

A Three-Legged Stool

^{NRS} **Luke 20:21** So they asked him, "Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth.

^{NRS} **Acts 24:14-15** But this I admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets.¹⁵ I have a hope in God-- a hope that they themselves also accept-- that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous.

^{NIV} **Hebrews 5:12-6:1** In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!¹³ Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.^{NIV} Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God.

^{NRS} **Romans 12:2** Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect.

^{NRS} **1 Corinthians 3:1** And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready,³ for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?

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Some of you may have noticed that two of the scriptures that we just read were the same as two weeks ago. The sermon two weeks ago started out to be this sermon, but things kept popping into my head and then there were two sermons swirling around – and they finally got sorted out. Two weeks ago we talked about the distractions and the frustrations of this season – and how folks back then expected a Messiah, but they didn't expect him to be like Jesus. Instead of a liberating Moses, or a lightning throwing Elijah, or a warrior David, they got a peasant baby who grew up to be a rabbi, a teacher – a teacher who lived and taught what came to be known as The Way. A few years later, the apostle Paul would proclaim that he was one of those people who believed and lived The Way. As part of The Way, which others called a sect, he worshipped the God of Israel, obeyed the law, and believed the prophets.

Today, we seldom talk about The Way. That's just not an expression that we use very often. But we do use the term *church* as a sort of shorthand way of talking about our faith and our relationship with God. While the two terms do not mean the same thing, they are interrelated. We ask questions such as, "Where do you go to church? Did you go to church last Sunday? What does your church believe?" Consciously or unconsciously, we tend to think about church as having three main components: buildings, worship services, and people, or members.

What makes a building a church? What does a church building need to be a church? Can you tell by looking at it? We talk about beautiful churches, storefront churches, churches that look like churches, and churches that don't look much like churches. Sometimes the only way we know that it's a church is by a cross on the sign out front. On some ultra modern structures the only clue is a pointy thing mounted on the roof, a steeple without cross or bell, reduced to its essential lines. In Houston, Texas, I was hired to do some recording at First Baptist Church. Their new facilities were out on the loop. It was a huge white box with a great big parking lot. When you walked in, there was a large lobby with couches, carpet, round white columns, and dark green foliage in large planters. It looked like a big generic hotel lobby. The auditorium had a slanted seating area with movie theater seats for about 3000 people. Overhead were huge lighting and loudspeaker trusses. No crosses. No fish symbols. No descending doves, or chalices, or communion table. There was a clear plastic podium which **did not** make me think of the word *pulpit*. Despite the fact that it looked nothing like a traditional church, they had thousands of members.

At the other end of the architectural spectrum, people find inspiration in visiting the grand cathedrals of Europe. Every time I've been to Notre Dame in Paris or Westminster Abbey in London, there's always been this background droning of hundreds of people who are wandering through the sanctuary, admiring the design, the size, and the detail that make the cathedrals unique expressions of faith.

The problem is, there's a temptation to make an idol out of the building. It's hard to maintain our balance sometimes. This is true in all kinds of areas where we can take something positive and corrupt it into something harmful and sinful. Nourishment can become gluttony, love can be corrupted into lust, thrift can evolve into stinginess, and ambition can deteriorate into greed. The building built for worship can become the building that is worshipped. The two small congregations that I served in Missouri could have become one stronger and more vibrant congregation, but one couldn't bear the thought of leaving their stained glass windows and the other couldn't leave their beloved fellowship hall. It's hard to know when the time has come to let go of a building. It's hard to know where the line is between being good stewards of the facility and getting lost in rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. Roof leaks left unrepaired eventually lead to structural problems. On the other hand, major re-decorating may not lead large numbers of people to profess their faith in Christ. Making decisions about how to spend limited resources can be emotional, difficult, and subjective. It's difficult to get much scriptural guidance on this because the early church met in homes and catacombs for the first three hundred years. There were no church buildings during the time that the New Testament was written. It's hard for us to imagine church without a church building, but Christianity grew and spread over the Roman empire without a building to its name until about the mid 300s. The facilities are one leg of the three-legged stool, but that leg is not the most important, nor is it absolutely necessary. The attitude of "if you build it, they will come," is a gossamer dream, a fairy tale, a wistful hope without much wisdom or real promise.

The second leg of the church stool is worship. **How would you describe worship? What makes worship, worship?** Scripture speaks more about worship. We can read passages about scripture being read, prayer being offered, songs being sung. We're told that we need to confess our sins to one another. Interpretation of scripture, or preaching, is usually part of worship. Sometimes worship includes the sacraments, baptism and communion. Offering our lives and our wealth is usually part of worship.

Beyond these things, we quickly get involved in questions of style, frequency, and focus. There are some who declare that we should worship on Saturday, because that is the Sabbath, and the day of Sabbath was never changed. Most Christians consider Sunday to be a day of worship - and it strikes us as odd that some churches offer worship on Saturday evening. It just doesn't feel right, somehow. Many people are pretty sure that you just aren't really a committed Christian unless you go to church Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening. If you don't show up three times a week and every night during a revival at least once a year, then you're backsliding and tongues of fire are lapping at your heels!

