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“Church” is a verb  
Brantford United Churches  
Aug 7, 2022  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 16:13-20, 1 Corinthians 11:17-22, James 1:26-27, 2:14-17, 5:13-20

[church in sign language, church, kyrkan, kirche, iglesia, kilise, chiesa, kanisa, igreja, jiaohui]

If any of you are tempted to go into professional ministry - I have a warning for you. You will have to go through numerous interviews with church committees. And you will be forced to reflect - over and over - on what, exactly, the word “church” means. It’s an important exercise of course. But it is harder than you might think. Because you can spend your entire life as part of a church without ever really asking what the word “church” means.

The meaning depends on context of course. If you are yelling at a family member and you say, “hurry up, or we will be late for church” then the word “church” means a Sunday morning worship service. If you say, “I wish that this church had a turkey supper” then the word “church” refers to the congregation. If you say, our church needs an elevator then the word “church” means the building. If you say that the church needs to apologize for something historic then “church” refers to the leadership of a denomination.

[image: evolving christianity]

And if you - as I propose in my book “Evolving Christianity” - are telling the church to stop being racist, then “church” means the global Christian community.

I’m sure that each of us have our own sense of what the word “church” means. And I

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invite us to share those ideas over coffee time, and through the coming weeks. And since all 4 United Church congregations in Brantford are sharing worship together this summer, I really mean it. What is our understanding of “church”? What is our collective vision for “church” here in Brantford?

Do you want to know what I think the word “church” means? We will get there.

[image: pope in canada]

But first, I was reminded of this whole conversation this week because of the Pope’s recent visit to Canada to made formal apologies for the Catholic Church’s role in Canadian residential schools - among other things.

What I was actually reminded of was from 2007. In June 2007 the Roman Catholic Church released a 16-page document that discussed the meaning of the word “church”. What was notable was that according to the Roman Catholic Church, we in the United Church of Canada are not a church.

The document was in the form of questions and answers. One of the questions and answers was this:

- Question: “Why do the texts of the Council and those of the Magisterium since the Council not use the title of “Church” with regard to those Christian Communities born out of the Reformation of the sixteenth century?”
- Answer: “According to Catholic doctrine, these Communities do not enjoy apostolic succession in the sacrament of Orders, and are, therefore, deprived of a constitutive element of the Church. These ecclesial Communities which, specifically because of the absence of the sacramental priesthood, have not preserved the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic Mystery cannot,

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according to Catholic doctrine, be called “Churches” in the proper sense.” (June 29, 2007)

So, according to that document, Protestant groups - including us - are “ecclesial communities”, not “churches”.

[image: apostolic succession]

It sounds like a statement not against protestant churches per se, but against the ministers who (like me) are not part of an apostolic succession. According to Catholic doctrine, you are perhaps all fine, but I am not adequate for the job.

So that’s what Roman Catholic doctrine says. What about the bible? What does the Bible say about “church”.

[image: bible]

Let's begin with the parts of the bible that Jesus wrote. Wait a minute - there is nothing in here that Jesus wrote. Well, how about the gospels? Between the 4 gospels we would expect they say a lot about the church. But wait - I can only find 2 references to the church in the gospels. (Are you sure this is the whole bible - you didn't buy it on sale or something?)

Here is the first gospel reference. It is a portion of what we read from Matthew earlier.

[image: you are peter]

[Jesus speaking] “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of death will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever

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you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Matt 16:18-19)

This is an interesting text in that Jesus tells Peter to build Jesus' church - but doesn't give any real details as to what that would be like. The larger story, the one we read earlier is common to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but the piece that I just read that endorses Peter's special status is found only in Matthew. This is the key gospel text that the Roman Catholic Church uses for their argument for apostolic succession. But I feel compelled to tell you that scholars doubt that the text can be attributed to Jesus. It was written by the early church. As was the great commission found in Matthew 28.

So what did Jesus actually say about church? Nothing. Jesus never told us to start churches, or how to run them if we did start them. Jesus did not tell us to have potluck dinners, or food banks. Jesus did not even weigh in on the theological issue of whether it is more appropriate to have a roast beef dinner or a turkey dinner. If only Jesus had given us some good churchy advice. Perhaps churches would work a bit better. Perhaps there would be less fighting in church.

[image: food fight church]

We could have avoided this church fight about how best to organize a potluck supper.

[image: church fight about peace]

And we could have avoided this congregational fight about whether or not we should pass the peace during worship.

It would have been so much easier if Jesus had given some basic advice to churches.

But we should not expect that. Just a reminder - Jesus was not Christian! Jesus was born and died as a Jewish person. Jesus spent his time helping people, teaching, and helping people find healing. Jesus's ministry was mainly around reforming the Judaism of his day which for Jesus was far too big on rules and far too thin on love and justice. The Judaism of Jesus's day was far too big on talk, and far too thin on action. Jesus's attempts to reform Judaism did not work, and so we ended up over time with Christianity. But Jesus never wanted to start a new religion.

