

The sermon

Intro

Life can be a monotonous routine. We can get used to just going through the motions. We can forget why we gather together every Sunday.

As we begin a new year I'd like us to reflect on why we're here. Why does Palermo Christian Church exist? I think we get some answers in Matthew 28:16-20.

READ PASSAGE

Body

Preliminary Remarks

Before we get to the passage, there's foundational questions we should ask ourselves from time to time.

Why are we gathering together this morning? Why are we singing? Why am I preaching a sermon? Why do we have elders and deacons? Why do we have church membership? Why not just watch a service on TV? Why the need for Palermo Christian Church?

First simple answer: because God commands it in his word.

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,* ²⁵ *not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.* – **Hebrews 10:23-25**

Because there's pressure from the outside world, we're tempted to waver. Because we're tempted to waver, we need other Christians to encourage us. Because we need other Christians to encourage us, we need to show up at the church building when the church gathers.

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. – **Hebrews 13:17**

Leaders keep watch over the souls of individual believers. And the individual believer submits to those leaders who watch over their souls. Submission primarily meaning submission to the leader's teaching. The assumption is the leader is teaching God's word well.

Second simple answer: because this is God's good and wise design.

We're designed for structured community. Thus, the many "one another" commands in the New Testament. We read a few in Hebrews 10.

Okay. We know that God commands certain things. Like obeying your leaders or leaders watching over individual Christians or church discipline or selecting elders and deacons or gathering together when the church assembles.

But why? Why the leaders? Why the gathering? Why the interaction between individual Christians? Why the structured community? That's where Matthew 28:16-20 comes in.

The structured community has a purpose.

Point 1: To make disciples

Setting

Jesus with the 11 remaining apostles. After Jesus' resurrection. Some needed instructions before his departure. Some had doubts about what they were seeing.

Explanation

4 commands:

- 1) Go
- 2) Make disciples
- 3) Baptize
- 4) Teach

And there's a sequence:

- 1) Go

They aren't going to stay in Galilee.

- 2) Make disciples

Note disciples are made from all the nations. The conversion of the Gentiles foretold in the Old Testament (Isa 42:6; 49:6) is about to take place.

Under the Old Covenant it was a come and see religion.

Under the New Covenant it's a go and tell religion.

- 3) Baptize

After a disciple is made, baptize that person. Baptism follows becoming a disciple, so disciple means believer. Baptism follows belief.

- 4) Teach

Teaching follows belief. Teaching follows baptism.

Gospel

What is it these disciples believed?

There's a Creator God who made us and our world. As Creator, he possesses all authority. We answer to him. He doesn't answer to us.

This God is holy. Meaning he can't tolerate sin. Sin is failure to keep God's commands. We've all failed to perfectly keep God's commands. So we willingly place ourselves under his punishment by breaking his law.

This God isn't just holy. He's good and merciful. So he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to earth, taking on human flesh to die on a cross for sinners. Such that whoever believes in Jesus will be forgiven of sin and heirs of eternal life. There is nothing we can do to remove our guilt. Only Jesus' death can remove sin.

This God calls us to respond to him in faith and repentance. That is turning from sin by trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection. If we believe, every sin (past, present, future) is pardoned and we'll dwell with Jesus forever and ever when he comes a 2nd time.

Baptism

Just a few thoughts on baptism.

- 1) Since baptism follows belief, we only baptize believers.
- 2) Baptism was the way a person entered the church.

We could say people became church members through baptism. In baptism, the church makes a public declaration, “this person is a disciple of Jesus.”

There’s no category for unbaptized Christians in the New Testament.

- 3) Baptism is an act of obedience.

That’s one reason we require baptism as a converted believer for membership. Are you a believer who hasn’t been baptized after believing? Talk with me. Is God showing you this morning that you need to be baptized? Let’s talk. Questions about baptism? Let’s have that discussion.

- 4) Baptism seems rather immediate here.

It’s believe → get baptized → be taught. Teaching follows baptism.

Here at Palermo Christian Church we don’t baptize people immediately after they profess faith. We require that they meet with the elders for a baptism interview. The questions generally are what is the gospel? and tell me about how you became a Christian. The goal is to ensure that the people we baptize are actually Christians.

Our baptism interview helps us obey Jesus’ commands. Jesus said to baptize disciples. Those who believe. That’s what we’re striving to do.

Make disciples

A few thoughts on making disciples.

We’re commanded to make disciples, but we can’t enforce belief. We’re commanded to produce what we can’t actually produce: faith. We can’t manipulate people into faith. We can’t, through perfect technique or perfect arguments, ensure faith. That’s not our burden.

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. – 1 Corinthians 3:5-7

Our job is to plant and water by speaking the gospel. We can’t ensure a believing response. Only God can produce a believing response in the hearts of those we evangelize.

But Jesus speaks as if it’s an attainable task. Disciples will be made. The church will grow. The gospel mission will succeed.

Application

Why do we exist? Why this structured community called the church? One reason God has brought us together is to make disciples. We exist to share the gospel with non-Christians. This means going and telling. Not just waiting for them to come and see. We go into the world together. We meet weekly to encourage one another to continue sharing the gospel. We share our struggles and pray for each other’s efforts.

That’s God’s design.

Point 2: To help others learn and do what's commanded

“teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” – 28:20

Commands would involve both positive instruction (e.g., encourage one another, give generously) and prohibitions (e.g., don't lie, don't steal). Obedience is both doing good and refraining from evil. We fail to obey Jesus when we cross God's boundaries. We also fail to obey when we don't do what's commanded.

Jesus isn't sending us to street witness in Portland and get decisions and leave people to themselves. Jesus is sending us out into the world to bring people into the church where they can learn truth and then practice truth.

