

## What If Jesus Was Serious...About The Church?

Week 5: Chapter 22 ~ 28

### Chapter 22 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Worship Should Be More Than A Mountaintop Experience

I like the questions Skye opens this chapter with...(they'd be good discussion questions)

- *What do you expect from a church service?*
- *What have you been taught to expect? (Or my rewording, why do you expect what you expect?)*

We all have attended countless worship services. It is safe to assume we do so for a reason and with expectation. This chapter invites us to identify those and to examine whether they are good and right.

While Skye doesn't mention this, it is also possible to go through the motions, be on autopilot, and mindlessly show up simply out of routine. (That's not to say it's not having any impact. As we emphasized last year, anything we do regularly, habitually, will form us even if we're unaware of it. I don't know about you, but I prefer to be mindful and conscious of what I'm participating in whenever possible.)

This chapter invites us to also consider what we expect in a relationship with God. Specifically, is it just a one day a week thing or an all-encompassing thing? Is God a means to an end or the end itself? Because that has a direct impact on our relationship with the church.

It is a wonderful thing to have an encounter with God, a spiritual or "mountain-top experience" as some describe them. Those are all well and good. But is it reasonable to expect such an experience from attending a church service week in and week out? Is that even what a church service is all about? Some people think so. The reality is that some people expect too much from a church service, while some people expect nothing at all. This is why examining/exploring expectations is a healthy exercise.

We learned from last year's series, *The Way We Worship*, that worship is not about what we get/receive, but rather what we give/offer. The best worship services I have ever been a part of were those gatherings when people had been connecting with God, communing with God all week long. When they gathered it was simply a natural expression of what had been happening all week.

Or let me say it another way—being brutally honest here—when worship services are flat, lifeless, strained, forced, going through the motions...the main reason isn't the music or sermon or liturgy...it's the worshippers. The point of a worship service is not to generate or manufacture worship or a "spiritual experience" but to allow place and space for worshippers to offer their worship.

In that vein, one of the main reasons we encourage Soul Training Exercises each week is to get people into the habit/rhythm of connecting/communing with God throughout the week. When people who regularly do that gather together, worship generally takes on a life of its own. When people have been regularly meeting with God throughout the week, worship doesn't need to be drawn out of people...they just need an opportunity to express it.

*(\*\*\*Please note that I've been using "church service" or "worship service" as opposed to just "church". The church is not a service...the church may have services, but services not to be equated as the church. Reaching back to Week 1, The Church is: **the presence of Jesus among His people called out as a spiritual family to pursue His mission on this planet.**)*

- *At what times, in what places, in what ways you have experienced God? When you attend/participate in a church service, what are you hoping to experience?*

#### Chapter 23 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Our Worship Won't Always Be Practical

This chapter immediately makes me think of the time when a woman (Matthew 26; Mark 14) or Mary (John 12) anointed Jesus' feet with very expensive perfume. The extravagance and lavishness of such a gesture caused quite a stir. Mark says "those present"; Matthew says "the disciples"; John specifically says Judas Iscariot—were indignant. The perfume could have been sold for a lot of money, and the proceeds could have been used to help the poor. What a waste!

Well, not so fast. Under normal circumstances there may have been a lot of truth in the angry reaction. Or, perhaps better stated, if such excess had been showered upon anyone other than God-in-the-flesh, then maybe it would have been a valid point. But this was an act of love, worship, devotion...to GOD. How do you put a limit on that?

Similarly, in Luke 21, Jesus points out a poor widow who put two small coins in the offering, all that she had. The point being, love (which is what worship is an expression of) is not practical. Skye, quoting Alec Guinness, calls worship, "*a rather nonsensical gesture of love*".

