

A God-Centered Church
Pastor Dan Erickson
September 8, 2019

One of the most interesting developments in the past twenty years has been the rise of **“atheist churches.”**

Sunday Assembly, for example, meets Sundays at 11:00am at 5450 Nicollet Avenue in Minneapolis. While the adults go to the “service” to discuss various social topics and listen to mostly New Age music, the children go to Sunday School. Instead of teaching Bible stories, this Sunday School focuses on helping young people “celebrate science” and cope with public school classmates from Christian homes.

Christian comedian, Tim Hawkins, speculates about what type of songs the kids sing in such a Sunday School:

*No one loves the little children
All the children of the world
No one hears you when you cry
No one hears your lullaby
No one loves the little children of the world*

I doubt they really sing a song like that. Though “atheist churches” seem kind of strange to me, they probably reflect a deep down longing for God that even people who insist He doesn’t exist feel.

Even stranger, however, are what might be called **“practical atheist churches.”** These are churches where the people say they believe in God, but this belief almost never impacts their lives in any practical way. So, though technically theists – believers in God – in practical terms they live like atheists.

I think of my friend, Sue, for example. Not any Sue you know. Sue goes to church almost every Sunday – a mainline church – because, well, because she always has. “Of course I believe in God,” she tells me. Yet, outside of that sixty minutes she spends in church most weeks, she barely thinks about God and never reads the Bible. She seldom thinks about church during the week – except in October when she helps out with the Fall Bazaar. She is a “practical atheist,” who calls herself a Christian. Yet, this is another, more subtle form of practical atheism that can happen in evangelical churches like ours.

Mark Galli, the editor of “Christianity Today,” describes it this way:

“For some decades now, American Christianity has been less and less interested in knowing and loving God and more and more interested in doing good things for God. We’ve learned how to be effective for him to the point that we don’t really need him any longer.”

Folks, this is what Galli calls, “*the heart of the evangelical crisis.*” – churches which could pretty much continue to do their ministries, Christians who could pretty much continue to “serve the Lord” even if God did not exist.

Friends, with our fall programs getting started, this is really the beginning of our church year at CBC. And it is a good time to remind ourselves who we are and why we are here.

When someone asks me to describe our church, I have a little saying that I think is a helpful summary of who we are, or as this four-part sermon series is titled, “This Is Us.”

Now, it is not officially in our constitution or anything, but I like to say CBC is a God-centered, truth-driven, gospel-focused, grace-saturated church. God-centered, truth-driven, gospel-focused, grace-saturated. I have tried to think of another word for truth that begins with “G,” but have not succeeded.

So, this is us. This is who we want to be as a church. This is, by the grace of God, who in many ways we actually are. This also explains why we are different from some churches, and why we are able to work together with others.

This first distinctive, a focus on being a “God-centered church” means we are not practical atheists. Not only do we believe in God, but we want God to be at the center of who we are and what we do. As we explore what that means, let’s pause and pray that God himself will speak to us through his Word and by his Spirit this morning.

So, what does it mean to be a God-centered church?

Well, it doesn't mean that people are not important. At CBC, even though we are God-centered, we do 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 creatures, made by the Creator; and each of us has been created by God for a purpose. We are not merely products of a chance process of evolution and not just "dust in the wind."

Thus, every human being – no matter his/her abilities, no matter his/her beliefs, no matter what his/her behaviors are – is worthy of our respect and love. We do not have to approve of these beliefs and behaviors. Often we should not, 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 have 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 nine days or ninety-eight years old. Every person is important. And we need to treat each person that way.

So, 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 one another and others is a great thing to do, God should be at the center of our church and our individual lives. That is what it means to be a God-centered church.

So, who is this God we are to honor and glorify? That is an important question; because in our world, there are a lot of different ideas about God.

Many folks have a view of God that they have kind of "customized" for themselves. I have a friend who likes to speak in personalized terms. "My God would never have rules about who could love whom," or "The God I believe in would never let anyone go to hell."

But here is the question: Is "her God," the God she believes in real? Does he actually exist? Or is "the God she believes in" simply a figment of her imagination? I'm convinced it is the latter – a description of what she would like God to be, rather than who he actually is.

Here at CBC, we want our church to be centered not on a God we create, but on the God who really is, who really exists. We are convinced, as Francis Schaeffer used to say, that He is there, and He is not silent.

We believe this God has revealed himself through the Bible, the written Word of God and through the person of Jesus Christ, the living Word of God.

Now, if someone doesn't trust either the Bible or Jesus to give us an accurate understanding of God, they likely will have a hard time "fitting in" here. Yet, if you or someone you know are in that category, I would love to sit down and discuss that.

