

“The Church: A Communion of Saints or Sinners?”

**A sermon preached by Dr. Calvin Warpula
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Have you seen some of the bulletin bloopers that churches have printed?

Here are some:

“A singing practice was hell at the church Wednesday night.”

“Don’t let worry kill you—let the church help.”

“Remember in prayer the many who are sick of our church and community.”

“The church chorus invites anyone who enjoys sinning to join their practice this week.”

“The youth group is saving aluminum cans, bottles, and other items to be recycled. Proceeds will be use to cripple children.”

“The outreach committee has enlisted 25 to make calls on people who are not yet afflicted with any church.”

Sometimes the church does sinning, crippling and afflicting, doesn’t it?

One outspoken, very colorful British politician wrote a book entitled, What I Believe. This is one of the things he said:

“The history of the Christian churches has been one of atrocious cruelty. All of them have done untold harm to the world. The traditions of the Christian churches for centuries can be summarized as dogma, persecution, secession, hatred, destruction, and fire. In fact, everything that Jesus loathed and denounced.”

[quoted by Stuart Briscoe, The Apostles Creed: Beliefs That Matter. Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1994, p. 161].

That is one view of the church. Here’s an opposite one from a member of a church in Dallas that he wrote to his preaching minister:
[see letter attached at end of this message]

You have heard two views of the church: one bad—a communion of sinners; one good—a communion of saints.

Everyone I know that thinks the church is evil claims to love and praise Jesus. But how did Jesus regard the church? He built the church (Matt. 16:18). He purchased the church with his own blood (Acts 20:28). The church is in God’s eternal purpose and in it God receives glory (Eph. 3:10, 21).

“Jesus’ heart and commitment to the church should compel us to love and serve the church. In Ephesians 5:25 Paul says, ‘Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.’ The context in which Paul speaks is marriage. . . .He is saying that the church is

like Jesus' bride, whom he loves and serves despite all her faults and flaws. Those who ignore the church, criticize the church, despise the church, or even harm the church must seriously question whether they truly love Jesus and are his followers, since true Christians love and serve the church because Jesus does." [Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010, p. 335].

We must not be so negative and critical of that for which Jesus gave his life. The church has never been a pure or perfect instrument but it is a chosen instrument.

Let's look further into this question by going to an early letter by one of Jesus' chosen apostles, Simon Peter. The letter of First Peter was written by the apostle in the mid first century A. D. Peter is addressing believers scattered throughout some of the provinces of Asia Minor, what is now the country of Turkey. These believers were undergoing suffering, rejection and ostracism from their pagan neighbors and from the idolatrous government led by the emperor Nero. Peter writes to encourage these Christians who are living in a pagan culture. Since he writes under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, what he says to them is applicable to us today in our pagan culture over 1900 years later.

First, Peter tells us who we are.

He begins by telling us that we are "God's elect" but "strangers in the world" (1:1). God's elect means that God has chosen us to belong to him. Behind everything Christian is the work of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit (1:2). God the Father chose to love us and save us and God the Holy Spirit made this message known, and God the Son shed his blood as a sacrifice for our sins.

We are God's children in his family (1:14; 4:17). Jesus died on the cross to forgive our sins and to bring us to God (1:19; 2:24; 3:18).

When we are forgiven of our sins, our guilt is pardoned, our condemnation is lifted and we are restored to fellowship with God. We are justified (Acts 13:38-39; Rom. 4:25). Justification is a state—a spiritual position that is complete and not repeated. Justification covers the whole of our life—past, present and future. Forgiveness removes guilt and condemnation but justification bestows a perfect standing with God. It is reinstatement with God—a right standing with God.

This occurred when we heard the good news of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, we believed in Christ, turned from our sins and were baptized into Christ (1:22-23). Peter says that baptism now saves us in the same way that water delivered Noah and the ark from the destruction of the world in the great flood (3:20-21). Baptism was the step of faith obedience that brought us into the reality of God's grace and it is the time when God gave us the remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

Peter says that we are God's spiritual house. We are all living stones of that temple built upon Jesus (2:5). We are a holy priesthood. We offer spiritual sacrifices of praise, prayers and good works to God through Jesus Christ (cf. Heb. 13:15). We are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people belonging to God (2:9). God gave us his mercy and made us his people (2:10).

We are servants of God (2:16). We were once straying sheep but we are now under the guidance and leadership of Jesus, the great shepherd and overseer of our souls (2:25).

We are Christians which means “Christ followers.” We wear the name of Jesus (3:14-16).

We have an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. Through our faith, we are shielded by God’s power until the coming of Jesus, (1:3-5). We are called to eternal glory in Christ (5:10).

This is who we are in relationship with God, the Spirit, and Jesus. But who are we in relation to the world?

