

Acts #12
The True Church of Today
Acts 2:41-47

One of the largest churches in the United States is the Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago, IL. Started in 1975, it now averages nearly 20,000 in attendance at its Saturday, Sunday, and mid-week services.

Desiring to reach non-Christians and those who, for one reason or another, have quit going to church they have deliberately tried to avoid many of the traditional ways of doing thing in their four Saturday and Sunday services. Using drama, multi-media, contemporary music, and creative messages that connect with people's lives, the services are specifically designed for individuals checking out what it means to have a personal relationship with Jesus.

Even though those who are already Christians are certainly welcome in the Saturday and Sunday services, it is the Wednesday and Thursday night services that are specifically designed for them. It is at these services that the "family of God, the Body of Christ" – the church – meets together for mutual instruction, inspiration, fellowship, and worship.

Despite the fact that Time Magazine and others have criticized them as "a high-tech entertainment church, trying to relate to the MTV generation and not to the rest of the world," they unashamedly preach Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. And the result is that the congregation has grown, and grown dramatically.

Now contrast that with the story of another church in this area (which I will leave nameless), which is the 1960's and 70's had a powerful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ, with almost a thousand active members. But their number now is about 150-200.

Why? Well, in recent years a subtle change crept in as their emphasis switched from presenting the Gospel to helping the homeless. They set up soup kitchens in the church building and began massive feeding programs for those in need.

Now, at first glance we would think that helping those in need is a very worthy and Christian thing to do, and it is! And they should be praised for doing so. But that is not the main emphasis that God has placed on the church.

Therefore, as we continue our study in the Book of Acts, we are going to take a look at the true church.

First of all, I want to talk to you about the reality of the Church. The Bible teaches that the Church came from God. From the beginning of time, before the foundation of the world, God had in His mind the Church. And He promised that even the gates of Hades would not prevail against it.

The word “Church” means many things to as many people. Some people link the “Church” with some particular historic denomination, tracing its heritage through the centuries by a succession of bishops. Others use the term “Church” to mean an invisible family, consisting of the devout of all denominations. There are still others that try to make the “Church” simply an improvement of the Judaism of the Old Testament.

Whatever the Church is, it is not something that was already in existence, as seen in Matthew 9:16-17, “No man putteth a piece of new cloth on an old garment, for that which is put in to fill it up taketh from the garment, and the dear is made worse. Neither do men put new wine into old wineskins, else the wineskins break, and the wine runneth out, and the wineskins perish; but they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.”

Whatever the Church is, it was something that was in the future during the ministry of Jesus, as seen in Matthew 16:18, “Upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”

Whatever the Church is, it is something that was hidden from the Old Testament saints, as seen in Ephesians 3:5-6,10, “Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel...to the intent that now, unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places, might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God.”

In order to get a better understanding concerning the reality of the church, look with me at the meaning of the word itself. The New Testament work “ekklesia” is the word from which we derive our word “Church.” Originally this word came from two words meaning, “to call” and “out.” It had lost that literal sense long before the New Testament times, however, and had come to mean simply an “assembly” or “gathering.” In a specialized way, the democratic Greeks called their town meeting by this name (“ekklesia”); the word did not describe the people who assembled, but the assembly itself.

The word “ekklesia” appears 75 times in the Greek Old Testament, and speaks of God’s people in assembly from Sinai forward. In Acts 7:38 Stephen calls the Old Testament assembly a “church.” In the Old Testament “ekklesia” referred to an actual assembly of people – not the people themselves.

The New Testament gives added significance and meaning to the word “ekklesia.” **In the New Testament this word always refers to people, not to an impersonal institution to which people belong.** This truth is seen in Ephesians 5:25 where Paul tells us that Christ “loved the church, and gave Himself for it.” And then we have been told in Galatians 2:20 that Christ “loved me and gave himself for me.”

Therefore, the reality of the Church is all the “me’s” that have exercised their faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ!

Secondly, I want to look at the composition of the Church. Ephesians 1:19-23 says, “And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all.” **The Word of God is teaching us that the Church has for it’s Head none other than Christ Jesus Himself!** We are also told that the Head did not take this position until after His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension!

The Church then is the Body of Christ, and we have been told in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by

one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.”

Look with me for just a moment as we think about these two truths concerning the “body.”

First of all, the body is the *manifestation of the person living in it.* Your existence is made known by your body. The Church then, exists for the purpose of manifesting the unseen Christ, as seen in Colossians 2:9-10, “For in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And you are complete in him, who is the head of all principality and power.”

Our God is seen in Christ, as seen in Colossians 1:15 where we are told that Christ “is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation.” Our Christ is seen in Church, as seen in 1 Peter 2:5, “You also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.” Our Church is seen in us, as seen in Ephesians 4:15, “Speaking the truth in love, may we grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ.” Our real self is seen in our everyday living, as seen in Luke 6:45, “A good man, out of the good treasure of his heart, bringeth forth that which is good; an evil man, out of the evil treasure of his heart, bringeth forth that which is evil; for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.”

Second, the body is under the control of the head. Ephesians 5:23 says, “For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church; and he is the savior of the body.” And again in Colossians 1:18 we are told that “He (Christ) is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.” **Biologist and scientist tell us that before our finger can be drawn away from a burning flame, it must receive the instruction from the head to do so.** Before our hand can reach out and hold our injured foot, it must be told to do so from the head.

As strange as it may seem, we have those churches that seem to be playing the part of the “Headless Horseman.”

We have looked at the reality of the Church, the composition of the Church, and last of all, we will look at the business of the Church. Acts 1:8 says, “But you shall receive power, after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you,

and you shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth.”

The business of the church is to witness for Christ! That is the only excuse we have for being on _____ - to bring men, women, and children to Jesus Christ for salvation. Everything we do in this church must be pointed to the end of bring the lost to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of their lives.

The activities of any church have only one reason for existence – they are simply means and tools to the end of bringing men to Jesus; not just to the church; not just to a meeting; but to bring them to a life-changing, soul-saving experience with God the Father through Christ the Son.

Fundamentally and basically, the great need of this world is to know Jesus Christ as Savior. And when men come to know Him, He begins to straighten out all the other problems in life.

The time has come to be obedient to the challenge in Philippians 3:13-14 to forget “those things which are behind, and reach forth unto those things which are before, pressing toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

If you are not saved, why not come to Christ tonight?