



Matthew 16:13-19
 Believe
 The Church

Rev. Brian North
 October 14th, 2018

This morning we continue our series titled, “Believe” in which we’re looking at 10 key, foundational beliefs of the Christian faith. The first five key beliefs we’ve looked at so far are mostly vertical in nature – that is to say, they deal with our relationship with and understanding of God. The God of the Bible is the one true God who is involved in and cares about our daily lives. This God has provided the way for us to come into a relationship with him through faith in Jesus Christ. God revealed this to us along with a road map for our lives – the Bible. This special book was written by humans, but inspired by God, and from Him. As such, it has the right to command our beliefs and actions, even if we don’t always do that well. We who embrace these beliefs and receive Jesus as our Savior from sin are given a new identity. From that moment on we can find our significance not in our performance but in our position as children of God. That’s a summary of the first five weeks of this series.

Today the series takes a bit of a turn as we look at our horizontal relationships – our relationships with other people. Out of our relationship with God we engage the world in a purposeful and fruitful way. **How will God accomplish the plan for humanity he has laid out in the Bible?** God has chosen to use two communities that He created to accomplish his purposes on earth: the ancient nation of Israel, and the Church. If you are a Christian, you are a part of this community. You are a part of the church.ⁱ And if we were to summarize in one sentence what the church is about, we might put it like this: **“I believe the Church is God’s primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth.”** Sometimes God moves on His own in miraculous ways. But most of the time, God works through the Church (still miraculous in its own right considering our tendencies).

Now, God’s purposes, and therefore the ministries of the church, are multi-faceted. I suppose we could boil it down to Jesus’ statement that the two greatest commandments God gives us are to love God with all we got, and love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:36-40), though we can narrow it down further than that, which we’ll look at in a minute. **But how all that**

looks gets multi-faceted, even in the smallest of churches, let alone mid-sized ones like ours and really large ones as well. (160 is worship attendance average; the average in America is around 90.) Worship services, discipleship classes for children, youth, and adults, small groups, prayer breakfasts, weekend retreats, choirs, worship bands, communion, baptisms...these kinds of things are all related to our relationship with God, to loving Him. Then there are ministries that help us love our neighbors, such as visiting and caring for the sick and the homebound, food pantries, snack packs, homeless shelters, and other social justice ministries; dinner gatherings, fellowship time after church, other social gatherings; opportunities to pray for one another, evangelism, community events like concerts or block parties...I mean, the list goes on. There are a ton of different ways that the Church (capital C), and any one local church even, and even any one Christian on their own outside the formal ministries of the church, goes about loving God and loving neighbor. There's a lot going on in the life of a church!

Sometimes, as a result, people are a little confused on what the purpose of the church is. Is it a club? Is it a social activism thing? Do you have to do everything? Can you do nothing? What's the point of the Church? These kinds of questions can arise – including for people who are disciples of Jesus, let alone those who aren't. Now, sometimes we churches unintentionally make things more confusing than they need to be. A prominent Christian organization has a page on their website devoted to Church humor. They had one piece that happened to relate to this exact problem of churches making it difficult to understand what the purpose of the church is. It says:

“One of the reasons that there are so many misunderstandings is because we often send out misleading messages about what we're about. I don't know whether you are familiar with the sort of information that can be found in Sunday bulletins, but someone made a list of some of the most humorous ones. These are actual printed church bulletins.

- One church had this, ‘This afternoon there will be a meeting in the south and north ends of the church. Children will be baptized at both ends.’

- ‘This being Easter Sunday, we will ask Mr. Johnson to come forward and lay an egg at the altar.’
- ‘The service will close with [the song] “Little Drop of Water”. One of the ladies will start quietly and then the rest of the congregation will join in.’
- Another church had this notice, ‘A Bean supper will be held on Saturday evening in the church basement. Music will follow.’
- Finally this, ‘Tonight’s sermon is on: “What is Hell?” Come early and listen to our choir practice.’ⁱⁱ

So clarity in the Church can be a problem, including at a deeper level. But it shouldn’t, because God is clear about the purpose of His Church: It’s about making disciples of Jesus Christ. Ephesians 4:15 put it quite well, using the metaphor of a body and its growth to describe our growth as disciples of Jesus. Paul writes, **“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” (Ephesians 4:15)**. In Matthew 28, Jesus puts it like this: “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. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “...let your light shine before people, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

All of these statements from Jesus, and others like them, help us see what the church is about. **And the main purpose of the church is to help people grow in their relationship with Jesus.** It’s loving God and loving neighbor...through discipleship to Jesus. Evangelism and missions, discipleship, worship, serving, and fellowship are all a part of that. So it is multi-faceted. But it is all focused on Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with a particular emphasis – and rightly so – on the Son, Jesus. Not because the Church says so, but because Jesus himself says so. Including in today’s passage from Matthew. First, Jesus affirms Peter’s declaration that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God (Mt. 16:16). This is Peter’s statement of faith about who Jesus is. And Jesus affirms that when he says, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you

by people, but by my Father in heaven” (Mt. 16:17). So Jesus affirms His understanding of who Jesus is.

