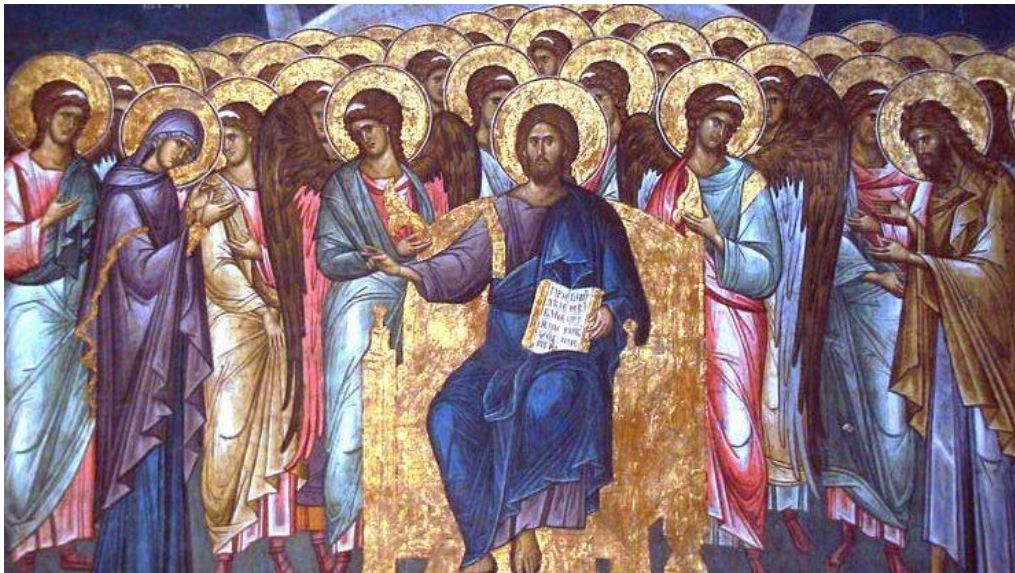


SHARING IN THE LIFE OF CHRIST

BY LOVING GOD AND LOVING OUR NEIGHBOR

A deeper dive into the theology behind our Mission Statement



January 2021

INTRODUCTION

"I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic [means of interpretation] of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it¹."

If you have spent any time in the church, you may not quite understand the meaning of the statement "Sharing in the life of Christ." What do I mean when we say share? Jesus' life was lived - how do you and I in any way "share" in his life?

I want to briefly walk you through some Scriptures that I pray will help you in understanding the mission of Immanuel Church, as I understand it to be the mission for all Christian Churches: to share in the life of Christ by loving God and loving our neighbors. As the famous missiologist Leslie Newbigin is quoted above, the very credibility of our claim of faith in Christ to the broader world is on display in each local church congregation. It is on display not only by our confession of faith,

¹ Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 27, in a chapter titled "The Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel."

but also by our actions and our love for one another². Faith and works go hand in hand, as faith without works is indeed dead³. They work hand in hand, not for our salvation, as we are saved by our faith apart from our works⁴. However, if there is an example for the Christian life and how it is lived, it is Christ himself, for the name "Christian" means "little Christs," and it can easily be said that Jesus' faith was evident and shown by his works all throughout his life.

Below we will break down our mission statement into three separate sections.

² John 13:35

³ James 2:14-26

⁴ Ephesians 2:8-9

SHARING IN THE LIFE OF CHRIST

Unlike all other founders of false religions, Jesus was shown to be perfect and sinless in his life (Hebrews 4:14-16). Yes, his life is worthy to be emulated, and we are also called to mimic Christ in our words and deeds⁵. However, the New Testament goes farther than Jesus only being our example. Through the giving of the Holy Spirit, we are brought into a sort of *participation* and spiritual union in him, where his story becomes our story, and his very patterns of living become something we share in throughout our life. In clear terms, Jesus' story has become our Master Story that we're called to come and live beneath, and *participate in* within our day to day life.

This sort of teaching is found all over the New Testament and is especially found in Paul's writings. In fact, the most repeated phrase in all of the New Testament letters is "In Christ," and I believe this phrase adequately expresses the spiritual reality of all Christians sharing in Jesus and his life through the presence of the Holy Spirit. To show this, let us dive into a few texts (of many) which help us understand this.