- *How would you describe your own acts of worship and devotion? (Proper? Restrained? Respectable? Practical? Reasonable? Tepid? Self-conscious? Unbridled? Irrepressible? Unbounded? Undignified? Enthusiastic? Passionate? Enraptured? etc.) Or, how might someone watching you describe it? Or, how might God describe it?*
- *When has God's delight in you inspired delight in Him?*

#### Chapter 24 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then We Must Not Give Up Meeting Together

A few years back—I want to say it was before the pandemic—I was having breakfast with a pastor friend of mine. He and I go back a ways...we had started a young adults ministry together which eventually became its own congregation. We were reflecting on life and ministry, discussing

things we had learned along the way, sharing current struggles, etc. At one point in the conversation the question was raised, “Why do people attend church services? What are they looking for?”

We both agreed it wasn't because they were looking for good teaching or preaching...after all, they can easily get that on the internet. Similarly, it wasn't for the music...again, that's easily found elsewhere. What the church really offers—that can't be easily found on the internet—is relationships/friendships. We reminded each other that humans are made for embodied community.

Time to revisit our definition of the Church: ***the presence of Jesus among His people called out as a spiritual family to pursue His mission on this planet.***

Last week (from the time of this writing) we celebrated Christmas. I suspect many of us went to significant lengths to be able to spend time, in person, with family. Why didn't we just Zoom or FaceTime? It would have been cheaper and easier, right? There's just something about being WITH others, particularly those we love and care about, that brings life to our soul and encouragement to our hearts.

Why do I attend church services? Primarily, to spend time with my church family. There's just something about being together. Secondly, it's to contribute whatever I have to offer to this family that I love. Thirdly, doing so provides a witness to the world that there's something special and significant about this family, this group of otherwise unrelated people...and His name is Jesus.

Now, to be fair, there is more than one way for Christians to gather together regularly. For the most part, most Christians default to the congregational model/form...so much so that this particular model/form is how many define “church”. This is unfortunate. Looking back over our working definition of “church”, you'll notice that no particular form or model is prescribed. Perhaps it's time to reimagine and experiment with other forms/models.

- *Why do you attend church/worship services (on whatever frequency you happen to do so)?*
- *What other forms/models of gathering together as the body/family of Christ can you imagine/conceive of?*
- *Within the form/model/expression of gathering together that CUMC utilizes (the congregational form), how are we doing with this primary function of encouraging one another? What could make it better?*

## Chapter 25 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then We Gather To See Through One Another's Eyes

It is interesting to consider how God has made us so interdependent on one another. As much as we might like to think we're highly independent people, not needing anyone...and as much as we avoid being dependent on anyone else...the fact remains that God designed humans to need one another.

Consider this: God has made the sharing of the Gospel (which is the primary thrust of His mission in the world) dependent upon humans sharing it with other humans (see Romans 10:13-15). Hmm, that doesn't seem to be the most effective or efficient way to get the job done. But part of learning to trust the wisdom and goodness of God is coming to grips not only with WHAT He wants but also HOW He wants it done.

God is a relationship...God is drawing us into relationship (with Him and each other)...and the way in which He is doing that is also through relationships. It's all about relationships. Relationships are the end and the means. So, whether we like it or not, we need each other, and the whole point is to draw us together in Christ.

- *Describe a time when your vision/perception/perspective was limited or hampered by your circumstances.*
- *How have you been encouraged by the experience of someone else? How has your vision/perspective been broadened by what others have seen, experienced, or attested to? How has your experience, vision/perspective brought encouragement to someone else?*
- *Describe a time when someone met a need of yours that you may not have recognized you had? How are you at asking for help from others?*

## Chapter 26 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then The Church Gathers For Community, Not For A Concert

Notice how closely this description by Skye matches our working definition of "church"; *"The church is the assembly of women, men, and children redeemed by Christ, filled with His Spirit, and living in communion with Him and each other in a way that reveals to the world the invading reality of God's Kingdom."*

One of the major drawbacks of the congregational form/model/expression of church services that we are accustomed to is that it tends to develop passive spectators (with a penchant for consumption, critique, evaluation, assessment) as opposed to a community of worshipping disciples of Jesus who are becoming family.

