

1 Corinthians 15:1–11 Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, <sup>2</sup> and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

<sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. <sup>6</sup> Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.

## 1 Corinthians 15.1-6 | First Importance

This year marks the sixth year of Redemption Church Denver and if all goes according to plan it is the year that we will join the Presbyterian Church in America. That means the beginning of this year is a good time to consider the church. Now it is not so often that we want to step back and consider the church, there is a sense in which the church is meant to be interacted with in a somewhat invisible fashion. If the church is working well, we'll be doing a lot of considering Jesus and loving one another. Reformed Theologian J.C. Hoekendijk said, “in history a keen ecclesiological interest has, almost without exception, been a sign of spiritual decadence.” He meant that negatively, not in the way you describe a Molten Chocolate Cake™ at Chili's.

But every once in a while, like you take off your glasses to check if there is a smudge on them, you must look at the thing you're looking through in order to see through it more completely. This first part of the year, we are going to take a moment to look at the church. Something you already know and are right now participating in, so that in our seeing the church more clearly we might be better suited to glorify Jesus in our participation in the church. Edmund P. Clowney in his book titled, *The Church*, says this:

“To be sure, if the church rather than Christ becomes the centre of our devotion, spiritual decays has begun. A doctrine of the church that does not centre on Christ is self-defeating and false. But Jesus said to the disciples who confessed him, ‘I will build my church.’ To ignore his purpose is to deny his lordship. The good news of Christ's coming includes the good news of what he came to do; to join us to himself and to one another as his body, the new people of God.”<sup>1</sup>

The Church in the United States is famously in decline. For example last July the Atlantic reported that “Forty million Americans have stopped attending church in the past 25 years. That's something like 12 percent of the population, and it represents the largest concentrated change in church attendance in American history.”<sup>2</sup> That's not great. But we would be mistaken if we read this decline as a sign of the irrelevance of the church. In fact it is just the opposite. The very

<sup>1</sup> Clowney, Edmund P. *The Church: Contours of Christian Theology*. 1995 Intervarsity Press, Donners Grove, IL p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/07/christian-church-community-participation-drop/674843/#>

threats that our culture poses to the existence of the church are in a sense a cry for help from the church. The very points at which the secular world cries out against the church are the very points at which the secular world needs the church's intervention. The sexual revolution has failed. The idolization of individual self-expression which promised the ability to make your true self known has left us more isolated than ever. The cultural cries of discontent are evidence of a church in decline but also ought to be heard as pleas for a church to advance. I'll return once more to Edmund Clowney:

Christian witness that is limited to private religious experience cannot challenge secularism. Christians in community must again show the world, not merely family values, but the bond of the love of Christ. Increasingly the ordered fellowship of the church becomes the sign of grace for the warring factions of a disordered world. Only as the church binds together those whom selfishness and hate have cut apart will its message be heard and its ministry of hope to the friendless be received.

It is very possible, and perhaps even likely in our culture, to view the church as a means to our own personal spiritual growth. The Church in the United States has often positioned itself this way. And I get it, if you're going to give up your Sunday mornings and shuttle the whole family to one more thing you're going to want to get something out of it. Perhaps some leadership tactic, or means of dealing with your anxiety, or tips for strengthening your marriage, or help coping with a loss. But a group of people gathering to pursue their own private religious experience, a church, does not make. That means we could have been participating in a church for years, and yet never have been a church. Jesus came to build his church. He didn't have something vague in mind, as in just another group of people, but the creation of a body who are his people, of whom he would say things like,

1 Peter 2:9 | But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Therefore if you care about the proclamation of the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light, and I know you do, then you must care about the church. We are made his people for that end.

But to begin with it is helpful to hold up one uniting principle. What is the thing that makes and binds the church towards which the church can aim? The answer is the gospel. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is of first importance.

## 1. The Gospel Saves

1 Corinthians 15:1–2 Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, <sup>2</sup> and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

Paul takes this ending chapter to offer by way of reminder the gospel. And in it he gives a pattern. Paul preached the gospel to this church and they received the gospel as truth and stood in the truth of the gospel. From the proclamation and reception of the gospel sinners become saved and those who were not the people of God become the people of God and are given eternal life in Jesus Christ. If you hear and believe the gospel you will be saved. There is nothing else like this. That's why Paul would write elsewhere that he is not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. Make no mistake, it is that simple. Believe the gospel of Jesus Christ and you will be saved from the wrath of God at the final judgement.

There is a man named Bryan Johnson that algorithm keeps showing me He made a ton of money on Venmo and he is using that money to try and live forever. He has taken on a vampire aesthetic which seems a bit on the nose. But the "blueprint," as he calls the system he has developed, is pretty awe inspiring in its rigidity and detail. Bryan was raised Mormon, had a crisis of faith, got divorced, made millions, and now seeks immortality by strict adherence to a system which he says is able to "take better care of himself than he can." To me it seems like he merely exchanged one rigid quest for immortality for another. The gospel to him would sound shockingly mundane, repent and believe upon Christ and you will be saved, you and your household.

So what is this gospel which saves?

## 2. Creedal Affirmation

1 Corinthians 15: 3-4 | For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

This section of text is generally considered to be a recitation of an early church creed. That is most people in the church would have been able to sing or recite this statement of faith. Paul in relaying this creed is relaying that which he has received from Christ and the other apostles, as a summary of the true faith. Paul here describes it as being of *first importance*. The gospel is the only thing that can handle the weight of being the center of the church. And here it is, plainly in four premises.

1. Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures. The church is those people for whom Christ died for our sins. And this was in accordance with the scriptures. From the very beginning of mankind we sinned, and Christ came to die for our sins. We are forgiven in his death. The church is foremost a group of sinners forgiven by the sacrificial love of God. Is there another community with such a sure foundation!

How can a group of forgiven sinners walk in pride regarding themselves, they are only able to walk together in exaltation of the one who forgave them.

2. He has buried. Christ really died. We must see the fact of this. Just as you will one day really die. He was buried, lest you think he was not really dead. The second person of the Trinity died.
3. He was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. Christ came back from the dead. There is a resurrection, and this is our hope in the face of death. In Christ we will share in his resurrection. He lives and rules today.
4. He appeared to Cephas then to the twelve. Christ made himself known in his resurrection to the people who knew him best for the purpose of their relaying the truth of Christ's resurrection to the world. So that someone like Paul could say he delivered what he received and this might mean the witness of the church to all peoples for the glory of Christ.

It is worth noting that the church believed things about Christ from the very beginning. We are not a people merely based on a shared experience but on a fact of history. We have things that we believe, things which can be written down and said. This is no secret knowledge. In fact Paul will emphasize the veracity of his claims by adding to this creed,

1 Corinthians 15:6 | Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.

No other world religion has a statement like that. Here is the simple point I want to make this morning. The Church is about the gospel. The gospel is the story of the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By his death we are saved. And we participate in that salvation by faith in the gospel given to us by his spirit. This makes us a people the church. This is of first importance. We are the people who believe Jesus came back from the dead. All of who we are flows from being the ones Christ died to save. From being the ones who welcome and look forward to the Lordship of Christ. Look around, these are the ones for whom Christ died. If we hold that as our center we are a church.