

### **Purpose Series 3: Who are we? A Biblically guided Christian community**

Ephesians 4: 1-16, 2 Timothy 3: 14-17

I clearly remember the day. As guests were gathering for the wedding, an otherwise normal looking, well dressed, well-behaved, middle-class American family walked into the Church sanctuary. The eleven year old son quietly looked around at the stained glass windows, the beautiful furniture, the oversized cross hanging behind the Communion table. Turning to his parents he said: *This sure is a beautiful place, what's it used for?* Only then did I realize how un-churched much of America had become. When an eleven year old middle-class American boy no longer had the faintest idea what a Church even was, then the gap between us Christians and our neighbors has grown frightfully wide. And if we ever hope again close the gap, then we need to be able to clearly answer that eleven year old boy: just who is a Christian and what a Church is used for.

What is a church used for? Why do we exist? What is it that we do, or should be doing, to justify holding onto this rather large piece of real estate right in the center of town.

There was a day in historic America, when even the heathen knew what went on in Church and generally considered such good for society. But as our post-Christian world rapidly secularizes (stripping away all vestiges of its Christian heritage) more young people, like that eleven year old, are growing up without having any valid idea of what it means to call oneself a "Christian." According to 2014 polls, 36% of young adults now list their religious preference as "none" ( a percentage which is dramatically increasing every year).

But listing themselves as a "none" doesn't mean that these people are non-religious, indeed they are very spiritually minded; just that they now make little distinction between Christianity or Buddhism, or Islam, or tai chi, yoga, and veganism: dropping everything into one spiritual bag and then pulling back out whatever pieces personally feel good for themselves. Post Christian religion has definitely become a consumerist buffet, a moral smorgasbord where, just as in the days of early Israel, *everyone is once again is doing what was right in their own eyes* (Judges 17: 6).

The problem is, that this next generation has been convinced – by the Devil and a society now in open rebellion against God – that dedicated Christians, those holding any convictions contra to the popular current view, are "haters" and that there is nothing happening within a Church community that could benefit them.

And as society grows increasingly antagonistic to any form of firmly held religious belief then many devout Christians may be tempted to follow Amish, or Muslim examples of forming themselves into closed protective communities, separated as far as possible from their neighbors. To tell the truth, many Churches have already turned so completely inward as to become their own defacto Christian ghetto, going outside of their close circle of Christian friends only to work, or get gas, and then coming quickly back in. Because Ghetto living can be as much a mindset as an actual walled around or fenced in place.

The only problem with such "circling of the wagons" is that as Christ followers, we are not allowed to "shelter in place," to live separate from our neighbors. Jesus made it very clear that we are to go into the larger world actively serving and seeking the lost – just as he did. We have this God-given task of sharing our faith with "whoever has the ears to hear" out there in the larger community, introducing others to Christ and his exclusive claims of salvation, offered by God's grace and received through their personal faith. And then if they accept Jesus Christ as their savior, our task is to help them grow up in his family – the Church.

So we are here for a purpose, As a Church, as the family of God, as the body of Christ, as a Christian community, as an embassy of God's kingdom, charged with the task of demonstrating, living out, and yes speaking out what it means to call ourselves Christian. and for us specifically as members of Bedford Presbyterian Church.

Can you now do that?

Can you say, and prove by your life what it means to call yourself a "Christian?"

Can you tell an eleven year old child what a Church is used for?

You should be able to by now.

Five years ago the Session began working to define what it is that we as a Bedford Presbyterian Church were striving to do. Then three years ago we began sharing this understanding with you as our church's "**purpose statement**"; putting it on t-shirts, on aprons, on the weekly bulletins and over-head monitors, even on our business cards & letterhead. All with the intent of helping even our youngest members to be able to say what it is that Bedford Church does. And then by speaking to it each year helping you, our mature members to be able to explain what it means when we say that ***Bedford Presbyterian Church is a Biblically guided Christian community, loving God, loving others, serving the world, and growing disciples.***

Let's again spend the next few weeks breaking apart our Purpose Statement, making sure that we understand it, that it becomes for us more than just words printed on a business card but a true reflection of who we are, and what we value. Let's begin with the opening phrase: ***Bedford Presbyterian Church is a Biblically guided Christian Community;***

When the Session first proposed the purpose statement it lacked this opening phrase. But as more Churches have moved away from what even they admit is clear Biblical teaching to better accommodate cultural values. The Session felt it necessary – sort of as truth in advertising – to add this descriptor.

