

Perceptions of the Church

Matt. 16:13-17

Introduction:

1. In this passage Jesus recognizes that we get our information from two sources.
 - a. He asked His disciples, "Who do **people** say that I am?"
 - b. Peter was knowledgeable about what the people believed. He said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets."
 - c. When Peter said that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus acknowledged that Peter did not get this information from **people**. Jesus said, "Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but **My Father** who is in heaven."
2. Jesus had asked Peter what he believed and then stated that he did not believe what he believed on the basis of what people said, but on the basis of what God revealed.
3. We need to ask ourselves what we believe, but just as importantly we need to ask ourselves where our information is coming from. Do we believe what people say or do we believe what God has revealed?
4. Now this is a difficult process because we are gathering information all the time and a lot of it comes from what people say and a lot of it comes from what God has revealed. Sometimes we have to think long and hard to identify the source of our beliefs.
5. Nevertheless, we must engage the process if we are going to do what Paul says in Rom. 12:2. There he calls on us to "not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is."
6. Our perceptions of the church are often unclear because of the information that we have picked up from the world.

Discussion:

- I. A common perception among people is that the church is composed of a variety of different denominations.
 - A. Were we to diagram it in a pie chart the entire pie would represent the church and the various pieces of the pie might be represented by the Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, etc.
 1. Observe that in this perception there are some religious organizations left out.
Ex. Jewish religion is not represented. Muslim religion is not represented. Hinduism is not represented. Etc.
 2. The explanation might be given, "Well, they are not Christian denominations."
 3. Others might criticize this perspective as being narrow-minded.
 - B. Others might diagram their chart to include only Protestant denominations and leave out the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church might draw their diagram and leave out Protestants. Each might criticize the others for being narrow-minded.
 1. Those who believed that Jesus was John the Baptist probably rejected those who believed He was Jeremiah or one of the prophets.
 2. Fact of the matter is we all have our beliefs. We have "good reasons" why we believe what we believe. And it is reasonable and fair to debate, investigate and

challenge one another. This is the way learning takes place, as uncomfortable and disconcerting as this may be sometimes.

3. It is appropriate in doing this that we respect one another, recognize that the other person has God given intellectual powers, reason, and understanding. It is appropriate to assume that they have a genuine desire to understand and inappropriate to simply dismiss them as unwilling to accept the truth. Usually you can tell when an individual has run out of arguments. They dismiss the other person, resort to name-calling, question their motives, and act in other disrespectful ways.
- C. But what if the revelation of God would take us in a whole different direction? Instead of debating which denomination(s) are in and which are out . . . maybe we are asking the wrong question. And instead of debating each other, maybe the debate needs to be more internal—"Are my beliefs based on what heaven reveals?" Cf. Jesus' question to Peter, "But who do you say that I am?"

II. The Father in heaven did not reveal anything about Jesus being John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or some other prophet. The Bible does not say anything about Hinduism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Presbyterianism, Methodism, etc. Flesh and blood reveals things about these, but not the Bible.

- A. What does the Bible reveal about the church?
 1. It reveals that Christ built it (Matt. 16:18).
 2. It reveals that it is founded on the confession that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16, 18).
 3. It reveals that the church is those people sanctified (made holy) by their special relationship with Christ (1 Cor. 1:2).
 4. They are saints by calling (1 Cor. 1:2; cf. 2 Thess. 2:24).
 5. He purchased them with His blood (Acts 20:28).
 6. He is their head (Eph. 1:22-23).
- B. The Bible says nothing about the church being a building. It says nothing about the church being an institution that people get into. It says nothing about denominations. It describes the church as a collective of people who acknowledge Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. They are separated to Christ, thus made holy. They are those who submit to His headship and are purchased with His blood. Acts 2 describes them as believers, who had repented (i.e. they had turned to God), who were baptized for the forgiveness of their sins.
- C. The Bible identifies these people as disciples or Christians (Acts 11:26). Does your perception of who a Christian is square with this revelation?
 1. Observe there were no "John the Baptist Christians," no "Elijah Christians," no "Catholic Christians," no Lutherans, no Pentecostals, no Jehovah's Witnesses, no Mormons, etc., just Christians.
 2. There are a variety of group names employed in Scripture to describe these people.
 - a. The kingdom (Matt. 16:19).
 - b. The body (Eph. 1:22-23).
 - c. The flock (Acts 20:28)
 - d. God's household (family) (Eph. 1:19).

