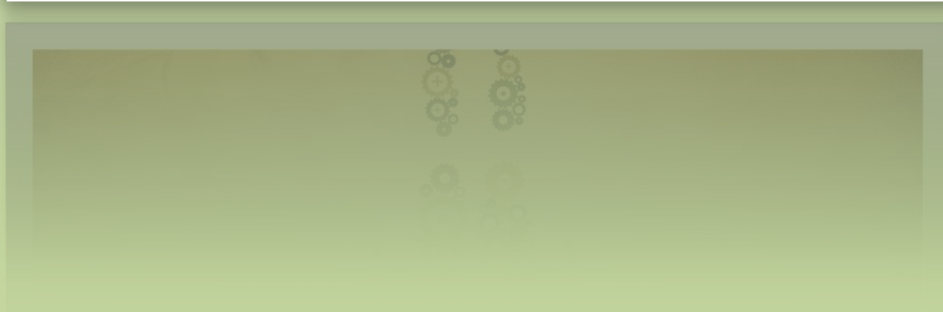
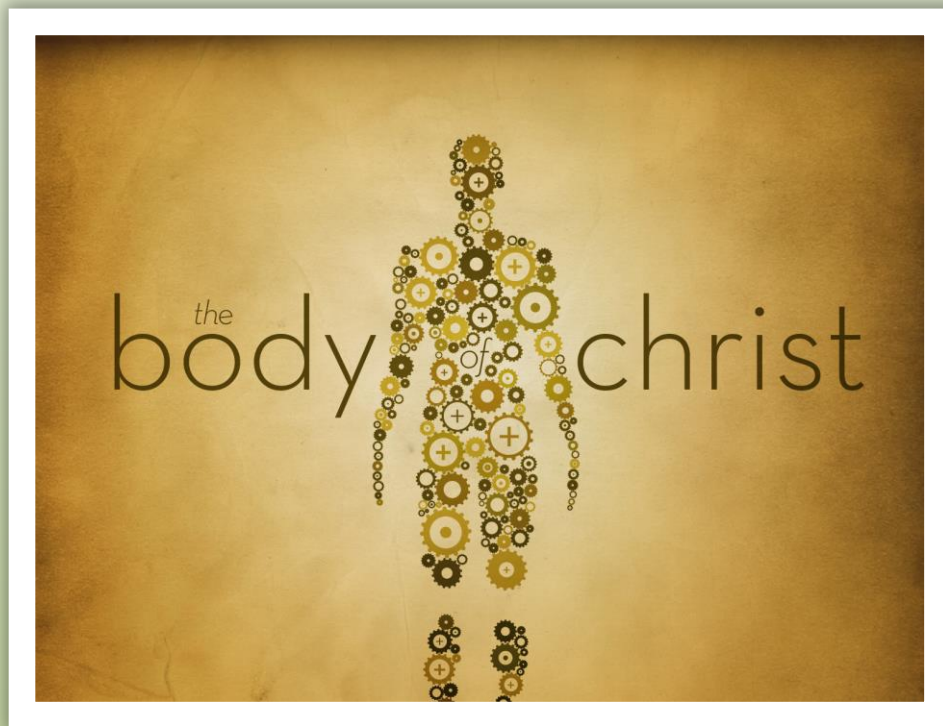


UPON THIS ROCK I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH

HALLMARKS OF A CHURCH IN COVENANT

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Today we look to the **third** sermon in this five-part series. Over the last two weeks we have dealt with our covenant with God, and then covenant within the family. I have discovered that all of us have issues in our families. Mine is like yours and yours is like mine. No matter how much we try to put our best foot forward – all of us have struggles within our families and that’s why we need each other and the grace of God to be with us.

In today’s sermon we will look at the ***Covenant Within Our Faith Community***. As I look over the congregation, I realize that many of us have been worshipping in the same space together for most of our lives. We have celebrated marriages together, we have mourned the passing of loved ones together, and we have seen new lives come into the world together, as some have given birth. We have attended your graduations and have sat together in hospital lobbies and at the foot of hospital beds praying for each other - Church.

We have also made each other mad and have threatened to stop coming to this church – some have even stopped coming to church at times - but like Jeremiah said - I feel like fire shut up in my bones – and so we return to our covenanted religious community - Church.

Many of us have learned managerial and public speaking skills, as well as conflict resolution skills and increased self-esteem just from participating in the life of the community. Many have been given tasks that you felt you weren’t ready for, but took up the challenge anyway and excelled. Others took up those tasks and dropped them without warning - Church.

