

"Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to the Father in Heaven".

The christian Church came into existence on Pentecost. The word 'church' as used in the New Testament is a translation of the Greek word 'ekklesia' which means a fellowship of people who are called out. In this sense, those who answered Jesus call to discipleship during his lifetime were the church.

And in that group we see a wide range of discipleship, just as we can observe a wide range today. There was Judas, who got along quite well for a time, but ultimately betrayed the Lord. There was John who devoutly loved Jesus. There was thomas who believed much but had certain questions. There was Peter who for three years followed Jesus, and then denied him three times.

Well, the church was important to these early followers of Jesus. Today tho we want to try to note why the Church is important to us. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to the Father in heave" This verse contains by implication all that the church should mean.

1. For one thing the Church is redemptive. Jesus said "let your light so shine", but before

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you can have anything that is shing, you must have something which is lighteed. Jesus is saying that a redeeeming faith must be lighted and kept alive within your soul.

He said that if you take a lighted candle and put it in a room under a bushel, it will go out. The oxygen will soon be exhausted and it will flicker out. He said if you take the same candle and place it in a room it will continue to burn because the atmosphere contains the necessary elements. I think Jesus was stating a truth concerning the Church. The best place to come into contact with the atmosphere of God is within the Body of Christ. Here a person finds ~~the~~ contact and interaction with the Spirit of the living God.

Whatever we express tends to become real and vital within the life we have. The church is not a fellowship of saints, it is a fellowship of sinners. Paul said 'all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Every person - inside or outside the church - is a sinner in God's eyes. Many inside have been saved by God's grace, but all are either repentant or unrepentant sinners, striving for the 'mark of the high calling in Christ Jesus'.

I believe that it is ⁱⁿ the Church that one can

best express the love that he has bot God; and what ever one expresses tends to live. Expression of fia³th brings the fact and reality of faith and redemption,

2. Secondly the church is a nurturing community. A lighted fire of a redeptive faith needs to be replenished constantly or the danger of it ebbing is always present. A major function of the Church is the care and nurture of those who are part of the Body of Christ.

Jesus told the story about 2 men who went into the church to pray. One said he was not like other men and gave good reasons ofr his goodness. He convinced himself and felt justified and left with a clear conscious. The other man, stood in a corner, and acknowledged his sinfulness. And Jeus said that he went away justified in the eyes of God. Why was Jesus disturbed about the first man? Because he was completely satisfied with his faith. He had arrived religiously speaking. He had set and met his standards and not even God chould challenge him to evaluate the weak spiritual condition reflected in his attitude.

Now that first man is certainly akin to many I run into today. They want a church that will sooth their consciences rather than challenge them. The

fact seems to be that they want a club rather than a church. They want the church to relax its stand on alcohol, on race, on peace, on anything. But as we have said the church is a redemptive community and among those it seeks to redeem are its own members. Redemption means to change.

But redemption and renewal comes to the Body of Christ, and to those within the church, in an atmosphere of constant and continuing Christian nurture. That will help make the Sunday-gathered body of humans into the daily scattered Body of Christ.

3. A third mark of the church is that it is costly.

Some people believe that if they join a church and live a good ethical example for their children that they will have a Christian family. Experience does not support that. A mother whose three children were actively involved in the work of the church was approached by another mother who congratulated her for having such an outstanding Christian family. She stated in passing that she would give everything in the world if she had a similar family. The first mother replied, "I did give everything" It costs everything to have a Christian family.

There was a man who despised going to church because he felt that the minister talked too much about the cost of commitment, which in his mind always was equated with finances. He would say such things as "Our Church is costing too much, the y're always asking for money, I'm sick of the repeated requests". A lay persons, overhearing him said: "I want to tell you the story of my own life. Some years ago a little boy was born in our home, and from the time he was born he cost me money. I had to buy food and clothes and medicine and toys. When he started to school it cost me more, When he was in college, he cost me even more. But in his senior year he died, and he hasn't cost me a cent since.

Anything worthwhile is costly. The fact that 1000s of U Meth give only cents a year or nothing is a symbol of widespread lack of commitment. And the fact that 1000s give as little as a dollar a week indicates a widespread lack of vision. Actually of the church does not mean enough to cost the tithe which God has required, it does not mean enough.

Of course, we are talking about more than just financial costliness. The church's mission must

take root in the hearts and lives of those who sit in the pews. They must be willing to be scattered across society and be the redemptive body which will bring wholeness and Christ to others. Anyone who is not willing to share the gospel of Christ with others stands as a living testimony that ~~Christ~~ the church is dead within his life. The church will not cost us something - it will cost us everything - or nothing.

4. A fourth thing, and perhaps akin to the matter we have just discussed, is that the church is a sharing community. Christians we originally called the 'followers of the way'. Sometimes I think it would be better to call ourselves 'people of the way'. In Nt days the followers of the way went everywhere, living and sharing the way of life that captivated people and challenged them until they too desired to be changed by God's grace to the 'way'. Jesus said "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works. We need to be willing to do that today.

5. Finally the church is important because it is a regenerating force. Alan Walker tells how the city of Broken Hill, Austr was revitalized. Great silver lodes were discovered there, but living conditions there were unbearable because sand was

everywhere blown in off the desert. A number of men loved the city because it was their home, and they chose a deliberate course of action.. In a huge circle around the city they plant^{ed} trees, shrubs and grasses. They tended them daily and continued to tend the plants as they took root. Soon grass and trees and shrubs reached up thru the sand, and in time contained it. Soon the city became a thriving area because the grass captured the sand and sand blown in from great distances was stopped by the trees and shrubs. a plague was erected which refers to the circle of foliage as the 'regeneration belt' which saved the city.

The gospel tells us that when Jesus was born he was given the name Jesus because, as the angel announced to Mary, 'he shall save his people from their sins. Nearly 2000 years have passed since the incarnation of God in Jesus. His presence is still real today to any one who is his follower, and thus is a part of the living Body which is the Church.

It should give us pause when we consider what of church it would be like if everyone who claimed to be a part of it was just like me. In the old adage "What would my church be like if every member were just like me?" Would it be vibrant and healthy, or

vexed and impotent? The church has to be the regenerating belt that ~~will~~ will challenge the forces of evil and bring life and redemption to society.

Is the church that important to you/

If it isn't - it can be. HOW?

By your full commitment to Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone of the church. When this takes place, you will then truly 'let your light shine before men, they will see your good works and your faith, and they will give glory to the Father in heaven'.