

WHO MATTERS MOST?
Pastor Dan Erickson
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Henry Ward Beecher was one of the most prominent pastors of the 19th century. He was ill one Sunday, so a substitute preacher stepped to the pulpit as the worship service began. Realizing Dr. Beecher would not be speaking that day, some people got up and started heading for the door. At that point, the substitute speaker said, "All those who came to worship Dr. Beecher this morning may leave. All those who came to worship the Lord may stay in their seats." Everyone who was in the process of leaving turned around, went back and sat down. Friends, that story reminds me that sometimes we forget God is the reason we come together each Sunday. That may seem obvious, but with all the other things that go on here, we can sometimes forget that He is the one that Chisholm Baptist Church is about. As we continue our series on the purpose of our church, on "Why Are We Here?" we focus today on our desire to be a "God-centered" church. Of all the different ways folks might describe this congregation, I guess that would be the one that I hope would stick – CBC is a God-centered church. Friends, let's pause and pray that through His Word, the Lord would enable us to see what that phrase means and how we can better make it a reality.

Now, I want to make sure everyone understands that at CBC, we believe people are very important. The Bible teaches (Genesis 1:27) that human beings, both men and women, are made in God's image. Because of this, there is intrinsic value in each and every individual. No, we are not divine beings as New Age and Eastern religions might teach. We are creations made by the Creator; yet, each of us has been created by God for a purpose. We are not products of a chance process of evolution, and we are not just "dust in the wind." Thus, every human being, no matter his or her abilities, no matter what his or her beliefs, no matter what his or her behaviors, is worthy of our respect and love. We don't have to approve of those beliefs or behaviors, but we still should show respect and love. Jesus says we have a responsibility to love our neighbors, even our enemies, as we love ourselves. As a church, as a group of Christians, we are to love both those who are "inside" this congregation and the folks who are "outside" with whom we come in contact. Again, it doesn't matter how much money someone

has, how religious he is, what her political views are, what color his skin, or if she is 98 years old. Every person is important. And we need to treat each person that way.

One of the things this means is that at CBC, we should be trying to meet people's needs in both our congregation and community. That includes helping folks with their basic material needs. Listen to what the Lord tells us in **James 2:15-16 – If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, stay warm, and be well fed," but you don't give them what the body needs, what good is it?** Now, the church is much more than an extension of County Social Services. Yet, when people need food or clothes, the church better be willing to help.

Our concern, however, is much bigger than just physical needs. Because people are important, we want to help lonely people find friends. We want to help folks who struggle with family problems to become better husbands, wives, parents and children. We want to help those who find life empty and meaningless find purpose and joy. And our concern goes beyond the needs people are aware they have. We understand that every human being has a God-shaped vacuum inside which can only be filled by a relationship with Jesus Christ. We know that all of us need to experience God's grace so that our sins can be forgiven. Most important, we want to encourage everyone to turn to Jesus Christ, to trust in Him, and receive His salvation. Doing so is the only way someone can be prepared for the biggest challenge of life, which is death. Because people are important, we want to help meet their needs. That is one of the reasons we are here.

At CBC, people matter a lot. They are very important. But, we are convinced that **God is even more important.** He matters most of all. Though serving each other is a very good thing to do, our #1 priority should be to glorify and honor the Lord. Now, the vast majority of the time there is no conflict between the two. As we seek to honor the Lord we will often be serving people, and when we are serving people, we

will usually be glorifying God. Yet, on occasion, there may be a conflict between the two. If and when that happens, as a God-centered church, our first commitment is to seek to honor the Lord. Why should this be our priority? Because the Bible says so. Let's take a look at what it says on this topic. **1 Corinthians 10:31** tells us, **So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.** That command applies to each of us as individual Christians, and it applies to our church as a whole. Whatever we do should be done for the glory of God. Then consider **2 Corinthians 4:15** – **Indeed, everything is for your benefit so that, as grace extends through more and more people, it may cause thanksgiving to increase to the glory of God.** In other words, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the wonderful benefits of the Gospel, the message of Jesus Christ. Yet, the ultimate purpose of even God's gift of salvation is that "it may cause thanksgiving to increase to the glory of God." Yes, we want to see others experience God's grace, because it is good for people to do so. They need that salvation. However, even more important, we want to see people experience God's grace *because God is glorified* when they do. And He matters most!

Here are some other passages to ponder. **Ephesians 2:19-21** – **So then, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole building, being put together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.** This is a description of the church, including CBC. Note that the ultimate purpose is to become "a holy temple in the Lord." The church, like a temple, exists to honor or glorify the Lord. **Ephesians 3:20-21** – **Now to him who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us – to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.** Did you catch that phrase? "**....to him, to God be glory in the church.**" That is what the church is for. That is why we are here – so that God will receive glory.