We have given our offerings and paid our tithes faithfully and unfaithfully. Some - while we won’t admit to it - struggle with tithing because we lack the discipline and have too many negatives stories in our minds. We conclude that our gifts are not to God but to man. We say we just don’t have it to give. We say God will understand. We say we don’t work enough. We say and say and say - Church

But what is the church – a building? But who is the church - A group of believers with common faith, common values and a common destiny?

The term church comes from the Greek word Ekklesia which can be understood as:

- The called out ones
- An assembly or congregation
- Bethel - House of the Lord

Psalm 122: 1-2 I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord. ² Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem.

The Bible is filled with metaphors that are used to describe the church. We could do an entire series just on the metaphors used to describe the church. All of which have their potentials and limitations. Some of these metaphors are:

- ❖ **A Body:** Paul in I Corinthians 12:27 describes the church as a body when he said, “**ye are the body of Christ and members in particular.**” He went on to say that all the members have their own individual function. A sobering reminder that we all have our own gifts. My family never allows us to forget that there was a time in our lives where we had to remind ourselves and others that we all have our own ministry!
- ❖ **A Bride:** John the Revelator saw the church in a vision and said this in revelation 21:2 And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.
- ❖ **Salt and Light:** Jesus himself describe the church as in its preserving and illuminating form when he said:
 - **Matthew 5:13** Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.
 - **Matthew 5:14** Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid

It doesn't take a theologian, a philosopher or chemist to make sense of these two metaphors by our Lord. Our Christian faith preserves us unto holiness. Our Christian faith penetrates the dark parts of this world and brings to light the grace and Gospel of Christ to a lost and dying world.

Metaphors abound about the church. In other places, the church is an **edifice**, it's a **royal priesthood**, and its **branches** connect to the vine. For David, the Lord is our shepherd and we are the **sheep** of his pasture. Finally the church is sometimes described as:

A Family: II Corinthians 6:18, I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.”

However we choose to describe the church, what is clear is that the church is important and holds specific roles and responsibilities in the lives of the believers - even when we are skeptical and turned off from the church.

The writer of the book of **Hebrews (10:25)** puts it like this: “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.” If we are not

careful, the church runs the risk of becoming a lot of things it was not meant to be. Indeed the church was not meant to be:

- ❖ A money making machine – but the church does need money to fulfill its mission here on earth.
- ❖ The church was not meant to be a club or purely a social institution, but should make people feel at home.
- ❖ A church was not meant to be the great source of pain that it has become, but was meant to provoke the people of God towards Godly living and redemption.

Jesus told Peter and the others that He would build the church and the very gates of hell would not be able to advance against it. I believe these words with all of my heart, and yet there is a paradox to the words of Christ. I once came across a book about titled, “Autopsy of a dead church” by Lou Mancari. Too many Pulpiteers’ words drop like sounding brass, and tingling cymbals on too many deaf ears. As a church, our covenantal agreement must declare that God has spoken and is speaking from the pulpit into our situations and circumstances.

Every single one of us should be reminded that the church has specific responsibilities, now the more we realize that the quicker we will be able to assess if a congregation (including ours) is healthy or unhealthy. I would like to first describe three broad purposes or roles that the church (and by the church I mean you and I) must live out:

1. **The church must be a TEACHING church:** too many churches specialize in shouting, in dancing, in singing and in entertaining. In many cases, we have come to value preaching sermons more than teaching sermons. If anything, we need more teaching sermons and less preaching sermons. The ministry of Jesus provides ample examples:

Matthew 5:2 And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying

Matthew 7:28-29 Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, ²⁹ for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes

If preaching stirs the heart towards God then teaching stirs the heart towards the HOW of godly living. The universal church can use more teaching and less preaching. A teaching church tell the people:

- A. Thou **shall not**
- B. Thou **shall**

The congregation is not only taught what **not to do** but also what **to do** in time and space.

2. Ironically enough, **the church must never stop being a PREACHING church** because mankind is always at the threshold of sliding far from God. Because (sin lieth at the door Gen 4: 7). Of suffering C.S Lewis said, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” In a real sense, preaching is God’s megaphone to break the grip of sin and quicken our spirit man to hear God’s voice, to feel God’s presence and to do God’s will. Thus, we need **PREACHING** – in our lives.

