

The Church's Great Calling Various Scriptures

Intro – What in the world is the church for anyway?

- There are numerous subtle and not so subtle attacks on the institution of the church in modern life.
- There are plenty of people who either think that Christian churches just get in the way of progress and help propagate the worst problems of society like prejudice and the subjugation of women.
- There are others who simply ignore the church altogether. Why bother. The church is outdated and out of touch.
- Others, inside the church, think that churches need to reinvent themselves. From their perspective the older forms and structures can't withstand the pressures of the times or meet the needs of this generation.
 - Of course at the other end of the spectrum, there are those whose attitude toward how church ought to be "done" and how it ought to feel appears to be "if the '50's come back, we're ready." We've got the music, we've got the style, we've even got the carpet. We might call that the idolatry of tradition.
 - But of course the other extreme is idolatry of whatever is new. Some are convinced that churches have to be ahead of the curve and following all the latest trends.

But how might we rise above preferences related to style, fashion, and whether or not we like what is new. How might we explain to someone outside the church what the church is all about? How might we answer someone who is antagonistic to the church and Christianity? What does the church exist for? Or even more specifically, what do churches exist for?

This morning, I want to try to find out what the New Testament has to say about the existence of churches and what the great calling of the church is. And to get at that topic I'm going to work through 3 primary characteristics of authentic churches, and then see how those characteristics relate to God's character, and then finally come to the great calling of all true churches of Jesus Christ.

1. What should characterize all authentic churches of Jesus Christ?

As we begin this investigate, I should just acknowledge that for this first point of the message I'm indebted to the writings of Pastor Mark Dever of Capital Hill Baptist Church in Washington D.C. He has pointed out these three characteristics in the book of 1 Corinthians.

Now some of you know something about the church at Corinth. They were worldly, divided, and usually focused on lesser things than love.

a. *Holiness... 1 Corinthians 6*

- The Corinthian church's tolerance of sin was wholesale. Look with me at...

1 Corinthians 5:1-2 - It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. ²And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

- The idea of tolerance is one of the hallmarks of our time. In our culture, intolerance is the unpardonable sin. But later in 1 Corinthians, we find that a holy God is NOT characterized by tolerance of sin and He wants his church to live in holiness.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 - Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice

homosexuality, ¹⁰nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified [notice the words related to holiness], you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

- Paul wraps up this little section on holiness up with these words...

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 - Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Application – I think that there are a couple of lessons from 1 Corinthians that we can take away this morning regarding holiness.

- God takes holiness seriously, and so should we. There should be a holy and joyful seriousness about our pursuit of holy living. We should not deceive ourselves about the fact that true Christians are concerned about honoring God with a holy life.

- And then, in 1 Corinthians 10, after Paul reflects on the failures of Israel in the arena of holiness, he gives us one of the keys to pursuing holiness...

1 Corinthians 10:14 – “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.”

- We need to be serious enough about holiness in our lives and in the church to be willing to RUN! There are some temptations you were never meant to fight, you were meant to flee!

- And then there is an application to the church as a body. When we read **5.1-2** it ended with “Let him who has done this be removed from among you.” As a church, we must be serious enough about holiness to deal with scandalous sins in our members.

- *So holiness should be a primary characteristic of all true churches. The next characteristic is...*

b. **Unity... 1 Corinthians 1 & 3**

- This is the first problem that Paul tackled in the letter.

1 Corinthians 1:10-11 - I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord - Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. ¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers.

- The reason that these divisions were so serious is what they revealed. The divisive spirit of the Corinthian church revealed that they were looking to men to fulfill what only GOD could do. Some were saying “I am of Paul”, others were saying “I am of Apollos”. But they were missing the fact that these spiritual leaders were only tools in God’s hands.

- The main thing that their divisions revealed was a boastful pride. They were stuck on themselves and their accomplishments instead of being enamored with Christ and all that God has done for us in Christ. Paul’s antidote to this divisive pride is important:

1 Corinthians 1:28-31 - God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. ³¹Therefore, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

- **Application** – The important thing for us to learn about unity in the church for the purposes of this message is the solution. The solution to sinful divisions in the church is repentance of pride, humbling ourselves, and joy and gratefulness for all that God has done for us in Christ Jesus. How can we divide with someone over whether they like this or that Bible teacher (or any other secondary issue) when we all serve such a great and gracious God and a crucified and risen Savior!

- So again, we've seen that holiness and unity should characterize all authentic churches. Then...

c. **Love... 1 Corinthians 13**

- Again, the importance of love is demonstrated by the failure of the Corinthian church. They were focused on lesser important things. For one thing some of what was going on was the equivalent of playground pushing and shoving. Paul rebukes them for the selfishness of their pot-luck gatherings.

1 Corinthians 11:20-22 - When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. ²¹For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. ²²What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

- This church wasn't loving enough to let the poor and hungry people get into the lunch line first.

- At the same time, they were proud of their spiritual gifts, especially those who experienced the more prominent gifts that put them front and center. Listen to what Paul says about the interaction of spiritual gifts and the primacy of love...

1 Cor. 12:27-13:7 - Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But earnestly desire the higher gifts.

And I will show you a still more excellent way.

^{13:1}If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

⁴Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.