Believing the Bible and Jesus are trustworthy authorities is not an arbitrary decision we have made. It is not a shot in the dark or a leap of faith. There are good reasons to believe that the Bible and Jesus Christ can be trusted. They are a reliable, self-revelation of God to us. They provide, not exhaustive, but accurate and sufficient understanding of him.

This doesn't mean we know everything about God. We could ever know everything about him. However, the things God has revealed about himself are accurate, are true and provide the knowledge and understanding we need to be in a relationship with him and to live a life that is pleasing to him. A key Bible verse for us is:

Deuteronomy 29:29 NLT – "The LORD our God has secrets known to no one. We are not accountable for them, but we and our children are accountable forever for all that he has revealed to us, so that we may obey all the terms of these instructions."

Now, these "secrets" mean there are things about God and about how he works, his purposes and plan that will not make sense to us. That is kind of what "faith" involves.

Just as a mom wants her four-year old boy to trust her as she takes him to the clinic for a vaccination, God our Father wants us to trust him even when life is not exactly making sense to us. We need to remember what the Lord says to us:

Isaiah 55:8-9 – “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways.” This is the LORD’s declaration. “For as heaven is higher than earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

In other words, God is not someone whom we will always understand, but he is someone we should always trust.

Through what God has revealed about himself, we have reached some important conclusions about who God truly is and what he is really like. We believe the God described in the Bible is the true and living God, eternal and triune, existing in three persons – Father, Son and Spirit. We believe he is the Creator and Sovereign of the universe, with no limits on his power or wisdom.

Genesis 18:14 – Is anything too hard for the Lord?

This question clearly calls for an answer of “No, nothing is too difficult.” In fact, God is the only completely free being that exists.

Psalm 115:3 – Our God is in heaven and does whatever he pleases.

We believe God is both transcendent and imminent, **far above the universe he created and yet, near to us**, to each of us, through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. When Jesus says...

John 14:9 – He who has seen me has seen the Father.

...he affirms we can truly have a personal relationship with the One who created and rules the universe.

We believe the Lord is holy and righteous, but also gracious and loving. This is reflected in the description of God found in...

Exodus 34:6-7 – The LORD is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and

abounding in faithful love and truth, maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion and sin. But he will not leave the guilty unpunished.

God’s holiness and love was brought together in the most magnificent way when Jesus was crucified on the cross. There, God’s wrath against sin was poured out, reflecting his perfect righteousness; and yet, God himself, God the Son, Jesus, bore that wrath, paying the penalty for our sin, reflecting God’s gracious love. God is both just and the one who justifies. We can never truly understand the nature of his love without keeping in mind his holiness, and we can never rightly understand his holiness unless we keep in mind his love.

Friends, this is the God the Bible describes. This is the God whom we are convinced truly exists. This is the God whom we believe should be at the center of who we are and all we do as a church.

Here are some practical implications of this:

#1 We should be serious about God.

During the twenty-six years that I have served as the pastor here, my goal has been to help CBC be a church where we take ourselves less seriously and God more seriously.

Now, I believe taking ourselves less seriously not only makes life more fun, but it is actually good for our souls. Being able to laugh at ourselves and the amusing things we do or say is helpful in combatting the sin of pride and the inflated egos that often go along with it.

I also suspect there is a little more unity in churches where people are laughing, rather than walking around with sour expressions on their faces.

I think CBC is a place where people can have a lot of fun. That’s because whether we are tossing beanbags, performing goofy skits, or wearing silly purple clothing, we just don’t take it too seriously.

But, we’d better take God seriously. And I think we want to be serious about God. That means we want to hear what he has to say to us, every word he has to say to us.

I had a friend in college who liked to talk...a lot. One time I was on the phone with her, and she was in an extended monologue. So I whispered to my roommate, "Watch this." I put the phone down, pointed to the clock and watched two minutes go by, picked the phone up, and she was still talking. She had no clue that I had not been listening. Now, my friend has a little bit of a problem of being too verbose, but I was rude. I did not take what she was saying seriously. I didn't really pay attention to her words.

Folks, we must not do that with the Lord. When he speaks, we need to listen. That is why our individual Bible reading, small group Bible studies and Sunday morning sermons are such an important part of this church. We want to listen, so we hear what God has to say. If we don't do that, it indicates we are not very serious about God.

Of course, it is not enough just to hear God's words. We need to heed them. In other words, we need to seek to obey his commands and do what he says. Whether he tells us to avoid sexual relationships outside of marriage, show love to our enemies or to pray instead of worry, we take his words seriously.

