

THE CHURCH

THEME: We believe the prime agency for the work of God's kingdom is the Christian local church functioning under the sovereignty of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Introduction

This morning there are at least, two distinct and different cultures that have come together to worship the One True God. We are different in our cultural backgrounds, in our appearance, and in our language.

But our differences are what make our world interesting and exciting. Different languages can make communication difficult, of course. And sometimes those differences can be funny.

Many of us, I'm sure, have said things in a language that wasn't familiar to us, that sounded funny to those whose language we mangled.

I came across some signs in English that were displayed in countries where English was not the native language.

For example, in a Paris hotel elevator there is a sign that says, *Please leave your values at the front desk.*

An advertisement by a Hong Kong dentist read, *Teeth extracted by the latest Methodists.*

And a sign in a Copenhagen airline ticket office said: *We take your bags and send them in all directions.*

The name Coca-Cola in China was first rendered as *Ke-kou-ke-la*. Unfortunately, the Coke company did not discover until after thousands of signs had been printed that the phrase means "bite the wax tadpole" or "female horse stuffed with wax" depending on the dialect. Coke then researched 40,000 Chinese characters and found a close phonetic equivalent, *ko-kou-ko-le*, which can be loosely translated as "happiness in the mouth"

In Taiwan, the translation of the Pepsi slogan "Come alive with the Pepsi Generation" came out as "Pepsi will bring your ancestors back from the dead".

And when translated into Chinese, the Kentucky Fried Chicken slogan "finger-lickin' good" came out as "eat your fingers off".

A common word that is sometimes misunderstood in every culture and language is the word "church." We use it to refer to a building ("I parked my car at the church."),

to an organization (“What church do you belong to?”), and to an activity (“We all went to church today.”).

But the Bible uses the word “church” to refer to something very specific and unique. For example . . .

THE FAMILY OF GOD

The Church is defined as *The Family of God*, displaying God’s love for the world.

The *family* is God’s idea. Father, mother, and children—these were instituted by God when He created Adam and Eve and told them to ***Be fruitful and increase in number*** (Gen. 1:28).

So ultimately, we all can all trace our ancestry back to Adam and Eve. And so, in the most general sense, we’re all family. ***Therefore***, Paul said, . . . ***I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.*** (Ephesians 3:14-15)

But in a more specific sense, we are related by our common faith in Jesus Christ, just as Paul said we are children of Abraham through the same faith as Abraham’s (Gal. 3:7).

I’m always amazed at how different siblings can be from each other, even though they are raised by the same parents in the same environment. In a similar way, we are all different, even though God is the Father of us all.

But in a family, despite the uniqueness of each individual, there are always some similar characteristics. For example, there are similarities in appearance, such as facial features, the color of the eyes and hair, body shapes and sizes, etc.

And while there is certainly a great variation in the outward appearance among the family of God, there are also some distinctive similarities. For one, there is a passion for the Good News about Jesus Christ.

Another distinctive similarity among the people of God’s family is a compassion for people—especially the lost.

Which leads to another defining characteristic of families: a mutual commitment of love for one another.

"Blood is thicker than water" is an expression that says the bond of those related by blood is stronger than any other relationship. Indeed, the family has priority over every other relationship or obligation.

Believers are related to one another by blood too—the blood of Christ! And when we recognize the relationship of the family of God, such a sense of priority extends to other believers. As Paul wrote, ***Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*** (Galatians 6:10)

Jesus' prayer was that we would be one—united in faith and love—so that the world may believe that God sent His Son. (Jn. 17:20-21). Indeed, Jesus said, ***By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.***" (John 13:35)

We all know that there are sometimes—even often times—conflict and differences in families. But we work through those conflicts and differences, maybe simply learning how to live with them, because we are family. Because the love we share is not just an emotion, it's a commitment. As John wrote, ***Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.*** (1 John 3:18)

The Church is also defined in the Bible as *The Body of Christ*, displaying the presence of God in the world.

THE BODY OF CHRIST

Paul wrote, . . . ***God placed all things under [Christ's] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.*** (Ephesians 1:22-23)

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (1 Corinthians 12:27)

Just as our physical bodies are made up of many different parts—each one essential to our “fullness” or wholeness—the body of Christ is made up of different people, or “parts.” And each one is essential.

No one is non-essential, and no one can say, “I don't need” another “part” or person in the body of Christ. In fact, we need one another in order to be whole.

When Paul was preaching in Athens, he proclaimed “The God who made the world and everything in it.” And he said of God that, ***From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.*** (Acts 17:26)

I believe that such *times* and *places* that God determines can include even where a person goes to church, because each local church is the body of Christ. And every church is to present Christ to the community.

But that can happen only if every individual believer knows His purpose and function in the body, and is valued by the rest of the body.

What do we call someone who is missing a part of his or her body, or whose body is not functioning as it should? We call them “handicapped.”

In the same way, a local church where each individual member is not functioning according to his or her gifts or abilities, and who is not valued by the rest of the body, that church is handicapped. And the local community will not see Christ for who He is.

I believe the greatest challenge and the greatest joy in the Christian life is to discover and develop one’s purpose and function as a member of the Body of Christ.

While there are many more ways the Church is defined in the Bible, let me mention just one more.

The Church is described as *The Bride of Christ*, displaying the relationship God desires with His people.

THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

While *blood is thicker than water*, there’s no more intimate relationship than the one between a husband and wife.

And God has given us the institution of marriage so we might better understand the relationship He wants to have with His people.

When a man and a woman fall in love, nothing will stop them from being together. They believe that their love will overcome and conquer all!

In an even greater way, nothing will deter God from demonstrating His love for us! He loves us with an everlasting love. He loves us with a passion that is beyond description. In fact, God so loved the world that He sent His one and only Son to demonstrate the extent of His love.

There’s a beautiful and powerful image in the Scriptures and in the Jewish custom of the wedding. When the time comes for the bride and bridegroom to be united, the bridegroom leaves his father’s house, where he has

prepared a dwelling place for himself and His bride—actually, an addition on his father’s house. He goes to the bride’s house, where she has been getting ready, and where she has been waiting for her bridegroom.

When the bridegroom comes, the bride’s maids alert her, and she goes out to meet him. And he takes her home to be with him for the rest of their lives.

Jesus Christ—the Bridegroom—loves His Bride—the Church! He has gone to prepare a place for her (Jn. 14:1-3). Meanwhile, the Bride is getting herself ready. And a major part of that preparation is becoming all that she should be—in terms of her appearance as well as her identity.

In other words, Jesus is waiting until His Bride is fully ready. And in order for the church to be truly and fully ready, the church must consist of every people, tribe, language and nation. And when the last person is brought into the Bride of Christ, the Bridegroom will come, for the Bride has made herself ready!

Conclusion

And so, ***The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.*** (Revelation 22:17), because the Bride wants to be complete so that her Bridegroom will come.

The “work of God in the world” is to display His love, His presence, and His desire to restore us to our intimate relationship with Him.

Are you a member of God’s family? Are you a part of the Body of Christ? Are you making yourself ready for the Bridegroom who is coming for His Bride?