

BluePrints: Church = People

By Jason Huff

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Psalm 68:24-26,32-35; 1 Corinthians 12:27-31; Hebrews 10:19-25

Our final Scripture reading this evening is found in Hebrews 10:19-25. I invite you to turn their in your Bibles and to follow along with the insert in your bulletin. Let's listen now to the Word of God. "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Buildings get under my skin. Every time I go back to my hometown of Indianapolis, I notice when something's been torn down or a business has changed hands, even though I haven't lived there in ten years. Buildings aren't just landmarks; they mark time and place for us too. I think that's why church buildings mean so much to us and why it grieves us when they come down. It's where our families are baptized, where we get married, where we remember those who have gone before us. For some of us, it marks the place where we've devoted our lives to God and found Him waiting for us, where He replanted our desires in the fertile soul of His Spirit. The building reminds us of all the good God has done for us and in us and through us.

But in recent years, we've made a mistake. We've gotten confused about the word "church." It used to be that churches met in meeting houses or homes. Now we think churches *are* the place where worship happens. If we think that, though, we lose sight of who we are – we are the church. The building might be where important memories are made, but they're made because the living God has been doing His work in us as a congregation through that place. Many of us learned that lesson the hard way with the end of Church of the Covenant and the beginning of CrossWay, but it's a good lesson to learn.

All of this leads us to our sixth essential tenet of our new denomination, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Our previous essentials have told us who God is and who we are and how we can be in relationship together. This tenet clarifies for us what the church is and what it is supposed to be. Here's what it says:

The true Church is composed of all persons who through saving faith in Jesus Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit are united together in the body of Christ. The Church finds her visible, yet imperfect, expression in local congregations where the Word of God is preached in its purity and the sacraments are administered in their integrity; where scriptural discipline is practiced, and where loving fellowship is maintained. For her perfecting, she awaits the return of her Lord.

As we begin defining the church, we start with what the church is. *The true Church is composed of all persons who through saving faith in Jesus Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit are united together in the body of Christ.* The first really important point is this: the church equals people. Never in the Bible does the word “church” mean a building. It can’t. The Greek word we translate “church” is *ekklesia*, or “assembly.” It literally means, “the called together people.” The tabernacle, the temple, the synagogue, the sanctuary – those were all places. But the church was always the gathering of people.

We have the word “church” in our denomination – the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. But it’s not about a bunch of buildings. It’s a network of faithful Jesus followers who follow God together. When you come to worship on Saturday night, you are a part of the church – the gathering. If you come to Bible Study or Praise Team or Youth Group or Meal and a Movie, when you’re there, you’re a part of the church. You are part of the sacred assembly of God’s people. From now on, when you think “church,” think of God’s people gathered together as the visible body of Christ on earth.

But who is the true church? The true church are those people who are a part of the body of Christ. We become a part of Christ’s body through saving faith in Him and through the sanctifying work – the life-changing, perfecting work – of the Holy Spirit. That means that there is a church within the church. There’s the church that’s visible to everybody. Everybody who shows up to an event or comes to worship, that’s the church. Unless someone says, “Oh, I don’t believe; I’m just here to see what’s going on,” we include them. When somebody says, “How many people came to Meal and a Movie?” and I tell them, “About 70,” that’s the visible church.

Then there’s the true church, the church that’s invisible, the church that’s only known to God. The true church includes everyone who comes together who also has real faith in Jesus Christ and, because of that faith, has been given the Holy Spirit. We don’t determine who’s in and who’s out of the true church. Only God knows for certain.

There are people we rarely see because of work or other commitments, but they have a heart for the LORD and long to be a part of the gathering and just can’t be right now. And there are folks who come to worship but do it out of obligation or habit or they think it’s a good thing to do, but they don’t really believe. They go through the motions. They alone know why they come. We don’t judge anyone. We love every person who’s here. But we know that coming to the gathering of God’s people doesn’t automatically make you a part of God’s true church.

I would encourage you to check your heart and see why you come to worship. God puts a love of His people into the hearts of believers. We don’t always get along, but we love each other because we know that God loves us and has claimed all believers as His children. Do you want to be with other believers? Do you want to learn and grow together with them? Do you want to join in ministry to others together? Those are good signs that God is at work.

