

What is the Church? Her People

John 3:3

Last week we read how the church belongs to Jesus Christ. *He is her Lord*. The church is the assembly of people, who have been called out of spiritual death, darkness, & depravity by the Triune God; and delivered unto life, light, & holiness by this same God, for the purpose of worshipping & glorifying Him. The Lord Jesus creates the church – He builds the church – He is the Head of the church.

But what does it mean to belong to the church? Who belongs to it? What is the necessary mark to be of the church? I think this question has great significance, particularly in our day. I believe it's an understatement to say the American church is *confused* on what is *necessary & essential* to be part of the church.

The Barna Group conducted a "State of the Church" research poll in 2016. The question posed by the Barna Group was – "*Do you identify as a Christian?*" This is what they found: "Most people in this country identify as Christian. [In fact], almost three-quarters of Americans (73%) say they are a Christian" (<https://www.barna.com/research/state-church-2016/>).

Does this surprise you? I think when we hear that number – 73% claiming to be Christian – we should rightly roll our eyes in disbelief, because we look around at the state of our nation, seeing that $\frac{3}{4}$ of it is certainly not living for God!

But even more head-scratching is that of those 73%, only 31% call themselves "practicing Christians," while over 40% call themselves "non-practicing Christians." **What in the world does that mean?** You either are a Christian or you aren't Christian, right? As the saying goes... *You either are pregnant or you aren't pregnant...* there's no middle ground between, as is the case in belonging to the church.

And the waters become even more muddy when these 73% are asked about basic teachings of the Bible; many of those who call themselves *born again*, believe that good works will result in salvation or contribute to it. And then there is a percentage of those who say they belong to the church because of water baptism or participating in Communion or simply because "they grew up" in a particular church.

It's become a *pandemic of confusion* throughout our country. For many in the 73%, the answer to "**what is the necessary mark to be included in the church**"... *comes down to self-effort* – whether from participation in ordinances or longevity in attendance or from some other activity engaged in – to many who claim to be part of the church, the essential mark to "get in," *is based on self*.

In generations previously, knowing who is "the church," was always of primary importance so, answering that question *conclusively*, should be of utmost importance to us too. **That's because, there is no greater question than this...there is no matter as crucial in this life or the life to come, than knowing the answer to "what is necessary & essential to be of the church."**

Even the writers of Scripture dwell on the importance of knowing if you are or are not part of it. "*Be all the more diligent to confirm our calling and election,*" Peter tells us in 2 Pet. 1:10. Likewise, Paul states in 2 Corinthians 12: "*Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.*"

Many years ago, after I first became a Christian, I was asked by a teammate of mine... a professing Christian, "Do you think God would really send anyone to hell?... I mean, aren't we all be part of His church, since He's so loving?" I answered with a sigh... No, no we won't all be part of the church. *Some will live in Paradise but more will perish in Hell.*

Who belongs to Christ's church is the only thing that matters in life. My aim this morning is to answer that question. John 3, conclusively answers the question... Jesus plainly gives the essential mark of the church in verse 3 - "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*" Without being born again, no one can come into His kingdom... no one can see God... *and no one can be in His Son's church.*

Well, so what's going here in John 3. Let me take several minutes here to camp out & unpack it a bit for us... stay with me, I'm taking the long way around the barn. Let's back up to John 2:13... this is the episode when Jesus removes the false worshippers from the temple with a whip He fashions... the first of 2 times He will do this.

These money-changers are men who should know better; they are men who claim to know God, but are corrupt & take advantage of others; making the Temple court a place of merchandise & extortion & false worship. Christ's righteous zeal rises up, prompting Him to drive them out with great anger saying "*...do not make My Father's house a house of trade!*" And then verse 23 goes on to say, "*...now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many **believed** in His name when they saw the signs that He was doing.*

This passage is easily misunderstood. If we know what's happening here, we will grasp the significance of chapter 3 and in particular, *what being "born again" really entails.* Because verse 23 leads us to believe that Jesus saw many men come to faith because of the signs He performed - it says there, "*many believed in His name,*" and if we only fixate on that and smile & feel warmed & fuzzy inside, quickly moving past the rest of the passage... *we miss His point.*

That's because verse 24 is the key to interpreting verse 23; The "*many who believed,*" we are told that Jesus "would not entrust Himself to them." We have to ask, "Why not entrust yourself to your new found believers, Jesus? Why not give Yourself over to them *intimately* as their Savior?"

