

Alpha 11: What About the Church?

by Senior Pastor: Bill Couch

Copyright © 2010, Bill Couch. All rights reserved worldwide.
This material may be printed or copied for personal use only.

Today we come to the conclusion of our series of messages dealing with core questions people ask about the Christian faith. We are discussing these at our Alpha class on Wednesday evenings. If you missed the Alpha class, I hope you will consider taking it in the fall. It is a good way to focus on key teachings of Christian faith and make some new friends. The final question for consideration this morning is: what about the Church?

1 Peter 2:9-12

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

¹¹Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. ¹²Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

What about the church? Many people today consider church unnecessary and irrelevant. The majority of young persons between the ages of 16 and 29 do not attend any organized church. Some people view church as another social club—a place to meet nice people and make new business contacts. What about the church?

The Apostle Peter use some amazing terms to describe the church: “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation and a people belonging to God.” In the verses preceding our scripture reading this morning, Peter said those in the church are like living stones being built into a spiritual house. (1 Peter 2:5) When a building is constructed, the stones are laid from the bottom up. Each stone is dependent upon the stones beneath and around it to stay in place. Remove one of the stones and the others will fall. They are interdependent.

Peter uses this picture to describe the church. The church is the Temple or dwelling place of God composed of living stones. We are the living stones. There is only one place in the Bible where it says that our bodies are the Temple of God—implying that God dwells

in us individually. When we invite Christ into our hearts he comes to live within us individually. But the majority of time when the New Testament refers to God indwelling his Temple—it is referring to the church. Unfortunately, we often miss that dimension of God's presence. God manifests his presence in the church collectively in ways he cannot manifest his presence in an individual.

As Americans, we are very independent. We interpret everything in terms of the individual. Many people only come to church on Sunday morning, and that is the extent of their involvement in church. They may be very devoted Christians who have a quiet time alone with God every day. The Bible describes the church as a house or temple built with living stones. We are interdependent upon each other. To be living stones means we share life together. We consult each other about important decisions in our lives. We pray for each other. We help each other in practical ways. It is so gratifying to me when I see the groups in this church come together to help a member of their group in crisis. Perhaps they are in the hospital, or have lost a loved one or they are going through a financial struggle. The group steps up to share life with them. And Jesus is in the middle of it.

It is so sad to me when I see people who have only come to worship on Sunday morning go through a crisis, and they go through it alone. They often criticize the church for not being there for them. But they have not shared their lives with others, how can they expect others to be there for them? We are a house built of living stones. This is why it is important to connect in a group or ministry team with others. In those groups each part is dependent upon the others. When we are sharing life together and one person drops out, the whole group is affected—just like a stone falling out of a wall.

The Christian life described in the Bible is meant to be lived in community. An individual quiet time is important to our spiritual growth and connection with God. But if we just have our individual time with God privately, we are missing out on deeper experiences

of God. We are very limited in what we can do for God individually. When we come together, God uses the variety of gifts and personalities he has given us collectively to do far more for the kingdom than we could do individually.

Last fall when we began to dream Impossible Dreams of making a difference for the Kingdom of God, Margaret (my wife) began to dream of a center for women in transition. This would include women experiencing a divorce or loss of a family member or an empty nest. She named the center “Wings” which stands for women in need of God’s strength. Margaret is a visionary and has the gift of leadership. But she would be extremely limited in what she could do if she tried to do this by herself. She began to share her dream with others. God brought around her a group of women with gifts of financial expertise, facilities knowledge, prayer support and leading worship. They are building a house with living stones together. Each of them plays a strategic part in the building of this dream. They are interdependent.

In his book, The Four Loves, C.S. Lewis says that it takes a group to know an individual. Each person in the group relates a little differently to each of the others. One person draws things out of an individual that others cannot. One person sees potential in a person that others don’t see. One person challenges another in ways in that no else can. When we get to know a person in the context of a group, we get to know him/her far better than we would on an individual basis. We see dimensions of this person that others draw out, that we would never experience one on one with that person.

