

Christian Education Class – Following Jesus on Campus

Class 4: Church and fellowship life

-We've spent the past 3 weeks looking at what it means to have a biblical worldview, examples of this in the Bible, and some of the spiritual disciplines that will help us develop such a worldview

-With all that we've learnt in mind, today we'll begin looking at various topics pertaining to student life, starting with the area of church and fellowship life

-Two main areas today: what is church, why it's important and what the marks of a 'good' church are according to the Bible. Secondly I'd like to look at the whole issue of parachurch vs. the local church (i.e. campus fellowships like CCF vs. the local church) and the roles that each play in a student's life.

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Scenario 1: David is a frosh and new to Toronto. As a Christian, he's gone to church for most of his life and now in this new city he's naturally beginning to look for church to attend. One of his relatives back home used to live in Toronto and attend Chinese Gospel Church, highly recommending him to it.

It's his first Sunday in town and he decides to check out CGC. In he goes through the front doors. "Boy, this church sure is small," he thinks. "It's not at all like my church back in Vancouver. The doors are so narrow and everything looks and feels well... ragged." He decides to give it a try. As he walk through the doors to the sanctuary he hears the congregation beginning to sing... and it sounds awful! The drums are off, the singers are out of tune, the pianist is playing all the wrong notes... they're butchering "How great is our God".

He manages to navigate through the obstacle course of the greeters and finds a place to sit down, all the way in the corner of the sanctuary where no-one will bug him to fill in a visitor's card. The music ends (finally) and up comes the Pastor to give his sermon. He's in a suit and tie. David looks around and suddenly realizes that everyone looks so... formal. He crouches back a little in embarrassment as he look down and sees his baggy jeans. "No wonder they butchered the worship song... they were singing it to an organ, not a piano!" David thinks. The church is so much more conservative than he's used to. They even use the King James Bible (at lease it sure seems that way). He tunes out of the sermon and resolves never to come back... as he slips away through the side door, one of the greeter comes up to him again and extends their hand to welcome him. David timidly acknowledges them and quickly proceeds out the front door. "This church just isn't right for me..." he mutters under his breath. What would you say to David?

Scenario 2: Patty is a classmate of yours whom you met during your first week of classes. You were surprised and delighted when you saw her at CCF that Friday and found out that she was a Christian. But there's one big difference between you and Patty. Patty doesn't attend church on Sundays. In fact, ever since Patty came to believe in Jesus at a CCF retreat, Patty has never stepped foot in a church.

In great curiosity, you ask her why. She explains, "Well, we pretty much do the same things in fellowship as I'd do at a church... music worship, having great guest speakers, Bible studies, sharing in fellowship and godly relationships, etc. I don't see why I'd want to attend a 'church' for the sake of attending. I get all that I need already from CCF. There's really no difference between what we do on Fridays and what goes on on Sundays down the street from us. Right?" What would you say to Patty?

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I. What does the Bible tell us about the church?

-God uses two key metaphors in the Bible to describe the church

→ It is the Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33)

- the church and Christ are likened to what a wife and husband's relationship should be
- “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and himself up for her...”
- note: on the flip side, this passage tells us that a good, Christian marriage should be a display of Christ's relationship (his love and concern for) with His church

-John Stott: “On earth she is often in rags and tatters, stained and ugly, despised and persecuted. But one day she will be seen for what she is, nothing less than the bride of Christ, “free from spots, wrinkles or any other disfigurement,” holy and without blemish, beautiful and glorious. It is to this constructive end that Christ has been working and is continuing to work. The bride does not make herself presentable; it is the bridegroom who labours to beautify her in order to present her to himself.”

→ It is the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 27-28)

- the body is one with many parts
- “so it is with Christ... you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” (v.12, 27)
- it is the vehicle that Jesus chose to take the message of the gospel to every generation – what is the purpose of a body?

-Acts 2:42-45: what were the characteristics of the early church we see in Acts 2?

→ Devotion to the apostles' teaching:

- faithful preaching and teaching God's Word
- a church that does not dilutes the message of the gospel or the commands and principles of Scripture

→ Devotion to fellowship and prayer:

- “Breaking of bread and prayer” - a good church is one that communes and prays for each other; and it's at a deeper level of care and understanding of each other... not superficial. A good church is one where people are cared for, AND one where people allow themselves to be cared for
- “They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all people...”
- There is gladness and sincerity in meeting up with people. There is joy and thanksgiving to God

→ “All the believers were together...”