If you've been paying attention to our Soul Training Exercises over the past few years, hopefully you've noticed that most of them are designed to help us experience the presence of Jesus and/or foster our connection with one another outside of our weekly worship gatherings. Why?

Because the type of formation we are striving for requires a connection/relationship with God and each other beyond an hour or two per week. We are trying to develop a Life With God (individually and collectively) that orders and shapes every aspect of our lives. Leaning too heavily on the congregational expression of the church can warp/distort our understanding of the goal/point of it all.

- *What is expected of you when you show up for a church service/worship gathering?*
- *How are you being formed as a disciple of Jesus by being part of the church? What role does gathering together weekly for worship play toward that end?*
- *If someone (say, a coworker, neighbor, friend) were to ask you what the whole point and purpose of the church is, how would you respond?*

### Chapter 27 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Only The Mature Should Teach, But Anyone Can Preach.

Over the course of two thousand years of Church history, words, concepts, and ideas tend to evolve and mean something different than originally intended. Let's take the words Skye mentions in this chapter as an example: Preach & Teach.

Preaching and teaching are key functions of the Church and her calling. And, technically, they do mean different things. The Greek word for "preach" is "kerysso" which means to proclaim, announce, or declare. To "teach" is the Greek word "didasko" which means to explain or expound. Functionally and practically speaking, preaching is a monologue while teaching is more interactive, more of a dialogue. Skye's illustration in this chapter of the difference is excellent: an announcement of the arrival of a flight is a good example of "preaching", while explaining the aerodynamics of how a plane flies is a good example of "teaching". Again, the Church (the community of Christ-followers) is called to do both.

The focus of this chapter is WHO can preach (anyone) vs teach (those qualified to—i.e. the mature...those with the ability to explain and articulate theology, doctrine, etc. but also those who embody Christlike character). But I think it is worth noting that, within the context of the New Testament, WHO received preaching vs teaching is also important/relevant as is WHERE these two functions were practiced.

Generally speaking, the Gospel was preached to those who had not heard it (not-yet-believers/non-Christians) and usually in a place they naturally gathered or wherever they happened to be encountered. (Think Paul preaching in the marketplace in Athens in Acts 17.). Teaching, however, was usually for those who responded positively to the Gospel and for believers/Christians as they continually unpacked all the implications of the Gospel. (Think Paul having daily discussions with the disciples in Ephesus in Acts 18.)

What does all this have to do with us here and now? Well, what we generally call "preaching" (a pastor/preacher giving a sermon during a worship service to a crowd mostly made up of people

who already believe and would identify as Christians) is technically teaching. On one level there's nothing wrong with that—just a semantical issue, no biggie. But, on another level, lecture-based teaching is generally understood as the least effective form of teaching. Why do we have our most capable teachers utilizing the least effective form of teaching? In a word, tradition. Additionally, this also raises the questions of when/where do people actually “preach” the gospel and to whom? All of us ought to be able to articulate the Gospel, to declare that Jesus is Lord, and to do so whenever and wherever we have the opportunity.

Or to say all of this another way, preaching is more evangelistic in nature, and teaching is more edifying in nature. All this raises the question: what are we trying to accomplish in our weekly worship gatherings? All this also drives home the point that the work of the church is meant to be done by...well, the church...the people of Jesus...not left to a few special folks or “leaders” or “clergy”. We've all got a part/role to play. Each and every one of us is a living, breathing, walking, talking billboard for the Kingdom of God.

- *When you think of a “preacher” what/who comes to mind? Do you view yourself as a preacher? Why or why not?*
- *When you think of a “teacher” what/who comes to mind? Do you view yourself as a teacher? Why or why not?*
- *How does your life (individually) and our life together/collectively proclaim that Jesus is King and that His Kingdom is present, available, accessible?*

### Chapter 28 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Why Do We Worship On Sunday?

So what is this Church/Christian thing all about anyway? Or, what is God's end game, His telos? The answer is New Creation! And this is very important for us to grasp. If we don't currently understand where all this is headed, it will be easy for us to get sidetracked along the way (which, as history demonstrates, happens quite often).