And then Jesus says (let’s say this together), **“I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matthew 16:18b)**. Everything that the Church is about, everything that any individual church is about, is centered around Jesus Christ – and if we ever lose sight of that here at RH as long as *I’m* pastor, then we probably need to look for a new pastor. I want to stay on track with God’s purpose for the church. So Jesus is the focus of the church, with its mission being to make disciples of Jesus.

But the church needs some order and structure, as well. And the Bible gives that to us. Some of the organizational structure of the church that we still have even today goes back into the Old Testament. For example, **“Elders” have always been the top-level spiritual leaders in the church**. We see this all the way back into Moses’ life, in Numbers 11, when he was leading the Israelites as they wandered in the desert, and he was on the brink of burn-out. He was not a happy camper. And he speaks to the Lord about it, and just unloads on God about all his frustration with trying to lead and shepherd God’s people. Moses feels like he’s beating his head against a wall. And God’s response to him is: appoint 70 elders to help with the work of leading and shepherding the people. These were men with wisdom and experience in life. And so that’s that Moses did. That’s where “elders” come from. We see elders in the New Testament church as well. It’s the Greek word Presbuteros, and it is where we get our denominational name from – Presbyterian. It speaks to who governs and oversees our churches – the Elders do. (Have currently serving elders stand; anyone who’s served as an elder stand.)

In the New Testament we also see the ministry of the Deacons. They’re not quite as clearly defined as the Elders are, but it seems to be a ministry of caring and hospitality, and that’s what deacons in many churches do. It’s what deacons do here – they’re like the “heart” of the church, taking the lead in providing compassion and care and help to people in the church in their time of need. (Have current deacons stand; anyone who’s served as a deacon stand.)

Also, the New Testament word for “church” is ekklesia. **“Ekklesia” is a very normal, every day word that doesn’t have any explicitly religious meaning to it.** It simply means a gathering, or an assembly, of people. There’s nothing wrong with translating it as “church” because clearly when Jesus uses it and when it’s used elsewhere in the New Testament, it’s referring specifically to the people who are disciples of Jesus. So we might translate the latter half of verse 18 as “I will build by gathering of people and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”

Additionally, the New Testament gives us insight into how a church operates. Paul writes in Ephesians 4:11-12, **(Lauren – you can put both of these two verses on the same screen) “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4:11-12).** In 1 Corinthians 12:27, Paul writes, **“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you a member of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27).** You see, the Church is the people who follow Jesus. Jesus is the head of the church, the church is the body. Each member of the church plays a different role in the life of the church. The five offices of the church, or the people with the gifts of pastor, teacher, prophecy, etc., listed in the Ephesians passage, are the people whose role is to equip the rest of the body of Christ to carry out the ministry, so that the whole body – the church – may be built up. And if you’re a follower of Jesus then you are a part of that body. (Ask people who follow Jesus, and are connected to a church, to stand.)

So, this building up of the body of Christ, the Church, is why it’s so important for a Christian to be a part of a local church and be involved in it. **Each Jesus-follower has something to contribute, and if you’re not a part of a church or if you’re a part of a church but not utilizing the gifts and talents you have and that are shaped through the equipping you receive, then your contribution is missing.** A part of the body of Christ is missing...or it’s there but isn’t really functioning and contributing to the betterment of the whole body.

It’s like the guy who went to the doctor for his annual physical examination. After the doctor had examined him, he asked, “Is there anything else you’d

like to discuss today?” The man thought a moment and said “Yes, as a matter of fact there is. My wife has gotten so hard of hearing that often she doesn’t hear me...and she refuses to get her hearing checked. What can I do about this?”

The doctor said “I have an idea for you. Next time you see her and she is not looking, say something to her and see if she hears you. Then see how close you have to get before she hears you. Let me know what happens.”

