

WHAT DO WE WANT/NEED FROM CHURCH?

(WHAT IS CHURCH, part 4)

Sermon given by Dan Phillips

At Caroline Valley Community Church

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4TH Sunday after Christmas 2010

¹Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, ²To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— ⁶even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— ⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

It is the fourth Sunday in our series concerning church and church membership. This Sunday we will discuss what we want and what we need from the church. We could talk about this in terms of what we get from the church, or what the church is good for, or what services the church provides for us. All of these address the same issues from a different direction, I think. So I am going to talk about this subject in terms of us: what we want and what we need. I hope you will realize why I am using that approach as we wander around these ideas.

Our text passage today in I Corinthians is one of Paul's descriptions of what the church does for us. Paul says we are enriched in speech and knowledge by Christ

Jesus. Paul also says that we are not lacking in any spiritual gift. But Paul is not just talking about what Jesus does for us; he is also talking about the work of the church. We are to be God's workers in the vineyard, the divine work force on earth. And enriching each other is an integral part of our efforts in the church.

So what enriching do we want from each other? What do we expect the local community of believers to give to us? I think we first want comfort. We want to be comforted in church.

Comfort takes many forms. It can be as direct and simple as seeing friends, as knowing that there is a group that accepts you. Many of us find that in church. I believe that more people find it in church than in any other place, except maybe family. We want the comfort of being accepted. This is what Paul calls the 'saints together'.

We also want the comfort of knowing what our eternal destination is. We want to be reassured that we are on the right path, that we are going to heaven when we die. We want to know that we are reading the Bible the right way, that we are reading the right Bible, that

our interpretation of scripture is correct. We believe that having these things RIGHT in our life is important, and church often reinforces these things for us.

We want to hear that our theology is right. But it's more than that: we want to feel that we are living the righteous way. We want to feel that our life has been lived correctly. And going to church gives us that comfort. And we want to feel that we are the righteous ones in the neighborhood: the ones who go to church. It is so comforting to be able to be a part of a church congregation.

We want the comfort of the familiar. We go to church and we know, or think we know, what the experience will be. We sing the same songs, we follow the same patterns, we do the same rituals, we hear the same sermons on the same scripture, and the routine comfort us in a world that is often very chaotic.

We want the comfort of the rituals that the church only provides. We want church weddings, confirmations, communions, and church funerals. We want all these things because they feel right to us. It is interesting how many people who are NOT part of a local church will turn

to the church for a baby dedication, a wedding, or a funeral service. They, like us, want to be comforted by the church.

In addition to comfort, increasingly we want church for community. Over the past century, Americans have lost the sense of community that once was so much a part of our lives. And for many that need for community has been and is being filled by churches. Churches give us a sense of belonging. Churches give us acceptance, as I mentioned when talking about comfort.

Community is more than acceptance, however. Community means sharing values. It means communing, talking together, coming to a consensus about issues. It is the only way to alter the isolation that many of us feel in this modern age.

So far, I have spoken mostly about the things we want from church. But now I must speak of something that we NEED from church. We need to be challenged by church. We need for the church to alter our awareness, raise our consciousness, and change our outlook. We need for the church to shake us up.

If you look at the things I said about comfort you will see that some of them are good, and some of them have a dark side. We want to feel that we are righteous, we want to be reassured that we are THE righteous; but sometimes we use that to beat up on the ones who don't attend church. We tell them that we are better than them because we are the righteous.

Again, we are comforted by the old patterns and the old songs, but our children want to try something new. And so we fight over church music, or using dance in the church, or whether women can preach. We can be so comforted that we are unwilling to change for the next generation, or for those who otherwise might come to our church.

And the church is a very old organization. It is the oldest continuing organization existing in our society. We use ideas and creeds and formulaic answers that have changed little since the time of Jesus. And this is good! This is part of the power of the church: its accumulated wisdom and authority. I am not arguing for changing all that. I want us to use our ancient rituals. I see the value of communion and baptism and worship services. So we

are caught between the ancient and the new, between the righteousness of Christ and our overly developed desire for comfort, between what we want and what we need.

