Believe: “How Does God Accomplish His Purposes Today?”
Ephesians 4:15; Matthew 16; John 15

As we return to our BELIEVE series, the question of the week is this: “How does God accomplish His purposes today?”

According to the Bible and a Christian worldview, our belief statement is as follows: “I believe the church is God’s primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth.”

Our scripture memory verse associated with our belief statement comes for Ephesians 4:15: “Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.” So there you have it: God’s primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth is the…Church.

If you recall, A.W. Tozier once wrote: “What comes to mind when we think of God is the most important thing about us.” I would suggest that what comes to mind when we think of “church” has a whole lot to do with what comes to mind when we think about God. Unfortunately, many of us have very negative, or at best, suspicious ideas when it comes to the word “church”…and for good reason. When we hear about priests abusing children, when we hear about pastors running off with the organists, when we hear about denominations breaking out in civil war, when we see churches calcified in their traditions with no interest in serving the community, when we listen to preachers “selling” salvation if only we will support their ministry, when we experience religious leaders who are controlling and manipulative…we have good reason to be suspicious and even disillusioned when we think of this word, “the church.” In fact, I suspect that most of you under the age of 50 have no problem with Jesus…your problem is with the Church, right? I get it. Now, I know I’m a pastor of a local church, and I understand that you think I lack objectivity on this subject. But now listen: I have been serving in churches since I was 18 years old. I have 30 years of experiencing churches of various sizes, denominations, and temperaments, and my attendance has been a bit more frequent than most of yours! I think that gives me some credibility on this subject. In 30 years of pastoral ministry, I have seen the good, the bad, and the ugly….some of my deepest wounds have come from the Church…don’t think for a second that I don’t understand some of your disillusionment. But I, along with my faithful wife Christy, have chosen NOT to leave…NOT to give up…and at the end of this message, I’ll tell you why. But trust me…I get it, and I’m sorry for those who have had negative experiences in the past when it comes to churches. I know those memories and those painful experiences are real, and I will not in any way suggest that you should just “get over it.” I would like to suggest, however, that God is not finished with His Church just yet, and you may want to reconsider your perspective about the church based upon what we will learn in scripture this morning.
So…let’s get started. My goal this morning is to unpack this concept of “church” under the following headings: 1) What the Church is not; 2) How Jesus sees the Church; 3) How God will accomplish His purposes through the Church.

I. What the Church is NOT

1) The Church is not, in its essence, an institution. Webster defines an institution this way: an organization or establishment devoted to the promotion of a cause or program. I know, you’re thinking…that sounds a lot like our church…Colonial Presbyterian Church. We are an organization devoted to the promotion of a cause…right? We are an organization devoted to promoting the cause of Christ, and that leads us to promote the cause of the poor and the fatherless and to contend for those who are lost in our hurting culture. So…the Church is an institution, right? Wrong. The CHURCH is not an institution…the Church HAS an institution…but the CHURCH is not an institution. The CHURCH is people…God’s people…those who have been saved by the blood of Jesus. But when those people choose to organize, gather, join resources, and mobilize for the sake of advancing God’s Kingdom on earth, the organization that results is commonly referred to as a local church that has a building and a zip code and a membership. The organizational institution, however, is NOT the church…the Church is comprised of those people who are saved by Jesus. When the institution/organization/denomination becomes confused with The Church, we are in trouble. Such is why so many people have a negative view of “the church”…they equate their memories of “church” with the institutional leadership, the buildings, the politics, the traditions, and the ineffective practices of organizations that bore the title, “church.” But listen friends: the Church is not an institution. The Church is the assembly of believers…the fellowship of the redeemed, and it is currently about 2.2 billion people on this planet. We’ll look deeper into what the church IS in a minute, but it’s vitally important to understand the difference between the Church and the church’s institutions.

