

The Biblical Relationship Between the Christian and the Church

I Peter 2:4-10; I Cor. 12:4-7, 25-27

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July 18, 2010 – Morning Sermon

I will start out reading in I Peter 2 and then read from I Corinthians but there will be no need to turn to I Corinthians, I'll just refer to it later. I Peter 2:4-10 says

4 As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 5 you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For it stands in Scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." 7 So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," 8 and "A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. 9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

I Corinthians 12:7 says "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good", that is in the church. Then in the same chapter I Corinthians 12:27 says "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

May God enrich us and strengthen us through this reading of His Word and through the preaching of it for His glory.

A gentleman by the name of Oscar goes to see his friend Henry and he says to Henry, "Now look, you're an embarrassment to me and everybody that knows you. You know that you don't have any talking dog and we wish you would do us and yourself a favor and stop talking about that around town as though you had one." Henry says to Oscar, "Well, I do." Oscar says, "Well alright then where is he?" Henry replies, "He's in the backyard." So Oscar goes around and there lying in the dirt is a lazy looking old hound dog and Oscar mutters to himself under his breath, "It's pretty obvious you can't talk." "Oh yes I can" says the dog. "How can

that be?" Oscar says. The dog replies, "Don't know, I just know that when I was weaned from my mother I could talk like you. I had quite a life too. Lot's of CIA work for obvious reasons. Since 9/11 I haven't been able to stay home hardly at all." Oscar is totally amazed and goes back to the front yard and says to Henry, "Well, I have to admit you're right but I have two questions. One is will you sell that dog." He said, "Yeah, I'll sell it." Oscar says, "The big question is how much?" Henry thinks for a minute and then says, "Fifty dollars." Oscar says, "Fifty dollars, is that all for a dog like that?" Henry says, "You don't understand, that dog is a liar, he hasn't done any of that stuff he talks about."

Somebody somewhere along the line came up with a way of also emphasizing putting the emphasis in the wrong place and they talked about putting the emphasis on the wrong syllable. That's what that story is about and it's what the emphasis on the wrong syllable is about.

It gives me the opportunity to introduce for you the point that I want to make during this study and that is that somewhere this side of the Reformation we have lost a proper Biblical emphasis on the relationship between the Christian and the church. Just about the entirety of our preaching, teaching, Bible studies and even praying has to do with a focus upon individual Christianity rather than how that individual, we individuals, are to relate and function with Christ in His body, the church. I don't know where the teaching stopped. I think there was certainly a proper emphasis on this in the Reformation but somewhere between there and here we stopped talking about it. I'm still looking for where that is.

There are about three things that I think have contributed to it and if you want to find out about those you can ask me later. I don't have the time here to go into them in any detail but the point I want to have us realize is that personal, spiritual formation which is one of the principles we teach in our revitalization ministry, is another way of referring to sanctification that is spiritual growth and development, as individuals in the Lord. We talk about personal, spiritual formation for all individuals in the church but we talk about it primarily however as it relates to leaders in the local congregation and how leaders are to model personal, spiritual formation in their lives for the people in the congregation. Here again, the relationship between personal, spiritual formation and church revitalization as we teach it in our conferences, is that personal, spiritual formation is a personally experienced matter which has corporate application. It has collective application in the life and ministry of the local congregation. If we attend a Bible study we normally attend the Bible study for what we personally can derive from that. When we listen to sermons we listen with the idea of how is the Lord going to address me, speak to me and either correct or encourage me or whatever I happen to need at the time. Let me ask you this. How often have you attended a Bible study or done your personal Bible study reading or even in your prayer life or attending church, have you thought about the instruction, the benefit that was being offered from the perspective of the needs of the church? I hope that by the time we get to the end of this study we will not only continue to want from the

Lord what we personally need but we'll also consciously and deliberately want from Him what the church needs whether this one or another one where you're a member of another congregation or the church at large in its parts or in the whole.

