

## WHY I CHOOSE THE CHURCH

Sometimes preachers are accused of not speaking very clearly. I do not mean they mumble. That happens too, but in our day of superb electronic equipment, we can usually be heard if we want to be – on the technical level. In the first two churches I served, there were no microphones or speakers. Along with trying to remember what you wanted to say, you also had to remember to say it so people could hear it. But never mind; just an old man's memories.

A much bigger problem is that saying what we mean and getting clear on *that* level usually carries with it the danger of bringing offense to somebody. It is seldom the purpose, but it often ends up seeming that way to some of the hearers. Today I want to tell you why I choose the church. This seems like an important and even a beautiful thing to me. I would love it if this became an important and beautiful thing for a lot more of you.

But I cannot even open my mouth without running into a vocabulary problem. The New Testament word for “church” is *ecclesia*. I know and remember this, but most of the society around me does not. The *ecclesia* means “the people.” In the New Testament, long before we had buildings or denominations, it meant “the people of Jesus”: the faith family – “*wherever two or three are gathered in my name.*”

So how do I talk about why I choose the church, when to me that has nothing to do with being a Catholic, a Lutheran, a Presbyterian, a Baptist, or even a Methodist? *Of course* that will offend some people. And if I get more explicit, it will offend even more people. But maybe that is not terribly serious. The Catholics do not seem to worry very much about offending me.

In any case, I do choose the church – with great delight, gratitude, and appreciation. It is clear to me that everybody ought to be part of a church for their own benefit and spiritual growth. I am deeply convinced that this was part of Jesus' primary mission on earth. To invite people into God's Kingdom – yes! And the practical and realistic side of this was to invite them into HIS CHURCH for whatever time they would be spending in this temporal world – this halfway planet. It should be clear and obvious by now that traditional views of a Day of Judgment – a Second Coming scenario – were not Jesus' mission or purpose. That is what people assumed would be God's plan *before* Jesus came. But

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Jesus came to form churches – churches in which every individual who became part of His Kingdom could be truly nurtured, loved, cared about, known, and respected.

Late in His earthly mission, Jesus and His disciples were on retreat at Caesarea Philippi, at the foot of Mount Hermon. They started talking about Jesus' true identity. (Matthew 16:13-20) Simon Peter made his great confession: *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."* Jesus was delighted and declared: *"You are Peter, the rock, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall never conquer it."* Moments later, when Jesus was trying to tell His disciples what was going to happen to Him, Peter was aghast and insisted that this must never happen to Jesus. As we all know, Jesus turned on Peter with scathing words: *"Out of my sight, Satan, you are a stumbling block to me. You think as men think, not as God thinks."*

Peter went from the foundation rock to the worst of enemies in a few seconds. A very sobering moment indeed. But as you all know, Catholics insist that Peter the man is the foundation stone. The authority of the Pope, they still claim, has descended from Simon Peter down to the present Pope. Protestants insist that it is not the man Peter who destroyed his credibility only moments later; it is the confession of faith in Jesus' Messiahship that is the foundation of the church. Our awareness that Jesus is our true and rightful KING – *this* is the foundation of the church. Some of us still sing, "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ (*Khristos* = the Messiah) her Lord. She is his new creation by water and the word." That is hardly a tribute to Simon Peter, however much we may appreciate him for other reasons. Do any of you ever sing, "The church's one foundation is Simon Peter, the rock"? I think not.

If I have thrown you off track for a moment, we are saying that forming "the church" was one of Jesus' top purposes. The church is not an addendum, an afterthought, an "add-on." The *ecclesia* is what will carry the Message and purpose of Jesus through all the years to come. Without it, nobody would ever hear about or remember anything that Jesus ever said or did or called His followers to become. When that really sinks in, more and more of us choose the church.

So I must insist: When I say "church," I do not mean the United Church of Christ. I do not mean Community Church, Congregational. What comes closest to my understanding of the *ecclesia* is one of our Disciple Bands. And that is much closer to what the New Testament

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meant by “church.” When Paul speaks of “the Body of Christ” and how we are each given gifts to help build it up and make it strong, he is not talking about cathedrals or denominations. No such things existed in Paul’s world. He is talking about what we think of as Disciple Bands. When Paul writes letters to Galatians or Philippians or Romans or any of the others, he is writing to Disciple Bands: little pockets of believers who have banded together to sing and pray and encourage and support each other in the awareness that the Holy Spirit of their Risen Lord is with them.