And it is not just the Apostle Paul who thinks this way. **1 Peter 2:9** says **But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of**

the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. CBC exists to proclaim God's praises. Or **1 Peter 4:11** – **If anyone speaks, let it be as one who speaks God's words. If anyone serves, let it be from the strength God provides, so that God may be glorified through Jesus Christ in everything. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.** This verse speaks to every member of the church. Whether you are serving with your hands as you work in the church kitchen, shovel snow or pass the offering plate. Or if you are serving God with your mouth as you sing in the choir, teach Sunday School, or preach a sermon. Whatever you are doing, the reason for doing it should be "so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ."

Friends, there are other verses we could look at, but I think these make the point clearly. The ultimate purpose, the primary purpose of the church is to honor or glorify the Triune God. That is the bottom line. Yes, we are concerned about the needs of people. They are important. Yet, even more important is what honors the Lord. At CBC, we want to be a God-centered church because He matters the most. Now, if you disagree with what I have just said, I would love to discuss that with you later. But I suspect that to most of you it sounds just fine. You totally agree. The problem is that "to glorify God" ends up being one of those Christian clichés that sounds good, but we are not really sure what it means in practical terms. Let's look at some of the ways a God-centered church will seek to honor the Lord in concrete, practical ways.

#1 – In a God-centered church, the Bible plays a central role. This starts with a formal acknowledgement of the Bible's authority. Here at CBC, we believe (this is right in our office, our Statement of Faith) that the Bible is God's Word. Every word in this book is here because God inspired the writer to put it there. We also believe the Bible is without error and teaches only what is true. And we believe the Bible is our authority. The rules and guidelines it sets down for us as both individuals and as a church are to be obeyed. As God's Word, it carries the authority of God Himself. These are things this church believes, but a God-centered church goes beyond a formal acknowledgement of these truths. Our desire is to be a church that really lives as if the Bible is our authority. And friends, the reality is that believing in the Bible's authority and living that way can be very different things.

I love the story of a lumber town with a church located along the river. The loggers in that community would cut down trees and then take the logs and put them in the river. From there, they would float to the mill a few miles downstream. The pastor would sit in his office watching the men do this. But, he noticed that they were also taking logs **out of the river**. He soon realized that these logs had floated down from a town further upstream. The men were cutting off the mark which identified where the logs had originated and putting on their own mark. In other words, they were stealing the logs. The next Sunday, the pastor preached a powerful sermon from Exodus 20:15. "You shall not steal." After the service, everyone told him what a wonderful sermon it had been. Yet, on Tuesday he looked out the window and saw the men were still taking logs from the river. So, the next Sunday he gave an even more pointed sermon which solemnly declared: "You shall not steal your neighbor's logs." Again, almost every member of the church congratulated him on the fine sermon, but a couple of days later he looked out the window and again saw the men stealing the logs. That Sunday, his sermon included these words: "You shall not steal your neighbor's logs by taking them out of the river, cutting off the mark, and putting on your own mark." At the end of the service, the church chairman

told the pastor that the board had decided he needed to resign. Friends, the folks at that church believed what the Bible said up here (their head). They just did not believe the Bible in here (their heart).

Friends I have not seen anyone trying to steal their neighbor's logs, but I am afraid sometimes we fail to live by the Bible's authority. In a God-centered church, whenever an issue comes up, the most important question is always, "What does the Bible say about this?" Whenever we are making a decision, this is where we need to look for guidance. Another pastor was telling me about a conversation with the chairman of his church board. They were discussing an issue and the fellow said, "Pastor, I don't care what the Bible says. We have always done it this way in this church, so I don't see why we have to change." Friends, if we are a God-centered church, we must care very deeply about what the Bible says. We need to want to do what it says. In a God-centered church, we spend a lot of time talking about what the Bible

teaches. When I preach a sermon, or when a Sunday School teacher is giving a lesson, we often tell some jokes or cute stories. We sometimes give our opinions on current events. The most important thing, however, is that we communicate what the Bible says. A good sermon or lesson is not one that is interesting or entertaining, but one which helps us better understand, better apply and better respond to God's Word. Now, boring sermons don't usually do that, so boring sermons are seldom good. Yet, understanding, applying and responding to God's Word is what a God-centered church strives to do.

