

“Wait – What’s the Point of All This, Again?”

John 17.20-23

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

May 29, 2016

Christ’s prayer was that his followers be *united*, in perfect harmony, like the majestic unity of the Trinity. “I pray that they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you ... so that they can be one just as we are one ... so that they will be made perfectly one.” How far we are from that vision.

We are living in *very* turbulent and bewildering times. Culture is shifting all around us. It is an election year, and that brings its own set of unique challenges, though the character of *this* election feels decidedly different than previous elections. It feels like the quality of discourse has sunk to an all-time low, and we watch in amazement as one of our major parties descends into an internal civil war. There is an escalating amount of violence at the local level – to name just one example out of many, how many school shootings have there been in recent years? So many that I’ve lost count; so many that whenever another one happens, foreign news agencies comment, “Just another day in America.”

And then there’s the church. The body of believers in Jesus Christ. I am truly grateful that for the most part the people in this congregation play fairly and treat each other with respect; we’ve come a *long* ways from where we used to be. But while we’ve been getting healthier and stronger, our denomination has been coming apart at the seams. We were debating some important issues when I was ordained in 2003. Between then and now, the *debate* has practically turned into a *war*. If you imagine a see-saw or a teeter-totter, imagine one side pushing *so hard*, with such incredible *force*, and (honestly) with some really objectionable *tactics*, that the whole thing jerks violently, and people on the other end go flying off in all directions. We have literally lost hundreds of churches, thousands of pastors, and tens of thousands of members in a very short span of time, because Presbyterians have not been able to agree on certain important issues. You may think it’s all about one issue. It is *not* just about one issue. I count at least *four* separate, distinct issues where there is strong disagreement, with the result a whole bunch of people have decided to go play in a different sandbox, including some people I consider friends. The same thing is now starting to happen in the United Methodist Church; a few weeks ago I received prayer requests from two Methodist pastors as they headed into what they anticipated would be the most divisive and contentious General Conference in living memory. I don’t think this is what Jesus envisioned when he said, “I pray that they will be *one*, Father ... *perfectly* one.”

I own a lot of books. I’m struck sometimes by how much diversity there is on my bookshelf. While most of the authors on my shelves would say, “Jesus is Lord,” quite a few of them would take

issue with what some of the *other* authors on my shelves would say. There are so many different versions of what people call “Christianity” today, and they don’t fall neatly along denominational lines. Even in these pews, we’ve got a *lot* of different opinions on a *lot* of different issues. That makes preaching here somewhat challenging; there are times when I know that if I say *this* about *that* issue, then *this* person isn’t going to be happy; and if I say the opposite, then *that* person isn’t going to be happy. Thank God my job here isn’t to please *people*, or else I’d be *completely failing, all the time!*

As the social order changes, old structures that used to be strong and solid are shaking at their foundations. Organizations all over the place are trying to figure out how to balance their budget, or attract younger members, or come up with a vision that’s going to be effective in this twenty-first century, or – in more dire cases – just *hold on for as long as they possibly can*. It feels like there’s chaos and uncertainty virtually everywhere we turn. Our whole social order is changing – and it’s affecting *everything*. When so much is uncertain, where do we turn? How do we make *sense* of all the chaos?

Well, the first answer should be obvious. We are in church, after all. The answer’s Jesus, right? Yes, of course, the answer’s Jesus! The Word of God incarnate! *Absolutely* we have to start with Jesus. But the problem is – a lot of different people are saying a lot of different things about Jesus. Was he just a *man* who lived and died a long time ago? Or was he *more* than that? And if more, *how much* more?

So we need the Bible. The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. If we truly want to know who Jesus Christ is, then we *need* the Bible. The Word of God written, which bears unique and authoritative witness to the Word of God incarnate. Unfortunately, some Christians seem to think the Bible’s optional. That it’s no longer relevant. That it’s too tied to the culture in which it emerged. I will wholeheartedly agree that historical context matters, *but* I will *vehemently* disagree with anyone who thinks they can be a Christian without the Bible. In twenty centuries, orthodox Christianity has *never* said that the Bible is optional – and *every single renewal effort* in the history of the church has gone back to the *Bible* as its core. There would never have been a Protestant Reformation if Martin Luther hadn’t been reading his Bible carefully. The church has a remarkable tendency to away wander from God’s Word. At our core we have always been a *Word-centered* tradition, and we must *remain* that.

