

Teaching Notes

**The Church as the Basis for
Our Identity, Ethics, and Purpose in Life**Jerry Truex; May 21, 2017

A. Introduction

We continue our series on "Spiritual survival strategies in the Trump Era."

1. The emerging threat to the church

The election of Donald Trump as president was not simply a victory of the Republicans over the Democrats, or vice versa. The country elected a person:¹

- Who lied continuously,
- Who aroused fears of racial bigotry to gain political power,
- Who tried to criminalize this opponent,
- Who blamed and demonized vulnerable immigrants,
- Who displayed the most vulgar behavior toward women,
- Who expressed wholesale mistruth toward Muslims,
- Who promised to wall American off from outsiders,
- Who pledged to protect the economic security of the nation's most wealthy and continues to shield his own wealth and international investments from public accountability,

In addition, Trump continues to attack the free press. Remember that every authoritarian ruler in the world tries to undermine the public's confidence in an independent media so he or she can define the truth.

In Trump's case, his relentless attacks on the media have the intent of undermining the credibility of the press. In that way, he hopes that only his version of events, his exaggerations, and outright lies will not be held to account. This is how evil works its way into the social fabric.

¹ The following bullet points and paragraph about the free press are a direct quote or a paraphrase of Wes Granberg-Michaelson, "5 Spiritual Survival Strategies I the Trump Era," *Sojourners*.

2. American Christians are being assimilated

Unfortunately, 81% of white evangelicals voted for Trump, apparently believing that it was congruent with their understanding of Jesus to vote for such a narcissistic, pugilistic, and vindictive person.

I view the emergence and election of a person like Donald Trump as a threat to the church. The ethics and behavior of Trump is antithetical to the ethics and behavior taught by Jesus Christ.

Trump's ethics and behavior model precisely what Christians are not supposed to do or be. And yet 81% of white evangelicals and 52% of Catholics voted for Trump. It shows that the church in North America is being assimilated by the non-Christian values and culture.²

In a political environment like this, we must ask, "Where should Christians get their sense of identity, ethics, and sense of purpose? Should we rely on our politicians, elected officials, the political parties, the media, or what?"

I propose that we find sense of identity, our ethics, and our sense of purpose in *the church*, the community that desires to follow and imitate Jesus, those who are committed to live together in discipleship to Christ.

I propose that:

- The church shapes our sense of *identity*, not identity politics.
- The church informs our *ethics* and our *behavior*, not political parties, politicians, or politicized media.
- The church reveals our *purpose* in life, not the government, not educational institutions, not the stock market, certainly not social media—it is the church.

Let's look at few key features of the church to emphasize the role the church plays in shaping our identity, morality, and purpose in life:³

1. The Foundation of the church
2. The Agents of the church
3. The Nature of the church

² "How the faithful voted: A preliminary 2016 analysis" by Pew Research; <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>

³ Cf. Sermon 293, "The hermeneutics of Community," by Jerry Truex, September 21, 2014.

4. The Purpose of the church
5. The Salvation of the church

B. The Foundation: Jesus Christ

1 Corinthians 3:9-11, 16. ⁹ For we are God's servants, working together ... you are ... God's building.... ¹⁰ According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation ... ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.... ¹⁶ Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? (NRSV)

First, Christ is the foundation of the church; the church is Christocentric. In the context of 1 Corinthians, Paul is arguing that the church is “the building of God” and he laid its foundation (1 Cor. 3:9-10). Paul has in mind a certain building, namely, the Temple (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:20).

In the ancient world of Jesus, the Jewish Temple it was the center of Jewish life. It was regarded as the *axis mundi* of the universe, the point of connection between heaven and earth. The Temple was the place where God *descended* to live among his covenant people and, through the daily sacrifices in the Temple, the place where prayers *ascended* to God. The Temple was the gateway of heaven on earth.

Now, Paul says, the church is that sacred place on earth. We are the Temple of God. And Christ is the foundation (*themelios*). “The one essential thing about the building is that it depends on Jesus Christ as the foundation of its existence, coherence, and identity.”⁴

Just as a building depends on its foundation, so the church depends on Christ. Just as a foundation prevents the building from sinking or collapsing, so Christ prevents the church from sinking or collapsing. Just as a foundation determines the length, the width, and the height of any superstructure built upon it, so Christ determines what the length, width, and height of the church.

