

True Church (1): What a Church is Not

I. Call to Worship

- A. Isaiah's temple vision is one of the most familiar texts in the OT (**Isa 6:1-4**)
1. Isaiah's vision of the Lord is high and exalted, his robe filling the temple
 - a. Angelic seraphs fly above Him, covering both their faces and their feet
(You didn't show a great king your face or your feet— you bowed low and back out)
 - b. The seraphs call, "*Holy, holy, holy*" and their voices shook the temple
 2. OK, it's easy for us to rush past the setup to get to this incredible vision
 - a. Isaiah begins with a date, "*In the year that King Uzziah died*" (740 BC)
 - b. Why? Isaiah is largely a collection of oracles not in chronological order
 3. Why preface this awesome vision with something as mundane as a date?
- B. The point here wasn't the date (740 BC) but rather fact that King Uzziah died
1. Uzziah was the greatest and most powerful king of Judah since Solomon
 - a. Uzziah raised and equipped a large and powerful army (**2 Chron 26:11ff**)
 - 1) He even built great war machines for his archers (**2 Chron 26:15a**)
 - 2) He defeated the Philistines and exacted tribute from the Ammonites
 - b. The fame of King Uzziah spread all the way to Egypt (**2 Chron 26:8b**)
 2. So the death of the great King Uzziah was devastating to all of Judah
 - a. That's why Isaiah's vision of God was "*in the year King Uzziah died*"
 - b. Before he could be a prophet, Isaiah had to see who was really King
What had been filling Isaiah's eyes until now was the throne of King Uzziah. What God shows him is HIS throne on which HE sits. Isaiah had been believing in God and the king. He needs to trust in God who is the King! (McGuiggan)
- C. God was on his throne despite the death of Uzziah; He is still on his throne
1. If Isaiah wrote today, he would begin "*In year of great recession, I saw...*"
 - a. Or maybe the vision would begin, "*In the year the Twin Towers fell...*"
 - b. Or maybe he would start, "*In the year that I got cancer, I saw the Lord...*"
 2. Like Isaiah, we need see who reigns... because there are many contenders
 - a. We can't worship wealth, success, power, beauty or celebrity. Many do.
 - b. We begin this morning by proclaiming that only God sits on the throne
 3. With seraphs, we cry, "*Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty, the earth...*"

II. Introduction

- A. One new trends in church growth (plants) is the called “*the portable church*”
1. Churches meet in a school, movie theater or community building
 - a. The “*church equipment*” is packaged to be portable (setup/take-down)
 - 1) The only property the congregation owns fits into a large trailer
 - 2) Worship is portable; the rest of church life is in small home groups
 - b. One novelty company takes this concept a bit far—the inflatable church.
(Used by wedding planners for those undecided on church or home wedding)
 2. Would it be hard to see an “*inflatable church*” as being a true church?
 - a. Would a church-in-can you assemble from trailer feel like a real church?
 - b. Church can meet anywhere— one church met in lobby of movie theater
(Pulpit was in front of “*Coming Attractions*,” Rambo looked over preacher’s shoulder)
- B. OK, but we can see church one way so that all other ways seem wrong. *Right?*
1. No? Let me (*hypothetically*) suggest some different ways of doing church.
 - a. What if did the Sunday sermon more like we do the Sunday adult class?
(What if I asked questions? Like that! What if we had discussion during lesson?)
 - b. What communion without a table? *What about around table with a meal?*
 - c. What if had some Gregorian chants? (*were good enough for 1000 years*)
 - d. What about women **servicing** communion (*they serve every other meal!*)
 2. **Point:** We tend to equate how **we** do church with how it **must** be done!
 - a. Some of you are thinking, “*Here we go! Here comes a new goofy thing!*”
 - b. Yep, Gregorian chants! Actually, I want us to focus on some old things
 - 1) If forms and formats don’t make a church a church, then what does?
 - 2) What exactly is it that makes a church a real church or a true church?
 3. I used to have sermon, “*7 Signs of True Church.*” (*Or maybe 10, 40, 144,000*)
 - a. All of those were external characteristics (*organization, worship, theology*)
 - b. But in the NT, the characteristics of Christ’s followers are RELATIONAL
 - 1) Jesus said, “*All men will know that you are my disciples...*” (**Jn 13:35**)
 - 2) How are we to know what congregations of His followers look like?
 4. For several weeks, we will look at what the NT says true churches look like
 5. Before we start that study, let’s suggest a few things that churches are not

