

“Understanding the Necessity of the Church”

Introduction:

In the Book of Proverbs, we read:

*“For the LORD gives wisdom;
From His mouth come knowledge and understanding;
He stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
He is a shield to those who walk uprightly;
He guards the paths of justice,
And preserves the way of His saints.
Then you will understand righteousness and justice,
Equity and every good path.
When wisdom enters your heart,
And knowledge is pleasant to your soul,
Discretion will preserve you;
Understanding will keep you,
To deliver you from the way of evil,
From the man who speaks perverse things”*

Proverbs 2:6-12

These words from Solomon express just how valuable it is to have a true understanding of how things really are, for it protects one from ruin that comes from false assumptions and enables one to live a successful life. Understanding is the basis of wisdom. In the original context, the admonition is very general and was directed toward young men to prepare them for adulthood. Therefore, it has many specific applications. We should see these words as an admonition from God to seek a correct understanding of everything that comes into our life so we can respond to these things with wisdom and prudence.

Understanding something is knowing the true nature of that thing. According to behavioralist, one of the most important things that a human being needs to understand is one's identity. This is true not only in terms of one's individual self but also understanding the nature and identity of the people and institutions with which one associates oneself (because in part, a person understands their identity in light of the people and institutions that they are closely related to).

This is true for us not simply as people, but specially in regard to our identity as Christians. This explains why a great deal of information is given to us to help us understand who we are because of the redemption we have received in Christ. But a careful look at the Scriptures reveals that we are also taught about the nature of who we are as a community of believers, as part of Christ's body, the Church. In every age there have been challenges that have faced believers that tended to obscure their understanding of the nature of the Church. And the reality is that there is spiritual danger in imprecise thinking about something so central to who we understand ourselves to be. Therefore, it behooves us to clearly understand what it means to be the Church of Jesus Christ.

Often, the most pervasive misunderstandings come not from embracing evil ideas, but from embracing distortions of well-intentioned ideas. What often results from embracing distortions of good ideas is that it tends to distort one's overall understanding of reality. Practically speaking, when one misunderstands some important aspect of reality, it inevitably leads to making poor decisions. Scripture indicates that the evil one delights in God's people making poor decisions. As part of our efforts to prevent ourselves from giving in to such temptations, it is spiritually healthy to address two very popular misunderstandings about why the Church of Jesus Christ exists.

I. The World's Misrepresentation of the Church:

One distortion regarding why the Church exists has become very popular in the modern western world at large. And it is an idea that is frequently embraced even by Evangelical Christians. The idea is that the Church exists to address the needs of the poor and oppressed in this world, to relieve misery and suffering, to be a source of kindness and love to those who know little of either. One might ask what could be wrong with an idea like that? The problem is that this assertion confuses a generally good thing, with an ultimately good thing. The central distortion is suggesting that attempting to alleviate suffering for others is the defining purpose for which God ordained the Church. Of course it is virtuous to alleviate suffering. And to love other people is at the heart of what God wishes to accomplish in the lives of Christians. However, it is false to suggest that this is our main calling in this life. Jesus told us very clearly what our calling is as His people in this world:

“And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’”

Matthew 28:18-20

Jesus said that our calling is to make disciples. Never are we told that our defining mission is to alleviate suffering. Rather, the Scriptures teach that as we live out our daily lives, we should have a compassion disposition toward others that motivates us to perform acts of kindness as we have opportunity and as God gives us the resources to do it. To do that is to love one's neighbor as one loves oneself. In addition, in a parable Jesus made it clear that anyone whom we encounter is to be understood as our neighbor (Lk.10:29-37). The problem with saying it is our mission to alleviate suffering in general is that not only is this never said to be our defining mission, Jesus' words in rebuke of Judas Iscariot specifically indicates that this simply isn't so:

“Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him,

said, 'Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?' This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it. But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial. For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always.'"