Worship style gets a lot of attention. Sometimes it can seem to get all of the attention. Do we dress up in our best clothes for worship - or does that degenerate into worship being the occasion for a fashion statement? Back in the fifties I think more attention was paid to one's new Easter outfit than was devoted to the message of the resurrection. At one time in our reformed tradition past, we tossed out pipe organs and sang only psalms. During one period there was a great deal of dissention about whether prayers could be written or if they had to be extemporaneous. We've wrestled with whether worship should be planned ahead of time or if the whole worship should extemporaneous. Should the minister wear elegant vestments, a plain academic robe, or a Hawaiian shirt? Could women be ministers? Should sermons be declared from the pulpit or proclaimed in the aisle? Is the congregation to be an active participant in worship? Is it okay to respond verbally to a sermon - or should one limit their response to an occasional slight nod of the head? Is the tone of worship to be solemn or festive, quiet or exuberant, formal or informal? The truth of the matter is that different worship styles resonate with different people. Sometimes the differences are cultural. Stoic Norwegians aren't likely to have an exuberant worship style. Christians in the Solomon Islands probably feel no need for a pipe organ. Some things are

generational. Three or four generations ago, many of our ancestors were wrestling with whether it was proper to sing hymns instead of psalms. But many of us sang "Michael Row the Boat Ashore" at church camp with a guitar. Today one can find people who respond best to meditative chant from Iona and those who are moved by electric guitars and drums.

Most important about worship is, where is the focus? The extreme cases may provide the clearest illustrations. There is the church of perpetual guilt. The overwhelming message is about your sinfulness, God's anger, and the temperature of hell. You live in constant fear of eternal damnation. There are churches at the other extreme that only seem to talk about how God wants you to feel better about yourself. The church service bears a strong resemblance to a motivational conference. A third type is the prosperity theology model. The message there is that if you will just be generous in supporting Dr. So-and-so's ministry, God will bless you with health and wealth. Invest in God – by sending money to Brother Ted – and the dividends will roll in. And there is the entertainment model, with impressive videos, big sound systems, and colorful pageantry – especially at Christmas and Easter – that'll have you tapping your toes and leaving with a smile on your face. But in all of these forms of worship, the focus is on the individual. Do you feel saved – or at peace within – or prosperous – or happy? It's about you.

Worship is a verb, a verb that calls for an object. By definition, worship is something you do toward something or someone external to yourself. You worship something or someone. You may worship an idol, a god with a lower case "g." Actually, most people do that. You see, your god is whatever has the most influence on how you live your life and where you spend your time and money. For some people it's Duke, Carolina, or State, or at least, their football or basketball team. For some, it might be the perfectly decorated house, the spectacular yard, or a super achieving child. At one point in my life, a 240Z came pretty close to being the prime focus in my life. We all need to ask ourselves what it is that we worship. And when we gather together here in this sanctuary, we need to be very clear about whether the focus of the worship service is God or us. God has been worshipped using a cappella voices, Jamaican steel drums, and pipe organs. Musical styles have varied from Gregorian chant to gospel, from Bach to rock. I doubt that God cares. The question is are we worshipping God, praising God, building our relationship with God, seeking to know and please God, or is our worship really about our wants, our fears, and our entertainment?

I've mentioned this before, but it bears repeating. Søren Kierkegaard, Danish philosopher and theologian made a telling analysis of worship. He said that we tend to think of worship as a bit like going to the opera or the theater. We sit in the pews as the audience. Up on the stage is the preacher and the choir who are the actors in this religious ceremony. Somewhere off stage is God, who through the Holy Spirit we hope is prompting the actors on stage with the proper lines for the ceremony. But we have it all wrong. The preacher and the choir are the prompters, encouraging and guiding the folks in the pews who are the actors, and God is the audience. Do you see the difference? In one case, the folks in the pews are the recipients, the focus. But worship should be directed to God. That's part of the reason that we use a liturgy - a printed bulletin. Look at the bulletin. Do you see how much of it is printed in bold letters - things for us all to say and do? Liturgy literally means "the work of the people." I don't call you to worship. Together, we call ourselves to worship. Together we sing. Together we confess. I don't forgive you - I assure you that God forgives us. I don't pray over the offering, but together we make our offerings to God. And at the end of the service, when I charge you to remember the word that has been proclaimed and ask for God's blessing as we depart, together we give our assent and prayer for it to be so, by us all saying "Amen."

So, there is the second leg of this three-legged stool, a leg that we need to constantly reexamine to make sure that it doesn't become twisted to be about us. It's a leg that requires frequent change so that we don't think that there's only one proper way to worship. Next Sunday we'll take a look at the third leg. Amen