

LESSON 11

THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH I

I. INTRODUCTION (PG. 42)

We believe that a visible church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ; governed by His laws; and exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His word that its only scriptural officers are Bishops or Pastors, and Deacons, whose qualifications, claims, and duties are defined in the Epistles to Timothy and Titus.

We just spent the last two lessons considering how God applies the salvation that he has accomplished to the lives of individual believers. While God is certainly concerned with the individual believer, there is also something more that He is interested in. To get us thinking about what that is, let's begin with a question: Why did you come to gather with this church today?

If you've been a Christian for any time, you know that there is more to the Christian life than just personal discipleship. Over the next two lessons, we'll be thinking about corporate Christianity and how those individual believers live together as the people of God. This is an area of theology known as "ecclesiology." The usual Greek word for "church" in the Bible is *ekklesia*, which means 'gathering' or 'assembly.' Ecclesiology, then, is the study of the church.

A right understanding of the church has been a source of debate throughout the history of the church. We are familiar with many of those often-contentious issues: Are women allowed to be pastors? Should infants be baptized? Does the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper become the actual, physical body of the Lord Jesus Christ? We could go on.

In lesson 12, we're going to wrestle with many of those issues. We'll consider the role of preaching in the church, baptism, the Lord's Supper, church discipline, church governance, and biblical church leadership. But before we get to those questions, we need to spend time considering how it is that God has "organized" believers into an institution that is ordained by Him and that is to ultimately bring glory to Him. These are more fundamental questions: What is the nature of the church? What are God's intentions for the church? What are the attributes of a healthy church?

II. THE CHURCH DEFINED (PG. 42)

(scratch Romans 9:6, Galatians 6:16)

To begin with, we need to define the church. So who makes up the church?

The church may be defined as the community of all true believers in Jesus Christ for all time. Ephesians 5:25 says, "**Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy.**" Here the term 'the church' applies to all those whom Christ died to redeem; all those who are saved by the death of Christ.

The Apostles understood the church to be a fulfillment of the promises that God had made to Israel. So it doesn't surprise us to see Peter calling the New Testament Christians "**a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God**" (*1 Pet. 2:9*).

III. THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST (PG. 42)

The next thing we should see, as it pertains to the church, is that the church belongs to our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one who brings the church into being. It's His church.

Paul often refers to the church as the “church (or churches) of Christ.” After all, it’s the church of Christ because he’s the one who purchased her with his own blood. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus tells Peter, “**I will build my church.**” Entrance into the church is gained by having faith in Jesus. Thus, the church “is international in membership and allows no ethnic, gender, or social divisions.” Reconciliation of worldly divisions is finally accomplished in Christ.

Within the church, “**there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all**” (Col. 3:10). Surely, this is at the heart of Paul’s understanding in Ephesians 2, when he explains that the unity that marks the church of Jesus Christ is an outflowing of Christ’s work of reconciliation on the cross. Paul says that God’s purpose was to create in himself one new man (i.e., the church) out of the two men – Jew and Gentile. Consequently, the Gentiles are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people.

The church is the body of Christ on earth and he is the head. The church takes its alignment from Jesus as a building takes its alignment from the cornerstone. The life of the church is maintained by its vital union with him, and it exists only insofar as it is ‘in him.’ The person and work of Jesus Christ, then, are at the heart of the New Testament view of the church.

Ephesians 2:11-22, “**Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace,¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”**

Questions or Comments?

IV. BIBLICAL METAPHORS FOR THE CHURCH (PG. 43)

In order to help believers better understand what the nature of the church is like, Scripture uses a range of metaphors and images to clarify how we should think about it. So what are some of these metaphors given for the church that we see in Scripture?

Generally speaking, these metaphors can usefully be divided into four groups, and each has something to teach us about how God relates to His people and what our response should be. As we discuss each of these, think about what the image means for us as a church. How are we to better reflect the metaphors that Scripture lays out?

