

September 16, 2007  
 Ephesians 2:1-10 / Acts 15:6-11 / Acts 18:23-28  
 The Church (#1) – Those Who By Grace Believe

If there is one thing that has become undeniably clear to any person that has kept abreast of the American Church Scene over the past two decades (maybe even the past generation) it's the fact that the American Church has been experiencing a very profound identity crisis.

In many sectors she has forgotten how she came about, who she is, what she was meant to be and do; what her primary task is, how she was meant to do it, and sometimes, why she even exists in the first place!

The demise of Christendom in the past generation ("Christendom" being state protection, state support, and even state sanction of the church), and the corresponding loss of the church's influence that came with it, has people all over asking, "What happened?" "How did the voice and values of the church that were once so influential, become so inconsequential?"

Less than 50 years ago the church used to dictate the core values of our culture, fend off (somewhat successfully) the erosion of Christian moral precepts, and hold in check the ever-present desire of sinful humanity to be free from the precepts of the Bible, and its call to bring all of life under the Lordship of God and His Christ.

Part of it, obviously, is due to the scandals of the last two decades in both Evangelical and Catholic circles, which eroded people's confidence in the church's leadership and her right to stand as a prophetic voice and a moral alternative to the pervading culture.

And the Religious Right, though championing some good causes, could never quite resolve its own ongoing internal conflicts, its clamoring after money, and bickering among leaders, which turned many people off and made the majority of younger Americans question its credibility and "self-appointed right" to critique and condemn and stand as judges of the moral values of others, when they didn't even have their own act together!

The result has been clear: The general sentiment of the population in general turned against the organized church and the younger people voted with their feet — rejecting organized religion in favor of a de-structured, personally tailored, private spirituality that could be practiced at home, or not at all.

That's one of the reasons why, 60% of people 65 years old and older go to church each Sunday, but only 28% of people 18-30 go to church each Sunday. And it's at least partially why two-thirds (two out of three) of all teenagers who attend church growing up, will leave church and never come back after graduating high school – a 66% defection rate!

In fact, a study done by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, concluded that if current trends continue, America will be on par with Europe by 2025, with only 2.5% of the population attending church on any given Sunday.

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And its not just scandals in the church.

Relativistic thinking has won the day, and so blurred the lines of distinction that many Christians no longer believe "truth" matters or even exists. According to a recent Gallup Survey, anywhere from 68-77% of all church members (that ¾ of the church — evangelicals included) say they no longer believe there is any such thing as absolute truth.

What matters, they say, is not truth but perceptions and felt needs. Not what is true, but what each individual perceives to be true for them. "Truth" is whatever works for you.

Likewise, universalism (the belief that everyone will be saved or go to heaven regardless of what they believe or do) is gaining acceptance even in places where it would have been fought tooth and nail just 20 years ago.

Secular humanism / and post-modern relativism / and "give me what I want or lose my business" consumerism / and love of this world materialism / and pleasure-hungry hedonism, which are all so contrary to the essence of Christian thought and life are all eating away at the foundations of the church in their attempts to convert and win the hearts and minds of the Western world."

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And I don't tell you all those things to depress you! I tell you to let you know what's happening here in America. As Darryl Lang told us last year when he came to preach, Things in America have changed drastically. And those changes have played a big part in the church's present "identity crisis."

In fact, I'd like to suggest that far from being depressed about such facts, such a scenario gives the church an opportunity to ask the hard questions that she never needed to ask so long as the culture at large supported, sided with, protected and even applauded the church.

It even gives the modern day church an opportunity it hasn't had for hundreds of years — the opportunity to grasp and experience and understand what the early church went through before Constantine made it the religion of the Roman Empire, and established what we could call "Christendom" — social, governmental and even military support of the church.

For the first time in centuries, the church is getting to experience first hand what it's like to be the persecuted minority, rather than the accepted majority — lacking support from the courts, the community, the state and the federal government.

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And not only that, the demise of Christendom, and Western culture's rejection of the organized church's control over society, has forced the church to ask some very pertinent and necessary questions, like this:

What is the church? "Who is, or who is not, a part of her?" / "How is she supposed to carry out her mission in this pluralistic world?" / "And how can she engage the surrounding culture without becoming afraid of it, or a slave to it?"