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Recently one member expressed to me their opinion that the phrase "Biblically guided Christian community" was code speak: our way of saying "*gays and liberals are not welcome here.*" It broke my heart to hear that, because a church should never turn away anyone seeking shelter, or truth, or hope, or community. But on the other hand, **the Church was formed around a distinct set of truths which often stand contra culture, but were taught by no less than Jesus Christ himself which he then called for us to learn, imitate, and teach to others** (that is why we call ourselves "Christian" or followers of Christ).

Think about this for a moment: **Jesus' claims for salvation, along with his teachings on holy living are exclusive. He invited "whosoever will" to follow him .... But only on his terms, not theirs.** He told his disciples, *I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.* (John 14: 6). And his disciples took that message to heart preaching, **there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved** Acts 4: 12. They even called "cursed" anyone who claimed to be "Christian" while preaching any other message: *but even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!* (Galatians 1. 8).

So you see, Christians have never been given much latitude for adapting the Bible's message to better align with the changing values of culture; not and still legitimately calling ourselves "Christian." So to name ourselves as a **Christian Community**, is to declare that we are a gathering of people, closely connected, based on our faithfully following of the teachings of Jesus. And the only place we can find the teachings of Jesus is in our Bible. So it is actually quite impossible to call ourselves a Christian community apart from our adherence to Biblical guidelines.

With regard to keeping the Ten Commandments as our moral guide for life, Jesus very clearly stated:

*"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven* (Matthew 5: 17-19).

So you see, the Bible and its moral code are not open to interpretation or adaption on our part; we either live or teach it as Jesus did – and be blessed, or by our own rationalizations diminish it and be called “least in the kingdom.” So to that extent that the Bible is not inclusive, not open to “unity amid diversity,” and neither are we allowed to be. **Realize that the phrase “unity in diversity” as it is currently being used is oxymoron, it is an intentional form of “new speak” trying to declare a common ground where there is no common ground.** The only unity that anyone can have is around commonly held beliefs.

**The Bible demands that Christians hold to certain beliefs and lifestyles, no matter where popular culture is headed. But that does not stop us from loving and reaching out to some very diverse people, Just as Jesus did to the unwelcome and unwanted:** to lepers and tax collectors and all those other “sinners” that the religious people of his day refused to talk to.

Jesus had this amazing ability to live righteously and yet be very welcoming of and welcomed by some very unrighteous people, unrighteous but hungry and seeking. And that is what we are commanded – again by our bibles - to imitate in our own lives.

so the truth is that gays and liberals are just as welcome in this community as are the rest of us forgiven sinners: welcome to come as they are, welcome to be changed by the indwelling Holy Spirit. And welcome to be a part of our community. **For we are all sinners saved by grace, and we are all being changed;** shaped by God’s word. As the Bible describes us: *once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light* (Ephesians 5: 8).

And in another place saying: *Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God* (1 Corinthians 6: 9-11).

**And this is what some of you used to be** ... To come into God’s family is to be changed; why would anyone not want to be changed? In fact to not be willing to change is probably as sure an indicator there is that you are not yet a Christian. As Billy Sunday (who was a Presbyterian Evangelist) said “**The reason you don’t like the Bible, you old sinner, is because it knows all about you.**”

**God loves us so much that he will meet us right where we are. But God also loves us too much to leave us there. And this is the pattern that we Christians are also expected to follow.** How sad so few of us do.