#2 – In a God-centered church, worship will focus on God. Last Sunday we talked about how worship is one of the primary purposes of this congregation. We come together, especially on Sunday morning, to express our praise to God. Yet, some things which happen in a church service may not really have the Lord as the focus. Oh, often these other things are good and necessary to do, but a God-centered church should strive to keep the focus on Him. What am I talking about? Well, one very concrete example is music and songs in the church. The Bible tells us, **Ephesians 5:19a** – We are to be **speaking to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs**. That means an appropriate part of a church's music ministry – whether the choir, the worship team, a soloist or congregational singing – is to provide encouragement for the folks gathered together. Songs that testify of our experience with the Lord, a chorus which reminds us of God's promises, a hymn that expresses our desire to follow and serve the Lord can all be ways which we encourage each other. There is nothing wrong with these songs.

However, if we are a God-centered church, we focus on songs which are, well, God-centered. That means we want to sing hymns which are about God, songs which call people to worship the Lord, and most important, sing praises directly to God Himself. **Ephesians 5:19b** says we are to "**sing and make music in your heart to the Lord.**" Whether we are talking about the hymnal in the rack in front of you, or about the contemporary Christian songs on the radio, most songs are either primarily focused on Christian experience, or primarily focused on the Lord. Both types of songs are good, but when it comes to corporate worship in a God-centered

church, most of the songs will be part of that second category – songs focused on the Lord – on who He is and what He has done for us. In the hymnal, for example, two songs, both favorites of many, are “In the Garden” and “Great is Thy Faithfulness.” The first is a testimony of fellowship with the Lord, of experiencing His presence in a flower garden. The second is a song to God, about God, extolling God’s faithfulness and demonstrations of that faithfulness. Both are good songs, but the second is much more fitted for corporate worship in a God-centered church.

Now, maybe some of you are thinking, “Oh, Pastor Dan, what’s the difference? If your heart is filled with love for God, does it matter if you are singing a song that doesn’t say much? And singing the greatest hymn in the world doesn’t mean much if your heart is not right toward the Lord.” That’s true, however, I believe people who truly love God want to be God-centered when they worship. If He is the object of our delight and affection, we will want to sing about Him and to Him. That is why so many of the songs we sing on Sunday morning are about God and to God. Of course, being God-centered involves more than music. We worship through prayers of adoration and thanksgiving, telling God how grateful we are for who God is and what He has done. Oh, it is also good to pray for Aunt Edna’s back problem and other needs people have, but those should not eclipse our prayers of adoration and thanksgiving as we worship. God-centered worship reflects the fact God is the one who matters most of all.

#3 – In a God-centered church, the ministry will be God-driven rather than seeker-driven. In recent decades, evangelical churches have often focused on being seeker-sensitive. There has been an emphasis on getting people out there to come into the church, learn about Jesus and become Christians. Churches often want to do whatever they can to remove any barriers that might be keeping people away. For example, most churches encourage casual, come-as-you-are attire so people don’t feel like they have to dress up to come to church. We want to be sensitive to those who don’t know the Lord Jesus. A God-centered church should be seeker-sensitive, but cannot be seeker-driven. We cannot simply ask people out there who are not Christians what they would like a church to be like and then try to become that type of church. Why? Because God is even more

important than people. What He wants our church to be like matters more than what either the people in this room or outside this room want the church to be like. If we are a God-centered church, there may be things we have to do, even if other people don’t like it.

#4 – In a God-centered church, the focus is on God’s glory, not the church’s. We should be far more concerned what people think about the Lord than what they think about CBC. It should be His kingdom, not ours, that we want to see flourish. If we convince people that CBC is the most wonderful church around, but fail to help them see that Jesus is the most wonderful Savior and Lord there is, we have failed miserably. There is a little test I give myself to make sure I keep that in perspective. “Dan, would you rather have five people in our community become Christians this week and start attending another church in our area or have two people become Christians and start attending our church?” If I would choose two in our church over five in another, it shows me that I may be on the wrong track. If God is using another church or another pastor to bring glory to His name, I should be glad. A God-centered church has as its theme **Psalm 115:1 – Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory.** Because God is the One who matters most, He is the one who needs to receive the glory, not us.

Friends, my desire is that CBC be a God-centered church. I believe that is what God wants as well. In many ways, I think we are that type of church. However, it is real easy to get off track. It is real easy to start thinking that the important thing is what we want the church to be like or what our friends want the church to do. Folks, the best assignment I can think of is to ask you to pray that this would be a God-centered church. Please try to find time this week to ask God to make His glory the focus of CBC, and ask Him to help you to do your part in making this church truly God-centered. **“Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory.”**