I probably started thinking about this about ten years ago and I don't remember what made me start to think about it but I began to discover that there was lack in my spiritual instruction in my growing up years. That's hard for me to say because I had such a wonderful and ideal situation in which to grow up humanly and in the Lord. I'm not sure exactly when I was converted. I was converted in one of the responses I made to evangelistic calls to go forward in evangelistic meetings when I was a child. The preaching was particularly convicting and every time the call was made I felt like I just had to go and so I did on more than one occasion. I'm not sure which one of those it took but in one of them I was converted. I was told that I needed to be a member of the church. The fact is I already was. I was also told I needed to be a church worker along with other people who were receiving the same kind of instruction but and this is not an indictment or a negative implication at all because I don't mean it that way, it was never really explained to me what a church worker really is. It was never really defined as to how I could personally be productively functioning in the life, work and ministry of the local congregation. That didn't really dawn on me until probably about ten years ago and that's too bad because I have been in the ministry by a many number of years by that time and I had contributed to the dearth of information about this by my own delinquency of not dealing with it in my own ministry. As I began to think about it further I came up with five deficiencies that I hesitate to call them that but let me just say that I have the highest respect for the people who taught me in church and in school. I was raised in a community where people knew Christian standards. I was raised in a church that was strong and solid in the Scripture and clear with the Gospel. I was raised in a strong school that had perpetual interest on spiritual growth and development and a strong emphasis on evangelism. So I'm not indicting anybody here. My point is not anybody hardly talks about this from way back when till up to now. So I'm not pointing the finger at any individual or group of individuals. I'm just saying here's what I've discovered.

Here are five things. I was never taught that my relationship with Christ was anything other or more than personal. You know how that is and it's right. I will say to you that you can't trust Christ for your children. No individual can come to Christ for somebody else in the salvation sense. The nature of the Gospel is that I must recognize my own sinfulness and you must recognize your sinfulness and you must respond to Christ personally. You must repent of your own sin and ask Him to forgive you and be the Savior and Master of your life. I hope you have done that. If you haven't I hope you will do it by the time were are done with this study but what happened from that point on in personal conversion in my case was I was never informed that my relationship with the Lord was also highly responsible in the area of collectivity as far as the church is concerned.

The second thing that I realized was, I want you to be careful to hear how I have worded this because I have done it very specifically, I was never taught that my personal agenda must never be allowed to compete with the welfare of the body of Christ which is the church. Here is a way I have illustrated this. When I was in the pastorate in Florida we had a gentleman by the name of Gordon Reed who was a pastor in Miami at the time. He came to do some officer training for us at a retreat and one of the things he mentioned was this matter I am addressing in this study but not quite as extensively. He said that his father had left for him a great example concerning personal, spiritual responsibility but also responsibility for the welfare of the church, so much so that he said if his father got a career move opportunity he would never seriously consider that career move until he had first of all, taken into prayerful consideration what his departure from their present church would cause and also he would not consider the move until he was comfortably certain that there was a place for him and his family to be rightly, properly, collectively, spiritually functioning in a local church at the destination point. He would not consider career moves unless those two things were in place in his own mind and heart. Now, I say again, and you'll understand it better this time, I was never taught that my personal agenda must never be allowed to compete with the welfare of the body of Christ which is the church.

Thirdly, I was never taught that it is actually sinful for me to think that I can have a personal agenda which does compete with the church and therefore with its head, Jesus Christ. You can't separate the head from the body and have life. Fourthly, I was never taught that my true welfare in Christ is actually impossible apart from my fitting into, Biblically speaking, His body under consciously under His headship.

Fifthly, then we'll develop these from this point on, I was never taught that if I do try to live in an exclusive satellite, individualistic, strictly personal relationship with the Lord, I quench the Spirit in my own life because I quench the Spirit in the church. Those are five things that are fairly serious. I realize once again, I say they are not intended to indict any people who taught me it's just that you don't hear this far and wide or even close and near.

So what is the common idea? The common historical, documentable idea that is average in most believers in the evangelical and even in the reform world, what is the common idea about the church for decades and maybe centuries? It is that the churches job is to provide for and promote individual, spiritual welfare. You say, "What's wrong with that?" There is nothing wrong with that as far as it goes except that it doesn't go far enough. Let me tell you with an illustration about that.

Here is the illustration. There is a man named Win Arn who has researched, written and made recommendations about the welfare and growth of the church over the years. I'm not sure how long ago it was but he did a survey of 1,000 churches. So he asked at least 1,000 people maybe more because I don't how

many people he asked in each church. He asked this question, why does the church exist? Eighty nine percent of those thousand or more that responded gave this answer to that question. The church exists to take care of mine and my family's spiritual needs.