Furthermore we need not preachers that will tell us what we want to hear. Paul admonished Timothy about this same issue when he said to him:

II Timothy 4: 2-4 Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine. ³ For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; ⁴ And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.

In the words of the great Protestant theologian of our time, Walter Brueggemann in his book *Finally Comes The Prophet*, “The Preacher listens to the biblical text, which is a long-standing conversation. The preacher listens to the lives of the people, which is always an ongoing conversation.” He or she then brings into conversation and harmony both biblical text and the lives of the congregation through the preached words. The Preacher:

- ❖ Points out sin in all its forms and point sinners to Christ
- ❖ Points out sickness by pointing the sick to Christ the healer
- ❖ Points out darkness by pointing souls to the light of God

3. **The church must be THERAPEUTIC in orientation. A place of healing and refuge.** The Psalmist bellowed the song, “I was glad – when - they said - let us - GO - into the house of the Lord.” Going into the house of the Lord is also leaving or moving farther away from the harsh and brutal realities of our world. The church must offer an alternative and better way of living life.

If the world says it’s every man for himself, the church must say – we are for each other. If the world says its dog eat dog, the church must esteem each other higher than himself. If the world advances a philosophy of life that says you only live once so fill your pockets and fill your body and fill your soul with pleasure, then the church must say “it is appointed unto man once to die and after that comes the judgment.” My children recently taught me that YOLO means “you only live once” but that is not entirely true.

The sermons must prepare people for life as well as for death and even moreso, sermons must prepare you for the after life or better yet for the after death. To Jeremiah's important question (8:22), "Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?" We, the church, must answer his question with a resounding YES! There is a balm in Gilead, one that heals fractured hearts and broken lives. The church must never lose its ability to heal those who find their way into the church "from the fields of sin."

Additionally, the spoken word must comfort those who are in mourning and give meaning to those wandering aimlessly through life. Church in general ought to name the places where people are living, give them a ladder to climb out of those places, and give them another ladder, and another one, and another one to climb into a higher place of living. The old song that says "Zion is calling me to a higher place of praise" can be interpreted as the church that is ever beckoning its members to righteous living.

There is so much more to say, but let me shift to where I believe the Lord is calling us to over the next two to five years. I have been looking to the Lord for a new direction and inspiration for this church. As noted in your program we will be focusing our work and energy with a certain degree of intentionality towards the following end:

- ❖ **Spiritual Formation**
- ❖ **Evangelism Explosion**
- ❖ **Strengthening Relationships**
- ❖ **Membership Retention**

All ministry leaders have been directed and challenged to ensure that all activities within the church are filtered through these lenses. That is, whatever work (teaching, sermons, social activities, outreach) we are engaged, we should be able to show how we are meeting the above criteria.

I would like to invite the entire congregation including children, youth, young adults, and adults to join us on this amazing and intentional journey towards spiritual and communal maturity. I believe this is the covenant that God has called us into as a church.

Spiritual Formation: We are called to move from drinking milk to eating meat - Maturation.

Evangelism Explosion: The power of ONE is still powerful. Each and every one of us are called to share the gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost world. EACH ONE WIN ONE.

Strengthening Relationships: People continue to attend particular churches because they experience a sense of belonging. Likewise people move on when they are part of a church and still feel isolated. We need to become less sectarian and more inclusive.

Membership Retention: The Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:5-8) holds true today. If we, over the course of any given year -- keep half the people that come through these doors we wouldn't have enough space to seat them. The cares of life, the pleasures of sin and the lack of vigilance by many churches including ours continues to send people back into the clutches of the great serpent. In moving forward, let us inspire and provoke one another to Godly living. Let us always be aware of who is present and who is absent. Let us indeed encourage those who are here to stay by engaging them in the spiritual life of the church and let us seek out those who have turned away with all insistence that heaven is missing them and church is missing them. I encourage all of us to take specific measures in making church attendance our priority this year. Don't miss any service if you don't have to. Finally make sure that you acknowledge those who are absent and reach out to them. This is the covenant of the believers one to another, that we will all make it into heaven as a CHURCH.

Next week Pastor Reece, Pastor Johnson and I will be taking up the topic of "Sunday Morning." In that sermon, we will delineate the moves, structure and rhythm of our Sunday morning worship services: from the prayers we pray, the songs we sing, to the sermons we preach and the call to the altar. We invite you to bring someone out with you for this transformative Word.