III. First, The Church is NOT a BUILDING.

- A. I am an international expert on this topic—I taught this in Ukraine years ago
1. The most common Russian word for “church” also means “cathedral.”
 - a. Some it was important to stress “The church is not a building.”
 - b. Translator answered without asking me, “I said church is not building”
 2. We know that, even if we say “*meet at the church*” or “*down at the church*”
 3. I’m not really concerned about semantics; we can make translation
- B. **Point:** Do we realize how connected our view of CHURCH is to the building
1. Early church met in homes/synagogue; we can make due if building burns
 - a. But we REALLY can’t imagine church w/o bldg (no “*portable church*”)
 - b. Much of **budget** goes to bldg; much **church work** is about bldg
 - c. Special rules limit how the building is used (*plenty room for b-ball, but...*)
(*Christian college band came, we rented space; we couldn’t rock in God’s house*)
 2. The Greek word “*oikos*” is the usual NT word for “*house*” or “*building*”
 - a. Jesus uses it of kings palaces (**Matt 11:8**) and to the Temple (**Matt 12:4**)
 - b. It usually isn’t a building but a family— “*the house of David*” (**Luke 2:4**)
 - c. Hebrews uses this same word to refer to real “*church house*” (**Heb 3:5-6**)
 - 1) Moses was faithful in God’s house, Jesus is son over God’s house
 - 2) We are the house; this building isn’t God’s special house— we are
 3. Church isn’t a place or what we do in this place— **church is who we are**
 4. Church about what happens when we live “*out of the shaker*” (**Matt 5:13**)

IV. Second, Church Isn’t INSTITUTION or ORGANIZATION.

- A. What do you think of if you hear “*institution?*” The institution of marriage?
1. **Old Joke:** *Who wants to live in institution?* The language is a bit archaic
 - a. For me, “*institutional*” bring to mind something very “*impersonal*”
(*What is institutional furniture? Institutional color? Institutional mattress?*)
 - b. What about word “*organization?*” Took a class “*Church Organization*”
 - 1) **Focus:** Writing a “Church Manual” that anticipate issues with policy
 - 2) Idea was that anything that came up was covered by policy/procedure
 - c. That’s what comes to mind with an institution or organization. **Rules**

- B. We can make church an institution focused on rules/policy and miss people
 - 1. Jesus criticized the Pharisee for precisely this—see rules/miss people
 - a. Their traditions became burdens that wore people down ([Matt 23:4](#))
 - b. The rules discouraged people from seeking after God ([Mt 23:13-14](#))
 - c. They made converts look just like them, not like God ([Matt 23:15](#))
 - 2. Pharisees were so focused on rules they had no sympathy for people
 - a. We've all experience institutional bureaucracy—rules are rules
 - b. Angelynn: Had to have SS card for driver license. For SS card, need DL!
 - c. Rules are rules; no exception because rules are more important than you
- C. Paul points to the failure of this rules are rules approach ([Col 2:20-23](#))
 - 1. Like the Pharisees, false teachers at Colossae had their system
 - a. It seems their system involved ascetic denials of food and comfort
 - b. Put a rock in shoe, wear a hair shirt—misery makes you spiritual
 - c. Paul said that rules and regulations simply can't make you spiritual
 - 2. We can turn the church into an institution with its rules and regulations
 - a. Can't eat in bldg, women can't wear pants, teens can't go to dances
 - b. Those and many other rules were fought over when I was growing up
 - c. We all thought we were holy because those things—Paul says not
 - 3. So then it doesn't matter what we do? Next section is on rules ([Col 3:5](#))
 - a. This isn't man-made, institutional rules— begin with God ([Col 3:1-4](#))
 - b. Church doesn't enforce rules from without, but implant those from above

V. Conclusion

- A. The church in the Bible isn't about a building or about institutional rules
 - 1. It's OK to have a building and rules; OK to have rules about the building
 - a. Someone this week asked if it was OK to have a garden on back 40
 - b. Roger and I looked at each other, "What's the policy on that?"
 - 2. Problem isn't building or rules; it's equating those to serving God
- B. This series of lessons will look at some of the characteristics of NT church
 - 1. We're going to find that these are all relational—to God, each other, world
 - 2. It is our response to what God did for us—He paid a debt he did not owe