

EASTER – A NEW FELLOWSHIP

I heard the story of a pastor who was the supply preacher for church in a small town in Texas. He would drive to that town early Sunday morning, preach a sermon to the congregation, and then leave after lunch. Usually, he would arrive before the service and go to a local donut shop where he would go over his sermon notes. One Sunday he arrived at the donut shop and opened his Bible and a man sitting there at the counter turned to him and asked "You a preacher or something?" He told the man that he was preaching that morning at the church in town. The man got excited and said, "Hey, I'm a member of that church." The church was small and the pastor had been preaching there every Sunday for over 3 months so he said to the man, "That's odd, I have never seen you there." The man looked at him strange and said, "I said I was a member of that church. I never said that I was fanatical about it!"

A few months ago, we did a series called I Love Sundays. I mentioned that over the past few decades that church attendance has been declining in North America. This is not because there are fewer Christians than there was 20 years ago, but that people attend with less frequency than they did in the past. Researchers give a number of reasons for this.

The first is that church has been placed as a lower priority for families with kids, choosing to get involved in sports and academic activities over church. When I was growing up, everything was closed on Sundays. Schools did not hold events on Sundays and very few kids were on traveling teams. Today, Sundays are not protected like they once were.

A second reason for this is that there are more online options for spiritual growth resources today than there was 20 years ago. People have changed worship habits, considering online worship services as an equal option to in person worship services. Bear in mind, this research was done even before COVID. This trend has only accelerated since then.

A third reason is that people just do not feel guilty about missing church anymore. At least I think we can all be glad about out the last one. Conviction is from God, but guilt is not. So, while the Holy Spirit may convict you and urge you to get to church for your own good and growth, guilt is not a great reason or motivator to be here.

Today I want to talk about the good reasons for going to church. We are continuing in our series today called the Easter Challenge, looking at how are lives are different (or should be different) because of Easter. Last week we talked about the fact that, because of Easter, we have a new Foundation. Today I want to talk about the fact that, because of Easter, we have a new Fellowship. The church was given to us by Jesus. It is God's idea.

Matt 16:15-19 But what about you? he asked. "Who do you say I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

There are people today who are concerned about the trends about church attendance. There is also concerns that AI is taking away jobs. I am not worried about job security.

These are the times that you and I have been given. God could have made me a pastor at any time in the history of His Church, and He could have placed you in His Church at any of those times as well. But He has put us here and now for a reason.

I am a pastor today because I believe in the church. I did not always. It was not until I took a course in Seminary on the church that I truly understood the importance of local fellowships. So why do I believe in the church? In this scripture Jesus tells us 4 reasons the church is important for us;

1. Our Foundation – upon this rock I will build my church

We talked about this last week. One of the reasons I believe in the Church is that Jesus established it and promised that it would prevail no matter the times or circumstances it faced. When Jesus asked His disciples who they thought He was, Peter rightly identified Jesus as the Messiah.

Matt 16:17 Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church

Jesus said to Simon Peter “on this rock I will build my church”. Jesus did not say that He would build the church on Peter – “on your rock I will build the church”. It was not Peter’s church. There are lots of jokes about Peter standing at the pearly gates deciding who goes in and out. This is not the case. The church does not belong to the pastor or to the elders. Jesus did not say he would build only the Baptist church or the Methodist church or the Catholic church. He said, “I will build MY church.” The church is His church. This church belongs to Jesus.

The rock upon which the church is built is Christ himself. It is built upon the truth of Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Christ – the son of God. Upon this confession everything is based. As I mentioned last week, the truth is the foundation upon which everything we build in based on.

In 1993 I started as pastor of Cornerstone Community church in Virgil. I remember when I started at the church I asked if the church had a real estate agent that I could use to find a house. The reply came back “we are Mennonites, we do not buy houses, we build them.” It was the first time we had ever had a house built. I remember the day the trucks came and dug the hole. It was so exciting. I figured once the hole was dug that the house would be up in no time. Then came the foundation. It took weeks and weeks, and by the end the trucks came in and pushed the dirt back around the foundation and all there really was that you could see was a hole in the ground. A very expensive hole! In Canada, the foundation of a home represents about 20% of the total cost of the home. You do not rush or compromise when it comes to foundations.