C. The Agents of the Church: Disciples

Second, the church is comprised of the followers of Jesus; in other words, disciples make the church the church. The Anabaptist conception of church begins with

⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 310.

people who decide—who make conscious, responsible decisions—to follow Jesus in matters of faith and life. This is a *voluntary* decision and it is a decision that only an adult or self-responsible person can make.

During the Sixteenth Century Reformation, people were automatically part of a church tradition of the “state” they were born into. When person was born, they were baptized into the Catholic or some Protestant Church. In other words, people had no choice in the matter. To put it differently, no one ever chose to become a Christian.

In contrast, Anabaptists emphasized the importance of choosing Christ and taking responsibility for that decision. In this way, Anabaptism is an existentialism—we become what we choose.

D. The Nature of the Church: Communal Fellowship

Third, the Anabaptist conception of the church begins with the notion of the church as a “brotherhood” or, to use gender inclusive language, a “communal fellowship,” corresponding to the German word, *Gemeinden* or *Gemeinschaften*.

1. Communal

The word “communal” stresses a close association of people with common ownership, common interests, and common goals.

2. Fellowship

The word “fellowship” stresses that we are an intentional gathering of people that share, care, and celebrate together.

The word “fellowship” stresses that we have something in common that focuses our attention, and that something is a Someone, namely Jesus Christ.

Matt. 18:20. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (NRSV)

3. Family-like

For Anabaptists, the “communal fellowship” of the church is not an impersonal society or association of individuals, but a community of relationships that is like a family. We are to have strong reciprocal bonds and a common commitment to God, Christ, and each other.

Following Jesus—discipleship—is the reason why we covenant together every year just before Easter. We covenant together, we are making a commitment to this family-like community.

Throughout the NT, the church is described in “family” language; for example:

John 1:12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God (NRSV).

Galatians 3:26 for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. (NRSV)

1 Peter 2:17 Honor everyone. Love the family of believers (*adelphotēs*). Fear God. Honor the emperor. (NRSV)

“Children of God” language stresses that the church is like a family which, ideally have close, trusting relationships. This is underscored by the word *adelphotēs* 1 Peter 2:17, which is translated “family of believers” by the NRSV, but literally, it means a “brotherhood.”

4. For “one another”

In this type of close communal fellowship, we need **one another**. Consider the dozens of Scripture passages that use “one another”; here is an example:

1 John 4:7-8, 12. ⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.... ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. (NRSV)

John 13:34-35. ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (NRSV)

There are dozens of other "one-another" texts (I counted 44). Each of the one-another texts tells us something about the "communal fellowship" of the church.

When we look at looking at 1 John 4:7-12 and John 13:34-35, we need each other for at least six reasons:

- To learn how to love
- To be born of God
- To know or "see" God
- To be united with God
- To imitate Jesus
- To witness to the world

E. The Purpose of the Church: Theōsis

Fourth, our purpose is *theōsis*, a term regularly used in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition to refer to becoming "god-like" or becoming "partakers of the divine nature."⁵ We take on the character of God revealed in Christ, so that we may escape the corruption of the world, so we may escape the painful realities of imitating "the Jerry Springer Show" and most other television programs. Listen to 2 Peter 1:3-4.

2 Peter 1:3-4. ³ His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴ Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. (NRSV)

Escaping corruption and taking on the divine character sounds like Paul's teaching. Paul talks about *take off* the Old Self (the likeness of Adam) and *put on* the New Self (the likeness of Christ).

⁵ Theōsis is usually translated "deification" by Orthodox theologians. For example, see Daniel B. Clendenin, "Partakers of Divinity: The Orthodox Doctrine of Theōsis," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37, No. 3 (1994) 365-79; Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2004); Norman Russel, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2004).

Col. 3:5, 7-10. ⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). ⁷ These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. ⁸ But now you must get rid of all such things-- anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. (NRSV) (cf. Eph. 4:22-24)

This is the church's primary purpose, helping people transform and take on the original image of God, the image of Christ. It is the central purpose of the church. That is our primary task and our mission, and if we are not doing that we are not the church.