But still, there is confusion. A lot of different people are saying a lot of different things about the Bible. Both the Old and New Testaments talk about *false prophets* and *false teachers*, people who *claimed* to be speaking a word from the Lord, when they had received no such thing; people who led many people astray from God’s truth. This problem hasn’t gone away. There are *so many* people, saying *so many* different things about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit – you *really have to be careful*. The stronger a foundation you have in the Holy Scriptures, the better off you’ll be. There are *so many* books being published by popular authors; some of them are *truly* good; others are really shallow, potentially misleading, or sometimes just plain *wrong*. Whatever authors *you* read ought to be helping you to grow in your knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. They ought to be leading you into a deeper understanding of God’s Word, a richer application of it in your own personal life, and a greater ability to reach others with the love and the grace of Jesus Christ. If they’re not doing that – if they’re just saying things that agree with your pre-conceived notions and aren’t challenging you to *grow in Christ* – you need to find some different authors to read! In Paul’s second letter to Timothy, he gives his

young protégé this advice: “Patiently correct, rebuke, and encourage your people with good teaching. For a time is coming when people will no longer listen to sound and wholesome teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear. They will reject the truth and follow after myths.” (2 Timothy 4.2-4) Are we not living in such a time *now*? People are looking for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear! Is that not the world we’re living in? Remember when we read through the book of Judges last year, and I talked about the last five chapters when *so much* was going *badly wrong*, and the constant refrain we heard was “In those days there was no king in Israel; each person did what they thought to be right.” *This is the world we’re living in.* “Yeah, I’ll follow Jesus – when it’s convenient for me.” “Yeah, I’ll listen to parts of the Bible – the parts I’m comfortable with.” “Yeah, I’ll pray – I’ll give God my wish list – and when he doesn’t come through on my timetable, I’ll conclude that he’s not really real.” Folks, *we can’t do this!* These kind of attitudes are *so prevalent* today – and they’re *destroying* us! They are killing the church; they are cheapening the gospel; they are demeaning who Jesus Christ is, and why he matters.

There are a lot of opinions on what the church needs today. We need more people in the pews. We need more youth and young adults. We need more money. We need a better building. All of that may be true. Most churches put most of their effort on those things, the “ABCs”: *attendance, building, cash*. But churches that focus their primary efforts in those three areas will be disappointed, because there’s something the church needs more than *any* of that. The church needs a *mission*. The church needs a *vision*. The church needs a *reason for being*. We need to know: what’s the *point* of all this?

Three hundred seventy years ago, during another turbulent and bewildering period in human history, when the whole social order was changing, in the midst of the English Civil War, in the year of our Lord 1646, some 120 theologians gathered in Westminster Abbey to clarify *what really matters*. They produced three documents, which became the foundational theological documents of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland and, later, in the United States. The most well-known of those documents is the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which begins with three foundational questions:

1. What is the chief end of man? (*That is, what’s our purpose in life?*) Answer: Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.
2. What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him? (*That is, where do we learn how to do that?*) Answer: The Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.
3. What do the Scriptures principally teach? Answer: The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.

When I get confused, bewildered, or discouraged by all the *disunity* in Christ’s church and the *chaos* swirling around us, this is one of the places where I turn. What’s my purpose in life? *To glorify God, and to live eternally in the joy that God offers.* How do I know how to do that? *By learning and applying the Bible.* What does the Bible primarily talk about? *Who God is, and what God desires.* What’s the *point* of all this? *God.* *God* is the point of all this. It’s not about me, *my* wants, or *my* desires. Nor is it about *you*, *your* wants, or *your* desires. It’s about *God* – and the *life* and *joy* he offers to those who glorify him.

© 2016 Rev. Bill Pinches