After reading the life of Christ as presented in the Bible and in the writings of some renowned Christian authors, Mahatma Gandhi deeply admired the **Sermon on the Mount** (which shaped his own philosophy of life) hoping to see Christians live up to its standards. While living with Christians in England, South Africa and India, Gandhi expected to experience such Christian qualities as unconditional love, forgiveness, willingness to sacrifice, meekness, etc. But to his utmost dismay, Christians in his era never lived up to the standards preached by Christ. ... Once while visiting with Gandhi, the Christian missionary E. Stanley Jones asked him: “Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is it that you appear to so adamantly reject becoming his follower?” Gandhi’s reply was: “**Oh, I don’t reject your Christ. I love your Christ. It is just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ.**”

([http://www.mkgandhi.org/africanneedsgandhi/gandhi's\\_message\\_to\\_christians.htm](http://www.mkgandhi.org/africanneedsgandhi/gandhi's_message_to_christians.htm))

Gandhi also said: “*You Christians look after a document containing enough dynamite to blow all civilization to pieces, turn the world upside down and bring peace to a battle-torn planet. But you treat it as though it is nothing more than a piece of literature.*”

The Church should be filled with radically changed, radically loving, world changing Christians. But the world wants things the other way around. They don't want the Church to change the world. They want the Church to change; the world has set an unbiblical standard for behavior and now demands that Christian conform: valuing personal freedom, diversity of lifestyle, and non-judgmental inclusivism over every other standard – regardless of the moral implications. This is the cultural shell that our Bible pleads with us to break out of in order to become something much more!

Being by faith "born again" into God's family we have gone through a spiritual metamorphosis, now we should complete the change by adjusting our values and our lives this new reality. How do we do this? The Bible says that this is done by *the renewing of our minds*. That word "renewing" means just that; in view of what God has done for us, our reasonable response is to now allow God to completely renovate our thinking.

Betty and I love the home improvement shows on television: Property Brothers & Fixer Upper, Love It or List It. What these shows all have in common is that they start with a aging, worn out house and completely remake it into a new and more welcoming place to live. And that is exactly what God wants to do the same thing with us. God takes our offered self (our old home) and starts a remodeling project on our character and our behaviors – tearing out walls here, putting in (granite counter tops and stainless steel appliances) – entering our lives and changing us from the inside out.

And it all starts us as new believers opening our Bibles taking in God's Word His wisdom, His precepts – and incorporating all this into our lives. Today's Scripture, 2 Timothy describes God's word as spiritually alive and the right tool for training and correcting our lives.

Hebrews 4 tells us that God's living Word can slice into our very soul and expose to us the very thoughts and intentions of our own hearts.

Ephesians 5 talks about Christ "washing" our life with the Word – so scripture also has cleansing properties as well.

I Peter urges us like hungry babies to crave such spiritual milk, so that we can grow strong, grow up.

What is the result? The more we are washed by the Spirit of Christ in our lives, the more we feast on God's living, powerful, perceptive word, the more we are changed (becoming something much more than what we once were). What we are being changed into is someone who thinks and acts like Jesus.

As our Bible urges us: Let the mind of Christ live in you (Philippians 2). So If Jesus' way of thinking and living is the example that we should be imitating, then that puts a lot of responsibility on us to learn who Jesus is, how he lived, what He believed and valued, doesn't it? And the only way we can do that is if we are willing to be **Biblically guided**.

So that is what we mean when we say that Bedford Presbyterian seeks to be **a Biblically Guided Christian Community**.

We intend to follow and teach Godly values as taught in our Bible all the while striving to do so in an open , loving, and welcoming manner as did Christ. And if you are striving to do this, you know it's not easy.

So Bedford Presbyterian calls itself a **Christian community** – because that is what the Holy Spirit has shaped us into: God's family, followers of Jesus, living as a witness here in Bedford.

And we call ourselves **Biblically guided**, because that's the only way for us to learn how reflect the love and the holy living, and to share the offered salvation of Jesus – and if we aren't being Biblically guided, then we just aren't being very Christian – are we?

Let's pray about this.