John 12:3-8

With these words Jesus made it clear that meeting the needs of others is not the primary responsibility of believers. If it were, Judas would have been correct in his rebuke of Mary. Obviously, Jesus was speaking to a unique situation, but this incident makes it clear that there are other considerations that are priorities over this supposed reason for the Church's existence. Also, it should be apparent to all, that God has not equipped the saints to do this fully. We do not have the resources to meet the needs of everyone who is suffering. Some would undoubtedly argue that the problem was not that there was something wrong with what Judas suggested, rather what was wrong was he wanted to retain the money so he could steal it. The Apostle John makes it clear that this was definitely the motive behind Judas' complaint. However, Jesus' statement did not address that reality, rather He addressed the idea itself that Judas had set forth.

Another problem with this view is that it fundamentally misunderstands what God is doing in the lives of His people and in the world at large. God is not seeking to put an end to the suffering that exists because of the Fall, rather He has provided a way that human beings can be delivered from our sin and our rebellious posture toward God, which is the reason for the suffering that exists. God is focused on providing deliverance from what our sin has brought upon us, His wrath and the condemnation that hangs over this fallen world. Providing temporal relief from suffering is meant to be a manifestation of that deliverance.

If we are to understand the role that acts of charity have in God's redemptive purposes, we need to see what God says about this, bearing aware of the context in which those things are said.

If we go to the Old Testament, we find that there are abundant examples of ways that God's people are encouraged, and at times even commanded, to meet the needs of others. However, on close examination, it becomes clear that this instruction is primarily focused on the people meeting the needs of their fellow Israelites. Though the Israelites were to be compassionate to Gentiles they encountered, there are no general admonitions for them to alleviate the suffering of Gentiles or seek to meet their needs. Part of the reason for this is that the focus under the OT was for Israel to illustrate the reality of their God to their pagan neighbors. The reason for this focus was the fact that the truth about who God is, had to have priority, because eternal salvation was available only through the God of Israel, and that salvation was a far more profound need than the Gentiles' temporal suffering and poverty.

And when we get to the NT, the change is not in priorities, but in the understanding of who represents God's people. In the NT, it is the Church. And there you find the same idea, be kind to all, but take particular care of those who are a part of God's family.

An Evangelical twist on this notion is that showing compassion by meeting needs is the strongest apologetic for the Gospel. However, this idea is also false. First, this is never stated in the NT. Instead, Jesus said that it would be the mutual love among Christians that would be at least one of the strongest apologetics for the Gospel (John 13:34). Second, it has been empirically proven that alleviating misery and meeting needs does not often encourage faith. Jesus healed and fed thousands during His ministry, and after His crucifixion and resurrection only 120 people gathered together as His disciples (Acts 1:15). Three years of miraculous provisions that met acute physical needs simply did not draw people to faith. And we should ask, why would we think it would. Scripture does not say that people come to Christ because they like Christians or are grateful for their acts of kindness. It states that people come to Christ because the Spirit of God convicts them of their sin and need of salvation, and that He does this through the dissemination of the Gospel.

Another issue that arises from this philosophy of ministry is that it tends to promote self-righteousness in those who devote themselves primarily to charitable work. Their focus is on what they are doing, how they are making a difference. It also tends to feed the false notion in unbelievers that God primarily exists to meet their needs.

We never want to discourage acts of charity. It simply isn't the primary reason why the Church exists and telling people that it is distracts them from the truth.

II. An Individualistic Misrepresentation of the Church:

Another idea that is popular in our time is to say that a person doesn't need a church to be a good Christian. In a limited sense this is true. However, there are also a number of ways in which this is not true. The main advocates of this idea are disaffected Christians. The sad reality is that there are many unhealthy congregations in the world, and many individuals have experienced abusive attitudes and behaviors from such congregations. It is undoubtably true that there are a great number of true saints who no longer go to church services because they can't find a healthy group of which to be a part. But does that really mean that a saint doesn't need the Church? The first problem with this notion is that it ignores that God has made it abundantly clear throughout the NT that His design for His people is that they congregate together in local groups. But it is also to consider the reality that it is impossible for an isolated individual Christian to fully follow the teachings of Christ, and to fully obey all of God's instructions to His people. To make this easy to conceptualize, we will look at what Jesus said were the two greatest commandments. As an isolated individual, a person could conceivably obey the first of these commandments, loving God with all that they are. However, the second commandment, to love others as we love ourselves, isn't possible to do in isolation. One can't say, well of course I can still do good things for others if I am not part of a church. You can't say that because God's commandments about how we are to love others does not simply involve acts of kindness (though that is a part of it). The greater portion of the epistles in the New Testament instruct us as to