Well, verses 24 & 25 give us the answer: "*...because He knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for He Himself knew what was in man.*" Jesus understands mankind. He knows our natures... our hearts. We are unrighteous; we are evil doers; we are murders; we are liars; we are "*white washed tombs*" - we are clean on the outside - "*but we are full of dead men's bones*" - that is to say, we are really dead on the inside.

These who "believed on His name" are phonies. Hypocrites. Liars. They liked His works... they were attracted to what He could do; they were amazed by His signs & wonders... but their belief is external only; their hearts remain dead & unfeeling.

We see this throughout John's gospel. This language of believing on Him in connection to His signs & wonders is found again in chapter 6:2: "*And a great multitude followed Him... because they saw His signs which He did on the sick.* Furthermore, in chapter 6:26-27, we hear Jesus exposing their hypocrisy: "*Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you.*

Jesus rebukes His traveling caravan of "disciples" for their attraction to what He gives physically - and not what He gives spiritually. And verse 66 gives the evidence of why Jesus

wouldn't entrust Himself to them [after Jesus makes belief narrow & exclusive & demanding] "*after this... many of His disciples turned back and no longer walked with Him.*"

What happened? We see Jesus calling them out in chapter 6, for what He already knew about these "who believe on His name," from chapter 2...**they did not possess an *internal, saving belief***... "*for He Himself knew what was in man.*" These disciples had an external trust...the same way I believe an airplane will get me from point A to point B. *I trust the airplane will fulfill my desire*; I trust it will do the job in an amazing, inexplicable way; as I fly in a metal tube with long fuel bombs called wings, gliding along on the air, floating 5 miles up, at speeds of 500 mph, – it's simply amazing, astonishing, unbelievable! But this kind of believing doesn't change my heart one bit once I arrive. This is Jesus to them. He is really something unique; powerful; amazing & able to fulfill their fleshly desires. He can really deliver; He's a living genie in a bottle. If I'm hungry, He feeds me. If I'm sick, He heals me...and so, I believe in Jesus, right!

Pastor John Piper says of this type of belief, "...Jesus knows what is in every heart, and so He can see when someone believes in a way that is not really believing. In other words, Jesus's ability to know every heart perfectly leads to the unsettling truth that some belief is not the kind of belief that obtains fellowship with Jesus and eternal life. **Some belief is not saving belief**" (www.desiringgod.org/messages/he-knew-what-was-in-man).

If you don't know by now, I have a passion for people to know the truth. I'm concerned that many people in church buildings & on the church rolls do not possess a saving belief. You and have seen people who claim Jesus, walk away from Him – through disobedience & just plain disappearance. Children who were once active in youth or young adults, have grown up & left; adults who were once involved in studies & attendance, are absent now; People who were engaged in all the busyness of church life, now gone. **What happened?** Dare we say, "**some belief is not saving belief.**" **Judas Iscariot confirms that.**

This is why we labor to teach God's word...in Sunday School, in worship, on Wednesdays. We labor to teach truth...not to fill your heads with facts but to see the Spirit fill you with life. Our souls depend on it. The difference between life & death hangs in the balance; Jesus knows what's in a man...Heaven & Hell is in view.

Well, that was all introduction...we made it around the barn. Let's look at John 3 to understand the significance of *being born again* as the essential mark to belong to the church of Jesus Christ. Look at vv. 1& 2. *Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."*

I've labored to explain that religious men, like the money changers are not true believers. And disciples who say they believe in Jesus sometimes do not really. In both cases, their belief is external & is a sham; *Jesus knows what's in a man's heart* - they cannot *naturally* belong to Christ's church.

This is the situation with Nicodemus: The text says there was a "*man of the Pharisee's.*" Not just a Pharisee, but a *man* of the Pharisee's... Why did John say it like that? It goes back to chapter 2: "*For Jesus Himself knew what was in man.*" Nicodemus is a Pharisee – he is revered as a zealous & righteous man of God. He is a ruler of the Jews – he is a respected political member of the highly religious Sanhedrin. He is an exalted teacher of the Law of God; He teaches God's Word. The community sees him as a devote man of God – *but Jesus*

sees him as a dead man...he is no better off than the money-changer or the deserting disciples.

