

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

Week 7: Chapter 36-39

Chapter 36 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then The Foundation Of The Church Is Christ Himself, Not Our Mission

It is time, yet again, to remind ourselves of our working definition of Church: **The Presence of Jesus among His people called out as a spiritual family to pursue His purposes on this planet.**

There are three key elements to this statement: Jesus, His People, His purposes. We, obviously, are His people. We have an identity, and we have a task. And, as Skye points out in this chapter, our identity comes first...out of which, then, flows our task.

We have been saying throughout this series, and as a focus for this season of CUMC, that we're trying to shift the culture from thinking of Church as an institution/organization to thinking of Church as a family. Institutions have purpose/mission statements. Families? Well, let me ask you, does your family have a mission statement? I'm guessing not. So, then, what holds your family together? Shared identity...from which flows a shared story, shared values, shared commitments, shared goals, etc.

Actually, we could say that our mission is simply to live out our identity. The world needs to see people who belong to Jesus (joyfully submitting to Him as our King) and who love each other well (caring for each other's needs, forgiving one another, bearing with one another, etc.) When we simply live out our identity before the world, the rest pretty much takes care of itself.

Part of the draw for putting the mission first might be that it's easier to measure "success"...typically gauged by growth (in attendance, budget, etc.). It's more challenging to measure identity in Christ. Faithfulness and transformation are tough to measure. So we substitute (or settle for) lesser measurements of success and, in so doing, compromise and corrupt our identity and betray our Founder and Foundation.

- *In your own words, why does the Church exist?*
- *Skye opens the chapter with these questions: What is the most important thing in a church? What binds a church community together? What is the irreducible, irreplaceable foundation upon which everything else depends? We all know the correct answer to those questions. So why do we so easily get off target? What draws us away from our Source and Foundation?*
- *Are there any reflections from last week's Scripture readings that you'd like to share?*

Chapter 37 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then The Church's Mission Requires The Church's Unity

I think this is one of the most important chapters in this book. While we all agree, conceptually, that Church unity would be nice, we have pretty much just accepted Church disunity as a given, the norm...sort of par for the course. As Skye writes, "*Our flippancy about church divisions is due, in part, to our cultural captivity to individualism.*"

Friends, the state of the Church, with all her various divisions, grieves the heart of God...and should grieve us as well. We should lament it, not accept it. We should work to fix it, not accommodate it. The credibility of our message, that Jesus is King, rides on our unity. Jesus understood this (see John 17); Paul understood this (see most of his writings). Do we understand this?

As Skye says, "*Unity is essential to the mission of God in the world.*" I guess the question we need to ask ourselves is: what's more important to us...unity or our individual interpretations, opinions, preferences?

Unity requires humility. Unity requires love. Living in love and humility looks like putting others ahead of ourselves. It looks like holding loosely to our interpretations, opinions, preferences. It's not about demanding our way. Sadly, in the individualistic and consumeristic "*cultural captivity*" (I like that term) that we've all experienced, we have been malformed and thus find it difficult to really embrace and embody the values and virtues of the Kingdom of God.

But, alas, there is hope...but it does require apprenticing ourselves to Jesus...which is really the invitation and offer of what it means to be/become a "Christian". So another important question to ask ourselves is: Do I really want to follow Jesus...to allow Him to speak into and order every aspect of my life and being?

Incidentally, and to tie this into our theme for the year, one of the main fruits of being "*rooted and grounded in love*" is unity. Or, to say it another way, our unity (or lack thereof) is an accurate gauge of our maturity in Christ. Additionally, when we talk about church unity, it is important to keep in mind that we're not simply talking about unity within our own congregation/church family but also unity between congregations.

- *How are you contributing to church unity? How are you contributing to church disunity?*
- *Unity is supremely important. That being the case, how does your life and the life of CUMC reflect that priority?*
- *How might we foster more unity...both within CUMC and with neighboring congregations?*
- *In your own words, why is unity so important?*

Chapter 38 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then The Church Should Preview God's Kingdom, Not Preserve Earthly Ones

When people look at, or think of, the Church, do they think “*Oh, there's a little picture of heaven.*”? If not, why not? Because that is what they should think or what we hope they would think. Of course, that assumes we understand and reflect our identity and purpose.

We are the people who testify, through our words, our actions, our relationships, every aspect of our lives, that the Kingdom is present and Jesus is the King. This is WHAT the Church is and WHY the Church exists.

So, then, when the church reflects a vision and values that are counter to the Kingdom, or not in harmony with the Kingdom, we have a problem. (Warning: I'm about to get on my soap box.)

Friends, democracy is not a Kingdom value; capitalism is not a Kingdom value; American exceptionalism is not a Kingdom value. I mention these three because they are not as easily identified as potential problems compared to racism, classism, sexism...which are blatantly wrong.

