

“Christ Centered – Part 1”
Philippians 1:21; Galatians 2:20
(Preached at Trinity, January 12, 2020)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. As I’ve promised, this morning I want to begin a series on the seven distinctives of our church. You might ask, where did they come from? When did we recognize these distinctives as the marks of our church? It actually began as a part of our tract ministry.
 2. We’ve made tract distribution a part of the ministry of our church for almost as long as I’ve been the senior pastor. We’ve printed and distributed several hundred thousand tracts, testimony to the faithfulness of the Trinity membership. When I was preparing our first tri-fold tract it left the back panel free for information about our church. That led us to consider, what are the distinctives that describe our church? One by one they began to unfold until we had identified seven. We started printing them on the back of our tracts and in time, they have become an essential element of our church’s identity.
 3. Our distinctives are both descriptive and prescriptive—what we are and what we need to be. Our church like all churches is always changing. There are times these distinctives have shined forth brighter than others. They describe our church, but they are also goals for our church.
 4. As we begin a new year it is an excellent time to stop and evaluate, to perhaps realign our church and recommit ourselves to these distinctives. They are really just marks of a New Testament church.
 5. The first of our distinctives governs all the others. The same must be true of your personal life. We are first and foremost a church under the direction of Christ. We find our existence in Him. We recognize His ownership of our church and His rule over our lives. We must be Christ-Centered. This is of such importance that I want to take two weeks for us to consider it. Then for the other six distinctives we’ll consider one each week.
- I. We need to begin with the most basic question. What defines a New Testament Church?
What makes a church a church? It is an important question.
- A False understandings –
1. Some people hold that a church is a group of Christians meeting together.
 - a. One of the dictionary definitions of a church: “A body of Christians meeting in a particular building.” We meet in a building often referred to as “the church.” Does this building make us a church?
 - b. Some hold that the word church is simply plural for *Christian*. They say a church is simply a gathering of Christians and quote Matthew 18
Matthew 18:20 NAU - "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst."
 - c. Does this mean that anytime two or three Christians meet together they are a church?

2. Some hold that a church must be a 501c organization to be a church
 - a. Does the civil government's approval make a church?
 - b. In 1940 our church was constituted as a church. What exactly made us a church? We filed articles of incorporation with the State of Louisiana. Did this make us a church?
 - c. As far as the IRS is concerned we are a non-profit organization. Does this make us a church?
 3. Some say a church is a church if a group of Christians gather and call themselves a church.
This is often the case today with the home church movement
- B. The answer to the question, "What is a church" is very broad, so let me paint with some broad strokes:
1. A church is a local assembly led by elders.
Titus 1:5 NAU - "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you,"
Acts 14:23 NAU - "When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed."
This, however, does not define a church. If a church loses its pastor it doesn't cease to be a church. The pastoral ministry is essential to the work and health of the church but it is not essential for its existence.
 2. *The Belgic Confession: Article 29*
The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks:
The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; It makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; It practices church discipline for correcting faults. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head. By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church-- and no one ought to be separated from it.
- C The essence of a local church is a body of believers who have joined together in community for the purpose of worship and carrying out the commands of Christ.
1. There is a recognition of the headship of Christ. A church finds its authority and existence from above. A local church is defined by Jesus Christ.
 2. The local church is defined by a commitment to a particular group of people – a group of people bound to one another as the body of Christ. This is the heart of church membership.
 3. What is a church? A church is a group of believers bound together in a common commitment. This commitment is expressed by way of covenant. In the 18th Century the *Charleston Association* stated:
"A particular gospel church consists of a company of saints incorporated by a special covenant into one distinct body, and meeting together in one place, for the enjoyment of fellowship with each other and with Christ their head, in all his institutions, to their mutual edification and the glory of God through the Spirit."

