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Good Works  
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**What does it mean to be the body of Christ,  
in the world, for the world, for the glory of God?**

Sunday morning: Again I am faced with the question of church. Where should I go? I sigh, discomfort twisting amidst threads of thought. *It has been more than two years since I moved to Athens. Why haven't I found a church? Is there something wrong with me, or my attitude? I have tried. But, somehow I haven't been able to connect.* I am twenty-four and can't seem to rattle myself into sitting through another church service.

Tuesday morning: I am with my friends and coworkers. "Good mornings" and coffee mugs crowd the dining room. The residents of the shelter have headed out for the day, and we meet where they ate breakfast. Someone closes the door against the incessant ringing of the phone, thank goodness. Staff members answer the phone all day—talking with many people—those seeking shelter or help with bills, eager donors, and each other as we maintain the daily operations of this organization. But now, it is time to quiet ourselves for prayer, song, scripture sharing...story-telling, collage-making, walking... hearing testimonies, honest fears and encouragement. In my week of work, this is a sustaining hour.

My parents are Mennonite missionaries, yet I didn't grow up going to church. When people ask me about my church background, I am usually tempted to say that I grew up in the "Isaan rice-farmers' house church" denomination. My sisters and I spent dusty Sundays visiting newly formed groups of Thai believers. For me, this meant bumpy rides out to various villages, politely sitting on the floor for many hours and straining to interact in my limited language abilities. The meetings and the meals that followed were simple, and sometimes "poor." Yet,

these villagers were experiencing the power of God in profound ways—dreams, physical healing, and restored relationships. I didn't always understand or appreciate what was going on around me at the time, but looking back I glimpse something mysteriously real, and beautiful.

These days, I spend my Sunday mornings exploring the village of Chauncey. A run-down town in Southeast Ohio, it is far from Asia. I find myself surprisingly energized to be there: meeting people from the Chauncey Church of God, Chauncey Faith Chapel and Chauncey Christian Church. I am a curious visitor, and I feel as though these sincere churchgoers have a hard time understanding me. I haven't yet found words to explain my hopes and intentions to them, because my purpose feels somewhat "other." Some day soon, I hope to live in this used-to-be coal mining community and take part in its culture. I hope for the movement of God in which I, along with others, can link arms with the local believers to continue to express Christ through our joined body.

These are a few of the angles from which I approach the question of what it means to be the Church. I do not intend to answer exhaustively, but rather to speak about several aspects that seem most significant to me.

The Church is made up of all those who, "in their hearts, sanctify Christ as Lord" (1 Peter 3:15). It is a living community that is centered in love and obedience to the person of Jesus Christ. I believe the Church exists as an extension or representation of who Jesus is: we embody Christ in the world. Thus, continuing the mission of Jesus becomes the sole purpose of the Church.

After his death and resurrection, Jesus appears to his fearful followers and commissions them, saying: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:21-22). Just as the Father sent Jesus into the world, so Jesus sends his disciples

to all nations. This is apostolic action; the title “apostle” means “sent one.” The Church is sent through the love of the Father, in the image of Jesus and with the comfort and power of the Holy Spirit. As a group of people who are acting in the name of Jesus, I understand Jesus’ way of living, dying and rising to new life to be inseparable from the essential nature of the Church.

### **Jesus’ Life**

To begin, how did Jesus live? What does this say about the meaning of the Church’s life? Jesus began his life in raw humility: an infant, a refugee, born to a shamed mother in a conquered nation. God chose to be with us, in our neediness and dependence, facing rejection, violence and subjugation to do so. I believe that the Church is called to the same. We are to let go of being powerful according to societal standards and live with those who are poor and weak.

I desire for my life to express this value, and this is one of the reasons why I believe God is calling me to live in Chauncey. In my view, it is important for believers to intentionally share the powerlessness that people who are poor experience. This may be through listening to someone share about an overwhelming situation in their life when you cannot fix it. We can also intentionally locate ourselves in places where we may experience some of the difficulties of daily life with people who are poor. While I do not think that God calls us to a specific “level” of identification with people who are poor, I believe that the Church must be willing and obedient to God’s call in this direction.

Looking at the example of Jesus’ life, he also placed himself within a particular people and culture. I see Jesus walking along the Galilean beach, watching the fishermen. He calls out to Simon and Andrew, “Come, follow me and I will make you fish for people” (Mark 1:17). It strikes me that Jesus knew the language of these men, and understood their livelihood. His invitation may have seemed odd to these young, working class men, but it was comprehensible.

Likewise, I believe the Church is to continue learning the languages and livelihoods of the world's people with the purpose of communicating who Jesus is.