What is the church's real message? "That she is simply a champion of conservative morality, and traditional values, or that she is the repository of redemptive grace, and sacrificial divine love — a love that doesn't condemn and reject sinners, but seeks them out and welcomes them into a life of gospel transformation?"

What should the church strive to be? "What should her priorities be, and how will she go about being a light in a world that is at times very dark?" "What shall she expend her energies on, invest her resources in, and set her passions on?"

And in that sense the current identity crisis is good. Because when the church was sanctioned and supported by society, all too often she allowed the surrounding culture dictate many of her policies and preferences, instead of Scripture — either becoming a servant to culture (serving many of its purposes rather than God's), or in some cases reacting against that culture and thus retreating from it, becoming hostile to it, or being needlessly antagonistic — BOTH OF WHICH are the result of being insecure and unsure about who we are, and what we are all about.

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You see, people in the midst of an identity crisis tend to withdraw and pull away, or feel threatened and thus go on the attack (what psychologists call the responses of fight or flight — which is exactly what vast sectors of the church have been doing for over a generation now —

encouraging their people to withdraw from the culture (because it was becoming so anti-Christian) or fight the culture (in which case we have been seen as hostile, angry, scary, judgmental and dangerous people who need to be avoided).

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Yet neither of those responses is what we find in the NT. Roman society was more immoral and anti-Christian than the one we live in, but in spite of it, the early church refused to fight it nor run and hide from it.

For Jesus had given them one of the hardest commands of all: "Be in the world, but not of the world" — living in the world, without judging it or withdrawing from it. Engaging the culture and reaching out to its people in love, without becoming part of it.

So, how does one avoid such unwise and spiritually unacceptable responses?

They resolve their identity crisis! They become secure in who they are, what they stand for, and what they are called to be and do. And then, secure in who they are and what they are supposed to be and do, they move out boldly and confidently; with love and respect to win those for whom Christ died — neither withdrawing from them nor becoming antagonistic toward them!

So today what I'd like to do is start a series on "The Church," to help counter its identity crisis and hopefully encourage and enrich and help you become more secure and confident in WHO YOU ARE, and what God calls you to BE and DO in this world. And I'm going to begin by starting with the most basic point of all in any discussion of "the Church" — "What the Church is."

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So **FIRST**, what is it? And maybe the best way to answer that is to point out what it is not. When I speak of the church I'm not speaking of any visible manifestations of the church. I'm not speaking of any organization, group, incorporated entity, or particular denomination. Nor am I speaking of the "church" in reference to any building, cathedral, or temple.

I'll be speaking of the "church" as the Bible speaks of it — as the people who belong to God — the people who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus, called of God, and born of His Spirit. People who have placed all their hope for salvation in the grace of God and the work of Christ alone to save them. Those who have trusted in Jesus, repented of their sins, and been set apart by God or sanctified unto God.

You see, I've said it before, and I'll say it again:

"That little nursery rhyme which forms the perception of what the church is in the initial years of Sunday school does a great disservice to people's understanding of what the church really is."

You know which one I'm talking about: You clasp your hands together, make a steeple with you index fingers, put your thumbs together and then say — "This is the church and this is the steeple, open the doors and see all the people." (Anyone ever exposed to that heresy ? 😊)

You see, it should go like this: "This is the building (or as New Englanders used to call it, "This is the Meeting House") and this is the steeple which points to God, open the doors and see the church." Because the "church" is the people, not the building! The building is simply the place where the "church" gathers to meet each Sunday for worship!

That's why Paul can write to such people as Priscilla and Aquila in Romans 16, and say *"Greet the church that meets in your house."* Or again in the Book of Philemon, *"To Philemon our beloved fellow worker, and Apphia our sister...and the church that meets in your house."*

Thus it becomes undeniably clear that the word "church" in the Bible NEVER refers to a building, but a group of believers in Jesus who met or gathered for worship and instruction in a building!

The word "Church" in the Bible comes from the Greek word "ekklesia" and ekklesia is a compound Greek word formed by combining the words "ek" meaning "out" or "out of" / and the word "laos" meaning people.