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The only real question is this. If Jesus were here today, would Jesus have the same problem with our churches? Are we ourselves far too big on rules and far too thin on love and justice. Are we ourselves far too big on talk, and far too thin on action? Now there's a great question for your next tea party.

OK - So what the rest of the Bible said about church?

[image: irrelevant joke # singing the wrong hymn]

There are over 100 references to the word "church" in the book of acts, the letters of Paul, and the other epistles. Paul's letters, and the other epistles tell us a lot about early church, because they were letters written by church leaders to specific congregations. Now we are getting somewhere!

The reading from 1 Corinthians this morning shows us Paul being annoyed at the congregation in Corinth. He is concerned about the cliques within the church, and the effect that is having on the unity of the church. To the point that the Lord's supper is compromised. This story tells us 2 things:

1. The church in Corinth had problems fairly typical of churches today - power struggles and divisions.
2. Paul, one of their spiritual leaders, thought it was worth helping to correct this behaviour. The behaviour was brought out in the open, faced, and dealt with. This is community in action. This is community helping each other to grow. This is community solving problems by not being "polite" all the time. I could imagine being a member at that church.

This idea of church reminds me of the introduction to the book of James in the version of the Bible called "The Message":

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“When Christian believers gather in churches, everything that can go wrong sooner or later does. Outsiders, on observing this, conclude that there is nothing to the religion business except, perhaps, business - and dishonest business at that. Insiders see it differently. Just as a hospital collects the sick under one roof and labels them as such, the church collects sinners. Many of the people outside the hospital are every bit as sick as the ones inside, but their illnesses are either undiagnosed or disguised. It's similar with sinners outside the church.

So, Christian churches are not, as a rule, model communities of good behaviour. They are, rather, places where human misbehaviour is brought out in the open, faced, and dealt with.” (Introduction to James, MSG)

[image: irrelevant joke # 98: tigger joke]

And the entire book of James supports this idea. James is big on helping people, and that requires action.

1. From chapter 1, “Real religion ... is this: reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption”.
2. From chapter 2, “Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?”
3. From chapter 5, “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed.”

From the New Testament we get the idea that the church was a “movement”. “Church” was not a box for the movement to fit into. “Church” was the movement itself. Which is why I like to say that “church” is a verb. Church is when people follow the spirit of God that directs them to act, to do, to love, and to care. Church is a movement. Church is movement. Church is action. Church is a verb.

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And I have to say. None of this seems to require apostolic succession.

[image: got apostolic succession?]

So, let's return to what the Pope said about church. Obviously, his statement that our churches are not churches will do nothing to help dialog between Catholics and Protestants - and that is sad. I myself am delighted that there are so many denominations. I value the Catholic Church, Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and all of them. I'm just happy to be located here myself.

On reflection, I like the Pope's description of us as "ecclesial communities" I think is very accurate. And it is a compliment. It is what we are called to be. We are a movement that is led by the Spirit into action. We therefore have no need for apostolic succession. We don't need to be what the Catholic church would call a church. Essentially, the Pope only said that Protestant churches are not Catholic churches, and that is really no big deal.

[image: brantford]

Frankly, I don't really care what the Pope or the Bible think the word "church" means. But I care deeply about what all of us think the word "church" means. And in particular, what is our collective vision for "church" here in Brantford?

I often hear people say that we want new people to come to our churches. Well, that's great. But I want you to close your eyes for a minute. And imagine - wherever you are - that you are actually surrounded by "new people". In your mind, look around at these "new people". Take your time. Now. What are those "new people" like? Do they look and think and act, and dress like you? Do they find delight in the same music that you enjoy? Or are they a diverse collection of people of different ages, different backgrounds, different needs, and different gifts? Spoiler Alert: When new people do come to our

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churches, they do not look, or think, or act like we do. And we can either embrace them for who they are .... or .... we can just close our doors right now.

Besides, isn't new ok? Isn't that what new life would look like? When caterpillars mature they do not just become larger caterpillars. They grows into butterflies. They embrace new gifts of colour and flight. They find new ways of living. And they do not constantly complain that they are not caterpillars any more.

Are we ourselves far too big on rules and far too thin on love and justice. Are we ourselves far too big on talk, and far too thin on action? What is our vision of church here in Brantford?

[image: stewardship prayer]

I want to close with the Stewardship Prayer (Archdiocese of Rochester):

My church is composed of people like me. I help make it what it is. It will be friendly, if I am. Its pews will be filled, if I help fill them. It will do great work, if I work. It will make generous gifts to many causes, if I am a generous giver. It will bring other people into its worship and fellowship, if I invite and bring them. It will be a church of loyalty and love, of fearlessness and faith, and a church with a noble spirit, if I, who make it what it is, am filled with these same things. Therefore, with the help of God, I shall dedicate myself to the task of being all the things that I want my church to be.

Amen