In his book entitled, Ekklesia: Rediscovering God’s design for the Church, Pastor Tom Nelson lists four ways people mistakenly think of church. So I will borrow Pastor Nelson’s metaphors to further our list of what the Church is not. Nelson writes that…

2) The Church is not a gas station. Many people treat the church like a gas station that they run into once a week to get refueled for the week. I must confess, I sometimes slip into this frame of mind myself, both as one who is getting fueled up and one who is pumping the gas! But let’s face it: when we think of the Church like a gas station, we are the consumers, and the Church exists to provide a commodity. We’ll see why that’s a poor way to understand the Church in just a minute.
3) The Church is not a Movie Theater. Many people use the church as a brief escape from their crazy lives in much the same way that we go to a movie to have a few hours of rest and entertainment. Such is why we act like movie critics on the way home, giving a thumbs up or a thumbs down on the music and the message. But friends, the Church is not a movie theater. The Church does not exist to entertain you.

4) The Church is not a Drug Store. Many people look to the church to “fix them” when they are hurting, sick, or struggling. If we are feeling unhappy, we go to the church to find some medicine that will take away our pain, take away our problems, and somehow set us back on the path to happiness. Friends…the church is not a drug store. We do not exist to “fix” anyone, and we certainly do not exist for the sake of your happiness.

5) The Church is not a Big Box Retailer. Many people expect the Church to be a service provider for the whole family with low prices and excellent service. We want great music, insightful preaching, wonderful experiences for our children and teens, and free childcare. If we don’t find the services we’re looking for in this church, we’ll keep shopping until we find what we’re looking for that is in reasonable driving distance and requires little or nothing from us in terms of service or giving.

Alright, I could go on, but you get the point. The Church is largely misunderstood and, to some degree, misrepresented in the 21st century when we hold those images up to what we find in the Bible. So…given what the Church is NOT, let’s now turn to the question…

II) How Does Jesus Think About the Church?
Remember that the goal of our series is to think like Jesus thought, to act like Jesus acted, and to become like Jesus in every way that we can. So…what did Jesus have to say about Church?

1) Jesus thinks of the Church as…HIS! In Matthew 16:9, Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am? “ Peter bravely responds: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus then says to Peter, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” The Greek term Matthew employs for “church” is *ekklesia*. In the ancient Greek world, *ekklesia* was used widely in literature to describe a public gathering, an assembly of people summoned by a herald or town crier. In the Greek version of the Old Testament called the Septuagint, the word *ekklesia* is used frequently to describe “the assembling of Israel before God to hear the reading of the law, confess their sins, express repentance and renew the covenant.” (Nelson, p 19). Jesus clearly assumes this OT context as the Jewish Messiah and associates the *ekklesia* of God’s people called Israel with the new *ekklesia* of those who now hold to Peter’s confession that Jesus Christ
is Lord. And note, a) Jesus will “build” this assembly of believers; and b) this assembly of believers will belong to Jesus. Jesus calls the *ekklesia*, “MINE!”

**2) Jesus thinks of His Church as…a MISSION.** Note what Jesus said to Peter, “…the gates of Hell will not overcome it (the church).” Gates do not march; gates are designed to defend. Armies march, and whenever they achieve victory, it usually means they overcame the gates…they knocked the gates down and conquered the enemy who looked to the gates for protection. Jesus said the gates of Hell would not overcome or withstand HIS CHURCH. That means His church, by definition, plays offense, not defense. The Church of Jesus is the means by which God will accomplish His mission. And what is God’s mission in Jesus and His Church? 1 John 3:8: “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.” The supernatural mission of the Church of Jesus is knock down the gates of Hell, to destroy the works of Satan, and to take back that which was hijacked by the Evil One. Now…that sounds dramatic and supernatural, doesn’t it? Yep…it does. The Church of Jesus Christ…the *ekklesia*…is a supernaturally empowered assembly of those belonging to Jesus who exist to push back the darkness…to be the Light of Christ in a hurting world so that the lost are found, the broken are made whole, the fatherless find hope, and the world is blessed to the Glory of God.

So the Church, according to Jesus, is supernaturally missional, and Jesus has supernaturally equipped His missional *ekklesia* with “keys.” Look at what comes next in Matthew 16, beginning with vs. 19, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Keys unlock stuff, right? Keys give us access to places that other people can’t go because they don’t have the keys. Keys allow us to open locked doors…or perhaps locked gates that hold people captive. Jesus says to His Church, “I am giving you keys that grant access to the powers of heaven. With those keys, what you do on earth matters for eternity.” Such is why the Church is missional…we have been entrusted with the keys of the Gospel that set people free.

