

Column

The telephone was ringing as I unlocked the door of the church office. Casting my computer backpack on a table, I picked up the receiver, only to be met by a foreign-sounding voice asking, “May I speak to the owner of the business.”

I don’t know what possessed me, but I found myself saying, “Do you mean Jesus Christ? He is in charge around here.” Apparently, the caller did not because I heard a click, and the line went dead.

Though jocular in spirit and tone, my response is true theologically and biblically. “And he [Jesus] is the head of the body, the church,” writes the Apostle Paul in Colossians 1:18. He makes the same assertion in Ephesians 5:23.

To bring this truth home, I read of one minister who put an empty chair at the head of the conference room table at every meeting of his church council. He began the practice when there was dissension over a building project but continued it even after the conflict was resolved. A bit theatrical? Perhaps, nevertheless the concept represented by the empty chair is true. Jesus is the head of the church.

What is the church? Is it first and foremost a building? A business with officers and a balance sheet? A club made up of like-minded people complete with a list of rites and rules?

No doubt, there is some truth in all three assertions. Buildings have their place. They stand as testaments of Gospel work done by people in the past in a community. Their towers and spires point men heavenward, away from the temporal and passing. They are places of peace and prayer, a refuge from the storms of life. There, Sunday by Sunday, the faithful are nourished and equipped before being sent back into the world, their mission field.

And yes, because churches are more than an idea in the head and operate in the world of time and space, they must have an organizational structure which includes people assigned for various tasks. Some are set aside for work of the gospel ministry. At the same time and just as needed are people to take care of financial matters, tend the grounds, provide appropriate music and assist those in the ordained ministry with teaching the young, tending the sick and providing hospitality.

And finally, as in clubs there are rites and rules. Rites in the church would include the ordered reading and expounding of the sacred writings, the Scriptures. Also included would be the administration of the Gospel Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper (Holy Communion), along with such rites as marriage and the burial of the dead.

And, as with clubs, churches have rules, standards to which members are expected to conform. These standards are based on the teachings found in the Bible and are supremely centered around love of God and love of one another. As Jesus took a basin and a towel and washed his disciples' feet, so they are to do.

So, buildings, organizational structures, rites and rules all have their place, but the Church of Jesus Christ is much more. At its deepest level the Church is a living organism made up of those who in every generation have responded to the call of the Gospel and have been united to Christ in faith and baptism. The Church is a body of which the faithful are members (hands, feet, lips, etc.) and Christ is the head, the One who calls the shots.

If my telephone caller had stayed on the line longer, I could have shared this and more about the 'owner of the business'.

LORD, we beseech thee to keep thy household the Church in continual godliness; that through thy protection it may be free from all adversities, and devoutly given to serve thee in good works, to the glory

*of thy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the
22nd Sunday after Trinity, Book of Common Prayer).*

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