

# LESSON 8 - THE CHURCH

## *The doctrine of ecclesiology*

*Community is not a common ideology, but a response to a common call. - Henri Nouwen<sup>1</sup>*

Fall 2012

### What is the Church?

Despite our best efforts to think otherwise, when most people hear the word “church,” they picture a church building. This is reflected in the language “going to church.” But this is not biblical. We do not “go to church.” Christians *are the church*. The church is a community. But not just any community like a social club, a neighborhood, a humanitarian organization, or a political organization. The church is a product of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is sinners saved by God’s grace who have been adopted into God’s family. It is therefore a covenant community. It is also a community that lives by faith in the gospel looking forward to God’s bringing his salvation promises in all its glory. Thus, the church is a community of hope. One evangelical theologian combines these ideas together and says the church is *eschatological covenant community*.<sup>2</sup>

#### SCRIPTURE

Read and Reflect on the following passage: Ephesians 2:11-22; 4:1-5:21

#### REFLECTIONS

What unites the church?

What holds the church together?

How should we live in light of this?

Why does the church not always seem to live up to picture?

In light of what (or more accurately, who) unites the church, how should we respond to problems in the church to make the ideal more of a reality?

How is Christ calling you to make the calling of the church more of a reality?

#### PRAYER

*“A psalm of David. Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent? Who may live on your holy mountain? The one whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart; whose tongue utters no slander, who does no wrong to a neighbor, and casts no slur on others; who despises a vile person but honors those who fear the Lord; who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change their mind; who lends money to the poor without interest; who does not accept a bribe against the innocent. Whoever does these things will never be shaken.” (Psalm 15, NIV)*

#### PRACTICE

This week’s spiritual discipline is *Service*. The Christian life is not about control and power. It is about giving up control and power. Jesus said to the disciples who desired to rule with Jesus in the kingdom, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many,” (Mk. 10:45). It is fundamentally about service. We use our talents to serve people in the body of Christ and to serve people in our community. We do this because it is what Jesus did for us. Countless Christians throughout human history have found how wonderful it is, and how close to Jesus they get, by serving others.

## The Nature of the Church

The Bible has many descriptions of the church. It is the people of God. It is a family (1 Pet 2:9-10). It is the body of Christ and he is its head (Eph 1:20-23). It is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16-17), which means the church is where God dwells and the primary place we experience growth in him. We grow only in community that is connected to Christ. It is the household of God and the bride of Christ (Eph. 2:19; 5:25-27). It is God’s chosen people for the purpose of serving the King in worship, what the Bible calls a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9-10). It is a holy nation and a foretaste of the kingdom of God since it is where Christ reigns. The church is a flock of sheep with Christ as its shepherd and pastors as his under-shepherd (Jn. 10:27-29; 1 Pet. 5:1-5). It is salt and light to the world (Mt. 5:13-16). It is the pillar of truth built on the foundation of the apostles’ work and teaching. It is marked by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:19-22). Therefore, the church is distinct from any other people or organization on earth (Ex. 33:16).

Theologians throughout church history have summarized much of the nature of the church with four qualities: holy, unity, catholic, and apostolic as listed in the Apostles Creed. The church is called to be holy and is continually being made holy by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit (1 Pet 1:15-16). It has been set apart for God's mission and to do so with moral purity and complete integrity. The mission of the church moves forward because of the church's holiness and counter-cultural life (Jn. 17:16-19). The apostles carried on the ministry and message of Jesus. The apostolic nature of the church means it is founded on the work and teachings of the apostles. It also means it continues to proclaim the gospel and the kingdom of God in all it says and does throughout the whole world. The church is united by its union with the one God who is Father, Lord, and Spirit (Eph 4:1-6). It is united in proclaiming the truth of the gospel. The church is united with all of God's people past, present, and future because of Christ and the gospel. The importance of these four qualities is it serves as a foundation to what the church is versus another organizations people are involved in. The church is called to reflect God's holy character, is united by the Spirit and our faith in Christ, is it universal and transcends tribal, ethnic, or class distinctions, and its purpose is to fulfill the great commission through the preaching of the gospel that the apostles preached.

But a challenge emerged with the Protestant Reformation about the unity of the church. This was in fact an old question given that Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy split in 1050AD as well as lesser known orthodox traditions that broke off after the councils that followed Chalcedon in 451. The details in these divisions are complicated and flow from various cultural divisions, language barriers and miscommunication regarding the conclusions of various councils, and just plain old pride from church leaders. But what some see as a great weakness and failure of the church in the hands of God's grace is also a tremendous strength. The reality is all the branches of Christianity agree on the most important things: The Trinity, the Incarnation, the person and atoning work of Christ in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The differences are largely over important but secondary matters: how a church should be governed and views on the sacraments such as Baptism and Lord's Supper. These are the obvious differences. Underneath those expressions is deeper theological disagreements about the how Christ works in and through his church.

