



### **The Church: Ancient Roots**

Pentecost was a long celebrated feast for the nation of Israel. It had been established thousands of year before and known as "The Feast of Weeks" (Lev. 23:15-22). It was the ancient version of going to the pumpkin patch with a few key differences. They were celebrating the end of the harvest season by thanking God for the complete of the work and for the food He had supplied them with. It was also a time to reflect on and turn from the ways they had lived against God and harmfully to one another. There was one other important practice that was a part of the tradition of this festival, when the farmers harvested their fields they were not to gather in everything for themselves, but rather they were told to leave the edges of the poor and for the stranger in the land. They had ancient roots of cultural and religious practice that made space for the oppressed out the abundance of the blessing of God.

**Read:** Acts 2:1-41

### **Questions for Reflection:**

1. What practices were the people devoting themselves to (Acts 2:42-47)?
2. What values do you hold that you feel compelled to devote yourself to practicing?
3. Within this Christian community, who else do you seeing moved by Christ to devote themselves to those practices?

The Church is the one institution that exists for those outside it.

William Tyndale

### **Prayer:**

SOVEREIGN GOD, Thy cause, not my own, engages my heart,  
and I appeal to thee with greatest freedom  
to set up thy kingdom in every place  
where Satan reigns;  
Glorify thyself and I shall rejoice,  
for to bring honour to thy name is my sole desire.

I adore thee that thou art God,  
and long that others should know it, feel it,  
and rejoice in it.  
O that all men might love and praise thee,  
that thou mightest have all glory  
from the intelligent world!  
Let sinners be brought to thee for thy dear name!  
To the eye of reason everything respecting  
the conversion of others is as dark as midnight,  
But thou canst accomplish great things;  
the cause is thine,  
and it is to thy glory that men should be saved.  
Lord, use me as thou wilt,  
do with me what thou wilt;  
but, O, promote thy cause,  
let thy kingdom come,  
let thy blessed interest be advanced  
in this world!  
O do thou bring in great numbers to Jesus!  
let me see that glorious day,  
and give me to grasp for multitudes of souls;  
let me be willing to die to that end;  
and while I live let me labour for thee  
to the utmost of my strength,  
spending time profitably in this work,  
both in health and in weakness.  
It is thy cause and kingdom I long for,  
not my own.  
O, answer thou my request! (Puritan Prayer)



## **The Church: Confronting the Cultural Moment**

Many a mission of humanity has originated within the hearts of men. In this case God chose to reveal His desire to this local gathering of people who followed Him – or church. What can be seen is a gathering that ardently pursued Christ in their practice and followed the direction He was giving. Obedience to Christ was considered over comfort. The willingness of this church to engage the cultural moment with obedience resulted in the launching of the apostle Paul into ministry even though it meant releasing two vital members of the community into the wild.

**Read:** Acts 13:1-12

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. What did it mean to be a part of the church in Antioch according to this passage?
2. Has hearing and obeying the word of God put you at odds with an established community?
3. How is the presence of God resisting and blessing culture in this moment?

Jesus asks us one thing: Will we be faithful to him as he has been faithful to us? We are all broken and sinful in deep places within us, and we will never follow Jesus perfectly, but I am convinced that there is a deeper faithfulness we can discover. There is a way of living by faith that allows us to be distinct in our world, transformed by our King, and a blessing to all people as we announce the good news that Jesus is Lord of all. At the end of the day, when we stand before Jesus, faithfulness to him and his Word is really the only thing we will answer for. As we look back to the past and see God's faithfulness to his people in exile and the people's response to their God, it is my prayer that we will find a way to be faithful to Jesus in our moment of exile.

-Rick McKinley, Faith for This Moment

### **Prayer:**

May every part of my character and conduct make a serious and amiable impression on others, and impel them to ask the way to the Master. Let no incident of life, pleasing or painful, injure the prosperity of my soul, but rather increase it. Send me thy help, for thine appointments are not meant to make me independent of thee, and the best means will be vain without super-added blessings.

-Puritan Prayer



### **The Church: Christian Community**

The book of Romans is known to be one of the most theologically meaty books in the Bible, its final chapter sees what seems to be an awkward and sudden turn away from theology to personal letters of recommendation and expressions of gratitude. At first it may seem jolting as it reads disconnected from the whole, however; this is where the heart of the author's message is being put on paper. Faith and belief are lived out in community. The author is naming and celebrating that community giving insight into more than just a list of names, instead he is painting a picture of the church as more than something that is theoretical.

Write a personal Romans 16. An awkward close to a theological book. It seems jolting as you read it and disconnected entirely, but in reality it is one of the most important pictures and expressions of the whole book. The heart of the author is being put on paper. The invitation becomes to examine your own church community.

**Read:** Romans 16:1-16

#### **Questions for Reflection:**

1. What is significant about the distinct way in which the author greets each person mentioned?
2. What would Romans 16:1-16 look like if you were the author? Who would it include? What would it say about each person?
3. How do you see Christ in your list?

Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ. What does this mean? It means, first that a Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ. It means, second, that a Christian come to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that in Jesus Christ we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity.

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

#### **Prayer:**

“Christ with me,  
Christ before me,  
Christ behind me,  
Christ in me,  
Christ beneath me,  
Christ above me,  
Christ on my right,  
Christ on my left,  
Christ when I lie down,  
Christ when I sit down,  
Christ when I arise,  
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,  
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,  
Christ in every eye that sees me,  
Christ in every ear that hears me.”

— Saint Patrick



### **The Church: Counter Cultural Community of Cultures**

In this passage we see the church as an alternative society of sorts, called to countercultural life in the Spirit. Instead of living a life enslaved to the draw of raw political power (like that of Rome or Babylon) the church's ultimate loyalty is to Christ. Instead of disengaging culture though, it is seen in Scripture repeatedly confronting it in synagogues, cultic temples and philosophical communities. The church is not to abandon earthly relationships and responsibilities but to transform these by their remade lives.

The church is the unveiling of the multifaceted wisdom of God, even in that it is unlike any nation as it is based not on history or ethnic background, but affinity of faith in Christ. This was the calling that Paul was fulfilling, expanding the view of who was included in the community of Christ beyond the ethnic nation of Israel. It is a counter cultural community of many cultures that shares the culture of Christ.

**Read:** Ephesians 3:1-13

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. What is the "mystery" that Paul keeps referring to in this passage?
2. Where do your cultural identity and Christ come into conflict?
3. How have you seen others in your community move through that conflict?

What do we really desire? As I try to listen to my own deepest yearnings as well as to the yearnings of others, the word that seems best to summarize the desire of the human heart is "communion." Communion means "union with." God has given us a heart that will remain restless until it has found full communion. We look for it in friendship, in marriage, in community. We look for it in sexual intimacy, in moments of ecstasy, in the recognition of our gifts. We look for it through success, admiration, and rewards. But wherever we look, it is communion we seek...

The desire for communion... is a God-given desire, a desire that causes immense pain as well as immense joy. Jesus came to proclaim that our desire for communion is not in vain, but will be fulfilled by the One who gave us that desire. The passing moments

of communion are only hints of the Communion that God has promised us. The real danger facing us is to distrust our desire for communion. It is a God-given desire without which our lives lose their vitality and our hearts grow cold. A truly spiritual life is life in which we won't rest until we have found rest in the embrace of the One who is the Gather and Mother of all desires.

-Henri Nouwen, "The Only Necessary Thing"

### **Prayer:**

Lord... We thank you for your church, founded upon your Word, that challenges us to do more than sing and pray, but go out and work as though the very answer to our prayers depended on us and not upon you. Help us to realize that humanity was created to shine like the stars and live on through all eternity. Keep us, we pray, in perfect peace. Help us to walk together, pray together, sing together, and live together until that day when all God's children — Black, White, Red, Brown and Yellow — will rejoice in one common band of humanity in the reign of our Lord and of our God, we pray. Amen.

-The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.



### **The Church: The Faithful Church**

The apostle John is writing a letter to the church as led by the Holy Spirit. Unlike all of the other letters that he writes at the same time, this letter does not contain any negative words towards the church. This is not to say or imply that the church is perfect or that there is nothing that can continue to be improved upon, but rather to reveal the faithfulness of the people who have responded to the faithfulness of Christ. They have suffered immensely. Instead of relying on their own imperfect strength, instead they have leaned into what they knew which was to continue to be faithful in the middle of acute persecution. Their lack of strength and ability is acknowledged, but is never used as an excuse. The empowering of the Holy Spirit for them was not that they were able to have super human strength, but that what they had was sustained under pressure. They were being denied many things commonly taken for granted in culture, like the ability to trade and have a profession on account of their faith. They learned what is meant to have only Jesus to cling to.

**Read:** Revelation 3:7-13

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. What promises are made to the church should they endure?
2. What would enduring faithfulness to Christ look like in your life?
3. What examples in your community do you have of someone who has withstood immense trials with very little strength?

"Some suffering is given in order to chastise and correct a person for wrongful patterns of life (as in the case of Jonah imperiled by the storm), some suffering is given not to correct past wrongs but to prevent future ones (as in the case of Joseph sold into slavery), and some suffering has no purpose other than to lead a person to love God more ardently for himself alone and so discover the ultimate peace and freedom."

-Timothy Keller, *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering*

### **Prayer:**

We beseech thee, Master, to be our helper and protector.  
Save the afflicted among us; have mercy on the lowly;  
raise up the fallen; appear to the needy; heal the ungodly;  
restore the wanderers of thy people;  
feed the hungry; ransom our prisoners;  
raise up the sick; comfort the faint-hearted.

-Clement of Rome, 1st Century