We are strangers in the world (1:1). We are aliens and strangers in the world (2:11). This means that we do not belong to this world. Nothing in this world is permanent. Everything here is passing away. This world is only a bridge to the next world. We do not trust in this world or in worldly things because we are just passing through on our way to an eternal life in the world to come.

Second, Peter tells us how we should live now.

We are encouraged to live the holy life God called us to (1:13-16). We are called to be saints or to be holy, now we are to live like it. Peter uses various forms of the word “hagioi” that in the noun form is translated “saints.” The word “saints” occurs 62 times in the New Testament and always in the plural. Paul uses that word frequently to address the ordinary people of God (Eph. 1:4; Col. 1:2; 2 Cor. 13:13).

Some people have the wrong view of saints. “How is your husband?” a woman asked her friend whom she had not seen in a while. “Oh,” replied the friend, “he is a real saint.” The first woman retorted, “Oh, dear, aren’t you lucky? Mine is still alive!” However, “saints” in the Bible are not dead people who have been elevated above ordinary folks.

So how does one become a saint? Some people think that you live a sinless life. No, there is no such thing as “sinless living” for us here on earth. The Bible says, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (I John 1:8). Even worse than that, listen to what John says two verses later, “If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar” (I John 1:10). In other words, if we say that we have not sinned, then we make God a sinner, a liar! I can’t think of a worse sin than that, can you?

In the Bible one becomes a saint by accepting Jesus as Lord and savior, by repenting of past sins, and by being baptized into the name of Jesus. Paul described this change in I Cor. 6:9-11 [read]. The word “sanctified” here is a form of “hagioi,” the saints. Notice Paul says, “We once were, but now we are in Christ.” So, we are nothing more than sinners, but we are nothing less than saved by grace.

“The fact that we are holy has nothing to do with our personal merit or sanctity of life; it has everything to do with a holy God and that we have responded to him. We are holy because of our calling, not because of our natures. Think of the moon, which shines by reflecting the light of the sun. The Apollo moon missions have made it clear that the moon is a dead world. It possesses no light of its own. But it can reflect the light of the

sun. Christians are holy in much the same way as the moon shines at night—by reflecting something (or someone) else. God’s holiness can be reflected in our lives, even if we ourselves are sinners.” [Alister McGrath, I Believe: Understanding and Applying the Apostles’ Creed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991, p. 128].

To be holy means to be attracted to God and to have his qualities reflected in us. It means to value what God values. It means to be valued by God and set apart by God for God.

With the help of God, we live like the profession we have made. We are not sinless we should sin less and less as Christ gains more and more control of our thoughts, attitudes and actions.

The things of the flesh, the world and the devil don’t belong in our lives anymore. However, the believers in Peter’s time were still having problems with the world. They had been converted from paganism with its freewheeling immorality, orgies, idolatrous worship but they struggled because they had to fight against the tendency to return to their old ways of life (2:11). They were given freedom from sin in Christ but this new found freedom could be misused to serve the flesh as Peter cautioned them (2:16). They were told to live for the will of God, not the flesh (4:2-4). The devil, like a roaring lion, was prowling around so they must be on their guard and resist him (5:8-9).

Is the church a communion of saints or sinners?

The church is a communion of sinners who are saved through Jesus Christ and are “set apart” (“sanctified” or made holy”). Saints are saved sinners. The church is a communion of forgiven sinners who are in the process of becoming holy “holy as he is holy.” The reformer Martin Luther taught the truth when he said that the Christians “are righteous and sinners at one and the same time.” [McGrath, p. 130].

We are righteous because God has called us righteous. That is forensic righteousness. But inside we are still struggling with sin. We are not righteous because of any righteousness we possess. While we are not righteous externally, God is at work within us, renewing and rebuilding us from within. We are righteous not in fact, but in hope. We are like sick people who have been entrusted to the care of a competent physician. There are already some signs of recovery within us and they point to our future perfection which will be in the world to come. This is like a sick patient under the care of a good physician who can rest assured of being cured as he detects signs of recovery. We are getting better, hopefully, but we are not cured yet. We Christians are not perfect; we are under construction and on the way.

At times, the most saintly among us still want to do what’s wrong and often do. If you have ever struggled with an addiction to sex, food, drugs, alcohol, pornography, or tobacco, perhaps if you know that Paul, one of the greatest of God’s preachers, struggled with sin, too, this might give you some assurance that the presence of sin does not mean that you are lost and rejected by God. Hear Paul as he describes his struggle, even after his conversion, “For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body....What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7: 22-24).

Paul found his hope in Jesus Christ. He seems to shout as he writes, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (7:25). Then he adds this assurance, “There is no condemnation to those that are in Christ Jesus” (8:1).

Churches are not museums of perfect saints but more like hospitals for pitiful sinners. Every church I know is led by sinners, including me. Sometimes people as sinners do things that hurt people. Preachers make mistakes. I know that this one does. None of us, I hope deliberately and intentionally, hurt people. But we still do hurt people at times.

