

Date: October 3, 2021 (Pentecost 19)

1. Texts: Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Ps. 26; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16.
2. Subject: ecclesiology.
3. Topic: God's definition of the Church.
4. Aim: encourage.
5. Proposition: "God's definitions of the Church shape our theology of the Church and our practice of Church."

GOD'S SAY SO

Every Anglican is tired of people saying, "Oh, your Church just got started because that king wanted to divorce his wife." Almost as wearying is the charge that the Church is *just* a manmade institution and you don't have to belong to it to believe in God.

Of course, the fact that the Church has made some very public and damaging decisions doesn't help. The residential school crisis and the cases of sexual abuse have materially hurt the Church. People outside the Church are all the more ready to reject the Church and deny its validity.

It also seems that we Church-people have largely worked to set the boundaries and definitions of the Church for ourselves. In effect, we consistently act as if human beings did create the Church. We behave as if it were just another institution under our power to control. That's less than helpful.

It also is not true. The Church is not a manmade institution. We didn't create the Church. We've done plenty to create tools and ministries for the Church, but the Church's existence is not of our creation. God created the Church. He gets to define what it is. He sets the foundations for the ministries of the Church. We would do well to constantly remember how God himself has defined the Church.

The Church is the Body of Christ.¹ We enter into that Body through baptism—not as a cleansing from sin but as immersion in the Spirit of God. The Body of Christ is made up of disciples who have been filled with the Spirit and

¹ 1 Corinthians 12.

so united to one another in an incomprehensible series and number of relationships.

Being joined to one another in love by the Holy Spirit makes the Church itself holy. To be holy is to take on the character of the Spirit. Holiness is what happens to the Church when the power of God forms it into the Body of Christ. We are set aside for a divine purpose by the power of the Spirit, as the communion vessels are set aside for holy eucharist. The Church is the chalice of God through which Christ's salvation is to be poured out onto the world. Because of this, the Church is by definition holy.

One reality dominates this dynamic—love. Jesus sacrificed himself out of love for all humanity. Such love is the attractive force that draws Christians together. Such love guides God's salvation. The love of God motivates and empowers the Church as it ministers in God's name. God's love makes us holy and it is because of that love that we share God's holiness with others.

According to God's definition, there is but one Church—one holy and universal Church. Human beings created denominations. God created the one Church. This often proves to be a sticking point for many denominations as each seeks to maintain its superiority over another.

The identity of the Church as the Body of Christ created through the love of God compels us to love God with all that we are and love others in the same way.² That is, having been adopted into the Body of Christ because of God's love, we prodded into loving God and others.

The Body of Christ also proves its God-given identity as it fulfills the Great Commission of Matthew 28:

And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey

² Matthew 22:36-40.

everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.³

Such proclamation and evangelism spring from the love of God and the identity of the Body of Christ. They are not optional expressions from a list of possibilities. Proclamation and evangelism are inherent to our identity as the Body of Christ. Proclamation and evangelism identify the Church, and are part of God's definition of the Church.

So, God created and defined the Church. The Church is the Body of Christ united in love by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. This indwelling and loving power unites all the saved in one great fellowship whose God-given purpose is to love others and to demonstrate that love through proclamation and evangelism.

In addition to proclamation and evangelism, there seems to be one other constant in the definition of the Church: prayer. The Body of Christ is the community of the faithful in prayer. The Church prays *to* God *for* people. It somehow belongs to our identity—the heart pumps blood and if it's not pumping, it's not the heart. So, the Church prays and if it's not praying, it's somehow not fully the Church.

But it is significant that the Church prays *to* God and *for* people. Frequently, the Church doesn't get that quite right. Usually we are praying *for* circumstances and situations. "God fix this or that." "God change the weather." "God stop the pandemic." But when you look at the examples in the New Testament, the Church ends up praying for the people in whatever circumstance they are confronting. *To* God, *for* people—for grace, courage, stamina, joy, love—all the characteristics of Christ himself.

The Church is God's own creation, so he gets to define what it is so that the Church can do God's work. The Church is the Body of Christ and is created through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. This truth means that the Church is both holy and unified by the Spirit. The Church is the total of relationships created by the Spirit and those relationships are necessarily

³ Matthew 28:18-20.

characterized by love. This is both love from and for God as well as love for other people. Such love compels us to proclamation, evangelism and prayer. Without the evidence of these necessary characteristics, we would have to doubt the existence of the Church. That is, where there is no proclamation, evangelism and prayer, is the Church actually present?

Our Church certainly does not exist just because Henry VIII wanted a wife who could bear sons. Our denomination? Well, that might be another issue. Our Church exists because of the sacrificial love of God as shown in the life and death of Jesus Christ. Our Church is not a manmade institution, although much of what it does is performed primarily through human decisions and without reference to God's definition of the Church. Our Church is the construction of God—he built it, using Jesus as his cornerstone. We read his blueprint in the Bible. We illustrate our divine origins in our proclamation, evangelism and prayer. We prove ourselves to be both holy and unified as we live according to God's design.

Now, let's go out into the world and prove to them the value of the Church in God's eyes.

AMEN.