It is beyond our purposes to explore those differences. But one distinction made by the protestant reformers can be helpful. That is the church is made up of the visible church and the invisible church. The visible church is as we see it, which includes Christians and non-Christians whether they have professed Christ or in name only. The invisible church is as God sees it, all true believers throughout history. Paul and Peter addressed both individual churches (Rom 1:1; Eph 1:1) and groups of churches in an area (1 Cor 1:2; 1 Pet 1:1). Paul recognizes not everyone in the service may know the Lord (1 Cor. 14:24). What is important

here is the tendency for churches to assume entire groups of Christians or churches, are without faithful Christians. God knows those who are his, and we should be careful to think we have the best model for church there is and *those* Christians have lost their way. The church as a whole, universally, will accomplish God's purposes to reach all people and we need all kinds of church to reach all kinds of people but not every single local church can be all things to all people because in part, they need to be ambassadors of Christ for people where they are.

Two additional issues should be considered. These have a variety of interpretations within Christian orthodoxy that is heavily related to some issues discussed in week 6. The first is the kingdom of God and its relationship to the church. Briefly put, both Israel and the church are witnesses to the kingdom of God to come. No one spoke more about the kingdom than Jesus and many argue we should too. However, after Jesus ascension into heaven the New Testament does not speak of the kingdom until Revelation. This leads some to conclude the kingdom has not yet come. But Jesus sits on his throne reigning over the universe even now but especially as head of the church (Col. 1:15-20). Others take this too far and argue the church is the kingdom of God. This leads to problematic political views of the government and the church (cf. Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:11-17). Neither is completely true or completely false. The kingdom is "already but not yet." Jesus *inaugurated* the kingdom of which the church is a foretaste where the church lives with Jesus as King. The church is a community of people in covenant with God and a sign of the kingdom to come. This what is meant by an *eschatological covenant community*. The kingdom will not come in its fullness until Jesus returns to reign on earth and everyone will acknowledge him as King.

The second is the relationship of Israel to the church. Similar to the kingdom, some say Israel was completely caste aside due to its disobedience. This is problematic since many of the first Christians and nearly all of the disciples were Jewish. In fact, Christ has abolished the dividing barrier between Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:19-22). Some say the church is entirely the fulfillment of Israel in a spiritual sense and is the true Israel. Paul addresses the question of God's faithfulness to Israel in Romans 9-11. In my view it is best to conclude that the church and Israel have been grafted into the *same* olive tree, that is, both are God's people. The primary difference between Israel and the church is that the church is worships in spirit and truth rather by the letter of the law (2 Cor. 3:7-11). The church is setup to reach the nations and bring people from every tribe, nation, and tongue to worship Christ. Part of the mystery of God's plan revealed in the gospel (Eph. 3:6) is that his plan was always to use Israel to call the nations to faith in him. Contrast to Israel, the church is multi-national and cannot be identified with a particular country or political system. The church is multi-ethnic and transcends cultural divides which includes Israel since Jews continue to come to Christ and contribute to the tapestry of the Christians globally.

## The Work of the Church

The church has several things it must do if it is to be considered a true church. These are sometimes referred to as the *marks* of the church. We begin with the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. These are sacred acts of the church that communicate God's grace by means other than words. There is essentially three different views in church history about the effects of the sacraments: 1) *sacramentalism* in Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, 2) *signs and seals* in many Protestant Reformed traditions, and 3) *sacred ordinances* in which we witness to God's grace through these outward signs. The differences in each is to what extent Christ is present in the practice of them and to what benefit they have for the believer. Some of these distinctions are the result of misunderstandings or different interpretations of relevant passages such as (1 Cor 10:16; 11:23-32; Rom 4:11; 6:1-14; Col. 2:11-12; Eph. 1:13).

We consider faith in Christ and the indwelling Spirit the most important factor in what makes someone a Christian. For our church, the preferred mode of baptism is immersion in water for those who have professed faith in Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection. But we would still receive into fellowship those who have been baptized as infants and not require a second baptism. One could believe Baptism and the Lord's Supper as signs and seals or sacred ordinances and be consistent with our church. Baptism points to the reality that the believer has died to sin through Christ's death and is risen to new life through his resurrection (Rom 6:1-10). The Lord's Supper is a celebration in communicating our union with Christ and his church through the body and blood of Jesus (1 Cor 11:23-26) and we look forward to the wedding supper with the Lamb (Rev. 19:6-10).

The Reformers added two more sacraments as marks of the church in response to Catholic excesses and in order to distinguish between a true and false local church. The sacraments they stressed is *the true preaching of the word*, that is expositing the gospel faithfully from the scriptures. A church that preaches the gospel faithfully is to be distinguished from a church that proclaims social activism, good advice, moral living, or any number of causes. The gospel is what produced the church and the gospel of Jesus Christ will ensure it continues. The other some have argued for such as John Calvin and for a time was implanted in Geneva is *church discipline*. Church discipline does not refer solely to excommunication, though that can be a result (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:13). The aim is to ensure the holiness of the church and build it up in unity to Christ. Church discipline is formative, referring to the edification, discipleship, and encouragement of believers to follow Christ. Discipline is also restorative, where it aims to correct waywardness of believers who refuse to confess and repent of sin.<sup>3</sup>