Sometimes people get hurt enough, angry enough, and turned off enough to quit the church. If that is your case, please don’t quit God’s church because of God’s people. I know that it would be a lot easier to love the church if it weren’t for the people. Over the forty-two years of full-time ministry, I know that some of my greatest friends are in the church and some of my greatest enemies are in the church. I know that I have been hurt by the church and I know, too, that I have said and done things that hurt the church. Yet I urge you not to forsake the church that is established, organized, and abundantly blessed by Jesus Christ. The church is the only institution that God started through his Son. The church is the only institution that is called “the body of Christ” and is connected to Jesus Christ as its head.

We should not be surprised if the church fails. The religious leaders of the first century led the charge against Jesus when he came to this world to start his church. His best friends deserted and disowned him when he most needed their help. In spite of that, he came right back to them after the resurrection. The first thing that he did after he rose from the dead was to look up the very people who abandoned him. Why would he do that? Because Jesus is not a quitter! He loves his church too much to give up on it. He will never give up on his church.

If you have ever been hurt by Christians or the church, let me encourage you to remember that Jesus is the Lord and Savior, not the church. Your commitment is to Jesus regardless of the sinful behavior of some of his people. You love, follow and obey Jesus, not those people. Do not let any believer who is weak, struggling and sinful stand between you and God.

A man once told me, “I believe in God but I don’t believe in the church.” I asked, “Why not?” “Because,” he protested, “the church is full of hypocrites.” I replied, “I know the church is imperfect. It is full of people like me who are sinners but who are trying to love the Lord and serve him. I don’t know of any hypocrites, pretenders or play actors in the church but I do know lots of real, imperfect people like me.” Next time someone objects to the church because it has sinners in it, I want to say this to them, “If you can think of a better place for them, tell me where it is and I’ll take this church to them.”

The truth is, we are imperfect Christians working with other imperfect Christians to serve a perfect Christ.

“The church is not a country club for people who have reached some ecstatic state of sinless perfection. It is the fellowship of forgiven sinners. The church is not a society for people who no longer do wrong things. It is God’s safe-house for people who like me who sin grievously against God and keep coming back because they need another dose of pardoning grace. That is why Christ committed his message of forgiveness to the

church.” [Robert Leslie Holmes, The Creed: Life Principles for Today. Greenville, SC: Ambassador-Emerald, Int., 2002, p. 166].

South Bronx of New York City is one of the poorest of all the poor neighborhoods in America. A church there includes leaders who are former addicts, undocumented aliens, the unemployed and the recently homeless. The congregation decided to reenact a passion play during the week from Palm Sunday to Easter. They began by dramatizing Jesus’ entry into the city, borrowing a live donkey and, led by an actor playing the part of Jesus, paraded in a long procession around the block of shabby storefronts and rundown apartments shouting “Hosanna!” When they got around the block and back to the door of the church, the Palm Sunday procession encountered in front of the church a street protest under way about police brutality. It was fitting, really, as Jesus and the protestors, the congregation and the street crowds, the cries of “Hosanna” and the cries of social outrage mingled together in a swirl of movement and noise. In fact, someone passing by on the street, seeing the confusion and fearing trouble, even called the police, whose arrival brought a bit of added color and drama.

Somehow the procession managed to make it inside the church where, as the play unfolded, Jesus was tried, condemned, and executed. But then, women came from the tomb early in the morning of the first day of the week, with an amazing word of an empty tomb and the astounding news, “He is risen!” The actors playing the disciples remained true to their assigned parts, expressing disbelief and confidence that this news from the women was but an “idle tale.”

Then the script called for three members of the congregation to stand up and bear witness to the truth of the resurrection. “I know that he is alive. . . .” each one was to begin. The first was Angie. “I know that he is alive,” she said, “because he is alive in me.” She then told how she was abused by her father, how she fell into despair and alcoholism, became HIV positive. But then she responded to the welcome of the church, then she started attending worship, then a Bible study, and bit by bit she rose from the grave of her life. Now she is a seminary student, studying to serve the church. “I am alive because Jesus Christ lives in me and through me,” Angie said, her face aglow, “I am a temple of the Holy Spirit.”

The two other witnesses stood in turn, each telling their part of the script: “I know that he is alive. . . .” Then that portion of the play was done, and it was time to move on. But others in the sanctuary began to rise spontaneously. “I know that he is alive,” they would say, “because he is alive in me.” Homeless people, addicts now clean, the least and the lost stood one by one. Nothing could stop them. “I know that he is alive,” they shouted..

[This story is told by Thomas Long, “A Sermon: The Dream Church,” in Roger E. Van Harn, editor, Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles’ Creed. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004, pp. 238-239}.

This is a picture of the church of the living God where men and women are free to let go of all that weighs them down, where every tear is dried and death and pain are no more. This is God’s church on its way to a glorious inheritance with the Lord forever. Praise be to God.

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