So the man went home and went into the “great room” with the living room, dining room and kitchen. He saw his wife with her back to him and she was at the kitchen counter getting dinner ready and he stood at the far end of the great room. So he asked in a reasonable voice, “What’s for dinner tonight Honey?” As usual, she did not respond. So he took a few steps closer and said again “What’s for dinner tonight Honey?” Again there was no response. So he took a few steps closer and asked a third time “What’s for dinner tonight honey?” Again there is absolutely no response. So he gets right up behind her and asks again “What’s for dinner tonight Honey?”

At this point she turns around and faces him and says “For the FOURTH time: Beef Stew!!!!”ⁱⁱⁱ So, he had ears, but they weren’t contributing what they were made to do, and weren’t helping the body.

Similarly, the Church needs the contribution of *all* of us – and we have different roles to play. We have elders who oversee, deacons who help lead us in caring for one another, others like pastors and teachers and evangelists who equip the members of the body for the ministry, and then the whole body – all the parts, all the people – together carrying out the ministry! People who serve in roles with Biblical titles aren’t the only ones who do ministry. So the Bible lays out some structure and some roles for us, with the strong teaching that ALL of us are a part of the body of Christ with a role to play.

And then the final thing I would add before wrapping this up, is that **God gives us directives in how we are to relate to one another and relate to the world.** We are called to live and be different from the rest of the world. One mark of a Christian’s life is that the fruit of the Spirit is evident in our

interactions with one another, our families, and with the world – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We also ask for and extend forgiveness – oftentimes when we are impatient, or unkind, lacking gentleness, etc. The rest of the world forgives and asks forgiveness as well...but we Christians are especially called to do that. We also bring an element of grace into all of our relationships. These are the kinds of things that are to mark the lives of Jesus followers; that describe how we interact with the people in our lives, both inside the church and outside of it. I hope our lives and our interactions with people are described by these things, whether that interaction is in person, in emails, on social media, at home, in the workplace, in the market place, and with others.

And all of this (the church’s organization, what we do, and how we treat others) **is for the purpose and goal of making disciples of Jesus Christ.** Even the parts of the church that don’t seem so “spiritual” are geared to making disciples. So, for example, right now here at Rose Hill we’re looking for someone to step in to the role of Facilities Director. It’s a part-time volunteer staff position working with a team of people, and growing that team of people, to help maintain and improve our church facility. It doesn’t sound very spiritual or Jesus-centered. But it’s a vital ministry in keeping our church building in good condition. And a lot of ministry happens here in the church, as you know. The people of the church are a church’s greatest earthly resource...but the church building is probably the next greatest earthly resource, and we need someone, or maybe a couple someone’s to share the position – to help us be good stewards of this great resource.

Also, we’re looking for someone to lead our efforts to decorate for Advent and Christmas – we have all the décor here, we just need someone to lead the effort so that we are drawn into the Christmas event more completely, and so that when visitors come during the Christmas season they understand that Christmas is important. It matters.

Additionally, there are children’s and youth ministry opportunities; there are opportunities to sing in the choir, serve as an usher in the worship service, or be a greeter at the outside doors, or help with fellowship time on Sundays, or go on a mission trip to serve others in the name of Jesus...and the list goes

on. There are a lot of ways you can be a part of building up the body of Christ here at RH. **If you consider RH to be your church home, you can be a part of helping us live into our purpose: Making Disciples of Jesus Christ.**

So the Church has a job: to make disciples of Jesus Christ. That's the mission that Jesus himself gives it. That's our purpose, because it is His purpose. I hope and pray you would find that same purpose in your life, and live it out here at Rose Hill so that as Ephesians 4:15 says, we "will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ."

I invite you to affirm our understanding of the church, by joining with me in this statement, as we wrap up this morning's message: **"I believe the Church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth."** Let's live that out...and let's pray...Amen.

If you want to serve in some way, but don't know how...there are a couple things you can do: 1) talk to the staff person in charge of the ministry area. A list of some of the staff are on the front of the bulletin; a full listing is at the church website. The people around you can help you find the staff person you're looking for this morning, or go to the Information Center, or ask me to help you find the person, or contact the church during the week and we'll get you connected. 2) On your Friendship Card, on the side for prayer requests, you can indicate you'd like to find out more about serving – whether you know what that might look like or you have no idea but want to find out more how you can help the body of Christ here at RH. If you indicate that on the back of a card, make sure to tell us how to contact you if your information is not already here at the church.

ⁱ I've tweaked this some, but essentially these two opening paragraphs come straight from "Believe" on page 93.

ⁱⁱ <https://alphausa.org/alpha-jokes/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.