The word "church," then (in the Bible), NEVER refers to a building, or a humanly established organizational structure, nor any denominational bureaucracy. It ALWAYS and very simply refers to a gathered group of people. And in the case of Christians, it refers to a group of people whom God has "called out from among the masses of humanity" and by His redeeming grace, have been regenerated, justified, and sanctified unto Himself by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

And I do apologize for telling you something SO BASIC that most all of you already know it! But we do need to be reminded of it. Because we can forget that the "Church" is simply the people of God. Comprised of ALL who from every tribe and people and nation and language group have or ever will truly trust in the Jesus of the Bible (and Him alone) for their salvation.

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But lest I lead you astray, I have to correct my correction to that little children's rhyme! Because when you open the doors of the building in which the church meets, and see all the "people," it doesn't mean every last one of them belongs to that spiritual entity called the Church — even though they do gather with the church, or come to the building where the "church" meets for worship and instruction every Sunday.

It is important to remember that not everyone in “a church building” is part of “the ekklesia” that meets there. I myself went to church almost every Sunday of my life without exception (my parents forced me to!) from the time I was born till the time I was 18-19 years old, got bigger than my parents and decided to go my own way! I even went through a membership class at 16 years old and joined the church I grew up in — without ever being part of “the Church”!

It wasn't until I came to faith in Jesus and was converted at the age of 23 — born again from above by a supernatural act of the grace of God, that God joined me to His church — the spiritual, universal, invisible ekklesia of God over whom Christ Jesus is the spiritual Head.

As Billy Sunday used to love saying in his evangelistic crusades between the years 1910–1920 (a day when nearly everyone went to church): “Going into church no more makes a person a Christian, than going into a garage makes a person a car!” He's right! Being a Christian isn't the result of something we do, but something God does to us.

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point: How can we know if we've actually been made members of the “Church”? And here Jesus Himself tells us the answer to that question in John chapter 3 when He uses the phrase “You must be born again.” “You cannot see,” nor can you “enter the kingdom of God,” says Jesus, “unless you are born again.”

And although the “church” cannot be equated 100% with “the kingdom of God,” there is a sense in which the church is, to some degree, an expression of His “kingdom on earth.” Which means we become a “member” of the church spiritual and universal, not by joining an organization, or going through a new members class, or having our names placed on a membership list.

There's only one way to become a “member” of the “Church,” and Jesus tells us what it is — “You must be born again.” What does it mean, then, to be “born again”? Simply this: It means we must have an experience of God's grace whereby He imparts to us His Spirit and joins us as one with Jesus in the mystical union of our spirit with His Spirit.

Jesus tells us that in verse 5 when He expands on the term “born again” or “born anew” and clarifies for us that it means being “born of water and the Spirit.” EVERYONE is born in a natural way as they come forth from their mother's womb. But what Jesus tells us is that to see or enter the kingdom of God, one must be born a second time, in a second way — a spiritual way — something for which we are totally dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit.

The term born again or born anew or born of the Spirit is in the passive tense in the Greek. That means it's not something we do to ourselves, but something God does to us! We are "passive" in the divine act of divine regeneration or new birth. It is something God does to us, and not something we do to ourselves!

And though there is considerable disagreement as to just what it means to be "born of water" — whether it means baptism (which is highly unlikely) / or the act of natural childbirth where a woman's water breaks (thus contrasting natural birth with spiritual rebirth) / or whether the term water is just another way of speaking of the "washing of our spirit" that happens in the new birth — there is very little disagreement on what it means to be "born of the Spirit" — which is simply another way of speaking about the initial reception, filling or infusion of the soul with the Holy Spirit."

What God does in the new birth or regeneration, is impart His life-giving Spirit into the souls of sinners who are by nature dead in trespasses and sins, thereby making them "alive in Christ," as Paul later puts it when speaking of the same experience of new birth in Ephesians 2:1-10.

Their bodies become the habitation or dwelling place of God's Spirit, or what Paul calls in I Corinth. 3, "temples of the Holy Spirit." That's what it means to be "born again" — to receive the Holy Spirit, or as Paul also calls it elsewhere, the Spirit of Christ.