As Skye says, we need to “*...slow down to examine our cultural values and habits and ask whether they are reinforcing the divisions of our society or healing them...The problem is not that we hear God's call for the church and disobey it, but rather that we are so immersed in the ways of our culture that we do not hear His call at all.*”

The main reason we're reading this book is to take some time, together, to examine what we've uncritically inherited, from both our culture and our church ancestors, in order to see if we're being as faithful and consistent to our calling as we can/should be.

Skye reminds us, “*The church is to be a new community, a healed society where the categories of rich/poor, male/female, slave/free, Jew/Gentile, black/white, young/old, native/immigrant, liberal/conservative, and every other social division or hostility are mended.*”

My hope is that we rally around this vision of the Church and are willing to make whatever adjustments are necessary to reflect this vision as clearly as possible. May the Spirit lead toward that end.

- *In what ways do you see the church reflecting the world/culture instead of the Kingdom? What divisions do you see the church maintaining instead of dismantling?*
- *How does the picture/vision of the church laid out in this chapter compare to your experience of church?*
- *How do you know/discern whether you're culturally-formed or Kingdomly-formed? How do we critically examine the influences that shape and form us?*

- *Can you offer an example of a cultural/worldly value that the Lord has helped you weed out of your life?*

Chapter 39 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then The Church Should Be Challenging Rather Than Comfortable

Are you part of the Church because you want to be comfortable or because you want to examine your assumptions, challenge your beliefs, and cultivate new behaviors, ideas, and attitudes?

Following Jesus, becoming more like Jesus, takes intentional effort and is naturally/inherently challenging. (And following Jesus/becoming more like Jesus is the goal and point of it all.) Being in a community striving for the same thing and with a commitment to care for one another can certainly produce comfort. But comfort during challenging times, or comfort as a byproduct of loving relationships, is different from a desire to be comfortable. The desire to be comfortable, or for things to be easy, convenient, and smooth, will actually work against our apprenticeship to Jesus and ultimately against our loyalty to Jesus and His will for our lives.

Allow me to say it another way. Love is challenging. Love is often painful. Love often requires us to be uncomfortable. Being forged into the image and likeness of Jesus is about the most challenging thing we can undertake...and exactly what we were created for.

There's an old saying in the fitness/exercise industry, "*No pain, no gain.*" While that can certainly be taken to an unhealthy extreme, as a general rule it is accurate. There is pain in the growth and development process. As Skye put it, "*learning and transformation require discomfort.*" At its heart, the question this chapter is really asking is, "*What do we actually, truly want?*"

Skye says, "*If our goal is simply assembling a crowd or increasing membership of our institution, then comfort should be our highest value. But if our mission is to [be and] make disciples of Jesus who obey all that He commanded, then we need to rethink our dedication to comfort.*"

A little food for thought to end this week...do you know where the Church is growing the fastest? Currently Iran. Recently China. The Church seems to grow fastest in places that tend to be hostile to the Gospel and/or places where conditions are difficult. Why do you think that is?

- *How have you been formed to desire ease, comfort, and convenience? How do you feel about the idea that a faithful, consistent life of following Jesus will require us to let go of those things?*
- *How, or in what ways, do you see CUMC trying to make things too easy and comfortable for people? Also, what's so hard about following Jesus?*

- *Our culture teaches us to pursue comfort and that the “good life” is a comfortable life. Jesus, on the other hand, tells us to “seek first the Kingdom”. How have you experienced these competing values in your life?*

Soul Training Exercise

- Read & Reflect on...
 - I Corinthians 3:5-19
 - Ephesians 2:13-22
 - John 17:14-23
 - I Corinthians 11:17-34
 - Galatians 3:27-28
 - Matthew 13:10-17
 - Luke 18:31-34
- Giving & Receiving Forgiveness
 - A huge part of unity is having the heart and humility to extend forgiveness and seek forgiveness when needed...which Jesus and the writers of the New Testament seemed to think would be often. (Clearly they knew something about human relationships.)
 - Receiving forgiveness: Who might you need to seek forgiveness from? Who can you identify who might have a reason to be upset with you? (Are you avoiding anyone because you don't know how an interaction might go? That might be a good indication that forgiveness is needed.) Key phrases necessary as we seek out forgiveness: “I'm sorry.”; “I was wrong.”; “Can you please forgive me?” Avoid the word “if”...ex: “I'm sorry IF I hurt you.” That is not sincere nor contrite. Express understanding for how you hurt them.
 - Giving forgiveness: Who might you need to forgive? This may require some real honesty on our part. We tend to deny or minimize how hurt we actually are. We can tritely say, “It's fine...no big deal.”, while deep down we're really upset. If we have a negative attitude toward someone it might be worth prayerfully discerning why that is. We might need to forgive them for something. The main thing we want to avoid is allowing bitterness or resentment to take root in our heart
 - Being a spiritual family is not some idyllic fantasy. It is rooted in reality and, the truth of the matter is, relationships are hard. Maintaining the unity of our spiritual family will require giving and receiving forgiveness. This is the hard work of being the church and a necessary piece of the mission of Christ. Or, to say it another way, this is what we signed up for.