New Creation started when Jesus stepped out of the tomb Easter morning. His resurrection was the inauguration of New Creation. It is the prototype of a world that is being redeemed, restored, renewed. Our hope, the promise we hang our hat on, is that we, too, will be resurrected. Until then, we are to co-labor with God in the restoring and renewing of this world. A key part of this New Creation is New Humanity...that Jesus reconciled us to God and to each other (see Ephesians 2:14-18). The way we learn how to live in this New Creation and the way we participate in the work of New Creation is by apprenticing ourselves to Jesus (i.e. Be with Jesus; Become like Jesus; Do what Jesus did)...who teaches us how to Love God and Love neighbor.

I hope you've been taking the time to read the Bible passages at the end of each little chapter of this book. One of the passages for this chapter is in the second to last chapter in the Bible, Revelation 21:3-5...

*“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with humans, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’  
He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’”*

Now, let’s be honest...it is very easy to look around at the world around us and think, “Hmm, this doesn’t look like ‘new creation’...just look at all the suffering, oppression, injustice.” That’s a fair observation. Here’s a few points to consider regarding that...

First is the reality of “now...and not yet”. New Creation has started, it is in process, and it is not yet fully consummated.

Second, I think it’s easy for us to take things for granted. Yes, there is a lot of room for improvement. Yes, there’s plenty of “old creation” all around. But our world is more infused with the Gospel and the Kingdom than we tend to acknowledge. Friends, I firmly believe things in our world would be much, much worse than they currently are had Jesus not risen from the grave two thousand years ago and if His people hadn’t been working with Him on this New Creation project since then.

That leads to the third point, which is our invitation, our calling, to work with Jesus, together, towards the end goal. Part of what that looks like is, as Skye says, *“The community of the church is supposed to be a sign to the world of the new reality that has begun—one in which ethnic and social divisions are mended, hatred is undone by love, and evil is overcome by good.”* In other words, the Church as New Humanity is the evidence of New Creation.

- *How does this idea of New Creation compare to how you typically think about what Christianity is about?*
- *How does having a Big (Cosmic) view of what God is ultimately up to affect our understanding of what we do week to week as a congregation and what it means to be a church?*
- *What evidence of New Creation do you see? What can you identify that still needs to be redeemed, restored, made new?*
- *Are there any reflections from last week’s Scripture readings that you’d like to share?*

## Soul Training Exercise

- Read & Reflect on...

- Exodus 34:29-35
- II Corinthians 3:12-18
- John 2:1-11
- Psalm 27:1-4
- Hebrews 10:23-25
- Matthew 18:15-18
- Luke 7:18-23
- Colossians 3:12-17
- Matthew 10:5-10
- Acts 1:6-8
- I Corinthians 15:20-26
- Revelation 21:3-5

- Write a Letter to Jesus

- In this week's reading we've explored such topics as Worship, Community, Encouragement, and the Witness of the Church. That's a lot of stuff to consider. One way to process, synthesize, and integrate all these ideas is by recording some of your own thoughts and feelings about them and sharing them with a Friend. In this case, that Friend happens to be Jesus.

The invitation/exercise this week is to write a letter to Jesus. Thank Him for some of the experiences you've had with Him over the years. Thank Him for specific people in your church family. Express your gratitude for the various forms of encouragement you've received from being part of a church family. Share with Him any struggles, confusions, doubts, or questions you have. Convey any thoughts and feelings you have about the church or New Creation and your role/participation in His restoring/renewing work. Really, nothing is off the table. It's your letter...write whatever you want...whatever is on your heart and mind...like you would with any friend or loved one.