Well, Jesus will have none of Nicodemus' flattery; knowing what's in a man's heart. So, He cuts to the chase in verses 3-8: *Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."*⁴ *Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"*⁵ *Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'*⁸ *The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."*

Nicodemus, you're deceived; your righteousness is as filthy rags; Your efforts are worthless; if you want to enter into God's kingdom, "*you must be born again.*" At this statement, this premier teacher in Israel *stumbles*. Nicodemus cannot get his head around such a statement.

Jesus doubles down saying again, "*Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'*" Nicodemus' view of salvation has just been shattered. Essentially, he believed he was headed to heaven because of his heritage – he is a Jew. He trusted he was headed for Paradise because he kept the Law fastidiously – he does good works... Just like the 73%, who claim to belong to the church because of their own self effort. But the apostle John says earlier in his gospel: No one has ever been born again by "*blood, nor by the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but only of God.*"

What does it mean to be born again? We hear this language in church...usually we say, "I am a born-again Christian," but what does this mean?

To be *born again* refers to the rebirth of man by the Holy Spirit...more literally rendered as, "born from above." Nicodemus, you must be born *from above!* AND...you can only be born again by God's will – His doing – His choosing. To be born again is solely & exclusively accomplished by God the Holy Spirit...*there is no act of man's will, or act of works, or family tree that salvation belongs to...no.*

The theological term is *regeneration*, whereby God "rebirths" spiritually dead man into a spiritually alive man. This is distinct from physical birth – to be *regenerated* or *born again* is to be made a new creation, made *alive*, in Jesus Christ. As someone has said, *Physical birth fits us for earth; spiritual rebirth fits us for heaven.* It's crucial to know: You & I contribute nothing to either birth: One is done to us by our parents & the other is done to us by God.

This is Christ's point in v. 8 when He says, "*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*" The Holy Spirit is likened to the wind; He goes where He wishes, and doing His regenerating work on whom He wishes.

Jesus encounters a rich young man in Mark 10 and the young man asks Jesus, "*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" **Did you hear it...what must I do to inherit eternal life?** *What works can I do to get into the church?* Attendance? Baptism? Communion? Walk an aisle? Youth Group? Membership roll? The Sinners Prayer? Bible Study?

Jesus answers the young man the same way He answered Nicodemus - "*With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.*" It's only through God's

regeneration that a *dead man becomes alive to inherit eternal life*. Only when “*He has caused us to be born again,*” according to Peter, will Jesus “*entrust Himself to us.*” **Garden Lakes – the necessary mark to belong to the church of Jesus Christ is you must be born again. Nothing else will do.**

Jesus Christ secured His church’s salvation – do you know that? He didn’t live perfectly, die perfectly, rise perfectly, & ascend perfectly for a *potential church*, but for an *actual church*. In other words, the church has a *definite people*. When Christ said in Matthew 16:18 – “*I will build My church,*” that is a statement of surety; of guarantee...He will secure His church of saints who are born again from above!

We intuitively think we must do something/ add works to be part of the universal church...we are not any different from Nicodemus...we are man. But, it’s all of God’s work – lest we rob God of His due glory. Paul tells us in Ephesians 1 of the Triune God’s regenerating work; God the Father chooses the church – “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.*” **In Jesus Christ** “*we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.*” **And by the Holy Spirit,** “*we are sealed*” & “*guaranteed an inheritance...to the praise of His glory.*” Because of the work of the Father, Son, & Holy Spirit we are made alive with Him in the rebirth.

We must respond to this truth however. We do so through faith & repentance. We trust in God, through Christ’s work of atonement. We turn away from our sins, to serve the living God. This is how we respond to the new birth; in turn we become the church.

George Whitefield was perhaps the greatest English evangelist ever to walk the terrain of Great Britain and then America. He was famous for open field preaching; over 18,000 sermons preached in just 35 years – with his booming voice, lively disposition & passionate pleas for men to be born again, he often returned to John 3:3 to appeal to men.

When “a lady once asked George Whitefield why he so often insisted on preaching on these words, “You must be born again,” Whitefield replied. “Because, Madam, you must [born again].” (Sinclair Ferguson, *In Christ Alone: Living the Gospel Centered Life* Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2007), 127.

This is my plea to you – you must be born again. Do not rest in your attendance, or family upbringing, or church participation, or a prayer prayed – Do not look to any works you have done in baptism or communion. You must respond in heart and call on Him; cry out to Him; He will listen & save.

To avoid God’s wrath, *you must be born again*. Let’s pray.