

Series: **Simplifying Church** – week 1

CDOBC – beginning on 2/5/17

Today's Title: "**Belief in Christ**"

*February 5, 2017 ~ John 3:1-15*

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OBJECTIVE: To help people realize the first step in following Christ is to believe in Him as your Savior.

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### *Opening Prayer*

Today is Super Bowl #51 - New England Patriots vs. the Atlanta Falcons - Tom Brady vs. Matt Ryan.

The offensive playbook from the New England Patriots 2004 Super Bowl team is 135 pages long. It's a *complicated* list of plays with 6-8 options per play, and even more variations per play depending on the defense.

Most of the time, wide receivers who were top receivers with other teams, if they get traded to the Patriots they often struggle and fail to produce on the field, not due to a lack of talent, but due to a lack of understanding the playbook.

The Patriots are successful due to their offensive schemes and strategy, but it's a very difficult and *complicated* system to learn - and many players with tremendous physical talent never put in the hours or they don't have the mental ability to learn the immense, *complicated* playbook.

Churches can be like the New England Patriots playbook.

Churches can become places of tremendous *complexity* - not by design, but by default.

It's kind of like your closet, garage - or your storage unit. The house I grew up in had not only an attic, but also a basement and a crawlspace. There were so many places to accumulate things! Moving out of that house was something I dreaded for many years - just imagining how much work it would be to sort through everything. We weren't hoarders...but over 25 or 30 years, things have a way of gathering.

Churches have a way of gathering and accumulating ministry and programs. When they are first introduced, they are good things - programs which will help share the gospel or help believers grow in their faith. But over time, these programs either lose their effectiveness due to the changes in church leadership or in the culture - or they lose their effectiveness because so many other programs and layers of ministry have been added in subsequent years.

When a church is in its first few years of existence, the ministry is focused - and it's easy to understand. When someone new comes into the church, the steps for becoming a Christian and growing in the faith are simple to grasp. But as the years go by and programs are added and layers of ministry accumulate, the steps for becoming a Christian and growing in the faith become *complicated* and entangled in the mass of ministry.

In previous decades, when the culture in the United States was still a “*Christian Culture*” - meaning there was a general understanding in the culture at large of Christian belief and practice - this ***complexity*** was a challenge, but not paralyzing.

Today - the “*Christian Culture*” many of us grew up with is a distant memory. The past 2 generations are not familiar with Christian belief and practice - they have been raised in a relativistic world, and when they walk into a church, the ***complexity*** of most churches make it virtually impossible for a non-churched unbeliever to have a sense of what to do - or even what questions to ask! It’s even a struggle for a Christian who left the church 10 or 15 years ago - and now they come back to the church and all it’s complexity!

It’s like traffic signs which are meant to give direction and help drivers make decisions and get to their destination - but over time as roads were added and options were added, the signage becomes a source of confusion and offers little help to drivers - unless you’re already very familiar with all the options! Its like we talked about last week - sometimes you don’t see the problem because you’ve been driving this road since it only had 2 signs - you know the roads - it’s not complicated to you - because it’s the reality you’re familiar with. “*It’s not confusing...just follow the arrow on the sign for 31 East.*”

This morning I'm beginning a series called: "Simplifying Church". *The goal of this series* is to lead our church through a 'ministry de-clutter' - positive side: 5 steps to follow Christ.

**We must simplify the church so we can be more intentional and more effective at reaching people for Christ and helping them grow in their faith.**

Gone are the days when there was a general understanding in the culture - and therefore in the church - where it was commonly understood what it meant to be a follower/disciple of Christ. So, we must make sure it's crystal clear:

- How to begin following Christ
- How to grow as a follower of Christ

If someone can't answer these 2 questions in the first few minutes of walking into our church...then we are too *complicated* - and we are not doing our job of making the gospel clear - and easy to understand on the front end.

This is not a 'dumbing down' of the gospel - but it's clearing away all the baggage that has gathered around the gospel. Like barnacles which attach themselves to the hull of a boat and need to be cleaned off so the boat will move through the water as it's designed - so we must "de-clutter" the church of the layers of ministry - and get down to the essential elements which will help someone put their faith in Christ - and then grow in their faith and gain maturity in their faith.

We have identified 5 steps in the process of following Christ. 5 steps which I will walk through over the coming weeks. Each week will define the step and help us understand the importance of this step in the life of a believer - and the life of the church.

