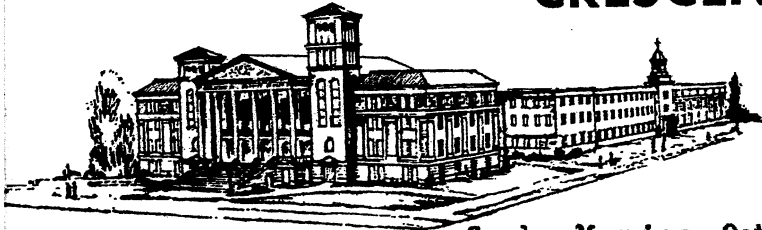


# CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

## SERMONS



"WHAT IS THE CHURCH?"

Sunday Morning, October 9, 1960  
Crescent Hill Baptist Church  
Louisville, Kentucky  
John R. Claypool

The American church of the 1960's finds herself in an unusual and uncomfortable position. For several decades, especially in the South, she has enjoyed unquestioned prestige and unchallenged moral leadership. Veneration and respect abounded from all quarters, and she experienced unprecedented growth. But suddenly in a world of social revolution and change, she is encountering both hostility and contempt. Many people are openly skeptical of her value, and have lost all confidence in her vitality for our contemporary world. Less than a year ago a student from Emory University sat in my office and openly confessed his opinion of the church. "In my mind," he said, "the church is washed up. For so long it has answered the questions that no one was asking and so evaded the real issues of life that now it has nothing to say." As he spoke these words I remembered having read what a Harvard student said to Dr. George Buttrick in the same vein. He said, "Do you know what I envision when I hear the word 'church'? I see an antiquated, out-of-date, Victorian train station, standing by railroad tracks that nobody uses any more." These opinions of today's youth make me shift uneasily in my seat, and they signal the gravity of our times as far as the church is concerned. We can no longer assume that everyone is for us and that we can continue an unexamined existence. The skepticism of our day demands that we rethink and restate the very nature and purpose of the church. We are being challenged to justify our existence and relevance to the turbulent '60s and we must answer this challenge or die. Therefore, since the times demand it and we who are new in the relationship of pastor and people need to get our thinking together, I invite your attention this morning to the question, "What is the Church?"

There are many images used in the New Testament to describe this reality. Twice in Matthew Jesus used the word "church," which means "a called out group," people who have been separated out through their response to the divine call. Other New Testament writers speak of the church as "the people of God," "the household of faith," "the building of God," "the bride of Christ." But the concept that seems to me to capture the essence of the reality is Paul's favorite phrase "the body of Christ." Especially in Ephesians and Colossians he uses this to describe the nature and the function of the church.

What does it mean? Well, you could give a lengthy discourse on the historical background and useage of the term in other writings. But I believe that Paul is here trying to say that the church is the instrument of God; that the church is the medium through which God has chosen to accomplish His purpose in this world. It is helpful to me to remember that some bodily form is necessary in our physical world. We know nothing of disembodied spirit. At this moment the personality of John Claypool is at work through my physical organism. As Dr. William Mueller was so fond of saying, "the body is the keyboard of the spirit," and when the body ceases to exist, the personality ceases to be effective in this world. This principle was true when our Lord lived on this earth. The power of His personality was made effective through His physical body, His natural organism. But now Christ is risen; He no longer inhabits this earth in flesh and blood. How does the power of the risen Christ make itself felt in the world? Why, through the church, which is His body! You see, what the physical body was to the incarnate Christ, the church is to the risen Christ. When on earth, Christ worked through His natural body and used this as an instrument of His purpose. Today He works through the

church and uses this as the instrument of His purpose. Thus I repeat, the church is to the risen Christ what the physical body was to the incarnate Christ.

Now this may sound like so much theological jargon to you, but draw out the implication. If what I am saying is true, the nature and task of the church appears in concrete form. It means that the church is to be and to do in this community what Jesus would do if He lived here in bodily form. Let us imagine for the sake of illustration that Christ comes to earth again, as He did long ago in Palestine. Let us say He chose this time to come to Louisville, Kentucky, and chose to live in the Crescent Hill Community. What would He do? Much the same as He did before. He would minister to the diseases of men's bodies and minds and spirits. He would teach them the truth about God and themselves and life. He would proclaim the good news of the Reign of God. Now, what He would be and do if He lived here is precisely what this church should be and do—for we are His body. We are to be to this community what Christ would be if He lived here in the flesh.