We know that Jesus sometimes spent time in synagogues, though we never hear of a close relationship between Jesus and a synagogue rabbi. There was clearly a synagogue in Capernaum where Jesus lived. But Jesus’ own “church” was His relationship with the twelve disciples. Many of us wonder if Mary Magdalene, Mary the sister of Martha, Suzanna, and several other women were also part of His church. His five biological brothers were not. It is amazing and significant to some of us that Jesus’ New Covenant Movement was not attached to the temple or to the synagogues of His time.

Cutting to the chase: Before the New Testament ends, there are “churches” all over Israel, Turkey, Greece, and Italy. But they are groups of people – not buildings. They are groups of people who have made covenant with each other, who believe that Jesus is God’s Messiah, and who have experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit, both personally and when they come together. Their desire, however imperfect at times, is to be obedient to the Holy Spirit, which they recognize to be their Resurrected Lord still in their midst. This is who and what carried the Message and spread the WORD for the first two or three generations of the Christian drama in our world. I think it is what has always carried the Message and spread the WORD, even though sometimes the *ecclesia* is buried inside religious institutions that make it more difficult for the *ecclesia* to operate in obedience to the Holy Spirit.

When I talk about choosing the church, this is the concept and definition of the church I am talking about. It has been my understanding of the church for many years now. If it were not for this reality in the midst of all the outer forms of “church” being proclaimed and advertised and promoted in the outer world, I personally would have abandoned the church. I am not saying that this would have been right or just or wise, but I know myself pretty well. And it is this “secret,” half-known, half-seen church that I keep finding within the facade

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of the outer church that keeps me wanting to participate; wanting to tithe; wanting to keep teaching and learning and praying – that keeps me from throwing up my hands and walking out.

Of all the institutional structures that humans have invented to carry forward the possibility of the real church – the *ecclesia* – Congregationalism is probably the most authentic. Therefore it has all but disappeared from the world. The United Church of Christ was designed to carry the legacy of Congregationalism, but ever since it was founded, the UCC has been trying harder and harder to become Presbyterian and to be bigger and more successful in the outer world. Congregationalism, as its name implies, always understood itself to be a group of normal believers – that is, laymen and laywomen – who, in covenant together and with the Holy Spirit, were called together to be Jesus’ servants and disciples in whatever community they found themselves in and wherever the Spirit guided them. Their freedom was the freedom to obey Jesus according to their own best light. For that reason alone, Congregationalists would not tolerate bishops or any ecclesiastical hierarchy that had the power to dictate how they should live or believe. The “congregation” – the people themselves – had to figure it out, pray it out, make their own mistakes, do their own repenting, claim the mercy, and get back to their own obedience. But they were not isolationists. They needed to be in covenant with each other. Communities without strong individuals making them up are sick. Individuals without a community to be responsible in and to are even sicker. But it was a community in covenant with each other – called by Christ – and wanting to follow Jesus the Christ.

Of course, no other structure matches the belief systems, the convictions, the attitudes, and the goals of the United States as well as Congregationalism. Therefore Congregationalism has all but died out in our country. Does that make any sense to you? It does if you believe in Satan. Besides, Congregationalism is too much work. It takes too much time and patience. It requires too much actual love and caring between its members. It does not do well with simple formulas or fast fixes to complex problems. It has a high regard not only for the Bible, but for serious science and higher education. Who started Harvard and Yale and Dartmouth and Oberlin and many other colleges, and built schools as well as churches in mission posts all over the world? But that was long ago now.

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*“By their fruits ye shall know them,”* Jesus told us. Well, Congregationalism has not been bearing much fruit in recent times, at least not in our country. But we have Disciple Bands in this church, and they are beginning to bear good fruit again. Is that enough for me? Absolutely. I am not an impatient man. If they catch on and hang on, the Kingdom will come alive in our midst more and more.

Meanwhile I do not get excited about the concepts or the fruits of churches like Mariners or Saddleback or the many organizations like them. Many people do, of course. God bless them. But it's not my cup of tea. It is not my notion of what Jesus wants His church to believe or be like.

