

NEW CATHEDRAL

By

CHARLES COLSON

Text: Matthew 18: 15-20	Date: 9/7/08	#0839
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The story is told of Christopher Wren, the renowned British architect of the 17th century. He was touring the stone yard of his most famous project, St. Paul's cathedral in London. He asked the first stonecutter he happened upon what he was doing. The man replied that he was earning his daily bread. Wren approached another and asked the same question. This man answered that he was cutting stone. But, the third man Wren asked answered, "Sir, I'm building a great cathedral."

How is it that this third man, a stonecutter like the others, could discern a greater purpose to his efforts: I'm building a great cathedral? I've visited many great cathedrals, myself, in Europe and America, St. Paul's included. I've noticed that not all visitors respond to these awesome structures as channels for faith, as entrances to the presence of God. Many visitors are just tourists for which cathedrals are simply fifteen minutes stops on their itinerary. Our attitudes, unfortunately, are not always attuned to transcendence.

In our lesson Jesus was teaching his disciples about humility and forgiveness. The last sentence we heard was: "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among

them.” The great Christian debate over the centuries is how to know where the church is and where it isn’t. Is the church present if there is a magnificent structure, but the people coming and going identify it as a mere building? The point Jesus made about the church has nothing to do with a building great or small; rather with the gathering of people in Christ’s name even a mere two or three. And the debate continues with the question: if the name of Jesus is not mentioned at all by people gathered for good in an obvious Christian facility, is the church truly present?

Jesus’ point, it seems to me, begs us to review how we gather. We gather at Faith Church some 150 strong for worship; we also gather in committee meetings, Sunday School classes, choirs, coffee hours, youth group, fellowship suppers, the vision team, workcamp, Women of Faith, Pepper, Session and Deacons to name just a few. What makes these distinctively the church: just the building in which they meet? How do these differ from other gatherings we’re part of for fellowship, learning, or decision making, gatherings such as concerts, hunting parties, tour groups, office picnics, sports teams, Rotary Club, Girl Scouts, dance lessons, or political conventions? The easy answer is that gatherings of the church begin with prayer, calling upon the name of the Lord to be present, thus fulfilling the literal meaning of Jesus’ words. But in recent months here at Faith we’ve begun to question the perfunctoriness of such minimum standards. What’s the true spirit of Jesus saying: when two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there among them?

Mike Huckabee, Baptist preacher and former governor of Arkansas ended his speech at the Republican Convention this week with a stirring illustration. A high school teacher on the first day of school removed all the desks from the classroom. The students asked where are the desks? The teacher replied: if you can tell me how you earn a desk you'll get one. Throughout each class period students answered: get good grades, behave well to which the teacher said: not correct. At the end of the day the teacher called all the students back and said since no one gave the correct answer she would tell them. Whereupon in the door walked some 25 veterans dressed in military uniform carrying desks. The teacher said: these men earned the desks for you. For you the desks are free because of their sacrifice.

A great illustration, I thought, of how to understand our gathering and bonds as an American nation. But it also occurred to me that this same illustration also bears a critically different meaning. We're gathered as the church not because we did anything to deserve it. We didn't perform any task or get questions right on an entrance exam, but because Jesus sacrificed his life for us. When we say that the name of Christ needs to be in our midst as the church, it means that the spirit of his sacrifice is what motivates us and inspires us beyond ourselves. The church gathers to know and act upon the spirit of Christ.

This morning we are gathered for the worship of God, but also to receive bread and wine, a meal that Christ gives us. The church sustains itself on this free gift of holy food. We need to

aspire to Christopher Wren's third laborer and be able to say, not that it's bread and juice, not that it's the worship service, but the sacrifice of Christ that makes us into a great cathedral.