Let me build on that by saying that is the common idea. You don't have to go very far, not any further than ourselves to discover that is generally the way we think about the church but it's also an opportunity to say we think of the church maybe not consciously but we think passively or subconsciously about the church in the same way, not as materially I don't mean this, but as a filling station or a place to get what we need in order to move on. The point is we go to a filling station to get gasoline for our car in order to then continue to pursue our own agenda. You don't go to the filling station just to hang around and have fellowship or to be built up in other way necessarily. That's I think to a great degree the way we view the church.

We view the church as a place to get what we need. How many times have you heard people say "I'm looking for a church that meets my needs"? There's nothing wrong with that unless that is as far as it goes and then there is a considerable amount wrong with it. Or if it is not like a filling station it would be something like a pilot. Pilots do flight plans and flight plans are for safety, for arriving at destinations with all kinds of supporting content from air traffic control and flight service stations. What are they for? They are for helping a pilot arrive safely at his destination on a flight plan that he himself established. Do you see the point?

There is a tendency to think of the church in that way so that whatever our agenda is, even in our relationship with the Lord, we will look to the church and we will say "I want to get into a church that will help me grow and help me as far as my spiritual needs, my family's spiritual needs" but what you don't hear is a Gordon Reed's father kind of mindset that says "I want the welfare of the church that I'm in and I want the welfare of the church where I will arrive if the Lord moves me from one to the other."

There are some other assumptions that are current and fairly common about the church. I'm happy to say as far as I have been able to tell this is not characteristic of people that I've met at Briarwood, but in the minds of some the church is at times considered an intruder into personal and family life. It's also viewed by consumer Christians in such a way that if one church doesn't meet my needs they will shop for another church in order to meet my needs but consumer Christians evaluate churches and they look around in order to gain satisfaction in personal preference. I have a whole category in my thinking and preoccupation these days about the power of personal preference in our lives. It has much more to do with who we are and what we do than maybe we realize but it certainly comes into play when we talk about or get involved in functions of churches and even in our looking for churches. So consumer Christians evaluate the church of

the basis of personal preference and sinfully shopping around for personal satisfaction with either little or maybe no regard for the welfare of the church itself.

Another trend that is taking place in this day and time is a rising tendency to not require membership in churches and that's because by in large there's a rising element in society or an enlarging element in society that does not want to be held accountable in that way but you can't have Biblical Christianity and Biblical church without Biblical accountability. If you try that what you do is you short circuit the developmental and corrective accountability or discipline that is to be a rich and good part of the life of a local body and fellowship. You have heard people say you don't have to be a member of a church. I may get in trouble for doing this but I hope I don't because I hope it will wind up a positive thing but I'm going to recommend a book. The book is called *Spiritual Discipline within the Church: Participating Fully in the Body of Christ* by Donald Whitney. He does a wonderful job in one of the chapters of that book describing Biblically why it is necessary and essential to be a member under accountability in a local congregation and I recommend that book to you.

These historic ideas, these assumptions, these documentable discoveries and characteristics that we have been talking about have a Biblical answer. What would that answer be? We start by saying the fact is if you look through the Scripture the individual exists more for the church than the church for the individual. Now don't misunderstand here. I didn't say that the church does not exist for the individual but I would say that certainly in our understanding the individual exists more for the church than the church for the individual.

Let me illustrate it like this and maybe it will help the point. Does the thumb serve the body or does the thumb serve the body? You would say, "Well, they serve each other." Yes, that's true but the body can live without the thumb and the thumb separated from the body in trying to exist is something of an oddity at best and if it develops a twitch or a spasticity that's what it is. It is out of sync with the rest of the body and is not really doing anything for the body as far as its welfare is concerned so that's part of what I mean when I talk about the fact that as individuals we need to be in sync with the body under the headship of Christ. Our synchronization really is with Him in cooperation with the body for the body's welfare, health and vitality.

Over and over again in the Scripture you find wording that says or implies that we are not allowed to be individualistic to the detriment of the church so that we're never can rightly say "I am mine" at the expense of "we" and "His." "His" is meaning obviously Jesus Christ. The passage that I read earlier speaks very strongly to this and the wording is significant and beneficial. It said "you are a chosen race" and not just a bunch of individuals. "You are a royal priesthood" and not just a bunch of individual prayers. "You are a holy nation" and not just a bunch of individual detached "would be" citizens. "You are a people", a joined

together people for God's own possession. Then it comes at it from the other direction and it says "You once were not a people" so you were just an individual but now you are the People of God. Then it says why? It is so you may proclaim the Excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