We need a group to help us become fully who we are created to be. The more you isolate yourself from the others, the less you will be the person God created you to be. In the context of a group, all the different persons in the group will help you get to know yourself in ways you would never experience alone. The more you isolate yourself from others the less you will experience of God! Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered

together there I am in the midst of them.” We experience more of God in groups than we do alone. When we isolate ourselves from groups, we also cheat others out of what they learn of themselves and God through us.

What I’m saying is not the belief of the majority of people. Eighty percent of Americans believe you can have a flourishing Christian life without being involved in church at all. The Bible tells us that God created us for community. When he looked at Adam in the Garden of Eden, God said: “It is not good for the man to be alone.” God created us to be interdependent upon one another. We are living stones building up the house of God—the place where God’s presence is experienced on the earth.

How do we as a church—a Christian community – relate to the world? Some Christian groups are exclusive from the world. They separate themselves from the world and have nothing to do with it. Some Christian groups are inclusive groups—they blend in with society and adopt all its values and practices.

The Bible calls us to be in the world, but not of the world. That means there is always a tension between the church and the world. Peter says that we are aliens in this world. The term he uses means we are “resident aliens”—not tourists or visitors. We live in the world but we are not of the world. There is tension.

The Christians in the first century lived a world that was dominated by Roman and Greek values and practices. The Christians lived by a different standard of values and conduct. Their values and lifestyle created tension with the world in which they lived. Listen to some of the values they lived by.

- The Christians believed in only one God and that Jesus was the only way to experience a relationship with God. The Greeks and Romans believed in many gods and each individual had their own personal deity.

- The Christians did not practice abortion or infanticide. If a baby was not wanted, the Greeks and Romans threw it on a trash heap and let it die of exposure—it was acceptable practice in their world.
- The Christians believed that sexuality was only to be experienced within marriage covenant. Greeks and Romans participated in orgies.
- The Christians believed that sexuality was to be expressed between a man and a woman. The Greeks and Romans participated freely in same sex relationships.
- The Christians empowered women. As you read the New Testament you see that women were placed in positions of leadership. Some were called apostles. The Romans and Greeks believed that women were second class citizens.
- The Christians practiced extreme generosity in giving to the poor. The Romans and Greeks believed in exploiting the weak and the poor.
- The Christians in their gatherings welcomed people of all classes and races. The Romans and Greeks believed that the classes/races should be kept separate.
- The Christians did not participate in games of violence. They did not go to the gladiator events that were part of the Roman culture.

The Christians in the first century did not fit—they were aliens. Their lifestyle and values created tension with the world. What about today? When you look at that whole list of values, you realize there is still tension. The Christians just don't fit. If you take some of the values like not practicing abortion or same sex relationships and believing in only one way to God—then they would fit well with conservative groups today. If you take some of the other values like empowering women, not participating in violent games and radical giving to the poor—then they would fit well with liberal groups. But Christians don't fit exclusively with either group—liberal or conservative. If we live by

the values of the Bible, we live by the whole list. We are still aliens and strangers living in tension with our world.

Peter tells us not to withdraw from the world or to attack it. He calls us to engage it and transform it. Listen to verse 12: “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God.”

Our “good deeds” are the things that we do to serve those in the world. Rather than withdraw or attack, we serve the world. We do not participate in the things of the world. We are called to be light in the world of darkness. By our example and our love, we are to demonstrate another way to live. The world will attack us. They will accuse of wrong, because we don’t fit the mold. We live by a higher moral standard. We are not like the world. But at the same time the world will stand up and take notice when we care for the poor, when we turn the other cheek, when we treat everyone as equals regardless of their race or economic status.

When we live as servants in the world, we offer another way. What about the church? It is the place where people experience the presence of God upon the earth. It is the place where we become more fully who God created us to be. It is the place where we experience more of God collectively than we can experience alone. The church is the instrument God has chosen to bring light and transformation to the world. The church is the hope of the world.