**3) Jesus thinks of His Church as…His BRIDE.** In several places throughout the NT, *the imagery and symbolism of marriage is applied to Christ and the body of believers known as the church. Christ, the Bridegroom, has sacrificially and lovingly chosen the church to be His bride (Ephesians 5:25–27). Just as there was a betrothal period in biblical times during which the bride and groom were separated until the wedding, so is the bride of Christ separate from her Bridegroom during the church age. Her responsibility during the betrothal period is to be faithful to Him (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:24). At the end of the age, the church will be united with the Bridegroom and the official “wedding ceremony” will take place and, with it, the
eternal union of Christ and His bride will be actualized (Revelation 19:7–9; 21:1-2) [quote taken from https://www.gotquestions.org/bride-of-Christ.html].

Now…here’s the point: Jesus loves His Church, just as a Bridegroom loves his Bride. Jesus chose the Church; Jesus courts His Church; Jesus sacrifices for His Church; Jesus lays down His life for His Church; Jesus anticipates a great union with His Church at the end of the age.

If Jesus loves and adores His Bride, who are we to cast Her aside? That is why I want you to reconsider your negative views about the Church. Jesus thought His Bride worth dying for…but we are willing to abandon the Bride should the service run 10 minutes late. Jesus gave up His life for the Bride when she was adulterous and rebellious…but we will give up on the Bride because no one made us feel welcome that one time that we visited. Jesus adores His Bride, warts and all, but we divorce the Bride when the people there turn out to be as fallen as we are.

I know that “churches” as organizations led by imperfect people are sometimes toxic or even hurtful. But THE CHURCH…the Bride of Christ…is singularly beautiful in the eyes of Jesus, and for that reason we should ask God to allow us to see the Bride like Jesus sees the Bride.

4) Jesus thinks of His Church as…an extension of Himself. In John 15:5 Jesus says to His beloved disciples, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”

When we repent and place our faith in Jesus, we are born into Jesus. We are attached to Him, our existence depends on Him, we draw nourishment from Him; and, as we abide in Christ, we bear fruit that brings glory to God. But should we seek to exist apart from Him, like a branch that is separated from the vine, we will wither and die. We will not bear fruit, and we become useless. “So,” says Jesus, “abide in me.” Stay connected to the vine.

Paul uses another metaphor to describe the Church as an extension of Jesus, and that metaphor is beautifully described in 1 Corinthians 12. Paul writes, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it…for just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.”

Think about that for a moment: if we are branches, we are useless apart from the vine. If we are members of the Body of Christ, apart from the body, whatever organ or appendage we might be will shrivel and die, and the Body will be missing us, right? If you are a detached foot, you are
useless to the body and you will not survive apart from the heart pumping blood into your cells. At the same time, the Body will suffer because it lacks a foot. This is the picture of the Church that we find in the NT. Every believer is spiritually born into the BODY OF CHRIST, and we simply cannot thrive or survive apart from the BODY. In the same way, each person is essential to the surviving and thriving of the Body.

Now, I’m not trying to convince you to join our organization this morning. I’m trying to convince you that if you are a Christian, you are already a member of the Body of Christ. My question is this: are you attached to the Body? Or are you living as a “foot” detached from the body? According to Jesus, if you are His disciple, you are a branch that was designed to bear fruit. My question to you is this: are you attached to the Vine? Are you bearing fruit? Or are you unattached…which, according to Jesus, means you are withering and fruitless? The picture that we find in the NT is that solitary, individualistic discipleship is a foreign concept…in fact, I would submit to you that it is impossible. If you are a believer, you are a member of the Body. Should you choose to act as though you are not a member of the Body…the Body suffers, and so do you.