And thus, being born again by the sheer unmerited GRACE of God / Being made alive by the POWER of His Spirit — spiritually resurrected when we were dead in trespasses and sins / Having God fill our souls with the LIGHT of His presence where there was once only a spiritual darkness — we are freed and liberated from the chains of sin and death, repent of our sins and place our trust in the Jesus who saved us by grace.

That's why I say in my sermon title (which is nothing more than a quote of Acts 18:27) that the church is made up of disciples "who by grace believed." ***WHY? Because both Jesus and Paul make it clear that it was the grace of God in regeneration, and the infusion of the life-giving, sin-conquering power of the Spirit that enabled them to believe in the first place.***

One does NOT believe and then become regenerate as a result of placing their faith in Jesus! Our believing is NOT what makes us born again! Just the opposite! It is our being born again (or given life by the Spirit of God when we were dead in trespasses and sins) that enables us to believe! Faith is our response to God's gracious act of regenerating us; regeneration is not God's response to our faith! ***Faith FOLLOWS regeneration, it does not PRECEDE it!***

Jesus makes that clear again when He says, *“No one can see (see being a faith word) — No man can see nor enter the kingdom of God unless or until they are born again.”* One must first be born again, says Jesus, before they can see or enter the Kingdom of God. God must first do a miracle of grace in our hearts or else we can never believe!

And Paul tells us why: It's because in our natural state we are dead in trespasses and sins, and dead men can't believe! Before we can believe we must first be made alive! *Repentance and faith are our RESPONSE to the new birth, NOT the CAUSE of it!* That's why Paul can say in Ephesians 2:5: *“When you were dead in your trespasses and sins, God made you alive in Christ—it is by grace you have been saved.”*

That's also why Luke can say in Acts 18:27 that *“Apollos greatly helped those who by grace had believed.”* (Not that God believed for them, but that they couldn't have believed in the first place if God hadn't first raised them from the dead by imparting to them the life-giving power of His Spirit.)

Peter says the same thing in Acts 15:8 where he tells us of the Gentiles: *“God showed that He accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them just as He had to us.”* And then after further explanation he summarizes the whole matter when he says: *“We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”*

What grace? The “grace” of giving the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles, just as he had initially given it to the Jewish disciples! That's why Luke calls Christians “Those who by grace believed.” Because no one could respond in faith to Jesus if God did not first give them the *light* and *life* and *power of His Spirit* which enables us to respond in faith and repentance!

That's also why Jesus doesn't even mention “faith” or “believing in Him” until verse 16 of John chapter 3! He speaks of being born again long before he ever gets around to speaking about believing. WHY? Because one must be born again before they can believe!

This also explains why Jesus can say in John 6:44 and 6: 65, *“No man can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him.”* As Matt pointed out in ABH, the word “draw” is a fishing term, used of a fish being pulled aboard a ship in a net. And in verse 65 of that same chapter He repeats it: *“This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father who sent Me enables Him” (literally, “unless it is granted to Him by the Father”).*

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You see, can attend a church every Sunday, have your name on the membership roles here or elsewhere, go through a new members or confirmation class, get baptized, partake of the Lord's Supper, repeat the Nicene and Apostles Creed every day, do good deeds until you're exhausted, pray and read your Bible habitually, even do miracles says Jesus...but if you are not "born again from above by the Holy Spirit" you are not yet a member of the "Church."

For as Jesus tells us, "You must be born again." "You must be born again!" "You must be born of water and the Spirit," or you are not yet part of the true, spiritual heavenly Church — the only church membership that really matters for eternity!

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"To those who received Him," says the Apostle John, that is, "to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God. Children born, not of natural descent, nor of human desire, nor of a husband's will, but born of God." (John 1:12-13)

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So let conclude by pausing and asking you:

Have you been born again by the Holy Spirit? Has the LIGHT of His presence filled your soul?  
Has the POWER of His Spirit raised your spiritually dead soul from its deadness in trespasses and sins?

Have you experienced that spiritual resurrection where your spirit, where once being cold and dead to the things of God, your heart now craves them, and the Christ you once could take or leave has become unspeakably precious?

If not, I pray today that you might experience that grace in your heart today. That God might move upon your spirit to give it new birth. Pray for it! Cry out to God for it! And don't rest until you know you have experienced it, and through it, been brought into the fellowship of the Church.