Completeness

Note also that Jesus wants complete, not partial, disciples. He's not after partial obedience. He wants complete Christians. All he's commanded. New understanding, new thinking. Leading to new ways of doing life.

Paul put it this way:

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ *For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.* – **Colossians 1:28-29**

Meaning Paul worked tirelessly in the strength God supplied so that every believer would be taught, so that every single believer would be mature, complete.

When we encountered Colossians I said, **Colossians is all about pressing on towards completeness (no area of life untouched by God's word) in submission to Jesus' lordship.**

Completeness speaks to every aspect of the Christian life. Our relationships in the church. Our marriages. Our parenting. Our work ethic. Our personal evangelism. Biblical spirituality is more than forgiveness of sins. More than heavenly hope. More than devotions in the morning. More than a Sunday morning experience.

Jesus saves us to make us new and alter every area of our lives. Learning is for completeness. Completeness doesn't happen without learning.

Jesus wants complete, whole disciples where God's word touches every aspect of life.

Application

Why does Palermo Christian Church exist? This structured community exists so that there's a place for new believers to be instructed in all of Jesus' commands. We exist to help new believers learn all of Jesus' commands and obey them. We exist to help each other have no area of life untouched by God's word. We do this together. We meet weekly to learn. We meet weekly to encourage one another in learning and doing.

That's God's design.

Point 3: To learn and do what's commanded myself

If every disciple should be instructed in all of Jesus' commands for obedience purposes, this includes us too. There's an obligation on every single one of us to be learners. And doers. Christian, Jesus is placing an obligation on all of us: be learners and doers of all he's commanded.

This means there's an obligation on your elders to teach you the whole counsel of God. There's an obligation on your elders to guide you to good, edifying resources. There's an obligation on us elders to be deep and broad. To emphasize all of Jesus' commands, not just some.

And there's an obligation on each of you. To be learners. To make use of the programming available here. To read the Bible regularly so as to be familiar with God's commands. To pray regularly for God's help to obey what he commands. To receive encouragement and correction your brothers and sisters provide.

Illustration

When meditating on completeness, I thought of the complete basketball player. Like the Celtics' Jayson Tatum.

Offense: step back 3, catch and shoot 3, mid-range pull-up, post fade, can drive at will.

Defense: can cover guards and forwards on ball, contests shots, steals, blocks, rebounds, can switch onto anyone.

He's about as complete as there is.

If sports isn't your thing, think cooking. On the Food Network there's people who can do Cajun, French, Italian, Mexican, etc. They've mastered techniques like braising, broiling, grilling, poaching, sautéing, smoking, etc. Breakfast, lunch, dinner. Desert. Apple pie, cheesecake, cupcakes, macaroons, etc. They can do it all.

Musically, the person who can sing, play drums, guitar (solo and rhythm), bass, piano, violin, flute, etc.

Jesus is saying he saves you so that you'll be a complete, developed, well-rounded disciple. Sports fans, Jesus wants you to be a Jayson Tatum type of Christian. Well-rounded, multi-faceted obedience.

I'm not talking about serving in every area of our church or having every spiritual gift.

I'm saying we need to be well-rounded in our knowledge of God's commands. Well-rounded in our obedience. Obeying Jesus by serving in the church, stirring "*up one another to love and good works*", loving our spouse, parenting well, honoring father and mother, working hard in the workplace, and evangelizing.

We want to be disciples where God's word touches every area of our lives.

And a player like Jayson Tatum, as complete as he is, has room for improvement: sloppy dribbling and careless passes, particularly at crunch time. Well-rounded chefs are still improving particular cuisines and techniques.

There's always room for our knowledge and obedience to improve. We'll always have a reason to live!

Application

Why do we exist? To grow in our understanding of God's word and obedience to God's commands.

That's God's design for disciples.

Point 4: Do these with confidence in Jesus' authority and presence

In case you're hearing me wrong, I'm not saying obedience is easy. In our advent series we learned that we're sick and broken people. We need God to change our hearts. Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing (John 15:5).

And I'm not saying evangelize out of guilt.

If we're hearing Jesus correctly, we evangelize and obey from confidence in Jesus, that is, from faith.

First, we live from confidence in Jesus because "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*" Meaning Jesus issues commands and acts with supernatural power. We're proclaiming the words of the Lord of the universe! The Lord of the universe acts supernaturally for us!

Second, we live from confidence in Jesus because ***“I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*** That’s divine enablement to obey. Because Jesus indwells us, he’s changing our thoughts, our attitudes, our desires. He’s moving us from sick to healthy. We’re a new creation. This gives us confidence we can obey.

As for evangelism, Jesus gives courage to speak, love for the gospel, love for lost people, wisdom to speak the right words, eyes to see the open door before us.

Evangelism is a fruit of Christ’s presence in our heart!

And Jesus is present to bring mission results. Jesus works on human hearts through our gospel conversations.

And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. – John 10:16

Jesus’ other sheep are Gentiles. Meaning Jesus has sheep that haven’t yet believed. When we speak the gospel to them, they will receive our message (*“I must bring them also”*).

We don’t know who these sheep are. But we know they’re out there. So we proclaim the gospel to everyone we come across.

What guarantees mission success? Jesus’ presence. Disciples will be made when we go because Jesus is with us. He enables us to speak. He brings conversion through the proclamation he enables. All glory goes to Jesus, not us.

A good prayer is, “Jesus work in me. Jesus work for me.”

Conclusion

So what is Palermo Christian Church here for? Why has God placed us together in structured community?

- 1) **To make disciples** by proclaiming the gospel.
- 2) **To help others learn and do what’s commanded.**
- 3) **To learn and do what’s commanded myself.**

How do we do these?

With confidence in Jesus’ authority and presence.