

What The Church Is

Introduction

- A. I googled the word “church” last week so that I could pull some current news stories that involved churches. As you might anticipate, my search produced some interesting results.
1. Churches do all kinds of things:
 - a. The Winnetka Congregational Church in Chicago announced their yearly huge rummage sale. This is no small, Saturday morning event. They expect to raise more than \$200,000 for local community organizations.
 - b. The Trinity Lutheran Church in Detroit Lakes, Minnesota is sponsoring an art exhibit this month for local high school students.
 - c. There was an article about a Presbyterian church in Queens, NY that was opening a fitness facility as a way to serve the community and make a little money to help them pay the bills during these tough economic times.
 2. Many would read items like these in the paper and they would be pleased. Most think that this is exactly the kind of thing the churches ought to be doing – helping out the community. The problem is that these are not the only articles to be found in the newspaper about things churches are doing. If people keep looking, I suspect they will find some things that they do not like.
 3. For example:
 - a. A church in El Paso, Texas made the news because of a large sign they were displaying to expression their opposition to the new immigration law in Arizona. I suspect that at least the people on the other side of this issue might object; they might even say that churches should not be doing this kind of thing.
 - b. Then there is the church in Massachusetts that has begun a new monthly worship service...for dogs, which includes a special blessing for the dogs who attend. I think even a lot of dog lovers would be a little squeamish about this idea.
 - c. Our list should certainly include the Bay Area Fellowship in Corpus Christi, Texas. They made headlines back at Easter because their plan to give away 2 million dollars worth of prizes at their Easter service (including sixteen cars and fifteen flat screen TVs). A whole lot of people objected to this idea. It was sort of mini-scandal for a few days in the news. I think some would say, “If you’re going to go this far, why not just give them money to attend?”
 - d. Going with the thought, the Lighthouse Church in Chicago gives away \$1,000 to one lucky attendee each week. LifePoint Church in Tampa gives \$1,000 to one person at all three of their Sunday services.
 4. At some point, you’re going to find some church doing something that will cause every person to pause and say, “I just don’t think that’s what churches are supposed to do.”
- B. Which brings us to a very basic, fundamental question about ourselves that we need to ask and answer at regular intervals: What is the church? What are we all about? What are we supposed to do?
1. Obviously all will agree that we cannot make the church into whatever we want it to be; the church cannot just do anything we decide to do. So how do we decide what is (and is not) appropriate? Everyone draws the line somewhere. But the question is, how do we decide where the line SHOULD be drawn.
 2. Before we set out to answer that question, let me be clear that this really isn’t a question that we get to answer. It’s not a question that a counsel of men can come together, debate and resolve.
 3. There is only One who has the right to decide what the church is (**Matthew 16:18**). This is Jesus’ church. He is the only One who has the right to say who we are and what we should do. Let’s open His book and consider His answer.
 4. Let’s begin with this – when it comes to our duty to the world around us...

The Church is not a social welfare agency. The Church is in the soul-saving business.

- A. I mention this because much of our religious world has this backwards.
1. Churches have become social welfare agencies to address the needs of the community.
 - a. There are hungry people in the world, so churches have made it their mission to provide soup kitchens and food pantries.
 - b. There are people who need clothing, so churches have made it their business to open discount clothing stores.
 - c. People need health care, so churches have made it their business to operate hospitals.
 - d. High school students need a place to display their artwork, so (at least for a time) churches have used their facility as a gallery.
 - e. And the list goes on as we have seen... Evidently many have decided, if the community needs it, the church ought to provide it.
 2. This is such the norm in our culture that hardly a day goes by without someone calling the building and asking for Christmas food baskets, help paying a light bill or purchasing a laptop for college. In fact, many would be shocked and angry if someone suggested that these are not the kinds of things that churches should do.
 3. And yet, if we are to be true to our principle and allow Jesus to speak to this issue, it simply will not be possible to reach any other conclusion.
 - a. We find nothing in the New Testament about the church serving as a social relief agency for all of the needy in the community. Certainly there were needy people at that time. In fact their plight would have been even more different than people today who have the benefit of government agencies to help them. If Jesus wanted the church to do this kind of work, this would have been the time for it. And yet, there is nothing in the New Testament about churches serving the community in this way.
 - b. There was benevolent work done by churches, but this was limited. It only involved assisting needy brethren during times of crisis (**I Corinthians 16:1-3, Romans 15:26**). But this is all we find – churches assisting needy brethren in times of special crisis.
 - c. New Testament churches were not in the business of trying to relieve every need of man.