Now…there is so much more I could say about the biblical metaphors that describe the church. But I will stop here so that we might turn our attention to the last question of this message…

III. How will God accomplish His purposes through the Church?

1) God will glorify Himself through His Church! Jesus states in John 15, “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.” In the end, we, the Church, exist on planet earth to bring glory to God. When God is glorified as God, all other competing deities are demolished. That is hugely important. The greatest evil in the world is idolatry…the practice of creating and worshipping artificial gods as though they can somehow save us. When the Church is faithful, when Jesus is high and lifted up, when the Gospel is preached and lived out among those who have been redeemed, God receives glory, and the idols are exposed for what they truly are…counterfeits. So Church…whatever you are doing, wherever you may be, “…do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). That is the first and foremost way God will accomplish His purposes through the Church.

2) God will love the world back to Himself through His Church. If I were to guess, I suspect that most of you would say that you are a Christian because you came to understand just how much God loves you in Jesus Christ. So…how did you come to understand the love of God? I suspect many of you read the Bible and learned about the love of God by reading the Gospels. But was that enough? Probably not. For most people, we come to know the love of God through the love of Christ’s church. We see Jesus in His people through their hospitality, their care, their generosity, their intentionality, their precious time, and their testimony. God reveals His love to
the watching world through His Son, and His Son is revealed through His Church…the Body of Christ.

3) God will set captives free through His Church. Remember, Jesus gave the “keys to the Kingdom” to his disciples…the Church. That means that the Church has been commissioned to go into the hard places of the world where people are being held captive by the Prince of Darkness in order to set them free using the “keys” that were entrusted to us.

Last week I visited with a couple who recently joined our church. They run a ministry for girls who were recently victims of human trafficking. In order to unlock these girls from the cells of their traumatized past, they use the Keys to the Kingdom entrusted to them…and for this couple, that comes in the form of horses! True story: God works through the horses to unlock the prison of their past so that these girls might experience hope and healing in Jesus Christ. I was amazed by the stories they told of how God supernaturally ministers to these girls through horses. But then I realized that God works supernaturally through music, food, sports, dreams, visions, science, medicine, generosity, and a thousand other ways to set captives free in Jesus’ name. Church, what keys have been entrusted to you? Where has God placed you so that you might be a part of His mission to set the prisoners free?

4) God will make His gospel known to the ends of the earth through His Church. When we read the Bible, we cannot help but discern that the most important TRUTH in all of the world is that Jesus died and rose again so that sinful human beings might be forgiven and inherit eternal life. That TRUTH, however, is not intuitive. We cannot come to a knowledge of the Gospel by looking at the ocean or staring at the stars. In order to come into a relationship with Jesus Christ, we must be told about Jesus Christ. In order that people might read the Bible and understand the gospel, they must first learn how to read and then have access to the Bible. In order for people to understand themselves as sinners and repent, someone must proclaim to them the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is our job…that is the ultimate mission of the local church. No government, no philanthropic organization, no other group of people anywhere in the world has been entrusted with this task…only the Church of Jesus Christ. Jesus said it plainly, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” God will accomplish His purpose to save the world through His Son, Jesus Christ, by mobilizing His Church and sending them to the very ends of the earth. Jesus prophesied in Matthew 24:14: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. Jesus didn’t say that might happen…He said it would happen. And I have no doubt that God will accomplish that purpose…of proclaiming the Gospel to the whole world…through His Church.
And that is why I have not given up on the Church. The local church is the hope of the world because we carry the keys…we carry the Gospel. That is serious business. Souls are at stake, prisoners are languishing, and the Enemy is gaining ground every moment that we…the Church…defect from our role. But hell shudders at the thought of this Church…His Church…on mission. And that is exactly what God intended.

Colonial, the time has come for the Church to arise! We are the Sons and Daughters of God…we are the redeemed, we are the Bride, we are the Body, and we have been entrusted with a mission that matters for all eternity. Half-heartedness will not win the day. Jesus did not choose us for co-habitation, He chose us to be MARRIED…full commitment, all in. The world is watching and waiting to see the Church that the Bible describes…the Bride of Christ, the Body of Christ, the Household of Christ, the Mission of Christ…the Love of Christ…the Power of Christ…the Joy of Christ…the Truth of Christ.

What will they see when they look at us? I pray they will see Jesus and be saved. Will you join me in that prayer?