This leads into the second part of the tenet: *The Church finds her visible, yet imperfect, expression in local congregations where the Word of God is preached in its purity and the sacraments are administered in their integrity; where scriptural discipline is practiced, and where loving fellowship is maintained.*

Let's split that into bits. First, the church – the gathering of God's people – is found in local congregations. Our passage from Hebrews says, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another." We get together to encourage one another to follow the LORD faithfully. Not only did Jesus command it, we work together better than we do separately. No one of us can feed everybody that comes to Family Movie Night – but together, we can. No one of us can afford to support missionaries, a Compassion child, youth group, praise team, Bible study, Saturday night worship – but together, we can.

We come together because we are the body of Christ. We need each other. Just like a body isn't complete without its hands and feet and ears and organs, we aren't complete without each other. Maybe I can preach and you can't. But you can introduce your friends, friends I don't have, to Jesus. You relate better to some people than me. You might be a gifted helper or encourager or networker. God put us together because we need each other as a congregation.

And while we might not always get along, while some people might even annoy us, as the people of God, God has called us to unity as His children. Each Christian congregation is an example to the world of what God is doing. When we love one another despite our differences, we show that God really is in our midst doing His work.

Moving on...this tenet also tells us that some congregations are really a part of God's church, and some aren't. Some congregations aren't actually furthering the cause of Christ. Some don't belong to Him at all. Now the tenet says that congregations are imperfect; we aren't going to do it right all the time. We're going to make mistakes. But there are three marks that set apart a true church of God's people from an organization that just happens to get together and mess around with religion.

What marks a true church? First, the Word of God is preached in its purity. Pure preaching respects Scripture as holy and sacred. Pure preaching explains God's law which tells us how to live. It demonstrates that while we're to keep it, we can't – we need a Savior to save us from our sinfulness and rebellion against God. And pure preaching glorifies Jesus as our only hope, the One who came so all who believe in Him would not perish but have eternal life.

Unfortunately, there are plenty of congregations where Jesus is never mentioned. There are others where Jesus is preached as the means to get what we want – that Jesus will get you the perfect family, a nice house, and a great life. They don't preach that a commitment to Jesus is a lifelong sacrifice of ourselves to God. The true church preaches that God is fantastic and that following Him is wonderful, but that He requires every part of us every day.

Next, the true church administers the sacraments with integrity. That means that we take the sacraments seriously. We do not baptize just anyone who walks in the doors; we explain that it is the beginning of a lifelong commitment to God. When we baptize a child, we discuss with the parents that they are committing to do everything they can to train their child in the ways of God so that their child might become a faithful believer in Christ. We explain communion – that Jesus meets with us when we take the elements, and we say the words that Jesus said, asking us to remember Him through the bread and the cup, which represent His body and blood given for us on the cross.

Again, many congregations don't do that. They might celebrate the sacraments, but they don't explain them, they don't train people in what they mean, and they don't make sure to follow through on them; they're ultimately unimportant. The true church treats them with reverence because Jesus commanded we do them as part of our relationship with Him.

Another mark of the true church is the practice of spiritual discipline. Now this worries us. Discipline is a curse word in our society. Nobody wants to be told they're wrong. But it's essential. Discipline makes us better people. I play racquetball better now than I did nine years ago in seminary because I'm disciplined enough to play three times a week. I weigh less now than I did two years ago because God disciplined me and convicted me about my weight.

We practice discipline all the time. Annetta and I discipline one another on the praise team. They'll be a rest in a song and Annetta will sing through it in practice. I'll stop the song and say, "We've got to stop singing there or it will sound wrong." Sometimes we get it wrong in worship, but we get it right more often than not because of that discipline. In that same rehearsal, Annetta will say to me, "Jason, you haven't said if we're going back to the chorus or we're singing the bridge again. I can't do my best if I don't know where you're going." And she's right. She disciplines me to be more thorough and organized. We are not the best praise team on the planet, but we are better than we could be because of discipline.

