

WHAT IS THE CHURCH? – REVELATION 21:10-14, 22-23

PASTOR COLIN RIEKE – MAY 10, 2015

¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. ¹¹ It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. ¹² It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. ¹³ There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. ¹⁴ The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. ²² I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³ The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.



Grace and peace to you from him who is, who was, and who is to come,

Look around this morning at what's around you. I would suspect many of you could identify, quite easily, that you are at a church. Yes, during the week, this building masquerades as a school, but on Sunday mornings, we transform it into a church. It's an amazing thing that Church in a Box is able to do. And I want to publically thank each and every person that has helped bring together church this morning and every Sunday morning, I am much appreciated.

If you think about it churches come in many shapes and sizes. In fact, I get a quarterly magazine called *Worship Facilities* which shows me some of the latest and greatest trends in church design. Much of the attention is drawn towards the great big churches – like the Crystal Cathedral. It could also be a more traditional style of church, like the one we have at Grace-Tucson. You can travel across the ocean and come to more “humble” churches, like the ones my dad used to preach at in Africa – just made out of mud bricks and tin roofs. Far smaller, but it would still be considered a church.

But why would we call each of these churches? What commonality do they all share? I think an answer that would come to mind quite quickly is “the Word of God.” Each of these places are where the Word of God is preached, it is where the Word of God is learned. And you would be correct in saying that. But is that all there is to it, or is there more? How would we answer the question, “WHAT IS THE CHURCH?”

1. The church is in us
2. And in the presence of God

(1)

Throughout this journey in Revelation, the apostle John has spoken a lot about WHAT IS THE CHURCH. He began this book with seven letters to seven different churches exhorting and encouraging them in the Christian life. Throughout the book he has described the church in a few different ways – he's described the church as it continues to struggle here on earth, and as it enjoys the crown of victory in

heaven. And here in chapter 21 (and continuing into the final chapter of the Bible), John gives the glorious reunion of the church with God.

Listen to John's words again, **"And he carried me away in the spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel...It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel...The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb."**

Oftentimes, it's easy to just think of the church as a building or a place where we come to worship God, or a place where God's Word is present. But that isn't the way that John describes it here, and that isn't the way the rest of the Bible describes God's Church either. For example, Jesus says, **"Wherever two or three are gathered together, there I am with them."** But the church isn't just present when we gather together with two or three others. The church is present in the hearts of believers. Once again God says, **"No one can say Jesus is Lord, except by the power of the Holy Spirit."** Wherever the Holy Spirit is, so is the church. WHAT IS THE CHURCH? The church is in us.

A few verses prior to this, John described the church as the bride of Christ, now he describes it as the holy city – Jerusalem. In the Old Testament, Jerusalem was considered the Holy City because that was where God's temple was. That is where the glory of God was. Pilgrims would trek from all around to go to Jerusalem. Why do we know that this Holy City John is describing is the church, Christians of all time? Simply look how it is described. On the gates of the city were written the 12 tribes of Israel. No doubt these are the same names from chapter 7 of Revelation which talked about the church. Also in the book of Romans, Paul goes to extreme lengths to describe the true Israel as those who follow Christ.

The foundation of this very city had the names of the 12 apostles of Jesus. All of this lines up with Ephesians 2:2 which says the one true church of Jesus is **"built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets."** The fact that the twelve names of the tribes of Israel are on the gates is to indicate that only true Israelites are able to enter this city. Think of it almost as getting into a sports event or a concert. The only way you get in is with a ticket. No ticket, no entrance. Believers have that ticket, it is Jesus Christ.

In the verses we skipped over in this section of Revelation give the specific dimensions of the city. Once again the numbers to describe the size of this city are symbolic – not only because John said he was in spirit, but also because the sheer size of it would not make sense. So we have no choice but to consider this as John's perfect picture of the church. We are in the church, and the church is in us.

(2)

But when we consider the church and WHAT THE CHURCH IS, we will not only want to remember that the church is in us, but also something else. And that something else was mentioned twice in our verses for this morning. It's something called the "glory of God." John says Jerusalem **"shone with the glory of God"** and **"the glory of God gives it light."** The glory of God is very important when considering WHAT IS THE CHURCH.

The glory of God is being in the presence of God. There were a few times when the glory of God was visible on this earth. It was visible in the Old Testament as God spoke to Moses through a burning bush. God told Moses, “**remove your sandals for the place where you are standing is holy ground.**” Moses bowed down in fear. The glory of God, a sign of God’s presence came when the Tabernacle and the Temple were dedicated – God filled it up with what looked like fire and smoke. The glory of God was seen at Jesus’ birth as the angels descended upon poor unsuspecting shepherds. The glory of God was seen at Pentecost, something we will celebrate in two weeks.

Certainly these would have been awesome instances to be at, to see the presence of God in a visible form. But this also had something else in common. Something that should make us think about whether we would want to be in the presence of God. In each of those instances where the glory of God was present, people had to be told not to be afraid. That’s because something becomes very clear in the presence of God, how unworthy we are to be there.

And certainly we are unworthy. We have been described as the bride of Christ. And yet how often have we been unfaithful to our husband Christ? How often have we neglected his Word in our actions or our attitudes? How often have we with our actions contradicted our husband’s words? Our eyes may betray us, or our mouths reveal how selfish and cruel we can really be. And the fact that we try to cover it up is even worse. We so often act like nothing is wrong with us, instead we tout our accomplishments in the hopes that they will cover over our failures, we compare our lives, our families, our jobs against others to make ourselves look better than we are. But when we compare ourselves to holiness, God’s holiness, we see how far short we fall.

And when we look at the vision of heaven that John paints, we know we should be the ones standing on the outside looking in. We have been given the very church of God within us and we have disappointed. But the very presence of God that would cause us to tremble, is the presence of God we rely on to get into this city, to be a part of the church on the last day.

In the Old Testament, the Jews would have been very aware of their sinfulness. So aware, that God required sacrifices to teach them there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood. One particular sacrifice would take place on a very special day, called the Day of Atonement. On this day, the high priest would sacrifice the blood of a bull, and take it to a very special place called the Holy of Holies. This was the only time of the year that anyone was allowed in this room – because this was where the presence of God was. He would sprinkle the blood of the bull upon the atonement cover, to take away the sins of the people.

The book of Hebrews makes very clear that this was a picture of Jesus Christ, our high priest, who would sacrifice himself on the altar of the cross to make atonement (or payment) for our sins. At the time of Jesus’ sacrifice the curtain that closed off the Holy of Holies was torn in two, signifying that with the blood of Christ, anyone could come into the presence of God without fear. What’s also interesting is the similar shape of the Holy of Holies with the shape of the holy city of Jerusalem. They are both perfect cubes. The first, a small cube no bigger than a bedroom in which God’s presence was contained. The second, an enormous cube encompassing the full presence of God with his people. This is the glorious day that awaits us.

I want you to look around once more at not only what's around you, but who's around you. Because while we can look around and be reminded of God's love for us – at the altar and pulpit, at the baptismal font. We can cherish the blessing of music that God has given for us to praise him. This is not what makes up the church. What makes up the church is the people – the people you see around you right now. The church is living inside of them, the church is living inside of you. The church is living inside of you because the power of the almighty God put his presence in your heart so that you could call him Lord. If you take all of these externals away, we would still be considered a church.

And that's something to think about as you go home this morning. You are the church when you are at home. You are the church when you are at work. You are the church when you are hanging out with friends. You have the source of spiritual light dwelling in your heart. Don't hide that light, but let it shine, and joyfully look forward to the time when the church will enjoy the full light of the glory of God in heaven. Amen!