

'Being the Church' – Part 3 *'The Church is not an Institution'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Several years ago I read a quote from Pope Francis from one of his sermons at the Vatican. I am sure there would be many things the Pope and I would disagree on, however, this one statement is not one of them. He was preaching about the Church and he made this simple statement: *"The Church is a love story, not an institution."* That quote caught my attention not only because it's a beautiful and accurate description, but because it came from the leader of the most institutionalized part of the Christian Church. However, it's a quote that sits well with Pope Francis who has been pushing against the confines, rules and practices of that institution throughout his whole life.

Of course, even though we speak of the 'institutional Church,' we need to remember that this is not the language of Scripture and it's a concept which would have been totally foreign, if not abhorrent, to those first Christians all those years ago. The early Church and the New Testament both focus on the relationships which lie at the heart of this community of faith we call the Church.

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul talks about the Church as the 'Body of Christ', the 'Household of God' and the 'Family of God.' Peter refers to the Church as the 'Flock of God' and the 'People of God' and in Revelation, John says the Church is the 'Bride of Christ.' In Scripture, the Church is always depicted in terms of relationships. Relationships lie at the heart of the Church. These relationships are based on love, because God is love. So the Church is the 2,000 year old ongoing love story between God and His redeemed. In fact, the Church only succeeds to the extent that we respond in love to the love of God in Christ.

So let me ask you a personal question. Do you love Jesus? More importantly, do you know how much you are loved by Jesus? As a Christian are you caught up in this amazing love story? Our 'husband,' our 'bridegroom' sacrificed everything for us but do we live in the light of that love every day? Pardon me if this sounds like mushy nonsense, but it actually speaks to the very essence of being the Church. Can you remember one of the last conversations Jesus had with His close friend Peter? It was after Jesus had risen from the dead and He was on the beach one morning and He asked Peter a question. In fact He asked him three times in a row – just to make sure Peter understood. Jesus asked Peter, *"Do you love me?"* I find this fascinating. Here's Peter, upon whose confession Jesus said earlier He was going to build His Church. This is one of Jesus' last encounters with Peter before leaving forever in the flesh. I imagine Jesus could have asked Peter lots of questions at this vital moment. Questions like, *"Are you ready to lead these people? Do you remember what I taught you about making disciples? Do you know how to deal with those who come against you? ..."* I could think of a hundred important questions for a moment like this. But the only thing which Jesus thought was important to ask Peter before leaving him was a question about their relationship and He asked it three times: *"Peter, do you love me?"*

Our love relationship with Christ lies at the very heart of our identity as His followers, His disciples and the Church which bears His name. Everything begins and ends right here as we look Jesus in the eye and respond when He asks us, *"Do you love me?"* The Church is not a gathering of people in a particular place or under a particular banner. It is most certainly not a group of people who subscribe to a particular doctrine – that's religion and God hates religion. That's what the Scribes and Pharisees had established when Jesus arrived and He blew all that out of the water entirely with His radical message of love and grace.

I love the Church Jesus is building from the depths of my being, but I have no affection whatsoever for the institution mankind has tried so hard to build. I genuinely love the Church; the community of God's people; the 'called out' ones who love Jesus and are committed to His ongoing mission on earth. I love the men, women, and young people with whom I have been able to share my life, worship and serve alongside in the name of Jesus.

For decades now we've heard the adage, "*the church isn't the building, it's the people.*" The current global pandemic and the closure of all Church buildings has thrust that statement in our face in an unprecedented way. Now we get to decide if we really believe it. Most of us recognize that the bricks and mortar structure isn't the church, but somehow we haven't had the same epiphany about the intangible structures, programs, regulations and activities of that institution. Whether we know it or not, in most peoples' imaginations the Church remains a collection of programs, committees, policies, teams, ministries, initiatives, budgets and events. Most people speak of 'the Church' the same way they speak of 'the government' - it's an organization with a hierarchy of leaders managing a structured program of activities.

I see this dichotomy most clearly when it comes to volunteer service. As Church leaders we often feel compelled to draw more people into the institution's programs to serve. Pastors and leaders scan the membership directory and mark possible recruits who are not presently 'serving the Church.' But where did we find such a concept? It most certainly was not in the New Testament – upon which we claim to base our entire lives and ministry. **We have never been called to serve the Church.** Even the now common labels we use for people such as the 'churched' or the 'unchurched' testifies to the centrality of the institution in our minds and in our mission. The whole 'Church growth' movement we experienced in the last couple decades of the twentieth century cemented this institutional mindset. When attendance at a Church gathering or activity is large we say, "*the church is growing,*" when attendance is low we say, "*the church is failing.*" But is that accurate? Is the real Church, the Body of Christ, the 'called out' ones who love Jesus, really growing or failing, or are we simply observing the rise or fall of a man-made institution? Can we even tell the difference anymore?

I know of some large churches with a really poor level of theological and relational maturity. All they really have is an attractive, successful program – not a healthy Church. I know of some pretty small and insignificant churches whose members have really grown in their faith and their understanding of the priority of relationships and the centrality of the Holy Spirit in all their activities and they are committed to the mission of Christ. Those people are far closer to the heart of the Church which Jesus promised to build and yet, they may be seen as small, insignificant or a failure in the eyes of those who focus on the institution.

I am not anti-institution. I believe structure is necessary. Some structure is good and some structure may even be God-ordained. We see evidence of a loose structure from the very foundation of the Church in Acts. But these structures always existed to serve the mission of Christ and they were always flexible and able to move and grow and adapt as the Holy Spirit led the people of God on a daily basis. **Our structures must always serve the mission of Christ and be subject to the Holy Spirit.** Today, it can often seem like God's people exist to serve the structures in the fulfilment of the mission of the institution which, more often than not, is simply to become a bigger institution!