- Like-minded unity defines a godly church.
- Doesn't mean there aren't relationship problems (no church is perfect), but overall there is a desire to get rid of discord so that the Christians can truly be together...

→ Mutual care and concern

- "the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need"
- a good church is one where there is clear recognition that all that we have comes from the Lord. Therefore, there is generosity in the fullest sense. So in one sense, there is no-one who will be in want... the philosophy is that we share life together.
- This of course needs to be tempered with common sense and Scripture that warns that those who can but don't work we as a church should not squander our resources on (2 Thess 3:10) but rather exhort them to work.

- Bible paints the picture of the church in which members cherish and give honour to each other... just because one person has one gift, and another person has a less visible gift, that the first is better than second (1 Cor 12:14-26)
- in fact, the one with the 'lesser gift' is to be given greater honour as the passage says
- "But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one them, as He chose." – 1 Cor 12:18

II. I want to have a meaningful church life... but how?

- The church community described in Acts 2 is only possible if and when there is **commitment**
- Through thick and thin, Christians in the church need to be committed to one another in love; likened to a guy-girl relationship... if there's no commitment on the part of either, then it's merely casual dating – there's no intention of stopping and planting roots down, investing in that relationship
- There can't be commitment if you're physically not there, nor if mentally you're not there... i.e. you can physically be in the building but your mind elsewhere
- We are a generation by a large of spiritual loners – faith is a solo pursuit. We are a nation of "believers" but not "belongers" as Joshua Harris points out
- Signs that you are 'dating the church' (Joshua Harris):
 - Our attitude toward church tends to be me-centered
 - We go for what we can get – social interactions, programs, or activities
 - Driving question is, "what can the church do for me?"
 - You are largely independent:
 - You go to church because that's what Christians are supposed to do – but we're careful to avoid getting involved too much, especially with people
 - We don't pay much attention to God's larger purpose for us as a vital part in a specific church family
 - We go through the motions without really investing ourselves
 - You are largely critical
 - short on allegiance and quick to find fault in our church
 - we treat the church with a consumer mentality – looking for the best product for the price of our Sunday morning

-as a result, we're fickle and not invested for the long-term, like a lover with a wandering eye, always on the hunt for something better

III. There's so many things that go into church life... how do I know when I see a good church?

Joshua Harris points out a number of key things to look for in a church. Besides these criteria, everything else is gravy – style of service, type of music, what time the service starts, multi-ethnic or not, etc... these other things need to only play a very, very small part in your decision. It might take a few Sundays and definitely effort to commit on your part in order to properly assess a church, but ask yourself:

1. Is the church where God's Word is faithfully taught?

-a God-glorifying church is governed by God's Word

-2 Tim 3:16: "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."

-need to be discerning though because at first glance, most churches will appear to teach God's Word

-some teachers start their messages with the Bible, but it's only a jumping-off point to share their own opinions

-driving point is that God's Word has the authority

-related to this: is this a church where people strive to live by God's Word?

-Look for a church that seeks not only to believe the Bible, but to live out the Bible (James 1:22)

-It will seek not only to win converts, but to make disciples of Christ in their congregation by teaching, feeding and showing how to live a godly life

2. Is this a church where sound doctrine matters?

-simply means what the Bible teaches about any given subject

-doctrine means biblical truth – does the church value biblical truth, knows what it believes, and is guided by these beliefs in the way it functions?

-sound doctrine is always under attack

→ "...the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to truth and wander off into myths." – 2 Tim 4:3-40

-don't compromise – the people may be welcoming and great, they may have great programs, the pastor may be friendly and they mean well, but look closely at what they believe

3. Is this a church in which the gospel is cherished and clearly proclaimed?

-Charles Spurgeon: "Do not go where it is all fine music and grand talk and beautiful architecture; those things will neither fill anybody's stomach, nor feed his soul. Go where the gospel is preached, the gospel that really feeds your soul, and go often."

-Is this a church committed to reaching non-Christians with the gospel?