Dr. W. R. Pettigrew spoke to the Seminary chapel while I was a student, and told of a little cripple boy whose only means of making a living was selling notions in the lobby of a train station. He sat all day on a high stool with a large tray, and sold to the travelers who came by. One day a man was rushing to catch a train, and whirled around the corner and crashed into the little boy before he saw him. The stool went one way, the boy another, and all the trinkets scattered over the floor. Instead of apologizing, the irate man raised his voice, cursed the boy for being there, and stalked over to catch his train. Another traveler was rushing to catch the same train, but when he saw what had happened, he set down his bag, put the stool back on its feet, helped the little boy back up on it, and stooped down and gathered up the trinkets off the floor. Then he reached in his pocket and pulled out a ten dollar bill, and gave it to the boy saying, "Here, this will pay you for the notions that got lost and broken." Then he picked up his bag and turned to leave, but he was stopped dead in his tracks by the sound of the little boy's voice. He called out: "Wait, mister, wait. Mister, are you Jesus?" The man turned around and said, "Oh, no, son. I'm not Jesus; but I am one of His followers who is trying to do what He would do if He were here." I submit to you that this is the church in action—this is the body of Christ as it ought to be—so acting and serving that men see Jesus in what is done. Therefore, I think there is real truth in this statement of Dr. W. O. Carver's that the church is an extension of the incarnation. It is not to be identified with Christ absolutely, but it is the extension of His redemptive ministry. It is part and parcel with what God has done and is doing in Christ. God acted finally and decisively in Christ, and now He works through that called-out fellowship of men and women who have responded to His revelation and committed themselves to His command. Someone has said that the church is "God's bridge between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be;" it is His instrument for redeeming mankind and bringing into realization the Kingdom of God.

If this be its calling and function, why has the church fallen into disrepute? Why are more and more people writing us off as an out-dated relic of a bygone age? Do you want my honest opinion? Because the church has lost sight of its nature as God's instrument, and has become preoccupied with numerical success and ingenious organizational skill. We have reduced our function to building bigger buildings and promoting an attractive program, and we have lost touch with the power and reality of God. The church has got to realize that it is not an earthy institution or country club or body of fraternal good will—it is the servant of God. We are not called to be big or successful or spectacular—we are called to be faithful; to bear witness to the truth of God; to be channels of His redemption. I do not mean to oversimplify the situation, but we must desist in our desire to please men,

and return to our purpose of pleasing God. The church is a fellowship of divine obedience, or it has no eternal significance. I often hear the boastful phrase—"a Baptist church is autonomous." In terms of structural polity, this is true; but in the deepest sense, we are Christonomous, not autonomous. We are not free to do as we please, to let majority will determine policy. We are free only within the will of God, and our only justification for existence is fidelity to His leading. The church on earth will never be perfect; because it is made up of human beings, it will never be more than a fellowship of forgiven sinners—saved from sin, but never completely from sinning. Yet if it does not point beyond itself, if it is not the servant of eternal ideal, it has no more eternal significance than a garden club or civic organization. We must make up our minds whether we want to be a church—the body of Christ—or a purely human fellowship that seeks nothing more than the common denominator of majority consent. What am I saying?—The church must reaffirm its divine origin, and then be willing to suffer for its message. We have grown weak because we have stumbled along in the vanguard—the last to change, the first to compromise, the last to offend. Instead of being on the cutting edge of God's truth, we are the rear guard of reactionary opinion. We have got to decide which we will do—please men or please God.

In my mind the task of the church for our day can be dramatically illustrated by several modern symbols—we should be like a hospital, dispensing divine healing to distraught minds and spirits; we should be like a filling station, vitalizing men's lives and giving power and inspiration for daily life; we should be like a lighthouse, illuminating the dark places and guiding men by eternal truth. This is what we should be. Yet we can never be a hospital if we are obsessed by making men comfortable, if we constantly sooth the conscience with the anesthetic of compromise instead of pronouncing radical diagnosis and painful remedy. Again, we can never be a filling station if we pass out artificial stimulation for real power. They tell me moth balls in the gas tank of a car give a tremendous surge of power, but it does not last. I am afraid our church has been trying to substitute the "moth balls" of human promotion for the high octane of God "dynamis." And we cannot be a lighthouse if we do not cast our light in dark places. To be sure, the light hurts, and people who live in the dark will despise us for it, but what good is a lighthouse that burns only during the day—that sends its light only into already lighted places? To be what we must be—hospital—filling station—lighthouse—we must be in the world but of God.

To come back to our original question—what is the church? The body of Christ—the instrument of God—doing here what Christ would do if He were alive in the flesh. If this is what a church ought to be, two questions remain. First, how does this church measure up? Are we His body—hospital—filling station—lighthouse? Are we a suffering fellowship of Christian obedience? But the second question gets closer to the heart of it—you, how do you measure up? The church is no better than the individual members that make it up. On the basis of your commitment, is this church what it ought to be? I find it healthy to ponder often the little rhyme I learned as a child: "What kind of church would my church be, if all of its members were just like me?" Let me repeat: "What kind of church would my church be, if all of its members were just like me?" Here is what the church ought to be; what it is will be found in your answer to that question.

I wonder.....?