The answer to this tension is that concept that Paul speaks of: being enriched in speech and knowledge. Our Jesus experience, our church experience, is a lifetime learning experience. We are to continue being enriched throughout our lives. We live a life that is constantly growing in the love and knowledge of Christ Jesus. None of us has reached our peak yet. We need to find new and creative ways to express the old, old story. We need creativity and discernment and wisdom as we do church. We need to understand that the answers that are so comfortable to us may be uncomfortable to others. And so we are continually challenged.

Now I know this conflicts with our love of comfort. We feel more comfortable with doing things the same way all the time. You don't have to tell me about that. Martha will tell you that I am a creature of habit, doing things in the same way every day. And my routine helps me. But it also constrains me. Like the church, I live in the tension that causes.

I believe then that our challenge is to find ways to be creative with what we have been given. We need to be creative with our study of scripture. We need to look for the new meanings in old passages of the Bible. We need to see how the principles of God's word can be applied to the ever-new changes in our society, applied to arrive at the old, old solution: the lordship of Jesus Christ and the power of God to work in this world.

In addition to challenge, we need for church to be a place where we wrestle with the big questions of our age. In a society that has no grounding of any sort, we need to build the basics. The church needs to struggle with the tough questions, such as why live, why live righteously, and how to live rightly. It has become too easy in our country to live what is considered to be the good life without thinking about life itself. I read recently about a very smart, well-educated man who said the meaning of life was not an important question. I ask you: what is a more important question. We need for churches to address this kind of question, and provide meaning to lives.

We also need for churches to wrestle with the many ethical questions that have arisen in our time due to the onrush of technology. When does life begin, and end? What is human life? What is our ethical and spiritual responsibility for the natural world? Only God's people assembled have the tools to properly wander through this new minefield of ideas.

We need for churches to help integrate the lives we already lead. We find it too easy to separate the parts of our lives, to compartmentalize our existence. We are one person online using FACEBOOK, another at work, another at home with family, and another at church. And when you add in school, stores, and sporting events, you can see that many of us are trying to be several different people at the same time. Often we try this as though there were different moral and spiritual values for each organization. And then we wonder why people feel pulled in many directions at the same time!

The church needs to help us pull all this together. Only in a place that recognizes the primacy of spiritual ideas can give us a proper basis for integrating our lives,

for being consistent in our actions. We need to build churches that do this.

And the church that does all this must be safe. What do I mean by SAFE? I mean that churches must be places that people do not fear to enter, do not fear to take part in. With all the wild ideas that exist in our society, it is not surprising that some of them wander into our churches on occasion. We must not overreact to those ideas, no matter how strange or outrageous they seem. That does not mean we have to accept them: we just have to gently separate them from the well-meaning but misguided people who carried them into the church.

And in being safe, we must not be afraid. We can be safe by ignoring all ideas, and just going through the rituals and motions we inherited from the past. We can be safe by ignoring our mission to reach out to the whole world with the Gospel of Christ. We can be safe that way, but we cannot be church. If we give up the theological and spiritual side of who we are, we can gain a momentary safety, but we will cease to be the organized people of God and simply become a confused mob. No, our challenge is to find a way to explore, enlarge, enrich

our faith without threatening our neighbors who don't share it. Nobody said it was going to be easy!

Robert Louis Stevenson tells of a storm that caught a vessel off a rocky coast and threatened to drive it and its passengers to destruction. In the midst of the terror, one daring man, contrary to orders, went to the deck, made a dangerous passage to the pilot house and saw the steerman, at his post holding the wheel unwaveringly, and inch by inch, turning the ship out, once more, to sea. The pilot saw the watcher and smiled. Then, the daring passenger went below and gave out a note of cheer: "I have seen the face of the pilot, and he smiled. All is well."

Like the daring passenger, we know the pilot. The church can only face the challenges we have talked about today in the power of Jesus Christ, who will, as Paul puts it, sustain us to the end. Amen.