- B. They were in the business of addressing man's greatest need – salvation.
1. Disciples have been charged with the duty to spread the good news – that men can be saved from sin through Jesus Christ (**Matthew 28:19**). The early disciples were consumed with this work (**Acts 8:4, 11:19-21**).
 2. It was the work of churches to support these efforts. They supported this work with their prayers (**Colossians 4:2-4**). They provided financial support for those men who devoted their lives to this work (**II Corinthians 11:8-9**).
 3. Let me add that this is the most important work. I do not wish to minimize the importance of helping those who need food, clothing and shelter. But let's be honest: these are a distant second to the importance of sharing the message that will save men's souls from hell.
 4. I'm sure that some will wonder why we do not do it all. But consider: First, Jesus did not give this work to His church – and it's His church. Second, religious groups that try to do it all end up neglecting evangelism. Third, we have all kinds of groups that exist to help the needy of our culture. But there is only one group charged with the task of doing the most important work – spreading the gospel. It is the church.
 5. Let me be clear about the point we are making. The needy in our community certainly need to be helped. In fact individual disciples, as members of a community, should be helping the less fortunate (**Galatians 6:10**). But we're not talking about what individual disciples are supposed to do. We are talking about a group of disciples who have banded together as a church – what is our work together? As we have seen, it is the most important work being done in the community – the work of rescuing lost souls. We cannot afford to be distracted from this most important work!
- C. We can see this principle in other settings.
1. Schools exist to educate children. This is their purpose. So what would you think if your child's school decided to open a health clinic for the needy in the community? Money would be taken from the school budget to pay for doctors and medical supplies. Teachers would be taken from the classroom to help register patients and handle billing issues. One period out of each day, students will be used to stock supplies, move equipment and clean up.
 2. Would this be okay with you? I can hear the objections already...Schools don't have enough money as it is. You can't take more away. Kids are there to be educated, not stock supplies.
 3. But doesn't the community need health clinics? Yes, but... The schools already have an important purpose. Let the schools do their thing and let someone else open run the clinic. Just because something is needed does not mean that every organization should do it.
 4. Can we now see how this same principle applies to the church? The church has an important work given to it by its Head – the most important work. We must let the church JUST DO the important work Jesus gave it. Individual Christians and other community organizations can be busy addressing these other needs. The church is not a social relief agency for the community.

The Church is not a community center for its members. The Church is in the business of spiritual growth.

- A. Again, I say this because so many churches have this backwards.
1. It is their purpose to become the social and recreational center of their members' lives.
 - a. If the members need something, then it becomes the business of the church to provide it.
 - b. If they need a good place to work out in the morning, then the church opens a fitness center.
 - c. If they need help with weight loss or money management, then the church offers classes.
 - d. If they want the kids to have a place to play basketball, then the church builds a gym.
 2. This is such the norm in our culture that, when people start looking for a church, one of the first things they do is ask about the programs. And they don't mean Bible class programs. They want to know about ball teams, summer camp and Jazzercise. In fact, many would be stunned to hear us question whether or not the church should be involved in providing activities like these.
 3. And yet, if we are true to our principle and allow Jesus to speak to this issue, we simply cannot reach any other conclusion. We find nothing in our New Testament about the local church serving as recreational center for the members.
- B. What we do find is local churches in the business of promoting the spiritual growth of its members.
1. To that end, disciples worked together to help each other grow in Christ (**Ephesians 4:11-16**). As part of this effort, they came together for worship (**Hebrews 10:23-25**). They practiced church discipline to rescue those who were drifting from Jesus (**II Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15**).
 2. Again, what we see in the New Testament is the church involved in the most important work. There is value in having ball teams and weight loss classes. But these do not begin to compare with the important work of growing to be like Jesus and staying on the path that leads to heaven. It is to this more important work that churches should be to be dedicated.
 3. Again, some will ask, "Why don't churches do both?"
 - a. First, Christ did not give this work to HIS church...and it is His church.
 - b. Second, when churches try, the more important work is neglected. Take the work that is done with youth. Many churches address the social needs of kids with camps, ball teams, parties, etc. But rarely do you find an intense effort to teach kids the Bible and help them grow spiritually.
 - c. Third, we have plenty of options when it comes to satisfying our social and recreational needs (plenty of places to play ball and exercise). Let's leave the church to do the vital work God gave it to do, rather than burdening it with trivial tasks Jesus never gave us. After all, it is His church.

Conclusion: Jesus has given us a vital work.

The Lord's church is in the business of helping people go to heaven. It is THE issue that will define our existence. Are you taking a path through life that leads to heaven?

- David A. Banning