



Current Thoughts

From Dwight's Corner

© American Baptist Churches of the Great Rivers Region

March 2003

No Christ, No Church

In January I suggested a definition of church: Individuals committed to life together under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The piecemeal “exegesis” of this assertion will not be an exercise in linear thinking, but an attempt to sketch a network of meaning.

The first “node” in that network is: No Christ, no church.

This may seem almost childish, but too often we forget it, or we treat Christ as only optional for the church.

It is clear that the earliest Baptist thinkers understood that they existed within the boundaries of historic Christianity. While our Separatist forebears may have debated the purity of the Church, they always affirmed the key confessions, in general, and the centrality of Christ, in particular.

The historic, foundational role of Christ for the church—even for Baptists—is unambiguous. This is true even though we do not subscribe to the kind of “apostolic succession” other denominations consider essential.

But there is more to the relationship of Christ to the church than history. There is a theological dimension. And there are practical consequences.

Theologically, we believe that the redemptive work of Christ calls together persons to become the “people of God” or the “household of God” (not isolated believing individuals). This calling involves the commitment to become a disciple—a student, a follower--of Jesus Christ. In this sense, we can understand the church as a band of pilgrims, called out and committed to Jesus Christ, traveling together.

Further, while we are called to be the people/household of God, we are also called by Christ to do. This doing is gathered under the umbrella of the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

Thus, the purpose of the church is manifested in preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, teaching for discipleship, ministry to the hurting, and mission from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

Finally, Christ is a living, empowering presence in the church. Paul Minear has cataloged nearly 100 descriptive ideas of the church in the New Testament. Nearly all are “life-oriented.” The divine character of the church is rooted not only in its origins but


Permission to copy for non-commercial use is granted.

Please visit us at: www.abc-grr.org

also in its continuing sustenance. It was common for early Baptists to describe the church as “a divine society, not a human institution.”

The living presence of Christ in Word, sacrament, mission and ministry brings life both individually and corporately. Worship is the occasion during which we celebrate and are renewed by the living Christ.

If Christ is not present—as evidenced in preaching, teaching, ministry and mission—the organization cannot be a church.



Permission to copy for non-commercial use is granted.

Please visit us at: www.abc-grr.org