how we are to speak and behave as part of a communal group of people. That is not something a person can do on their own. Building relational connections that run deep and strong is part of the basic fabric of what God seeks to create through redemption. In the Fall human beings became alienated not only from God, but from each other. In Christ, this alienation is replaced with loving communal fellowship with both God and one another. Therefore, encouraging others, or justifying for oneself being in isolation from other saints is not pleasing to God.

III. God's Intention for the Church:

A fair question to ask is, why has God always chosen to relate to groups of people? One might think that this is not always true, that God also develops relationships with individuals. It is true that God relates in special ways to certain individuals, but He does not do this apart from His relationships with groups of people. God chooses and enables individuals to act as His agents for the benefit of the groups of people with whom He has a relationship. He chose Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, and the prophets not for their individual enrichment, but to enlist them in His service for the benefit of the Israelites. Later Jesus chose the apostles to do the same for the Church.

At this point it is helpful to reflect on some key passages in the NT that explain how the Church is a necessary part of God's redemptive work in the lives of believers. In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul wrote:

"I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling"

Ephesians 4:1-4

"And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head — Christ — from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love."

Ephesians 4:11-16

In the first portion of Ephesians chapter four, we read that God calls His people to pursue unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. This is impossible to achieve as an isolated individual. But it is what God's people as a community are to strive for. It

requires the cultivation of humility, personal restraint, and patience. These are things we learn in relationships with others, and these disciplines continually train us to be focused on others rather than on ourselves. This is not an easy goal to achieve. Anyone who watches what happens in the world around us should understand that it is something that can only happen as a result of God's work among us. And the accomplishment of this goal provides the fulfillment of Jesus' statement that His followers would be known to the surrounding world by the way they love each other. Such a miraculous achievement demonstrates the reality of who Christ is, and who is the true God. The second portion of Ephesians chapter four describes how the people of God can achieve their goal. Though this ministry is set in motion by gifted leaders, it is a ministry that is the work of the entire community. God has intentionally created us to be different, with different strengths and weaknesses, so that together we can be more than we could ever be on our own, through the contributions we make spiritually in the lives of one another. The method and the fruit of this mutual interaction is described by Paul in His letter to the church of the Colossians:

“But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all. Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.”

Colossians 3:8-15

Paul describes the things we are to strip away from our lives and the things we are to cultivate within ourselves. The idea is that as we interact with our fellow believers our sinful tendencies are revealed, and we have the opportunity by the grace of God and by the empowering of God's Spirit to choose what is righteous and refuse to give into what is wicked. And we also do this with the aid of each other, as we tolerate our inevitable failures along the way and cheer one another along.

Finally, in Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, he wrote:

“Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”

Philippians 2:1-4

Paul had just written about the reality of the suffering that both he and the Philippian saints were enduring. He reminded them that such suffering is part of how we advance God's purposes. In light of this, in the passage above, Paul advised them that if they were to find any real support and encouragement in the midst of suffering for Christ, it would have to come from one another. For this to be achieved they would need to set aside every manifestation of selfishness, and with humility put a priority on the welfare of one's fellow believers. Through such things, mutual love is formed, and a community of people are transformed together so they can reflect the nature of God and therefore be an effective witness to His redemptive work.

Conclusion:

The idea here is not in any way to discourage kindness and mercy. Nor is it to make light of how difficult it is to find a healthy group of committed believers with whom one can fellowship and grow. It is simply to make the case that there is an even more important and realistically more difficult task to which we have been called. And if we fail to engage in this task, we have chosen to be unfaithful to God.