Philippians 2:1-22

We find this in the famous passage found in Philippians chapter 2, which reads:

⁵ Romans 8:29, Matthew 11:29, Ephesians 2:10, etc.

[1] So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, [2] complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. [3] Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. [4] Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. [5] Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, [6] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, [7] but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. [8] And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. [9] Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, [10] so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, [11] and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (ESV)

After Paul mentions various encouragements in Christ, and a call to love and to be in harmony together, as they all embrace their shared filling of the Holy Spirit, he calls them to humility. He calls them to a life that is not selfish or ambitious for one's own personal gain, but rather he flips upside down worldly self-centered ambition and calls us to count others as more important than ourselves. Then he goes farther: I must not only be concerned for my own well being and interests, but also the interests of others.

But how can we grab a hold of these things? How can they be ours? Well, says Paul, they are already ours in Christ (2:5). We already have them, and we can assume, as we said just previously in verse 1, that it is ours because, if you are a Christian, we all participate in the Spirit. We all have His Spirit, which unites us together in bringing Jesus, and who He is, into our lives, and into our story.

Now Paul goes into a lengthy explanation of how it is ours: because of Jesus' patterns of living. He, being in the very form and splendor of God, did not count his equal status with God as something he should cling to in order to be exploited or taken advantage of⁶ for his own benefit, as Paul just asked the church to avoid. Rather, like Jesus, he willingly took on the lowest status available to him in the ancient Roman times - Paul comparing it to being a "slave" (even though Jesus was not actually a slave during his life, his deep poverty as shown in the Gospels caused him to be in a status not much higher than that of a slave). He emptied himself of all the splendor he had in heaven⁷, and took on skin and bones and low class living. What's more, he became obedient to God to the point of death, and not just any death: the worst and most brutal of all deaths - crucifixion.

⁶ Many New Testament scholars agree that the translation "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped" should better and more clearly be translated as something like "he did not count equality with God a thing to be exploited for his own benefit." To go deeper, please see the work of Michael J Gorman, "Participating in Christ: Exploring Paul's Theology and Spirituality, 2019, Baker Academic

⁷ Jesus, however, did not somehow leave behind his divinity, only the splendor that naturally comes with his divinity. It could be likened to a king taking off his splendid garments and putting on the clothing of a peasant. Mark Twain's "Prince and the Pauper" is a fine example.

Because of his extraordinary (and what we may call supernatural) humility, he was exalted with the name that is above all names, and one day every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is King and Lord to the glory of God!

After such an almost poetic and creedal and hymn-like statement from Paul, he continues:

Philippians 2:12-13

[12] Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, [13] for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (ESV)

The call is clear: this very pattern of living, of Christ being willing to set aside and to give up any privileges he had in his divinity for the sake of our salvation and redemption, becomes the very pattern in which you and I are called to live. The remainder of Philippians continues to explore what it means to share in these patterns of Christ-like living. The question becomes for us: what privileges do you consider that you have in life? What can you set aside, like Jesus, in love, for others? When we share Jesus with others, if our life actually exemplifies the manner in which Christ lived, we are then living within the manner which is already ours in Christ by his Spirit: we are *participating in Christ*. We end this portion with a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer,

“The Church is the Church only when it exists for others . . . not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men of every calling what it means to live for Christ, to exist for others⁸.”

Galatians 2:20

Finally, for one other brief example: we participate in Christ through faith by identifying with his death, embracing his death as our own death, and his new life as our new life. Paul says,

[20] I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (ESV)

How could Paul say that, when we consider the death of Christ, that we should consider his crucifixion as our crucifixion? What drives Paul to make a claim that we died when Christ died? Elsewhere Paul even makes the dramatic statement, “I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day!⁹” Paul seems to understand that when we first place our faith in Christ, when we confess that he is our new Lord and King and Savior as we commit our allegiance to him, we didn’t just commit to die to ourselves every day - but through the gift of the Spirit, we *already died because Christ died*. This is a spiritual death of sorts, a death to self, a death to what the New Testament calls our flesh - living as if we are most important, and

⁸ Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison

⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:31

exchanging the god of self for Jesus Christ as King and God. Of course, this is limited in scope: in no way does Paul mean that we somehow share in Jesus' atonement for our sin - that work belongs alone to Christ. But once again, we find the theme of participation: Jesus' story has become not just instructive, but in a spiritual sense has become the Master Story in which we identify and seek to emulate in our own life day to day.