If you think about it a little while you'll discover that purpose cannot be accomplished by detached, uncollected or un-orchestrated individuals and the people of God put together under the accountability of the head, the brain, Jesus Christ Himself is what we are looking for here. It says "For once you were not a people but now you are the people of God that you may proclaim the Excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." Individual salvation and blessing are actually for collective function and effect and that's what that passage in I Peter is addressing. It says once you were living stones (plural), individual, but we were picked up one at a time so to speak and installed in the building. So if you listen to the wording and the minutia here, you were also living stones but now you are being built up as **a** spiritual house put together, for a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

John 17 is the real Lord's prayer as I'm sure you have heard some say. That is where Jesus prays for us and He prays something very pertinent to what we are talking about in this study so that at one place He says, "I pray that the glory which You have given Me I have given to them that they may be One just as we are One." It didn't strike me until not too long ago of how that is certainly pertinent to what we are talking about in this study, in that no individual member of the Trinity has His own agenda that competes with other members of the Trinity. There is a unity there that is being addressed by Christ that includes what we are addressing in this study. He says, "I pray that they will be One just as we are One." In other words, meaning working together for the purposes that are under the whole.

There is an exclamation of praise and thanksgiving that you find in Ephesians 3. Ephesians 3:20-21 says 20 Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. That's the English. There's a word there in the English that doesn't occur in the Greek, in the original. The word "and" in verse 21 does not occur in the original language. So it actually says this; *to him be glory in the church in Christ Jesus...* It sounds different doesn't it? There is not a separation between belonging to Christ and belonging functionally and fruitfully, according to giftedness and for the accomplishing of the Great Commission and all the things that fall out from that. If you are in Christ we must also be in the church and so it is in Ephesians 3.

I will finish with this and then I will bring conclusion. In our revitalization work we base a good part of it on Revelation 2 where the church at Ephesus is addressed in the first of seven letters to the churches at Asia Minor. It is said to the church of Ephesus "I have something against you." There were many positives that were given to this church but then He came to one point through Jesus to John said to that church, "I have this against you; you have left your first love" and then he gave a strong command. He said, "I want you to remember from where you have fallen, repent of that and recover that first love and if you don't I'm going to come and remove your lamp stand." What did He mean by that? It's pretty clear as to what He meant with the remembering from where we had fallen, repent of that, recover, be renewed in love for and commitment to Christ but the point is He is speaking here to the church. Now He is speaking by necessity and implication to the individuals in the church but He's addressing the church when He says "I'm coming to you and will remove the lamp stand of the church."

What is the lamp stand? It's the effectiveness in ministry in the local congregation. That's what you find out when you read the first chapter of Revelation where there you see some of the symbolism described and the lamp stand is the ministry of the local congregation. So that's what I mean here when I say that there's both individual and collective accountability in our personal relationship with the Lord which is not just personal but it also necessarily involves our right Biblical function in and through the body of Christ because look at the New Testament.

The New Testament is almost all letters to churches. It addresses individuals but those individuals are addressed as people of the church. We have lost this. It's pretty American to view ourselves as individualists. There are some other reasons why I think of our present situation as I have been describing it here and as I said earlier I don't have enough time to go into all of that, but the point is if you happen to be one who certainly has come to Christ, repented of your sin, trusted Him to be your Savior, I would say that this is one of those places where we talk about going further and deeper in the Gospel. We don't leave the Gospel here when we talk about the church we just go further and deeper in the Gospel and we let the truth and content of the Gospel regulate, provide for and enrich our relationship with the Head and our relationship with each other and we cease and desist from "would be" individual Christian living at the expense of the body of Christ and the accomplishing of the Great Commission.

Do you know Christ as your Savior? What is your view of the church? What is your understanding of discovering your giftedness for use and function in the life and ministry of this body or whatever one you might be a member? May God give us grace, wisdom, faithfulness and fruitful usefulness under the Head in the church for His Name sake forever. Let us pray.

Prayer:

Father, we ask You to do in each of us what needs to be done. Give us insight, give us clarity, give us willingness to address this. Protect us from establishing our own agenda ahead of what would be the welfare of the church, the body of Jesus Christ. Even now as we listen to and participate in music and preparation for communion and as we consider things we might need to address in our relationship with You, we pray that this will be one of them and because we have addressed it rightly before You we will personally be built up in You, in the body and that the church here and in other places will be enriched because of Your working these things in us, in Christ's Name, Amen.

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