⁷Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

- I think that what Paul is ultimately saying is that what matters in the end is not whether you have a spiritual gift that is impressive to others but whether you genuinely love people in a humble, self-sacrificial, others focused kind of way.

- **Transition** – Author Ed Clowney labeled the church a “colony of heaven”. And that is certainly true to the degree that churches are holy, united, and loving places.

But at the same time, it wouldn't hurt to ask ourselves WHY?

2. Why should holiness, unity, and love characterize true churches?

And as it turns out, churches should be these things because our GOD is!

a. **God is holy – 1 Peter 1.13-16** – *God repeatedly commands His people to be holy because He is holy!*

1 Peter 1:13-16 - Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹⁴As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ¹⁵but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

- This quotation is one that was repeated 4 times in the book of Leviticus. God is interested in His people being holy because of His own holiness. The greatest privilege of being the people of God is that God dwells among us. That was true for the Old Testament chosen

people of Israel, and it is true of the church: **Ephesians 2.22** says, “In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” And holy God wants a holy dwelling place.

- Next we see that God wants us to be united as a church because ...

b. God is one – Ephesians 4.1-6

- Even though God is clearly a Trinity, Father, Son, and Spirit; we also know from the Scriptures that God is One. There is a delicate balance of emphasis in the Bible on one God in three persons. But there are a number of places in the New Testament that emphasize the importance of maintaining the unity of the church based on the unity of God. Perhaps the most clear is...

Ephesians 4:1-6 - I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

- We are to maintain the unity of the Spirit in our churches because there is one body and one Spirit, there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God!

- The “give and take” within the persons of the Trinity, where the Holy Spirit delights to glorify the Son and the Son obeys the Father, and the Father loves the Son is the basis for our unity in the church.

- And then finally, we are to love one another because...

c. God is love – 1 John 4.7-12

Perhaps this is the most striking of all these connections between the calling of the church and the character of God.

1 John 4:7-12 - Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

- We are to love one another because the essence of God’s character is love!

- Author and pastor John Stott explained that to claim to be a Christian and not love others is like claiming to be intimate friends with someone that doesn’t even speak your language. The language of God is love and if we don’t speak that language, we are not His people!

- And there is the clear teaching in verse 12 that although no one has ever physically seen God, we can see a snapshot of His character when we love one another!

- **That is a high and holy calling!**

- So if we were to take all of this that we’ve talked about this morning: God wants churches to be primarily characterized by holiness, unity, and love; and He wants those to be the primary characteristics of His people because those are HIS characteristics, then we can come to this conclusion...

3. WHAT IS THE GREAT CALLING OF THE CHURCH?

a. The great calling of all true churches is to REFLECT THE GLORY OF GOD!

b. Churches are called to reflect God’s holiness by our pursuit of holiness, God’s oneness by our unity, and God’s love by our love.

- c. We reflect God's character back to Him. When He sees His own holiness, unity, and love in our lives He is well pleased.
- d. We reflect God's character to one another. When we love our brothers and sisters in Christ, we are modeling God's character to them. When we live a life of holiness, we are modeling God's holiness to them. When we are unified with one another, we demonstrate His own oneness.
- e. We also reflect God's glory to the world around us. When they see our character, they should be seeing an image of God's character.
- f. There are several Biblical themes that emphasize this calling of the church to reflect the glory and character of God...
 - i. IMAGE - First of all, this is a theme that started at the very beginning of history. God made humanity in His IMAGE. In other words, human beings were created to in some way image the character of God in this world.
 - And then Christ died so that His bride could reflect His character –

Romans 8:29 - For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

- ii. TEMPLE – Throughout the Old Testament, the people of God were the dwelling place of God. The Temple was the place where the cloud of God's glory rested, and now the church is the dwelling place of God.
 - We've already noticed **Ephesians 2.22** - "In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."
 - As the dwelling place of God on the earth the church is to reflect the glory of God because God is glorious!
- iii. And then we should close with **EPHESIANS 3.21** –

Now to him who is able

to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think,
according to the power at work within us,

to him be glory in the church

and in Christ Jesus

throughout all generations,
forever and ever. Amen.

- **TO HIM BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH!!!** We glorify God as a church, when we reflect His character! Notice that it is a work that is "within us". It is a matter of character. When we take holiness seriously, when we are humble enough to be truly united, and when we are loving enough to make a difference in the church and in the community, THEN God's character is being built in the church and God is glorified!

Conclusion –

- The supreme calling of the church to reflect God's character and glory is an amazing privilege and a serious responsibility.
- The reality of this calling should cause us to pause and consider whether or not we are living holy lives. Is CBC a holy church? Would we be known in the community for holiness? Do we tolerate personal sin or corporate sin?
- We should consider whether or not we are a united church. Are we united around core doctrines of the faith? Are we willing to consider others better than ourselves? Do we look after the interests of others before our own? Does CBC reflect the unity of the Trinity in our united fellowship with one another?

- And we should consider whether we are loving individuals and whether we are a loving church. Is it easy for people to get to know us? Do we genuinely care for the needs of others, and not just those like us, but those who are different from us in many ways? Do we love those who are the neediest around us?
- **The greatest need in the world is for churches that reflect the glory of God. Will we be one of those churches?**