

ESSENTIAL #1 – EMBRACING OUR IDENTITY AS A CHURCH TEACHING / PRESENTATION IDEAS

“What is our group? A Bible study? A spiritual discussion? A prayer meeting? Just some friends having fellowship? A cell group that’s *part* of a church? An actual church?”

How a group defines itself strongly influences its sense of purpose, what its members set out to accomplish and how they spend their time together. If they’re a church, they need to know it and whole-heartedly embrace that identity.

Perhaps the simplest biblical description of what constitutes a barebones church was expressed by Jesus in Mt. 18:20. A look at that verse in its context is helpful:

15 “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. 18 I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”

Verse 20 summarizes the reason why groups of believers (“churches”) can make serious spiritual decisions with confidence that God is backing them (vv. 15-18), and why they can make significant requests of God with confidence that he will answer them (v. 19). The reason is because Jesus himself is there with them and more than happy to endorse their efforts. They don’t need a quorum of more than two or three as long as they are meeting together “in his name”.

Obviously the critical part of that definition is the last three words. We need to be clear about what it means to meet “in Jesus’ name”. One way to approach this issue with a group is to ask and answer a few questions.

QUESTION #1: Is it possible for a group of Christians to meet together, but *not* in Jesus’ name? For example, what if they’re simply meeting to have lunch or to bowl on the same team every Tuesday night? Are they a church *then*?

ANSWER: Just because Christians come together doesn’t make them a church. The reason *why* they’re meeting and what they *do* when they’re together are important factors in determining whether or not they’re a real church.

QUESTION #2: So what does it *mean* to meet together “in Jesus’ name”?

ANSWERS: There appear to be three equivalent expressions or meanings for meeting “in Jesus’ name”:

(1) According to his will. In other words:

- for him; for his sake; to please or benefit him.
- with his interests in mind and at heart.
- to pursue what’s important and valuable to him, and so to advance his cause.
- to accomplish his desires and fulfill his purpose as the reason or motivation behind why we’re meeting and doing what we’re doing.

(2) **Acting on his behalf, as his representative or stand-in.**

(3) **With the backing of *his* authority and status with God**, not merely my own; because of who he is, what he's earned and my/our relationship with him.

A few illustrations may help to contemporize these ideas.

ILLUSTRATIONS:

- If a country boy is sent by his mom to the town store to buy a sack of flour, but he forgets her assignment in favor of charging three candy bars and a slingshot to his family's account, he's making the purchases in his own name, not hers.
- Someone who possesses "power of attorney" is legally able to act "in another person's name", or as an agent on their behalf.
- Someone who tells you to "Stop in the name of the law" is invoking a higher authority than his own to get you to comply. Otherwise he would have no right (as a mere civilian) to tell you what to do.

QUESTION #3: What distracts or hinders us from meeting in Jesus' name as He desires?

ANSWERS will vary from group to group.

QUESTION #4: What kinds of practical things can a group of Christians actually *do* to go from merely "meeting together" to "meeting in Jesus' name"?

POSSIBLE ANSWERS:

- Deliberately acknowledge and honor him in prayer and praise as *present* with us.
- Keep our attention centered on him and what we know is important to him.
- Frequently consult and listen to him/his Spirit, seeking to discern his will and guidance. (*Good follow-up questions: How can people and groups hear the Holy Spirit? How can we distinguish his voice from others/our own?*)
- Invite him to lead us and reveal himself to us.
- Seek to handle every situation, activity and interaction as he himself would, as his representatives and stand-ins.
- Listen to others as though he may be speaking through them.
- Respond to and care for each other as he himself would.
- Do whatever we believe he wants us to (as individuals and as a group).

If we're committed to meeting in Jesus' name, and to being a church as he intends, we need to add these practices to every one of our meetings.

QUESTION #5: What, specifically, will our group do when we meet together to ensure that we continue to meet in Jesus' name?

CONCLUSION: Collect and refine your group's answers until everyone agrees on what you're committing to. Then figure out a way to keep these commitments before the group, perhaps by reading them aloud at the beginning of your meetings and praying accordingly. A sample of a carefully-crafted introductory reading used by one simple church is included in the Teaching Ideas portion of the Engagement Guidelines essential.