

10-11-2009, Stewardship Campaign
Chapelwood UMC, Lake Jackson

We Go to Church—
To Be with Christ
Matthew 18:20

When I move to a new church one of the first things I do is to look around in the community and find the most active service organization. Then, I join it. There are a couple of reasons I do that: I think it's important to get to know the leaders in the community, and many of them will be members of that organization. Also, I like to be a part of an organization in which I am not the pastor. I don't think it's healthy to only fellowship with people who know you as their pastor. I've known pastors who didn't know how to be an ordinary person anymore. They only know how to talk to people as their pastor. I want to avoid that if I can.

When it comes to service clubs, I'm non-denominational. I've been a member of Lion's Clubs, Kiwanis and Rotary International. Each of them has a slightly different flavor. If I were to compare them to denominations, I would say that the Lion's Clubs are like Pentecostals. They are pretty rowdy. The Kiwanis are like Presbyterians. And the Rotarians are like the Episcopalians. But they are all built around fellowship and service projects, locally and internationally.

I have enjoyed every club I've joined. I enjoy the Rotary Club I belong to here. They are a great group of people, and they do a lot of good.

However, as much as I enjoy these service clubs, I have never been overwhelmed by a sense of the presence of Christ in one of their meetings. Many of the members are deeply religious and active members of their churches. However, these service clubs are not churches. They are not people who have come together in the name of Christ.

And that is the difference between a church and a group of good people who get together for the purpose of doing good.

Jesus said that he would be present in the midst of people who are joined together in his name. The Spirit of Christ resides in the congregation of the church.

On the Day of Pentecost, the disciples were a group of people, but they were not yet the church. They became the church when the Holy Spirit came down on them. The difference between a group of people and the church is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Christ.

And we come to church because we have a hunger for the Spirit of Christ.

We are talking about why we come to church. As we prepare for the Pony Express ride, as some of you are asked to take leadership positions in the church, this is a good time to ask why we support the church. Why do we offer our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service and our witness to the church? Why do we come to church? The answer—in a word—is Christ.

We've talked about how we come to church to hear the words of Christ and we come to church to worship Christ. This morning I want to talk about coming to church to be with Christ.

The Spirit of Christ dwells within the church, and we have a hunger for fellowship with Christ. We are hungry for Christ.

Human beings are amphibious. You know that amphibians are creatures that can live on land and in the water. They belong to two different environments. We are like that. We belong to this physical world. But we also belong in the spiritual world. Deep within us we are spiritual beings.

The spirit within us hungers for spiritual fellowship. There is nothing in this world that can satisfy this need. We can have happy, fulfilled lives with family and friends we love. But we will still be dissatisfied because of this aching for something that lies beyond this world.

It is the hunger for God. That hunger is satisfied when we encounter Christ. And the Spirit of Christ is present in the church.

Much of the sadness and sickness in people's lives is a result of spiritual starvation. Many of the addictions we experience are the result of trying to satisfy our spiritual hunger with something other than Christ. Many of the broken relationships are the result of the disappointment that always results when we look to the people in our lives to satisfy our spiritual hunger. We are disappointed when our spouses can't make us happy. We look to our children to satisfy us, and we are disappointed when they can't do it.

Only Christ can satisfy us. And the best place to enjoy fellowship with Christ is in the church.

Now, we have to be careful not to confuse the fellowship of the church with the fellowship of Christ in the church. Many people think that when Jesus said that wherever two or three are gathered in his name, he would be in their midst, that he was saying that in our fellowship with one another, we experience fellowship with Christ. It is true that we experience the love of Christ in our love for one another.

But the Spirit of Christ is something else. No human being can satisfy this spiritual hunger—not even the love of the people of the church. Christ alone can satisfy us. But the Spirit of Christ dwells in the church.

Let me put it another way: We are not Christ to one another. But Christ is present where the church comes together. We come to church to enjoy our fellowship with the members of the church. But, even more importantly, we come to church to enjoy fellowship with Christ.

That is what keeps drawing us back to the church, even when we are not enjoying our fellowship with the members of the church. And that does happen from time to time.

Well, can't we fellowship with Christ outside the church? Sure. The Spirit of Christ is with us always. But Christ is more present in some places than others. And Christ is most present in the church.

Can you survive spiritually apart from the church? Sure you can. But just barely. It's the difference between a diet of Lean Cuisine frozen food and a banquet. Why live on just enough to survive when you can feast on the Spirit of Christ at church?

People often say, "I come to church to recharge my batteries, so that I can make it another week." I understand what they are saying. It is so much more satisfying to go into a new week with our hunger for Christ satisfied. When we are spiritually satisfied, we are healthier, happier and stronger in every area of our lives.

Do you remember the old quote from Willie Sutton? He was asked, "Why do you rob banks." His answer was, "Because that's where the money is." Why do we go to church? Because that's where Christ is.

And so Sunday by Sunday, people come to church to satisfy their need for Christ. We come to church to be with Christ.

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