It is interesting that Jesus is talking about the church here before it even came into existence on the day of Pentecost. The word used for church is the Greek word EKKLESIA which means a local assembly or gathering. It means people. Our gatherings are based on the truth of God’s word. Our foundation.

2. Our Function – I give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven

Jesus says here that he has given to us the keys of the kingdom. What does this mean? A key provides access. You cannot get into your house or car without a key. A key represent authority.

When we went on vacation we gave a friend the key to our house so they could come over to feed our cat. That meant that they had full access to our home while we were away. They could come in, turn on the TV and eat everything in the fridge. Jesus has given His church the authority to go into all the world to offer salvation and discipleship to all people. That is the function of the church.

Rom 1:16 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. 17 For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

What tremendous power and responsibility Jesus has given us! He has given us the most powerful message of all time and told us to share it. We know that only God can forgive sins and that only God can save people. He has left the sharing of that message up to us.

Imagine if someone gave you a new car. A 2025 Mustang Shelby GT500 with a 5.2L supercharged V8 1300 horsepower engine. It has all the power you could ever want or need. You have the keys and the car is full of gas. However, instead of starting the engine you just decide to open the door and start to push it down the road. Do you imagine that the person who gave you the car is going to be happy about that? God has given us the keys to the kingdom. The almighty creator of the universe has entrusted to us the most powerful thing of all time, and we try to push it along using our own strength.

One of the reasons that corporate worship is so important is that it reminds us of our function. When we gather together, you have probably noticed by now that I seldom tell you something that you do not already know. We talk about the basics. We are reminded about our function. We do this because, as human beings, we often forget.

It heard the story of the couple was having problems remembering things. The doctor told them that they were physically okay, but they might want to start writing things down to help them remember. Later that night, while watching TV, the man gets up from his chair and says, "Want anything while I'm in the kitchen?" The wife responds "Will you get me a bowl of ice cream?" "Sure" He says. "Don't you think you should write it down so you can remember it?" she asks. "No, I can remember a simple bowl of ice cream." "Well, I'd like some strawberries on top, too. Maybe you should write it down" she says. He says, "I can remember that. You want a bowl of ice cream with strawberries." "I'd also like whipped cream. I know you'll forget that. Write it down," she says. Irritated, he says, "I don't need to write it down. I can remember it! Ice cream with strawberries and whipped cream, for goodness' sake!" After about twenty minutes later, the man returns from the kitchen and hands his wife a plate of bacon and eggs. She stares at the plate for a moment and asks, "Where's my toast?"

Like that couple, one of our big problems is that we need constant reminders of the truth. There's so much in this world that is questioning, contradicting, and attacking the truth. When we gather here, we are reminded of the truth of God's Word, the truth of who God is, and the truth of who we are in Jesus.

The problem with attending church less is that, when we forsake meeting together, the truth will quietly slip from the forefront of our minds, and we will almost imperceptibly begin to buy into and live according to the lies of this world. It amazes me how quickly I can forget or question God's goodness, power, love, and involvement in my life. Gathering here with you every week keeps my life on track with what I believe in my heart. It reminds us of our foundation and our function.

3. Our Fruit - whatever you bind ... whatever you loose

Jesus has not only given us the keys to the kingdom but he has also given us the Holy Spirit to empower us to victorious Christian living. In Him we not only have eternal life but life abundant. In the name of Christ we have been given the authority to take the spiritual resources of heaven and apply them to the problems of earth. We are to bind the powers that enslave people and loose the blessings and power of God for them to live as Christ intended them too. One of my greatest joys as a pastor is seeing how Jesus can transform lives.

Gal 5:22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control.

Through the Holy Spirit we are transformed. Old habits and addictions are changed as our characters are aligned to Christ. We are changed and become different people. We have been set free. It is always amazing to see the power that is in the name of Jesus, especially when dealing with the demonic. Through the church the power of the Spirit is released on earth bring healing and change and transformation as the kingdom of God breaks out.

Let me return to the analogy of the car. God has given us the power to bring freedom and to break chains. He has given us the keys and said go for it! So, what do we do? We park the car in an air-conditioned garage. We wax it and buff it and try to keep it in mint condition. We talk about it a lot and take lots of pictures of it to show to our friends, but we never drive it. That is not what the church is for. We are given the keys not just so we can turn on the engine and listen to it purr. We are given the keys so we can take it out on the road. That is what it was designed to do. Yes, it will get dirty. Cars like that are meant to be driven hard. Things will get messy. We get dings in the side and chips in the windshield, but that is all just part of using a car for the purpose it was created.