4. In Cambridge, Massachusetts during the 17th Century John Cotton and Richard Mather stated as the model government of a local church: "This visible union cannot be established by mere 'faith,' for that is invisible; nor by a 'bare profession' of faith, for that does not make a person part of one particular church or another; nor by 'cohabitation' (i.e., living in the same community), for "atheists and Infidels may dwell together with believers"; nor by "baptism," since baptism by itself does not make a person a part of a particular church. What establishes the visible union of a group of believers into a church is that they make a covenant with each other to be the church"
 5. It is this oneness of a people in Christ, speaking with one mind according to the will of Christ that makes a local church.
 - a. Jesus Christ is the focus. He is the Head. He is the source of our being. Everything we do has a eye upon Him.
 - b. Such a church exists because they recognize that Jesus Christ has declared them to be His church.
 - c. And it is this single voice on behalf of Christ that gives the church its particular authority.
- E. The NT Church exists by the authority of Jesus Christ who declared after His resurrection: "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth."
1. With this statement Jesus then issued the Great Commission.
 2. It is by the power of Jesus Christ that members are added to our church. **Acts 2:47 NAU** - "And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved."

This is why we never manipulate or coerce individuals into joining our church. This is why we explain thoroughly who we are before a new member is admitted.
 3. If Jesus Christ ever ceases to be at the center of our church our very existence will be in jeopardy.
 - a. The Church of Ephesus was an excellent church but they were in danger of losing their status as a church. They were hard workers and had persevered through every adversity. They were careful to maintain holiness. But they had lost their passion for Christ and Jesus threatened to remove their lampstand. **Revelation 2:2-5 NAU** - "I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them *to be* false; ³ and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. ⁴ 'But I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love. ⁵ 'Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place-- unless you repent."
 - b. The Church of Laodicea was a group of people who met together; they considered themselves to be a church; they called themselves a church—and yet, they were a church that had become no church. Christ was on the outside. Jesus warned the Church of Ephesus:

Revelation 2:5 NAU - "Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place-- unless you repent."

It would appear the Laodicean lampstand had been removed. They had ceased to be a church?

- c. We need to consider this carefully. What does it mean to be Christ-centered.

- II. What does it mean to be Christ-centered? This is at the core of our existence as human beings. God created us to be God-centered – theocentric
 - A. We were created to find the meaning of our existence in Him
 - 1. Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him
 - a. To glorify God means to display His divine excellence in our life
Psalm 29:1-2 NAU - "Ascribe to the LORD, O sons of the mighty, Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. ² Ascribe to the LORD the glory due to His name; Worship the LORD in holy array."
 - b. To enjoy Him means to find our highest pleasure in Him
 - 2. God is the source of our greatest happiness
 - B. With the fall of Adam human beings became self-centered
 - 1. Psychologists coin this ego-centric
 - 2. Our greatest desire is to satisfy and please ourselves
We have changed the meaning of our existence to: Our chief end is to exalt ourselves and satisfy every longing of our flesh
2 Timothy 3:2-4 NAU - "For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, ⁴ treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God,"
 - 3. In our fallen condition we are at the center of our universe. We spend our life seeking to use creation to satisfy our desires. The reason we are so void of contentment is we can never achieve the endless things our flesh desires.
 - 4. We have declared our independence. We despise all authority, especially God’s authority.

III. Salvation brings about a change of focus

A. The old self-centered man dies

Romans 6:3-8 NAU - "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? ⁴ Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵ For if we have become united with *Him* in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be *in the likeness* of His resurrection, ⁶ knowing this, that our old self was crucified with *Him*, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; ⁷ for he who has died is freed from sin. ⁸ Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him"

1. Jesus described the change of direction

Luke 9:23-24 NAU - "And He was saying to *them* all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. ²⁴ "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it."

2. Paul describes it as so life-changing it is as if we have been recreated

2 Corinthians 5:17 NAU - "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, *he is* a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."

B. We are transformed from being self-centered to being Christ-centered

1. At the heart of the New Testament is the centrality of Christ.

a. The church is built upon Christ. He is the corner stone

Ephesians 2:19-21 NAU - "you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, ²⁰ having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone*, ²¹ in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord,"

b. The church finds its very existence in Jesus Christ

Ephesians 1:18-23 NAU - "*I pray that* the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. *These are* in accordance with the working of the strength of His might ²⁰ which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly *places*, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all."

- c. Jesus is the focus of the Gospel. All preaching has Christ as the ultimate subject.
- 1 Corinthians 2:1-2 NAU** - "And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. ² For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified."
- 1 Corinthians 1:22-24 NAU** - "For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, ²⁴ but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

Conclusion:

1. Jesus Christ is the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last. He is our all in all. This must be the heart of our church. We must be Christ-centered. And this must be at the heart of your life as a Christian.
2. Next week we'll explore more about what this means practically.