Dr. Tom Schreiner tells about a pastor, a Baptist pastor, who said, "I know the Bible talks about not being unequally yoked and stuff like that, but sometimes it is okay for a believer in Christ to marry a non-Christian because that may be the only chance to get married that person has."

Folks, that is not taking God seriously! That is a trap into which we don't want to fall. We will talk more about this next week as we explore how we want to be a truth-driven church.

#2 As a God-centered church, we should make worship a priority.

At CBC, we have identified what we think is the four-fold purpose of a church – worship, fellowship, evangelism and discipleship. These flow out of what are called "The Great Commandment" – love God and love your neighbor and "The Great Commission" – go and make disciples.

We believe this is God's design for every local church, and we believe it is important to have some type of balance between these four.

Yet, in a God-centered church, worship may be the highest priority. As we seek to glorify God, expressing praise, adoration, love and thanksgiving to God would seem to be the center of what we want to do. Of course, a big part of glorifying God is encouraging others to give praise, adoration, love and thanksgiving to the Lord.

That's why John Piper says:

"Missions exists because worship does not."

Our desire that God would receive glory means we should be deeply troubled that others are not giving him that.

Psalm 96:3-4 – Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples. For (Because) great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For (Because) all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens.

We do missions, evangelism and discipleship – yes, because we want other people to go to heaven and we want them to experience God's blessings in their lives; but even more important, we want them to become worshipers of the true and living God and give him the glory he deserves!

Now, God can be worshiped anywhere, anytime, in a variety of ways. Singing hymns when you are taking a shower is a great way to worship – especially if it is best that no one but God hears your singing voice.

Yet, corporate worship – coming together once a week to join other believers in expressing praise, adoration, love and thanksgiving to the Lord – is a very important part of what we do as a God-centered church.

It is important that you be here on Sundays as we do that. And it is important that as we gather, we seek to worship, as Jesus said, "in Spirit and in truth." That is certainly our goal at CBC.

In some churches, a pastor just picks out a few hymns he likes or some songs that are popular on the radio. The congregation sings them, and that is called worship. And, it very likely is.

Yet, here at CBC, we think worship is too important to be haphazard about. Our worship services are very intentionally designed to focus on God, on who he is and what he has done, and expressing praise to him for that. As Siri plans these times, she prayerfully ponders what songs and Scripture readings will best help us do that.

Yes, spontaneous corporate worship can, indeed, be done in spirit and in truth. In a God-centered church, worshipping the Lord together is too important not to be a priority.

#3 In a God-centered church, there should be an enthusiasm or excitement about God.

Not just on Sunday morning, but throughout the week, actually 24/7. Or another way to put it is, we should live like we actually believe what we say we believe. We must not be practical atheists. We say we believe in God, the God described in the Bible, who is the Creator and Ruler of the universe. We say we believe he is eternal, all-powerful, all-wise and totally pure and good.

We also say we believe that through faith in Jesus, this God is now our Father and our Friend. We believe he desires, doesn't need, but desires fellowship with us.

The question is: If we believe this, how should we then live? Do our lives as individuals and our life together as a church reflect that this is what we believe?

I want you to identify one person living today that you admire more than anyone else on the planet. A political leader, a religious leader, a celebrity, an athlete, maybe someone who is not famous at all. OK – do you have that individual in mind?

Let's imagine you get a phone call from that person saying, "I am coming to the Iron Range for a week, and I just want to spend time with you doing things and just hanging out." You reply, "Well, Aaron Rodgers, I guess I could carve out one hour to spend with you, maybe at 9:00 on Sunday morning."

No, we would not do that! Folks, Kirk Cousins probably doesn't make my top 100 list of admired people, but he seems like a good guy; and if he wanted to spend a week with me, I think I would try to spend pretty much every waking moment with him.

I would probably say, "Hey Kirk, I have a counseling session at 1:00pm today, but if you want to sit in on it, that is fine with me." It might not be fine with the person I am counseling; but frankly, I would probably be more concerned about what Kirk wanted to do than what the person I was counseling thought. I suspect Kirk Cousins would pretty much be the center of my life that week.

Friends, the true and living God, the Creator and Sovereign of the universe wants to go with us wherever we go, to be involved with us in whatever we do. Why in the world would we not want him to do that? Why would we not be excited about that?

My answer is: I am not sure. But for some reason, all of us, at times, prefer to keep God at a distance. As a God-centered church, we think that is silly. Thus, we want to seek to encourage one another to live God-centered lives.

May we strive to remind each other frequently that every part of life, no matter how ordinary, is to be lived by God's grace and for his glory!