This is very important: *No other organization on planet earth has the task to encourage human transformation into the image of God in Christ; only the church.*

There are many, good activities that the church does—feeding the poor, providing tax guidance, teaching ESL, having family movie nights, taking political and social action, etc.—BUT helping people and thus society transform in to the image of God in Christ is our preeminent task. No other organization does that. If the church ceased to exist, that task would evaporate immediately.

It is from this foundation—the task to undergo theōsis or transformation into the image of God in Christ—that gives us our sense of identity, right and wrong, and our overarching purpose in life.

To participate in taking on the divine nature, we need to do three things:

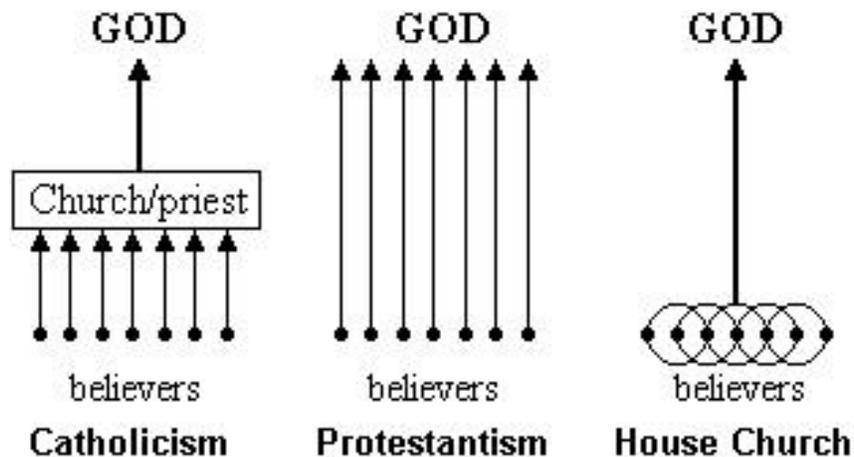
- To know Jesus as he is revealed in the narratives of the Gospels.
- To practice living like Jesus or imitating Jesus here and now in our world.
- To walk with others who are imitating Jesus, whom we help and who help us stay on the narrow path of Jesus.

F. The Salvation of the Church: Relational

As I mentioned, the church was (and is) the center of Anabaptist theology and practice. This is most clear in the role the church in the process of salvation.

Salvation is a very broad term. It redemption, rescue, deliverance, and healing here-and-now and in the future. It is already and not-yet. Most importantly, salvation is being in a right relationship with God, Self, and others.

With that in mind, let me contrast three views of salvation: Catholic, Protestant, and Anabaptist.⁶



1. Catholic View

- The way to God and salvation is through the institutional church and the authority structure (apostolic succession) of Pope, Bishops, and Priests.
- The institutional church has a reservoir of divine grace, which is dispensed through the sacraments by the ordained priests

2. Protestant View

- The way to God and salvation is through belief in sound doctrine
- The church's responsibility is to preach sound doctrine
- Each believer is responsible to respond to the preaching of the church
- Each believer stands before God alone in an unmediated relationship with God
- Hence, individual responsibility is emphasized in the salvation process

3. Anabaptist-House Church View

⁶ Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald, 1975) 80-81.

- The way to God and salvation is with one's brother and sister.
- A person cannot come to God without his/her neighbor (Mt 22:37-39).
- If salvation means having a right relationship with God and others,
- Then it is impossible to be saved in isolation, impossible to be saved without becoming part of the New Community.
- This does not eliminate personal responsibility to choose, believe, and act; but it emphasizes that choosing, believing, acting occurs within community

G. Summary

In summary, I have been arguing that our ethics, or sense of right and wrong, our sense of identity and purpose is rooted and grounded in the church, and the church is the community that practices living like Jesus.

- The church shapes our sense of *identity*, not identity politics.
- The church informs our *ethics* and our *behavior*, not political parties, politicians, or politicized media.
- The church reveals our *purpose* in life, not the government, educational institutions, the stock market, and certainly not social media—it is the church.

We must remember that:

- The Foundation of the church is Jesus Christ
- The Agents of the church are disciples
- The Nature of the church is a communal fellowship
- The Purpose of the church is transformation or *theōsis*
- The Salvation of the church is necessarily relational