I could go on and on, but I do hope one thing is clear: this is what it means to "share in the life of Christ" - it is only possible through the gift of the Spirit, who brings us into such deep union with our Lord, and who empowers us to be the Little Christs that we are called to be.

BY LOVING GOD

²⁸ One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" ²⁹ Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." - Mark 12:28-31

In this passage above, Jesus summed up the entirety of the Bible. We will first focus on the first commandment: to love God.

Far from being a cheap call to a cheap love, love requires that we give up all for God, just like Jesus did for us (Matthew 16:24-26; Philippians 2:1-11). Being a disciple of Jesus calls us to love God more than any other person or thing in our life and allowing our love for God to be the filter by which all other loves of our heart are brought through. Such a grand and all-encompassing love requires the devotion of our heart, soul, mind, and strength to the task, forever altering all of our motivations for living, and the way in which we live. We love God because he first loved us¹⁰. God, and his love, is even better than our

¹⁰ 1 John 4:19

own lives, and thus our only natural response is to worship and praise him with all of our being¹¹

This is a feeble attempt, for our purposes at least, to summarize the first step in how we share in the life of Christ: by loving God. What more can be said? How can I in such a brief space explain the fullness of the call to love God with *everything you have*? And I do not mean “with all of your enthusiasm” – as is a common misconception among many Christians today. Sometimes we can see people who are very enthusiastic about Christ publicly and immediately come to the conclusion that that person must love God more than me because they are more “excited” about Jesus than me.

Certainly, I am no judge of someone’s passion for Christ, and for many that is a natural overflow of a heart that deeply loves God. However, this love that we are speaking of is a love of full devotion – every square inch of your soul and heart and mind belonging to Jesus in a united front of life. No exceptions. No compromise. It is a difficult calling, not to be perfected in his life. Yet if we are to expect to participate in Christ, loving God above all else must be our ultimate compass. And as theologian and pastor John Piper is famous for saying, when we pursue this path and seek ultimate satisfaction in knowing and loving God, infinite joy is available to us. As Piper coined, “God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in Him¹².”

¹¹ Psalm 63:3

¹² A quote from John Piper, who admittedly is not quite sure if its original source.

LOVE OTHERS

Jesus said that they will know who his followers are "by their love for one another" (John 13:35). In fact, if we love others, we know that we are in God, because God himself is love¹³. Love is the fulfillment of the law¹⁴. For a Christian to be absent of love is an utter contradiction, for a Christian is to be the embodiment of love, as God through his Spirit in his is filling us with love. Loving others is the very manner in which we participate in Christ by the power of his Spirit¹⁵.

To love others includes everything from the simplest of acts, like giving someone a cup of cold water in Christ's name¹⁶, to the grandest, of fighting for justice and righteousness on a local, national and public level. In fact, the pursuit of justice can almost be equated with love, as the source for Jesus' quote of the second summary-commandment (love your neighbor as yourself) is found in Leviticus 19.

In Leviticus 19, before we are told to love our neighbor as ourselves, we are given summary statements as to how we are to love our neighbor. It begins in verse 9, with a commandment for those reaping their fields to ensure that they leave behind extra on the trees and plants themselves, as well as that which they drop on the ground, that the poor and sojourner (that is, the foreigner living in Israel's midst) may come after them to glean what is left (19:9). Commandments not to steal or

¹³ 1 John 4:16

¹⁴ Romans 13:8-13

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 13

¹⁶ Matthew 10:42

deal falsely or lie and in doing so, swear by God's name - all actions against neighbors and God himself - is strictly prohibited in the name of love. He continues with commandments to cease any sort of oppression of your neighbor, to pay fair and timely wages to workers (19:13), to not curse the deaf or blind and take advantage of them (19:14), in legal proceedings to do justice and not give special treatment to the wealthy and be partial to the poor, but to judge your fellow neighbors in righteousness (19:15). Don't slander your neighbors (19:16), don't hate your brother (19:17), don't bear grudges or seek vengeance against those who have wronged you (19:18) - but, as the summary statement is then given which concludes it all - "You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:18).

Love embodies all of this, and all of this embodies who God is. And as Jesus walked this earth, he embodied it all too, time and time again. So, when we are called to share in the life of Christ, we are called to share in Christ's love by actually doing these loving deeds.