Spiritual discipline in the true church means that we hold members accountable for their actions because what we do affects our relationships with others and our relationship with God. It doesn't mean we go looking for reasons to discipline people, and it doesn't mean we yell at them or hate on them or anything like that. Spiritual discipline is all about reconciliation – being reconciled to God and to one another. When we commit to being members of the church, we commit to our faith, which means as much as possible, we commit to being obedient to God. We need help being obedient, every last one of us, including me. We need discipline.

In a few weeks, we will ask everyone if you would like to become a member. That decision will be important. If you choose to become a member, you'll be under the loving discipline of the Session of our church – not just me, but a group of people dedicated to loving you and caring for you and wanting you to have the best relationship with God you can have – and that means getting right with Him.

It does not mean that you will have everything together. We all have sins that plague us that we want God to fix. We will not instantly become kind, loving, wonderful people 100% of the time because we are church members. But it does mean we are striving to become godly people as the Holy Spirit works in us. It means that some things will have to be left behind.

If you fight with everybody, you need to be willing to move past your anger to get right with God. If you're in a sexual relationship and you're not married, you either need to get married or end that relationship to get right with God. If you're cheating on your taxes or your spouse or your work or anything else, you need to leave it behind. It doesn't mean we won't slip up, but it means we are more committed to God than our own desires. Faithful disciples want to be held accountable. Everyone is welcome to be part of the fellowship even if they decide not to be members. But discipline is a mark of the true church we cannot afford to lose.

And loving fellowship is a mark of the true Church. We can preach the Word, serve the sacraments well and discipline church members appropriately, but if loving fellowship is ignored, we aren't a true church. In any real community of Christ, the people love one another. They hang out together. They want to be together. Maybe not every minute of every day, but we miss each other when we don't see each other. We should want to be together.

God never intended for Christians to be alone. He intends for us to strengthen each other. We are to "spur one another on to love and good deeds." We can't do that if we're isolated from one another. We learn about God as we are in community. God saves individuals, but He saves individuals as part of a larger community. He chose a nation for Himself – Israel. We are the new Israel, grafted into ancient Israel. We are a holy nation; we are the people of God.

The early church fathers believed we couldn't be saved if we aren't part of the true church. They were right. Not because God can't save people who don't gather together. But if we don't want the fellowship and refuse to be a part of it, there's something dangerously wrong with our faith. And any congregation that does not promote and encourage fellowship – a love for one another within the congregation and ways to go about serving and caring for one another – is missing the mark of being God's true church.

All this leads to the last point of the tenet -- *For her perfecting, [the church] awaits the return of her Lord.* Do we get some of this wrong? All the time. We aren't going to be perfect until Jesus comes back and claims His people and sets everything right. There is no perfect church because there are no perfect people. If there was a perfect church, I couldn't be a member, 'cause I'm not perfect. None of us could be.

There are a lot of people out there who have been burned by churches. Some have been part of groups that weren't true churches at all, that failed the tests we've talked about this morning. Others were a part of true churches that just failed, that were imperfect. We feel for those folks and pray for them and work hard to bring them back into the fold. But just because a local church failed us is no reason for us to give up on God's bigger church.

And there's no reason to hunt forever for a perfect church, because we'll never find it. When we find a true church, we're to stay there. It won't be perfect. It won't be everything you want it to be. That's not why it's there. It's there to bring you to faith in Jesus Christ and to encourage that faith to grow through love, discipline, and self-sacrifice. Will CrossWay ever have every program a big church can offer? No. Does a small church require a lot more service from each member? Yes. But that means you can be deeply engaged with God's mission in the world. You can make a real difference here. I encourage you to do that.

This last tenet also proves that the true church isn't hypocritical. If we believed we were perfect, we'd be guilty as charged. But we don't claim perfection. We get a lot of things wrong and make huge mistakes. We still sin. We still have trouble being kind to the mean cashier or not taking from others when we ourselves are in need. But God is working on us, making us complete, and getting us ready for His Kingdom. We invite others not to a home for saints but a triage hospital for sinners who leave worship each week readied for battle with sin and who will eventually come out victorious – because we know God will win that war on our behalf.

I'm excited about the church. The church is God's body in the world, doing His work. As the Holy Spirit works in us, we become His hands and feet to others. We are His people as we worship, as we witness, as we fellowship, as we grow together in His likeness. Let's commit to being the true church – the assembly of God's people in this world He loves and is redeeming even now.