Now I believe the ranks of those who love the Church but not the institution are growing. There's an increasing dissatisfaction among more mature believers toward the institution. I don't believe they're rejecting the Church like some people say they are. Studies show that these believers continue to grow spiritually by serving God and others and by developing meaningful relationships. In other words, they are growing by engaging with the real Church – which consists of people, not programs, relationships not religion. *That* is the Church which Jesus is building.

I am certainly not advocating the dismantling of the institution and nor am I advocating anyone should leave the institution. Sadly, that's a choice thousands of sincere Christians are making every day across the world – but that's the easy way out and I sincerely believe that is not what God is calling us to do. I pray that those people will reconsider and take the hard road and return to us so they can be part of the new day which is dawning for the Church.

It has taken me many years to work through this and it has been a real struggle at times. It even required me to step out of pastoral ministry completely for six years with no real commitment to return. I called it a sabbatical, but it could just as easily have been a permanent departure from the institution I had been part of for most of my life. Before I returned, I really needed God to make it clear to me that the institution we wrongly call 'Church' is not beyond reform. I needed to know it is not beyond hope. I needed God to call me back into those structures, back into that institution in order to be a change-agent as the entire Church as we know it is renewed, reborn and re-commissioned to fulfill the Kingdom purposes of God.

God made it clear to me that I can be a part of the institution we call 'church' and still faithfully pour my life into the real Church – which is God's called out people. In fact, the Lord made it very clear that it is simply not possible to change any system from the outside. Just as Jesus could not redeem and re-create humanity without becoming part of us, so too we cannot reform and re-create the Church by standing on the sideline yelling at the players on the field, hoping the outcome of the game will be different. The only way the game will change is by getting back on the field and staying there to show your teammates a better way and the real purpose of them being there.

Brothers and sisters, if we truly want to stop 'going to church' and start 'being the Church' then we need to accept that the majority of what we have experienced as 'church' throughout our lives is man-made and part of an organization, an institution we have built and it did not come from God or the New Testament! But somewhere, buried under all those structures, programs, regulations, activities and buildings is the Church which Jesus promised to build and God has called me to devote my life to finding that true Church and re-connecting God's people to its heart, which is the mission of Christ. To do that we need to get back the New Testament – and once again '*... devote ourselves to the Apostles teaching, to fellowship to the breaking of bread and to prayer ..*' (Acts 2:42) and re-capture the vision and the purpose of the Church Jesus birthed and promised to build.

What is the purpose of that Church? Why are we all still here? We are here to advance the Kingdom of God, by His grace and for His glory. What is the Kingdom of God? It is the rule and reign of Jesus Christ - as it has always been in heaven, so shall it increasingly be on earth. **The Church does not have a mission – Jesus Christ has a mission and that mission has a Church.** The mission of Christ is the only mission the Church has ever had. That's why Jesus commissioned us to go and make disciples and teach them everything He has taught us. What did Jesus teach about more than anything else? The Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven. Then He told His disciples to pray and believe that this Kingdom of heaven would increasingly come to earth: "*Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven ...*"

It's all about the Kingdom of heaven breaking into the kingdom of this world. It has never been about 'converts' or 'members' of an organization. Our primary mission is not to grow an organization and call it Church. We are not called to recruit volunteers to a worthy cause. We are not called to be the social conscience of society. We are not called to be a refugee advocacy group, an environmental watchdog or campaigners for social action, justice and equality. As wonderful as those pursuits may be, none of them are the mission of Christ and yet that is where a growing number of Christians spend most of their time in the name of the Church. The mission of Christ is to make disciples and teach them everything Jesus has taught us.

What is a disciple? A disciple is someone who has met Jesus, has been overwhelmed by His love and grace, has fallen in love with Him, received His salvation, embraced His mission, and committed their earthly lives to its fulfilment in and through their own lives and their own circle of influence. How is that possible? By His grace, which He has lavished upon us in the life, death, resurrection and empowering presence of Jesus Christ through His Holy Spirit. To what end do we do all this? The glory of God. The more we help Jesus usher in the kingdom of heaven right here and now, the more God is lifted up and glorified. The more God is glorified, the more He empowers the mission of Christ to reconcile His lost children to their heavenly Father.

So where do all those other noble causes fit into this purpose of the Church? Will we not still care about the marginalized and oppressed? Will we not still be concerned about our environment and about justice for all people? Of course we will – but none of that is the primary purpose of the Church. The mission of Christ is to advance the kingdom of heaven by introducing people to Jesus and making them His disciples. All manner of fruit will then flow out of the fulfilment of that mission – more fruit than we could ever imagine. All those social concerns and issues will be impacted as the fruit of the Gospel impacts our world around us. But the fruit is not the tree! Social action and advocacy must flow out of the gospel and the life of Christ in our midst - they should never replace the gospel. When they do, we are no longer part of the Church which Jesus is building – we are part of something else.

We must get back to the core purpose of the Church which is to join Jesus in His mission. We need to get back to the place where it's all about Jesus and His Kingdom rule and reign; where it's all about the gospel – the good news of Who Jesus is and what He has done and promised to do; where it's all about bringing heaven to earth which is what Jesus did when He was here and what He has commissioned us to continue doing.

That is why I will talk about the presence of God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit all the time. That is why I will always be pointing you and anyone else who wants to listen, away from me, away from the institution of the church and towards God, Who is present and alive and real and active in our midst every day. What does all that look like? Well, strap yourselves in because that is the ride we will be taking together in this teaching series as we discover afresh, or perhaps for the first time, what *being the Church* really means. May God continue to open our minds and our hearts and give us the courage to truly be the Church of Jesus Christ in a needy world.