But what about evangelism?

If you have been a Christian for some time, you may read all of this and say, "wait a minute: what about evangelism? What about sharing the Gospel with our neighbors? How is it that your mission as a church has nothing of evangelism?"

My single response would be this: *the whole idea of sharing in the life of Christ by loving God and loving our neighbor is indeed the fullness of evangelism.*

Let me explain: It has been argued that evangelism, in recent decades and perhaps in the past century, has wrongfully and perhaps slowly over time been separated from loving others, giving sole prominence to the sharing of our faith by words only. Of course, faith and a confession of faith is enough for one to be saved (as shown by the thief on the cross, who upon asking Jesus to remember him in faith, was granted access to paradise with Christ, and who died just hours later¹⁷), and I think I can explain this by providing two brief scenarios.

Elevator Evangelism

Let's call this elevator evangelism. You may find yourself on an elevator with someone, and somehow rather quickly Jesus is mentioned, and you find yourself with about 15 seconds to share the Gospel.

Take it! It was a divine appointment. The part that may be unfortunate in this scenario is that you may never see this person again for any sort of follow up for discipleship. Yet, the opportunity is given to share the Gospel through word - and you take it.

Sadly, however, I'll share yet another example. These scenarios, which God certainly can still use, may become less and less effective in

¹⁷ Luke 23:42-43

modern times, as a mere vocal explanation of the Gospel and Jesus himself is often clashing up and against an utterly different worldview, maybe even a reality that simply is not shared between you and the person anymore, showing that the Biblical prescription to make our faith known by our words *and* our love for one another just may indeed be the preferred path. Here's another example, and this one is a personal story of mine.

Friendship Evangelism

I love sitting in coffee shops with a Bible open, preferably as close to where people pick up their drinks as possible. They see it, and inevitably it becomes a conversation starter. In this way, I've shared the Gospel with so many, and even better, gotten to know so many in my community, and have often found myself "pastoring" many people just by my presence in the shop, as people get to know me and know my vocation. It's led me to sitting in people's backyards, talking about life and Jesus and family and marriage, praying with people right there in the coffee shop, helping clean out someone's elderly neighbor's backyard, and much more - it taught me that my Gospel must not only be shared through word, but also in deed.

However, I had to learn this over time. Initially, I was only focused on the verbal proclamation, and was only looking for someone to confess on the spot their newfound love for Jesus. The turning moment for me occurred when one day I was sitting with someone at the coffee bar, sharing the Gospel and telling them everything I could about Jesus, the

need to repent of their sins, everything – the whole package. Let’s call this man Steve. After listening to me ramble for fifteen minutes, he gently puts out his hand on my forearm, as we were facing one another in my single-sided monologue that I cannot even call a conversation. I realize his gentle gesture was a nice request for me to shut up, and so I took the cue.

He then looked at me and said, “What you are saying sounds good and all, but you keep talking about sin. What is sin? And what do you mean by confessing it?”

I laughed, and then responded, “you understood nothing of what I said to you, did you?” He laughed too, and said, “nope.” Steve, a successful writer and local community servant who was well known in the area, was no idiot. But what I realized in this situation is, that in modern times with so many, what we may call “biblical literacy” in the common culture of the day, is all but gone. The language of the Gospel might as well be French or German to your average American.

Does this mean we abandon the verbal proclamation of the Gospel? Of course not! For doing so would be in direct violation of Scripture. But I do believe it means that we must consider, whenever possible, that our evangelism be joined together with loving acts of kindness, service, friendship – and whatever else it takes to actually *show* them the love of Christ that we are telling them about. In this way we also

share in Christ, for he regularly revealed his own love for God and the truth of his words by his actions ¹⁸.

CONCLUSION

Making disciples as Jesus did is a call to share in his disciple-making life. It is a call to seek out opportunities to proclaim the Gospel, as well as show the Gospel, and, as one theologian put it, in some way actually *become* a glimpse of the Good News of Jesus by doing so¹⁹. After all, the New Testament is clear: we are the body of Christ on Earth²⁰.

Therefore, to make disciples is the very fabric of what makes up our mission: to share in the life of Christ by loving God and loving our neighbor.

¹⁸ For one of many examples, see Mark 2:5-9

¹⁹ See Michael Gorman's excellent book, "Becoming the Gospel"

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:12-27