4. Is this a church whose leaders are characterized by humility and integrity?

-1 Timothy 3 lists the qualifications for pastors: A leader in the church must be a man who is above reproach, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money

- qualifications relation mostly to the quality of life – of character
- characteristics of godliness
- most effective leaders view themselves first as servants, and they keep themselves accountable... they are not sinless, but guard themselves to the best that they can (by God's grace) so as not to sin

5. Is this a church where I can find and cultivate godly relationships

- there nothing worse than being a newbie standing alone at the back of a church (worse yet, in the middle section of a church) when there's no-one around who comes up to you and says hi and welcome.
- those already at CGC: to break out of cliques and to embrace newcomers sincerely takes effort because people naturally tend towards their friends, but this is a must
- we can't hope to form any relationship (much less, godly relationships) if we don't reach out and form that bridge
- godly relationships are ones built upon true, meaningful sharing of life – for accountability, for concern, for care, for spurring each other in our Christian walk through reading the Bible together, praying together
- those new to a church: will you be able to invest adequately in the relationship opportunities that the church offers? Distance is an issue for some; think about the importance of having a *local* church

6. Is this a church where members are challenged to serve?

- Ephesians 4:12 → pastors are to “equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”
- You should look for a church that doesn't rely on the Pastor to do everything, but clearly challenges and equips the congregation to exercise and develop their spiritual gifts in the context of community

7. Is this a church that is willing to kick me out?

- when a person who claims to be a Christian lives in a way that blatantly contradicts all that it means to follow Jesus, a faithful church's responsibility is to begin the process of removing that person from membership and treat them like an unbeliever in the hope that they will repent and ultimately be restored (1 Corinthians 5; 2 Corinthians 2)
- Matthew 18 escalation
- in other words, the real test of whether a church loves and obeys God's Word is whether they obey when the issues are hard to deal with
- church discipline is an expression of love, because its goal is to hopefully show the sinner the severity of their sin that will ultimately lead to repentance

IV. The local church and my university fellowship are one and the same... aren't they?

- What is the difference between a para-church group like CCF or Campus for Christ and a local church? What should be the difference?
- this has been a very difficult question to answer for a very long time
- for Bill Bright, founder of Campus for Christ, the main purpose of the fellowship he founded was to make Christ's presence known on campus in a very deliberate way
- he considered the role of C4C as making disciples of Christ primarily for the sake of evangelism and outreach

-I've worked with students for the majority of my Christian walk, with both CCF and our student fellowship at CGC... over the years I've heard so many different answers. You can come to your own conclusion throughout your student journey, but here's my assessment

-Pros of para-church:

- strong visibility on the campus
- students passionate and deliberate in evangelism
- lots of immediate opportunities for sharing your faith
- access to practical resources at school that the church does not have (rooms, etc.)
- campus has a presence that tends to attract resources (people like Ravi Zacharias, etc.) that local churches may not have
- the benefits of multi-denominational fellowship
- Opportunities for student leadership development
- Paul – Barnabas accountability

-Pros of a local church:

- inter-generational fellowship
- deeper focus on discipleship, maturity in personal Christian growth
- deeper focus on mentoring (not necessarily geared towards evangelism)
- Paul – Timothy accountability
- wisdom and guidance of elders and church leaders
- church discipline

-Cons of a para-church:

- fewer resources to equip students to handle God's Word thoroughly and systematically that will lead to overall spiritual maturity
- risk of students taking on responsibility / leadership beyond their phase of spiritual maturity
- pragmatic
- everyone is in the same life stage – risk of 'blind leading the blind'
- the deficiencies of multi-denominational fellowship
- transitioning to the local church after graduation may be very difficult for some

-Cons of the local church:

- too inward focused (applies to missions, evangelism, welcoming newcomers, etc.)
- head knowledge vs. application
- lack of creativity in outreach / church structure / overall
- bureaucracy
- lack of urgency

-If you look at this quick survey of Pros and Cons, I think we can quickly see where both pieces fit in to God's Kingdom

- In over-simplified terms, my observation is that the purpose of the church is for making disciples of Christ focusing on deeper spiritual maturity, knowledge and wisdom of how to handle God's Word, developing spiritual disciplines, taking good advantage of the wisdom of elders and others who have gone through your life stage and seen God's faithfulness in various forms

-The purpose of the parachurch, then, is to make disciples of Christ focusing more on **application** of our knowledge of the Word and the spiritual feeding we've received from our local church, especially in the context of outreach.

-Joe Choi's example of the model of McMaster and Harvest Bible Chapel