These 5 steps will help our church be focused and clear on how someone follows Christ - they will simplify the ministry of our church.

Today is step #1 - Belief in Christ (Belief and Baptism)

This seems like an obvious “step 1” - maybe you’re thinking it’s so obvious we don’t need to mention it. But I think it’s vitally important to identify and clarify this most crucial step. In a post-Christian culture - we cannot assume belief is a commonly understood and agreed upon thing. In addition - it’s vital for us to specify the belief - “in Christ”.

Not in church - not in religion - but in Jesus Christ - the Son of God - who gave His sinless life as a sacrifice on the cross for our sins.

***Turn to John 3*** - as we look at the difference between religion - and belief in Christ.

Today’s culture is not much different from previous cultures - even the 1<sup>st</sup> century culture of Jesus’ day.

Religious activity has often been accepted as the path God has called us to travel - but it's not the path Jesus taught and told us to walk on.

***Read 3:1-15***

**Religion is not the same as belief.**

This man - Nicodemus - John gives us his resume right at the beginning. He was a Pharisee - a member of the Jewish ruling council - which tells us he was a member of the Sanhedrin. "The Sanhedrin was a court of seventy members, and it was the Supreme Court of the Jews." (The New Daily Study Bible, Volume One, The Gospel of John, by: William Barclay, p. 143)

Nicodemus had reached the top levels of his profession. He was a leader of Israel, and it seems he was the premier teacher of God's Law in all of Israel (vs. 10). He comes to Jesus at night - and many commentators throughout the years have said this was to avoid being seen by others - that he was somehow ashamed of going to talk with Jesus or worried of what response other Pharisees would have if they saw him. These might be true...but another consideration is that the Pharisees did much of their studying at night when they were less likely to be disturbed by the business of the day - or the simple fact that his day was busy and the only time he had available to visit with Jesus was in the evening

hours. The reason isn't so important for us today - but his view of Jesus is very important for us.

Nicodemus was religious - but did not believe in Jesus. In vs. 2, Nicodemus speaks highly of Jesus - but he doesn't identify Jesus as the Messiah - as the Son of God.

"Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with Him."

He admires Jesus - acknowledges He is sent from God because of the miracles Jesus had been performing (2:23).

There's a lot of religious people in our world today who look at Jesus in the same way. They say: *Jesus is a man - from God - a prophet - a great moral teacher who did some wonderful things.*

But they stop there. These things are true of Jesus...but incomplete. He was these things...and so much more!

Nicodemus was a man who knew the Scriptures - was committed to doing all the rules and regulations the Scriptures teach - and he devoted his life to moral living and obeying the Law of God.

But this is not enough - this is not belief.

In vs. 3, Jesus responds to Nicodemus' statement:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Jesus doesn't waste any time here! No polite banter - He just gets to the business at hand!

Nicodemus was steeped in religion, but religion cannot save you. Religion makes you busy and gives you a sense of doing good, but religious activity does not save you!

A few chapters later - in **John 6:29**, Jesus says:

“This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.”

Belief in Christ... You must be born again.

Nicodemus isn't sure what to make of this - and he asks a question about being born again. He certainly knew basic human anatomy and biology, but the spiritual teacher of Israel was confused and did not understand the spiritual truth Jesus was talking about.

**Belief is a spiritual work, not a physical work.** vs. 5-15

Nicodemus was an expert in the O.T. - he knew the O.T. prophesied about a time when God would send His followers a new spirit and new heart. Why was he so confused with what Jesus was saying? This is a prominent teaching throughout the O.T.!

**Ezekiel 36:25-27**

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.



26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

27 And I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes and be careful to obey My rules.

**Psalm 51:10**

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”

Jesus is astonished that Nicodemus doesn't understand this! As an expert in the Law and the premier teacher of Israel, this should have been some basic spiritual truths for Nicodemus to understand.

He was an expert in the O.T. Scriptures - but he failed to connect the dots - to put the puzzle pieces together.

Knowing about God is not the same as knowing God.

At this point, Nicodemus had eyes, but he could not see - he had ears, but he could not hear what Jesus was saying.

The water Jesus refers to is an allusion to the cleaning from sin - and the Spirit is the Holy Spirit which brings a new heart to those who believe. Don't let the mention of “water” and “spirit” confuse you - they are simply illustrative of the spiritual nature of salvation. It's a result of God's work in us, not our own work.