We have been given the keys so that we can go forward in power, under the protection of His grace, and through the leading of His Spirit so that what is loosed here on earth by His power, may be loosed in heaven for all of eternity.

Chuck Colson makes an interesting observation. He points out that when the Communists took over Russia in 1917, they did not make Christianity illegal. The Soviet constitution guaranteed freedom of religion. What they did do is make it illegal for the churches to do any "good works" or works of service. The churches were no longer allowed to do what they had always done: feed the hungry, educate children, take care of widows and orphans, or care for the sick. It was not allowed to use the power of God to bring real change to the communities they were in. There was a very stunning result when the church obeyed the state in this matter. When the churches failed in their calling to serve the needs of others, it only took a few years for the churches to become ineffective and forgotten. This is our foundation, function and fruit.

4. Our Future - the gates of Hades will not overcome it

I have heard people say to me that they hate organized religion. I understand why. Throughout history there have been many times the church has forgotten it's mission and purpose. But, the best thing about organized religion is that it organizes. When we organize, we can get things done. God has called us to gather together to find ways to live, share, and spread the truth and power of the Gospel. We have a common mission and call. We can't complete it without each other.

You can get some things done all by yourself, but it is like a thumb without a hand or other fingers. In the end a thumb by itself is not really good for much. However, add some fingers and there is no end to the things your thumb can grasp, open, move, pull, or shape. It is the same way with the body of Christ. Our different gifts working in conjunction with one another open up ministry and Gospel opportunities we could never imagine on our own. You cannot be all you are created to be without the church, and the church cannot all that God has called it to be without you.

Current trends may say that church attendance is down, but trends do not tell the whole story. There is a reason that God tells us in Hebrews 10:25 that we should not to give up meeting together. God is not asking you to add another thing to your already busy life. He is saying that church must be a priority. The work of the kingdom of God must be central.

The church is not a fortress but a moving army. The gospel is going out every day and more and more people are responding to it. Many people in Europe and North America are saddened but what they see as the shrinking church but that is not true of the global church. The kingdom of God is moving forward and there is nothing in the world that can stop it. Nothing.

Notice that it says the gates of hell will not overcome it. When was the last time you were chased by a gate? Has a door ever jumped off its hinge and ran after you? This passage presupposes that it is the church that is moving forward.

Matt 11:12 From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.

The word here for FORCEFULL in Greek is the word BIAZO which comes from the word BIOS or life. Living things grow. The picture here is of a tree growing out through a crack in the concrete – it is forcing its way out. Someday the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and Christ.

Hab 2:14 For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea .

We know from the end of the book what will be. We know the future. We see that in the end we win! Until then the church has work to do. We know the end of the book but there are chapters yet to be written. God has given us everything we need to fulfill our mission. We as His church need to do it.

There is nothing in all creation like the church when it's working right. And that is why it is so tragic when we see the church of Christ when it is not working right. Is there anything more disappointing than a gathering of believers who have decided to park the Gospel in the garage to keep it clean and safe and pure? What an amazing honor, trust, and privilege God has given us.

It's our job to do our very best to make sure it's working right. But it only works right when we understand that the local church isn't a building. It certainly isn't a pastor. It's not a denomination. It's not staff or elders. It is a gathering—an assembly of followers of Jesus Christ who are united by love for Him. A church that's working right is a church where every individual in the gathering takes his or her place in the ekklesia with a determination to take the keys of the kingdom and charge forward with the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the glory of His name and for the freedom of His people.

As a church we have a clear foundation, function and hopefully fruit, and we know our future. The church of Jesus Christ will continue and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

Near the Tower of London there is a little ancient church called "All Hallows". On the wall of the church there is a large sign that has been placed there so that tourists leaving the Tower of London may read it. The sign gives a bit of history and then raises a pointed question: "Jesus Christ has been worshipped in this building for 600 years, on this site for 1100 years, and in Britain for 1400 years. Don't you think that maybe it is time you got started?" That sign points to the amazing persistence of the church. After storms and splits, wars and famine, persecution and prosperity - there is still such a thing as the church. The church has lasted simply because God has wanted it to last. It will continue because God has intended it to.