I once heard a Native American man speak of the gospel being shared in his “heart language.” These people groups who were savagely colonized by the Christian Church were often taught good news that was not good—it ground down and drowned out the good and beautiful things about Native cultures. For example, drumming has long been a way that some Native American cultures have connected with spiritual power. When Jesus Christ transforms their lives, should not drumming be consecrated as a legitimate way to pray to God?

I remember the first time I realized how much God loves culture. I was visiting my family in Thailand after a semester-long anthropology class. Throughout those months of intense study of many different cultures, I had often asked myself why it all mattered. Why did human beings organize themselves in these peculiar ways? What was the significance as they did so? With the looming reality of cultural destruction, I felt a certain sense of apathy toward this whole subject.

My family had taken a trip, sightseeing at the ruins of an ancient temple near the border of Cambodia. Stepping into a dusty courtyard, we came upon on a small band, spilling out strains of a luring Khmer melody. Each man played a traditional Southeast Asian instrument, played by hands and feet marred by the land mines that used to cover the Cambodian countryside. All at once, I felt a rush of truth. *Culture matters because God loves culture.* God created it, and loves it. These men are expressing part of the face of God as they voice the music of their land.

Similarly, I believe the Church must learn to love and embrace the godly aspects of each culture we enter. I myself want to learn American culture, and the ways of Appalachia, so I can

celebrate what is good, make sense when I talk about Jesus and salvation, and participate in the unique way that people praise God around here!

The cross-cultural thrust of the Church spans not only language and place, but also time. While the Church's identity and mission never change, the manner in which the person of Jesus is expressed takes diverse forms throughout the generations—and there have been many of them.

Take for example a recent conversation I had with a middle-aged man after a very dry, traditional church service. He says, "We need more people like you coming to church! Why don't people your age come to church?" I replied, "I'm not sure. You could ask them..." To which he says, "When I was young, people said they didn't come to church because they thought that Christians were hypocrites. These days, they tell me they're not 'church people'." I found a great deal of truth in his last statement. Young people are not averse to the identity of the Church itself. Rather, a cultural barrier has come between the church and the younger generation. Unfortunately, young people see the Church as a stagnant group with a certain lifestyle that is totally irrelevant to their lives. Even as a believer I feel this sense of disconnected distance while relating with many church institutions. I believe that the Church must evaluate what message its forms are communicating. They must communicate the good news, not simply a habit from the 1960's, to the people they are living among!

### **Jesus' Death and Resurrection**

I have been discussing the example of Christ's life, which forms the Church's identity. In his death, Jesus' model offers a second undeniable truth in the meaning of the Church. To be the Church is to embrace suffering for being faithful witnesses of Christ. Peter states to the first Christian fellowships, "Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same intention." And later, he encourages them saying, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery

ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as those something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:1, 12-13). In the early Church, suffering for the name of Christ was normative for the believers, and was an opening to the glory of God. I firmly believe that this hard truth remains for the Church of today.

A few weeks ago, I took a morning walk and the song "Shine, Jesus Shine" came to my heart as I saw the sun shimmering on the fall leaves. This song always reminds me of an Australian boy who went to the same boarding school as me. It was his favorite. When Philip Staines died with his father and brother, killed by a militant group in North India for their Christian witness, we sang it for him: *"As we gaze on Your kingly brightness, so our faces display Your likeness. Ever changing from glory to glory, mirrored here may our lives tell Your story. Shine on me. Shine on me."* In this family's story, I saw something of the identity of the Church, a people who chooses to take personal risks, and ultimately suffer, for the sake of God's mission.

Yet, the end is not suffering itself. It is, "so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 4:11). To him be the glory and the power forever and ever! In Jesus' life, I see that the cross is the way to the resurrection. Similarly, in the ordinary moments of the Church, our pain becomes the place of conversion and change. We choose to "entrust ourselves to a faithful creator, while continuing to do good," for "after a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you" (1 Peter 4:19, 5:10-11). The martyrs speak this reality with more intensity.

Philip's mother and sister remained in India, continuing their work of service and evangelism. Today, I hope to walk with my brothers and sisters in Christ in like obedience—to make many small choices that lead me to love God unselfishly and without fear. I can't exactly say what this will cost me but I want to be willing.

The current manifestations of the Church, in our small obedience and grievous failings, are enveloped in yearning for this coming when Jesus will himself restore us. “We wait for a new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (2 Peter 3:13). Created out of the overflowing love of the Trinity, God made humanity long to be restored into the community of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This desire is active in the Church, consuming us. Our lives today become small symbols of our real identity, our real eternity. We seek to walk in humility with those who are poor, entrust ourselves to God in the midst of trouble, and look eagerly toward the glory of heaven.