(vs. 8) Jesus then uses an illustration from nature as he speaks of the wind blowing where it wishes - and He connects the mystery of the wind with the wonder of

spiritual birth (8b). The Spirit of God moves in ways and in directions we cannot predict or even see!

The source of the wind is a mystery - it seems to come out of nowhere - and the same can be said of the Spirit of God.

A group of people can hear a message where the Gospel is explained - and they are all intellectually capable - they all understand what is being said - but only 2 in the group get it - 2 in the group believe - and the others walk away without any spiritual impact!

John mentioned this in the opening chapter:

**John 1:11-13**

“He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him.  
12 But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God,  
13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

*I know not how this saving faith  
To me He did impart,  
Nor how believing in His Word  
Wrought peace within my heart.  
I know not how the Spirit moves,  
Convincing men of sin,  
Revealing Jesus through the Word,  
Creating faith in Him.  
But “I know Whom I have believed,*

*And am persuaded that He is able  
To keep that which I've committed  
Unto Him against that day."*

**I Know Whom I Have Believed**, by: Daniel W. Whittle, 1883

We are born again - because of the work of the Holy Spirit - not because of our own work.

**Salvation is by faith / belief** vs. 14-15

The account of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness was another O.T. passage which highlights the importance of faith. (Numbers 21:4-9)

Due to their disobedience, God sent snakes into the Israelite camp - if someone was bit, they would die. The people repented of their sin, and God told Moses to "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole." (vs. 8-9)

If anyone was bit, they will live if they look at the serpent on the pole.

What about killing the snakes?

What about treating the snake bites?

Isn't there something we need to do?

Just look to the snake.

Have faith - that God will heal you.

Jesus says at the end of vs. 14:

"so must the Son of Man be lifted up,  
15 that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life."

The first step to following Christ: Believe in Christ.

**Romans 3:22**

“the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”

If you want to start following Christ, step 1 is **belief in Christ** - but there is another part - a part which Jesus ordained for those who believe in Him: **Baptism**.

**Matthew 28:19-20**

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...”

Baptism is not required for salvation - you don't get baptized in order to be saved / born again - you get baptized because you're born again.

I've put baptism in step 1 - because it's a public announcement of your faith - a public stand.

It's one of the ordinances Jesus gave us. After putting your belief in Christ, you make that belief known through baptism.

We practice water immersion baptism - because it most accurately pictures the cleansing from sin through the illustration of the water - and it pictures the death, burial and resurrection of Christ as we stand in the water, immerse in the water, and are raised up out of the water. It's also the primary meaning of the word in Greek.

**Apply it...**

Sinclair Ferguson: *The pulse-beat of God's heart has an evangelistic rhythm.*

Step 1 - belief in Christ - and baptism.

Do you believe in Jesus as your Savior?

I don't mean do you know about Jesus - do you like and admire Jesus - do you believe in Him and Him alone for the forgiveness of your sins?

It's not an issue of adding Jesus to your religious devotion and hoping all of it together is good enough to earn God's forgiveness.

**Ephesians 2:8-9**

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,

9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

It's Jesus alone - and nothing else.

Just like the serpent on the pole Moses held up - it was looking at the serpent and doing nothing else!

It's looking up at Jesus on the cross...and nothing else!

Do you believe in Christ?

If you don't, then won't you please **A**dmit to Him you're a sinner - and **B**elieve in Him as your Savior.

Have you been baptized after believing in Jesus -

**"Believers Baptism"**?

I know there's a bunch of you who were probably baptized when you were an infant - and this whole

baptism thing has been a source of great confusion for you. You were baptized - but was your infant baptism the same as the baptism I'm talking about today?

Infant baptism is a beautiful and wonderful experience for the family. I'm not sure how wonderful it is for the baby, since the baby has no say in it - but for the parents, grandparents, extended family and friends, it was a wonderful and deeply meaningful event as they dedicated you to the family of God.

But infant baptism is not the kind of baptism Jesus was talking about - because belief precedes the baptism Jesus was talking about.

So, if you haven't been baptized - after believing in Jesus - then I invite you to be baptized.

Our next baptism will be on March 26 - in both services.

If you're a believer in Christ, we're called to **C**ommit each day to Christ - and one of the first commitments is to obey Jesus' call to be baptized.

Step 1: Belief in Christ - followed by baptism.

Let's pray - and serve - so everyone who walks into this place will believe in Christ - and obey Jesus' command to be baptized.

Close in prayer