture to beg the people to be reconciled to Him, to say to them what Paul said in Acts 16, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved."⁷

How does this bring Glory to God?

The ministry of reconciliation is God centered, not man centered. It cannot be both. There can only be one center, it is either man and his needs or God and his glory. Reconciliation then is a means to an end: God's glory.

"The supreme way in which God intends to glorify himself is through the ministry of reconciliation, and it is through participation in that reconciliation that believers themselves most glorify God. Therefore, the believer who desires to glorify God, who wants to honor God's supreme will and purpose, must share God's love for the lost world and share in God's mission to redeem the lost to himself. Christ came into the world that he loved and sought to win sinners to himself for the father's glory. As Christ's representatives we are likewise sent into the world that he loves to bring the lost to him and thereby bring glory and honor to God. The ministry of reconciliation for us is the same as that of the father and of the son."⁸

Reflect and Respond

While we should all be focusing on individual and family kingdom work, how are you involved in supporting the local church? Without a strong local church, it cannot maintain its mission.

- Are you attending? Each of us has been given a spiritual gift for the good of the church body. If you are not regularly attending, others are not being served by you and your gift.
- Get to know the needs we have here at the Chapel. Where are you serving (nursery, children, grounds, setup, greeters, café, etc.)?
- How are you giving financially?
- Are you regularly praying for the leaders, workers, and ministries of the Chapel?

⁷ John MacArthur, *The Mission of the Church*, Sermon preached 3/9/97

⁸ David M Doran, *For the Sake of His Name*, pages 69-70