So I will back up and get more personal for a minute. I do choose the church because Jesus chooses me. That's the real truth behind anything else I can tell you. But there is backdrop for me. It started as an idea, grew into a belief, and comes to light in an event that actually happened in human history.

Many years ago I kept trying to make sense out of life by pondering things from my own point of view. Nothing I could think of seemed convincing or meaningful. Life was too short. There were too many accidents and disasters, and some people I cared about had been taken out by them. There was too much pain and suffering, and no matter where humans turned or how well they planned, their future was always a question mark. Given time enough, that question mark always came up with a grim answer. You might also remember that when I was born, there were only just over two billion people on the planet. *Seven and a half* billion changes almost everything.

Back in my early days, I used to like people a lot. It hurt me when things went badly for anybody. Yet no matter how much I tried to do, how much I wanted to help, even how gifted or resourceful the person I was concerned about might be, that relentless question mark would eventually come up with a grim answer. If I could have found faith in the myth of progress, that might have helped for a while. But searching life from my own point of view, I could never get past the outer realities. Some of my friends loved nature; I did too, in a way, though I was out in it more than they were. So I also knew that nature was “red in tooth and claw.” Studying the birds is not a peaceful thing, unless you run back into the house really fast.

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The nineteenth century was a time of great optimism. There were lots of problems, but we were right on the brink of solving all of them. The twentieth century showed us a very different reality. There were two world wars, and a major depression in between. There were death camps; death marches; a cold war; endless threats of atomic disaster, ecological disaster, terrorism; whole segments of society giving up, getting drugged, or cutting out.

So I tried to get past my own tiny point of view. What if there really was a CREATOR? Was there some plan beyond what I was seeing? My first reaction, as you would probably expect, was that any intelligent Creator would wipe out the whole mess and start over. Immature minds have a tendency to want to scrap things and start all over. "If I were the Creator," I said to myself, "I would make some big improvements. I would make a world where there could not be any suffering; where people would all treat each other well; where there could not be any hatred or quarreling or sickness or failure." I could have been happy in the United Church of Christ back then.

Very interesting. My first act as Creator would be to eliminate myself and everybody like me. After the first blush of confident enthusiasm began to wear off, I became grateful that I had not been promoted to the position of Creator after all.

The more I pondered, the clearer it became that there was no way to change the basic nature of humankind without losing all our best qualities at the same time. Ruling out the possibility of suffering or evil or failure would also destroy the qualities in humans that call forth admiration, respect, and love. I began to realize that the Creator has a bigger problem than I had imagined. So what was the Creator counting on? Did the Creator have some plan for teaching people how to use the gift of life in a better way? Even being God ain't no bed of roses. And even God, it seems, has a communication problem.

If you were the Creator, how would you reveal yourself to people like us? Certainly human eyes cannot see God. Even if human eyes could distinguish the vastness of Almighty God, how could our limited senses possibly interpret what we were seeing? How then could God reveal himself in ways that would teach us the uses and possibilities of life?

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Having built into Creation a communication system, you would doubtless try to make contact with people through the thoughts of their minds. And it would work – sort of, and some of the time. But when human minds are cluttered with so many fears, memories, desires, and hard experiences, how will anything get clear or stay clear?

Eventually you would be compelled, if you cared enough, to try something pretty strange and pretty dangerous. You would have to find some man with special gifts and awareness – some man who would be more attentive and more obedient than any man had ever been before – and you would pour your Spirit and your Message into Him for years, until He was ready. And when the time was ripe, you would pull the veil away from Him and He would come out of the water, the dove would descend, and the strangest and greatest drama that has ever taken place on our planet would begin.

I choose the church, the *ecclesia* – small but authentic Disciple Bands. I see them as the visible result and continuing development of God's plan: to honeycomb the earth with pockets of faithful people of all ages, nations, cultures, and races. Some of them will go astray or fade away or get lost or be sidetracked. But even Satan cannot destroy all of them; there are too many. And they do not depend on any hierarchy or any outer human structure. Many called and faithful people are part of them. As long as they remember Jesus Christ and sincerely track His Holy Spirit in their lives and in their life together, God's plan will continue to unfold. And all the bad question marks will lose their power and fade away in the trust that Jesus' people have – for Him, and for the Father who sent Him.