Class #4: The Church and the Neighborhood

Introduction

One of my favorite conversion stories at our church is Bill Anderson's. It gets told often, so you may well have heard it before. Bill came to this church in his early 60s. Wasn't a Christian. He'd spent 35 years as a professor with a focus on mass psychology. His class—"The Madness of Crowds"—looked at Financial panics, witch hunts, urban legends to examine why people in groups do stupid things. Group think. But a career studying people in groups didn't prepare him for the local church. He came to CHBC at the invitation of a friend and was intrigued by what he saw here. Not that relationships were strange—but that people seemed much more involved in each other's lives than simple self-interest would suggest. Especially since they didn't seem to share much in common. What was it that held them together? That question, over repeated visits to DC, eventually led him to the gospel of Mark, and an understanding of the peril of his sin, and to faith in Christ. And he's been a member here for well over a decade.

I love Bill's story because of how it illustrates one of Jesus' most memorable teachings. John 13:35, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Not just "if you love" but "if you have love for one another." There is something about the community of the local church that is crying out for an explanation—an

explanation that defies the laws of nature. Like a giant billboard screaming out, "this could only happen by the hand of God!" When it's rooted in the gospel alone, the community of the local church is profoundly compelling and attractive.

Is Your Light under a Basket?

What this means is that normally, evangelism should be corporate in nature. So often, we keep our Christian and our non-Christian worlds separate. We see our Christian friends at church, and then we go home or to work and see our non-Christian friends. And the two rarely mix. But do you see how ridiculous that is? The community of this church is one of your most powerful tools in evangelism. Separating out evangelism and church is a bit like digging a big trench with a plastic shovel, and then leaning back to rest of the backhoe that's sitting there. Use the backhoe! Show your non-Christian friends the life of our church—because that is one of the most powerful witnesses to the power of God in the gospel.

That's where we'll focus the rest of our time this morning. How do you invite your neighbors into the life of this church; how do you invite church members into the life of your neighborhood so that we can bear witness to Christ *together*? And to start, we'll need to take a step back to consider what the church is and how God intends Capitol Hill Baptist Church to relate to this neighborhood.

The Spirituality of the Church

How should a church relate to a neighborhood? The answer depends in part on what you mean by the word "church." Sometimes the New Testament uses that word to describe all the individual Christians who are part of a local church—"church" as a collective noun. In that sense, a church's task in loving the neighborhood is as broad as God's calling on each individual within that church. To love our neighbors, to be stewards of creation and society, and so forth.

But that's not the only way the New Testament uses that word "church." Sometimes it uses "church" in a more institutional sense. That is, the special way the Bible says Christians represent Christ when acting together as the local church. When we talk about the relationship of the church and the neighborhood, sometimes we tie ourselves up in knots and confusion because we aren't clear which sense of "church" we have in mind. The church gathered or the church scattered?

Let's start out with the church gathered. How should Capitol Hill Baptist Church relate to our neighborhood? Should we use our numbers and our organizing power to lobby the city council on educational policy, or neighborhood policing, or the expansion of low-income housing? Last week we talked about loving not only your neighbors but also the neighborhood—at a structural level—and the organization of our church seems ideal for putting muscle behind that structural level of change.

That's where we need to look at Jesus' goals for our church. And the book of Matthew is where you'll find the bulk of Jesus' teaching on the church. Jesus *inaugurates* the church as an institution in Matthew 16 ("on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it," 16:18). He *defines* the church in chapter 18 as a committed fellowship of those with credible claim to follow Christ ("For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them," 18:20). And then in Matthew 28 he famously commissions his church.

> [18] All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. [19] Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age[1].

The job of our church as an institution is the command of Matthew 28: to make, baptize, and equip disciples of Jesus. That is, the job of our church is about gospel proclamation—both to Christians and to non-Christians. That's different from the "love your neighbor" job you have as an individual Christian which is much more broad in scope. As an individual, you might serve God by helping to improve public access to green space by serving as a park ranger in your job, helping to reform the public schools as a member of the school board, volunteering to help

---

[1] Note the textual connections that hold these three passages together. In Matthew 16, Jesus says he will give his followers the "keys to the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (v. 19). What are these keys? That remains a mystery until chapter 18 when we learn they represent Jesus' authority to designate which of his followers have credibility in their profession of faith in him—authority of designation that he gives to the local church. These two passages about the church, in other words, are all about Jesus entrusting his authority to the local church. The Great Commission also begins with a statement of Jesus' authority. So not surprisingly, when those who heard that Commission began to live it out in the book of Acts, they did so by planting local churches.

get a particular politician elected, and so forth. But none of those things are within the job description of a local church because they're outside the Great Commission of Matthew 28. That doesn't mean they're not good things to do for individual Christians—but they're not for a church.

So we shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that because something is our responsibility as individual Christians, it's necessarily the responsibility of our church. Our church may help equip us for that work—like we're doing in this core seminar. But not all those things will fall into our collective job description from Jesus.

Inviting your neighbors into the life of life church

That's a bit about the church gathered—as an institution. But what does this look like for the church scattered—for us as individual Christians who are part of this church? Let's start talking about how we can merge our worlds of church and neighborhood. We'll start with what's maybe most obvious: introducing your neighbors to the life of your church. I know that this has its limits: we shouldn't think about evangelism primarily in terms of inviting people to church. But inviting people to church certainly has a role to play.