~~Related to church unity and discipline is church membership. It is clear in the New Testament they knew who was a part of the church and who was not. Leaders exercised authority over baptized Christians and were shepherds of their flock. Church discipline is exercised~~

~~with those who were clearly professing Christians. Discipline is not exercised with those who are not members who have not committed to the ministry of the church or have not confessed faith in Christ. Leadership was chosen by the people of the church (Acts 6:1-6). But most importantly, membership is an agreement to covenant with the rest of the body to love them, be loved by them, and love the city. One agrees to submit to the authority of the church, go on mission with the church in the ministry they are gifted and called for, to love and care for the church, and to be held accountable in order that all grow in holiness and faithfulness to Christ.~~

Throughout history there have been various forms of church government: bishop led (Catholic & Anglican), presbyteries, and congregational. Formal church leadership can be organized according to the context and ministry needs. There is a strong correlation between the major forms of church government in church history with the form state government when they developed: Catholics - Rome, Presbyteries - 17th century England, Congregational - Colonial America. There is immense freedom in scripture for how a church should be governed as long as the leadership is godly and faithful to the gospel. Regardless of contextual particulars of church government, but there are two clear offices of the church articulated in scripture, elders/overseers and deacons (1 Tim 3:1-13). Paul appointed elders over churches as they were planted (Acts 14:23). Elders are to be people of exemplary character, able to teach, and rule and guide the whole church. Deacons primarily work in areas of service in the church, particularly as it relates to caring for the poor and widows (Acts 6). We adhere to male eldership as the church and that women can teach, preach, and lead in the church in every respect a man can, except for the position of elder (cf. Eph. 5:21-33; 1 Cor. 11:2-16; 1 Tim. 2:11-15; 3:1-13; 1 Cor. 14:26-40).

The work of the church is carried out through the various gifts that are given by the Holy Spirit for the edification of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:7; Eph. 4:11-16). Everyone who is a Christian has a gift and no one person has all the gifts. No one is to view their gift or role in the church as more important than anyone else (1 Cor. 12:12-31). The gifts of apostles, teachers and prophets (including preaching) are particularly important, but no less valuable, for the building and leading of the church (1 Cor 12:27-31). All gifts are to be marked by mutual submission and service for the benefit of others and not for the showing off of one's talent or gifting. All should be conducted with the fruits of the Spirit, and the cardinal virtues of faith, hope, and love with the greatest of all being love (1 Cor. 13:13). There is also what is sometimes referred to as the miraculous or charismatic gifts of the Spirit which are particular manifestations of healing, words, tongues, etc. Our position is that these are not to be used as a test of one's salvation but that the Spirit may work in this way through some to accomplish his purposes. The miraculous gifts is an issue of substantial modern debate and it is best not to be divisive over it.

We must be clear on what the mission of the church is and more importantly, *how* it carries it out. The church is designed to carry out the great commission. Making disciples of all nations is essential to the nature of the church. Every Christian is a missionary and a disciple though in different capacities and areas of service. We are all to be servants and witnesses to the glory of Christ. This should be done through the proclamation of the gospel and characterized by sacrificial service and not abuse of power (Mk. 10:42-45; 1 Cor. 1:18-31). The mission is primarily the announcement of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. But it is accompanied with caring for the poor, the sick, the broken, the oppressed, and all those most vulnerable in society, whether single moms, widows, orphans, immigrants, the homeless, the disabled, or anyone else who is lost, alone, and without power (Mic 6:8; Jer 9:23-24; Mt 25:31-46; Jam 2:15-17; 3:18). These serve as a testimony to the power of the gospel but it is a result of the gospel, not the gospel itself (Dt. 4:1-8; 1 Pet. 2:11-12). Scripture is quite clear that faith in the gospel will result in good deeds and we should be careful of drawing too sharp of a line between the word preached and resulting deeds of faith in the gospel. The church is to be inviting and welcoming to all though it must preach repentance and call people to faith in Christ. Leaders share in this call to hospitality (1 Tim. 3:2). But the church is not a political or humanitarian organization. It is a community who worships Jesus and when necessary speaks prophetically to various issues and humanitarian causes for the glory of Jesus Christ, not for the glory of any state, person, organization, or cause. We do it all for the sake of the gospel.

#### FURTHER RESOURCES

*Everyday Church* by Tim Chester and Steve Timmis

*The Church* by Edmund Clowney

*Maximizing Your Effectiveness*, 2nd ed. - Aubrey Malphurs

This contains resources for personality, temperament, spiritual gifts, and leadership roles. Further resources not found in the book are listed below.

On spiritual gifts: [www.mintools.com/spiritual-gifts-test.htm](http://www.mintools.com/spiritual-gifts-test.htm)

Personality: [www.mbti-tki.eventbrite.com](http://www.mbti-tki.eventbrite.com)

Temperament: DiSC [www.discprofile.com](http://www.discprofile.com)

Character: [www.assess-yourself.org](http://www.assess-yourself.org)

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<sup>1</sup> Mark DeYmaz, *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass 2007), 13. Originally from Henri Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome* (New York: Random House, 2000), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 464.

<sup>3</sup> *Doctrine*, 327.