

# Current Thoughts

from Dwight's corner

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We near the end of our conversation about “church.” Remember that I have defined a church as: *Individuals committed to life together under the Lordship of Jesus Christ*. With that understanding, I have suggested that the network or “web” of meaning implied by this definition consists of a set of interconnected “nodes.” Working backwards through my definition, I have talked about “Christ” (*No Christ—No Church*), “life together” (*No Community—No Church*), and “salvation/transformation” (*No Conversion—No Church*). Now we fix our eyes on the last component: *No Commission—No Church*.

My dictionary lists six related definitions of “commission.” The first is: *a warrant granting certain powers and imposing certain duties*. Another is: *a body of persons charged with performing a duty*. A church is a body that has been granted certain powers and is charged with performing certain duties.

While Jesus did not use a single opportunity to give us a comprehensive list of “commands,” it is clear that he did have expectations of disciples (“If you love me, you will obey what I command.” John 14:15) and that authority was granted to meet those expectations (“All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore . . .” Matthew 28:19)

From the Gospels, I suggest five categories of things that Jesus commanded. A church remembers, loves, tells, shines, and perseveres. You might choose to group them differently, and I wouldn’t argue with you. But I hope you will join me as we consider these five components of “commission.”

**A church remembers.** “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.”(Luke 22:19)

Here the interlinking “web of meaning” I have used to describe church is most evident. Our first point of contact was stated: *No Christ—No Church*. An organization that has forgotten who Christ is, what Christ has done, and what Christ calls us to be and do is no longer a church. Both our being and our doing are centered in Christ. While this specific Bible reference to “remember” is set in the context of the Lord’s Supper, the “commission” is more expansive than merely communion. The Lord’s Supper itself is a communal ritual (in a positive sense) that demonstrates and calls to mind a long list of practices: worship, prayer, reflection, devotion, sacrifice, sin, confession, forgiveness, etc.

**A church loves.** “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.”(John 15:12)

Our first thoughts may go to the story when Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:34-40 and Mark 12:28-34). I chose this reference from John only because it is concise and clearly a command (a “commission”). More has been written about the command to love God

and love one another than I can possibly say here. So I will limit myself to a few brief points. First, love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable. Second, love of God and love of neighbor cannot be collapsed one into the other. Third, love of God and love of neighbor are not optional. Fourth, love is not an emotion; love is washing feet.

As in the case of “remembrance,” the command to love has multiple connections within the web of meaning for church. Love is the cement of community, and is therefore essential to the node: *No Community—No Church*.

**A church tells.** “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go 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 obey everything I have commanded you.”(Matthew 28:16-19)

Probably for most of you, the phrase *No Commission—No Church* immediately led you to this passage. In placing this third, I am not demoting “telling.” I want to lift it up at the same time I want to put it in perspective. I believe that the commission to “tell” flows out of “remembering” and “loving.” At the same time, if there is no telling, then our remembering and our loving are called into question. Telling means telling about Christ, how God loves you, and how I love you.

Obviously, I am using “tell” in a heavily laden way. Telling cannot be limited to speech. At the same time, we cannot totally abandon speech and be faithful to the commission. The goal of telling is to make disciples, which is an unending process.

**A church shines.** “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”(Matthew 5:16)

If there are “good” deeds, then there are also “bad” deeds. Jesus commands us to do good deeds and thereby shine light in a dark world. I have no need to oversimplify this, but it seems to me that Jesus is saying that the way we live matters and that we must have some discernment of good and bad. This is the stuff of both individual and communal ethics. Probably most disconcerting to us pragmatic Americans is the idea that sometimes good deeds serve no purpose other than to praise God.

**A church perseveres.** “Remain in me, and I will remain in you.”(John 15:4)

This is one instance when I prefer the older translations: “Abide in me.” Without degenerating into a debate over eternal security, Jesus persistently commands us to “remain,” “abide,” or “persevere.” Paul approvingly quoted the poet Epimenides: “In Him we live and move and have our being.” Apart from Him there is no life. Apart from Him there can be no fruit. A church perseveres in Christ through good times and bad. We persevere because “to whom else shall we go?”(John 6:48)

A church has been commissioned to remember, love, tell, shine, and persevere.

And so we complete (at long last) my essays on the nature of a church. A church is *individuals committed to life together under the Lordship of Jesus Christ*. The nodes that describe the web of meaning around this definition are: Christ, Community, Conversion, and Commission. (I hope you can make the connection between this and our description of a healthy church as vital worship, growing disciples, compassionate outreach, sharing ministry, dynamic spirituality, loving community, living network and effective organization held together by a captivating vision).

We are tempted to pervert this in least two ways. We can transform this robust, vital understanding of church into a hollow, deadly legalism. We may also be tempted to ignore the reality that this is a web, a network. We cannot choose to embrace one component and push away another.

The good news is that grace is given not only to individuals but to churches. Corporate confession and forgiveness is a practice many Baptist churches would do well to recover.



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