When was the last time you invited one of your neighbors to join you at CHBC on a Sunday? That invitation may be more attractive than you think. After all, your

neighbors know that church is a big part of your life and they might just want to check it out to understand why.

What have been the venues where you've found inviting friends and neighbors to church has helped in evangelism? What made them want to come?

Inviting the church into the life of your neighbors

Of course, brining neighbors to church isn't the only way to introduce them to CHBC; you can also bring the church to them. As you build friendships in this church, see if there are ways you can share those with your neighbors.

That can start with simply mixing your social circles. If you have a cookout at your house, invite some folks from CHBC and some folks from your block. If you're going to see a movie with some friends from church, consider inviting some other people along. I'm encouraged at how often I hear about this: parties, dinner invites that include people from CHBC and others as well. You might be surprised at how much your CHBC friends enjoy time with your neighbors—and vice versa. There's something powerful about the friend you've been sharing the gospel with discovering someone else who believes the exact same thing yet is so different from you in so many ways.

Let me give you a few thoughts about mixing social circles:

1. It's OK and can even be helpful to pre-wire some conversations. So you let Jack Cohen, who's Jewish and a member of our church, know that you'll be inviting both him and your Jewish neighbor to watch the air show together at Andrews. That way Jack might be able to connect with your friend more easily.
2. That said, second, don't make your neighbors feel like evangelism projects. It's a pretty awkward thing to go to your Christian friend's house only to discover that you're the only person there not from her church. Let alone when you realize that most of the other people are there to share the Christian gospel with you. Remember: we're looking for friends, not projects. The goal here is to simply share your friendships.
3. A third thought: develop the habit of introducing your church member friends and your neighbors as you all run into each other. At the store, on the street, wherever. Even if there's never a follow-on conversation, you're helping your neighbors understand a little better this church that they know you care a lot about.
4. Look for opportunities for CHBC friends to join you in the normal activities of life. You might bring a friend from church to hang out with you while you go to your kid's T-ball game. And maybe while you're there you get to introduce them—and how you know them—to another parent you see at the games every week.

And one final thought: as you're looking for opportunities to connect your neighbors with others from our church, neighborhood get-togethers are huge. I

realize that's especially useful for those of you who live near other CHBC members. When there's a block party, I hope you see that as a top priority on your schedule. Maybe you could even get together with the other Christians you know live on your block ahead of time to pray for opportunities for building friendships with those who aren't Christians—and then meet again afterward to debrief and pray some more.

But once again, before I dominate everything with my ideas, let me look to you. ***What have you found useful for inviting CHBC members into the life of your neighborhood?***

The Church as Neighbor

Let's look at one final topic before we close out this morning, and that is the church as neighbor. I talked earlier today about how our church as an institution isn't going to get involved in your neighborhood like you can as an individual. But as we think about this particular neighborhood at 6th and A, we need to recognize that our neighbors view this church building—and thus this church—as part of the neighborhood. That means that at least for those who live close by, our reputation as Christians and as church members is shaped—for better or worse—by the reputation of Capitol Hill Baptist Church. Of course, the offense of the cross will always be a part of our reputation—as it should be. But like the Jerusalem church in Acts 15 who at the leading of James resolved to "not make it difficult for

the Gentiles who are turning to God," we don't want to unnecessarily cause offense to those we pray will join us in Christ.

Let me give you a two ways we can have a good reputation as a church:

1. Consideration. Are we feeding a stereotype that we come here to use the neighborhood, not to be part of it? That's one reason we try to make the outside of our building attractive. We want to be considerate in how we relate to our neighbors. It's interesting—9Marks got its start through the gift of a neighbor who wasn't a Christian. He was so impressed with how this church had "transformed the neighborhood"—to use his words—that he gave us a very large sum of money to start an organization that would help other churches do the same thing. Even from a non-spiritual perspective, he saw the good of a healthy church.

2. Care. If people see you doing things that care for our community, I hope they know that you're part of this church. It's great if people know you're a Christian—but even better if they know you go to Capitol Hill Baptist Church. Why? Because "being a Christian" is vague, broad, and general in the minds of many. But being part of CHBC is much more specific. You're unlikely to reshape someone's perception of Christianity by your good deeds but you might get them to start asking different questions about Capitol Hill Baptist Church.

Reputation is a complex thing, isn't it? At the core of the Christian faith is a reputation—God's reputation. All that he does, including brining us to salvation, he does for his glory, to further his reputation. After all, what better end could he accomplish that showing us to the most satisfying, the most beautiful, the most joyful being that is: Himself. When we take the name of Christian, we attach our own reputations to His. And so when I share the gospel with my neighbor, he's got in the back of his mind the reputation of all the other Christians he's known. Then, on top of that, when we introduce the church and its own institutional reputation, we further flavor people's perceptions of who Jesus Christ is. We should be careful with the reputation of our church, because it is the reputation of Christ.

Conclusion

If you're like me, you've found this class to be a grab bag of different ideas. But all those ideas are under one heading: how can we expose our neighbors to the amazing testimony of a church? In a church, people commit to each other far beyond the power of self-interest, even when it's uncomfortable—because they value Christ more than comfort. When you build a whole congregation that way, it's an amazing testimony to the power of God and a testimony that demands to be heard. What can we do to make sure it gets heard?

Here's how I'd like to end the class: I'm going to give you sixty seconds of silence right now to write down just one or two things we've talked about in the class

today that you'd like to do to show off God's work in this church to your neighbors. Then we'll finish and I'll close in prayer.