- e. The bride of Christ (Eph. 5:22ff).
 - f. The church (Eph. 5:32).
 - 1) of God (Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 1:2).
 - 2) of Christ (Rom. 16:16).
 - 3) of the firstborn (Heb. 12:23).
 - g. The general assembly (Heb. 12:23).
 - h. The city of the living God (Heb. 12:22).
 - i. The heavenly (new) Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22; Rev. 21:2).
 - j. His people (Rev. 21:3).
3. None of these were denominational names. None were used exclusive of the others. (While I believe there is a denomination, maybe more than one, designated "Church of Christ" today such did not exist in N.T. days. I claim no part in any "Church of Christ" denomination today.)

III. The church of the Bible is not composed of various denominations.

- A. It is composed of Christians.
- B. What about denominationalism then?
 - 1. Some explain denominations as different branches of Christ (Jn. 15:1-10).
 - 2. This explanation brings denominations to this passage and assumes the point to be proven.
 - 3. The branches in this passage are individual Christians.
 - a. Are whole denominational groups pruned or are individuals pruned?
 - b. Are denominational groups clean because of the word spoken to them or are individuals clean because of the word spoken to them?
 - c. In verse 6 Jesus says, "If **anyone** does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch." Does this mean that individuals are thrown away or that whole denominations are thrown away?
 - d. In verse 7 does the word of Christ abide in individuals or in denominational organizations?
 - e. Are the disciples of verse 8 individuals or denominations?
 - 4. This passage does not establish denominations. It portrays individual Christians as branches in Christ who is the vine.
- C. And besides that denominationalism signifies division and Scripture reveals that Christ died to establish unity (Eph. 2:13-18).
- D. He prayed that we might all be one (Jn. 17:11).
- E. Paul admonished us to diligence in preserving the unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3). He said, "There is one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God

and

Father of all" (Eph. 4:4).

- F. Perhaps it is too much to ask. Perhaps it is naive. Perhaps it is impractical to expect people to be unified. But apparently it worked in the first century. Jews. Gentiles. Slaves. Freedmen. Different languages. Different cultures. Different religious backgrounds. They all came together in one group. It was not easy because they had been sinners of a variety of sorts: fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, effeminate, homosexuals, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, swindlers, but washed and

justified in the name of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 5:9-11). Sometimes there was carnality and division (1 Cor. 1:10ff). Some abandoned the cause. But it did not change the ideal nor the demand for unity.

- G. One thing is for sure these people demanded an abandonment of idolatry and every false religion (cf. Ex. Acts 17:26). They turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God (1 Thess. 1:9-10). They turned to God from 1st century Judaism. They knew toughness. They were not compromisers. They laid their lives on the line. Perhaps we are just too wimpy to take a stand. Perhaps we just want to be politically correct and are not courageous enough to take a stand. Maybe we just don't believe in the power of God and are trusting in ourselves to bring about unity.
- H. Maybe we just don't love one another like we claim we do. Paul says, "Love is the perfect bond of unity" (Col. 3:14), but that love demands humility, gentleness and patience. It demands that we bear with one another and forgive each other! Maybe we just don't love one another like Christ loves us.

Conclusion:

1. Unity is hard work.
2. It cost Jesus His life.
3. It will cost you: family relationships, position, money. I don't know if you can give up denominational affiliations, family relationships, sin, and the like in order to give your allegiance to Christ and to Christ alone, but that is what is required.
4. I had a friend who said, "If it doesn't cost you anything it's probably not worth much!" You can be a Christian without being a member of any denomination. It must be worth a lot, because it sure is costly!