

The Church's DNA—Christ in the Midst

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Matthew 18:20 (NKJV) *“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”*

“I am there in the midst of them.” The distinctive mark of the Christian church is the presence of Jesus Christ. Christ's presence sets Christianity apart from every other religion. Even Moses recognized that it was God's presence that made Israel different from every other nation on earth: *“Then he said to Him, ‘If Your Presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here. ¹⁶ For how then will it be known that Your people and I have found grace in Your sight, except You go with us? So we shall be separate, Your people and I, from all the people who are upon the face of the earth.”* (Exodus 33:15-16 NKJV)

Moses understood that if God's presence did not go with them, there was not reason to go! He knew that the nations they were going to possess would not believe Israel belonged to God without His presence. We as believers are no different than the world without His presence. Christ's presence is what makes the church the church. In effect, “Christ in the midst” is the DNA of the church. Without His presence we are simply another empty form of religion.

Christ's presence does not negate the need for order. God ordered the entire priesthood, sacrifices, and tabernacle structure in the Old Testament to accommodate His presence. But as Israel learned at Shiloh in Eli's day, without the glory of God inhabiting that religious structure, all they had left was “Ichabod”—the glory has departed! (1 Samuel 4) Unfortunately, Israel's form of worship continued without the glory and presence of God.

In our generation it seems that we also have learned to “do church” without Christ's presence. We carry out the routine of church Sunday after Sunday. But do we dare ask the question, “Is Christ in our midst?” If we cannot answer that question with a confident “Yes!” then do we dare ask, “Why not?” These are soul searching questions that any serious worshiper must ask.

The church in the Book of Acts was a powerful and effective church. Few churches today are experiencing what they did. They experienced bold and anointed preaching and teaching accompanied by miracles, signs, and wonders. Their fellowship was characterized by great grace and love. Thousands came to faith in Jesus Christ. The fear of God was upon both the saved and the lost. What was the secret of the New Testament church? It was “Christ in the midst.”

“Christ in the midst” was not something new. The disciples had experienced Christ in their midst for three and a half years. They walked with Him, talked with Him, ate with Him, watched Him, and learned from Him. The disciples were clear what Jesus meant by “Christ in the midst.” Jesus prepared them for His departure by assuring them that He would never leave them nor forsake them. Although He would not be with them physically, His presence in the Person of the Holy Spirit would continue among them nonetheless. The early church began and spread with this awareness that Christ was truly in their midst.

Is it possible that we do not have the same results as the early church because we do not have a conscious awareness of His presence when we gather together in His Name? How would a conscious awareness of Christ's presence in our midst affect the nature of our worship, prayers, preaching, fellowship, attitude, and ministry? Would it increase our expectation of signs, wonders, and miracles? I am convinced that much of our problem is unbelief. We do not believe or act as if He is actually in our midst!

One of the characteristics of the last days is people who have a form of godliness but deny its power (2 Timothy 3:5). Church form without His presence is nothing but cold dead religion. Israel learned the hard way that they could not survive without His presence. Listen to God's indictments against them: *"For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, And hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns that can hold no water."* (Jeremiah 2:13 NKJV)

Man-made forms are nothing but broken cisterns that cannot substitute for Christ's presence. Today's churches have largely forsaken the Lord's presence and substituted high tech worship, videos, movies, lights, concerts, drama, programs, emotional hype, and entertainment to "get results"—i.e. draw a crowd. Although some things can enhance worship, they cannot substitute for His presence or change lives. Unfortunately, it is more convenient to draw water from our leaky reserves rather than to drop our buckets and seek Him, the true Fountain of Living Water.

What is the result of forsaking the LORD to rely on our broken cisterns? It is that our reserves eventually run dry and the people are still not satisfied: *"Judah mourns, and her gates languish; they mourn for the land, and the cry of Jerusalem has gone up. ³ Their nobles have sent their lads for water; they went to the cisterns and found no water. They returned with their vessels empty; they were ashamed and confounded and covered their heads."* (Jeremiah 14:2-3 NKJV) In the end, we must seek Him!

Jesus came to a woman in Samaria and invited her to abandon her religious cistern and follow Him. The woman came daily to Jacob's well to draw water. Jesus offered her living water that would become inside of her a well that would spring up into a fountain. She had to let go of her bucket for it could not contain the river Jesus offered her. Jesus helped her see that the religious cisterns in Samaria and Jerusalem would one day dry up. However, His presence would be everywhere. Worship would no longer be determined by externals but by the condition of the heart. The Father is seeking those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth

The Christian life is all about His presence. If our forms prohibit His presence then the forms we have adopted must change. There is an architectural motto that says, "Form follows function." In other words, when designing a building, the architect must first determine its function. Only after the function is considered can the building be designed properly. Jesus is the Master Architect. He is building His church to accommodate His presence! Anything that quenches or grieves His presence is an enemy of His presence.

We must recognize, welcome, honor, and reverence His presence in our midst. We must invite Jesus to come in and cleanse His church of everything that hinders His presence. "Christ in the midst" is not an absence of order (1 Corinthians 14:33), but the establishment of His kingdom throne and government in our midst that brings His purity, presence, purpose, power, and praise.

Christ has promised to be "in the midst" of His church. We are His church, His body, His temple. "Christ in the midst" must become our motto and our quest. People are not impressed with our forms. They need to see and know that Christ is truly in our midst!