

## What We Believe: The Church and the Sacraments

Scripture: Acts 2:37-47

We're on week three of our four-week sermon series titled "I Believe". Over the course of this sermon series, we've been exploring some of the foundational doctrines of the church. We started with a message on God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, followed it up with a message on the Holy Bible, and will now turn our attention to the Church and the sacraments. I'm excited for this message because I believe that in the United States, we are experiencing a crisis of sorts with regard to the way we look at the Church. Remember that next week we will finish this sermon series with a message about sin and salvation, and then jump into our Spring Quarter theme "Spending Time with God".

Let's turn to the Word as we start our time together. We're in Acts 2:37-47, a passage that describes the birth of the Church on the day of Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit dwelt in the hearts of a who believed in Jesus and accepted Him as Lord.

**37 Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" 38 And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." 40 And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." 41 So those who received**

**his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.**

**42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.**

As we have the past two weeks, let's look at our Confessions of Faith. Article V describes what we believe about the church.

"We believe the Christian Church is the community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. We believe it is one, holy, apostolic and catholic. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by men divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ's own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the Church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers and the redemption of the world."

Please notice that in the order of these confessions, we see God the Father, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Holy Bible, and then the Church. The Church is critical to the Christianity given to us in scripture. In our reading we see the

birth of the Church. The passage makes it clear that these people came into community with one another. They worshiped together, ate together, sold their possessions to help one another in need. To put it plainly, they lived life together. From day one, this was a defining characteristic of what it meant to be a Christian. We recognize this in our confession by saying that the Church is first and foremost a community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. We follow this up with four characteristics.

The church is one: We who are believers in Christ and under his Lordship are all part of the same Church. Denominations come and go, but the tie that binds us all is true belief in Christ as defined by scripture, and the Lordship of Jesus in our lives. We are a community with the Church, but we are part of the same one Church with all believers everywhere.

The Church is Holy: We believe that the Church is unlike other institutions on earth. It was established by Jesus Christ and is led not by people but by the power of the Holy Spirit. Its purpose is to create and grow disciples of Christ to the very ends of the Earth. Its work is accomplished through the faithful efforts of its members, but its success and glory belong to God alone.

The Church is apostolic: That is, we can trace our roots back to the original apostles who were the founders of Christian Church. We're not a reboot, we are the inheritors of a 2000-year-old legacy that traces all the way back to the passage in Acts that we read.

Finally, the Church is catholic: When we say catholic, we don't mean Roman Catholic, we mean that the Church is universal. It is a church for all creation. There does not need to be another Church. We are part of the same church with the Nazarenes, Baptists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Roman

Catholics. Human history and indeed the Holy Spirit has led us to these different expressions of Christian community but make no mistake; we are all part of the Church. This carries with it all the Biblical responsibilities to love and support our fellow Christians churches both across the street and around the world.

We're going to briefly jump to a discussion on the sacraments. At Rosewood Church, we hold to our Wesleyan tradition and understanding of the sacraments. We consider there to be two sacraments given to us in scripture, Baptism and Holy Communion. I'm not going to read the entirety of our confessional statement on the sacraments but let me share with you a couple of the high-points. Baptism and Holy Communion are special activities within the Church because they share some specific characteristics. Both are given to the Church as instruction by Jesus. He instructs us to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and during the last meal he shared with his disciples, Jesus told them to "do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me." We believe they are both means of grace that God uses to grow us, strengthen us, and confirm our faith. We believe the power of God is present and reliable each and every time we come to baptize or come to the communion table. Baptism is our sacrament of initiation into the church and Holy Communion is the Church's sacrament of continued union with Jesus. The Baptismal waters signify our inner cleansing from sin and the mark of a disciple. Holy Communion joins the believer in spirit with Jesus and in union with each other as all partake of the same body and blood represented by bread and juice. Importantly, these activities are extensions of the ministry of the Church. Neither scripture nor Christian tradition suggests that they are anything other than for the building of the Body of Christ. Therefore we understand these sacramental activities to be

appropriately attended to by those set aside as clergy of the Church administering the sacraments for the congregation on behalf of the Church.

The confession goes on to call the church a “redemptive fellowship” and elaborates on this in the last sentence which says that the church “exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers and the redemption of the world”. Worship, the building of believers, and the redemption of the world. I said earlier that I believe the church in America is in a state of crisis. St. Cyprian said “No one can have God for his Father, who does not have the Church for his mother.” But in America... we’re sure trying to have Christ without the Church. According to Pew Research, right now about 1/3 of professing Christians in America do not attend worship at least once a month. The percentage of Americans who identify as Christian has shrunk from 75% to 63% in the past decade. 47% of Americans are not members of a church/religious community. Many Christians who stopped attending worship during COVID simply never went back to the church they were a part of. Now, this is a complex situation with a many contributing factors, but if you take all these data points together, we can say that we have a Church problem.

Christianity has always been a corporate/community religion. Yes, it is an individual’s choice to make Jesus Lord of their life, but he gave us the Church to live out the life he’s called us to. The Church is formed to build a Kingdom on Earth. It is not enough for a King’s subjects to obey him, he also expects those subject to live in unity with each other! Or, if you will forgive me a football analogy in this play-off season, I can call myself a football player, I can own a ball, helmet and pads, I can know all the plays, but if I never commit to being part of a team, what am I really doing? Christianity is a team sport and the Church is the team.

If the purpose of the church is to maintain worship, edify believers and lead the world to redemption, what happens if a large percentage of Christians decide to go it alone? These are all activities that take place in the context of community! What happens when they decide to divorce their faith from the Church of Jesus Christ? We see the result all the time: Christians who cannot stand other Christians. Christians who cannot articulate what they believe and why. Churches that cannot explain why Church is important to a believer's life. I believe one of the most timely and critical ministries of our day is the reconnection of Christians with the Church. The Church needs Christians and Christians need the Church. One is defined in its allegiance and love for the other. For all of us who have Christian friends who have for whatever reason stopped going to church and stopped participating in the life of Christian community, let's be encouragers! Church matters! Church is where strangers become brother and sister. Church is where we can learn the ways of Jesus not because we always love each other perfectly but precisely because we don't! We learn to give and receive grace and forgiveness. We entwine our lives with people that we wouldn't know otherwise apart from our shared fealty to Jesus Christ. And together we become transformed, so that we can bring the transformational love of Jesus into the world.