(fill in the blanks)

1. Family Images

The first group of metaphors pertains to the image of a family. Paul regards the church as a family unit when he tells Timothy to act as if all the church members are part of a larger family. We're to treat older men like fathers, younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, and younger women like sisters (1 Tim. 5:1-2). God is spoken of as our heavenly Father (Eph. 3:14), and Jesus calls his followers his brothers and sisters (Matt. 12:49-50).

These images remind us of the strength of relationship that those in Christ's church are to have with one another. We're to love and treat one another as we would our own family.

In a somewhat different family metaphor, Paul refers to the church as the bride of Christ in Ephesians 5:22-33. The bride analogy gives us a somewhat different message, and that message deals with the importance of purity as we are presented to Christ upon His return.

2. Agricultural Images

The next group of images to note includes those images that are agricultural, or natural.

In John 15:5 Jesus says, **"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me, you can do nothing."** In 1 Corinthians 3:6-9, the church is compared to a field of crops that were planted by man but grown by God. **"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building."**

Romans 11:17-24, **"But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. ¹⁹ Then you will say, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.' ²⁰ That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. ²² Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. ²³ And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree."**

These passages all have specific applications when taken in context, but a general theme in them is the idea of resting in Christ and relying on God for growth in the Christian life.

3. Building or Temple Images

The church is also referred to as a building in 1 Corinthians 3:9. But a more pronounced image in scripture is that of the "new temple", or the temple of God under the new covenant. While a building or meeting place may be called a church in our speech today, Scripture speaks to a church as a corporate assembly of believers in Christ.

Peter says in 1 Peter 2:4-5, **"you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."**

This building or temple image gives us a clear idea of God's intent for the church, namely to be indwelt by Him and to manifest His redemption through Christ. The Old Testament Temple was to portray God dwelling with his people, and so we need to be mindful of the fact that God's Spirit lives in us, as we are reflecting Christ to the world.

And as we mentioned earlier, this means then that the mortar that holds the bricks together in the church are not to be social demographics, such as race or age or wealth, but the Spirit of God we share in Christ.

II Corinthians 6:16, "What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

I Corinthians 3:16-17, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple."

4. The Body of Christ

Finally, the idea of the church is expressed in several passages as the body of Christ. This is perhaps the best known image of all.

1 Corinthians 12:12-27, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴ For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²² On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, ²⁴ which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, ²⁵ that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

1 Corinthians 12:12-27 speaks to the values of the different parts of the body, that different parts are required for the whole to function as it is intended and designed to function. The lesson here is twofold. First, there is an exhortation for unity in the church – we ought to live like one body. Second, we're called to an appreciation of the diversity of gifts that different members have. It's also an instruction to use those different gifts for the good of the whole to God's glory because at the head of the body is Christ (Eph. 1:22-23).

So we see that Scripture provides numerous images of the church to aid our understanding of it and the God who has ordained it. However, we should be careful not to let one image dominate our thinking to the detriment of the others. As Wayne Grudem puts it, "*The wide range of metaphors used for the church in the New Testament should remind us not to focus exclusively on any one...Each of the metaphors used*

for the church should help us to appreciate more of the richness of the privilege that God has given us by incorporating us into the church.”

Romans 12:4-6, “**For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function,** ⁵ **so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.** ⁶ **Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith”**

Ephesians 4:15-16, “**Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,** ¹⁶ **from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”**

V. THE CHURCH - VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE (PG. 43)

So far we have defined what the church is, whom the church is for, and what the relationships of the church should be. But God established the church to display his glory to the world. So what does the reality of the church look like? Are all those members on the rolls of the church also saved in Christ?

In its true spiritual reality as the fellowship of all *genuine* believers, the church is invisible. This makes sense when we remember that we, as humans, cannot finally know the state of the hearts of other humans. We certainly can see those who attend the church or who have made profession of Christ. We can also see outward evidences of inward change, but we cannot finally know another person’s spiritual state – only God can. “**The Lord knows those who are His**”, as Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:19.

This is true in our own church. That said, we do have some idea about the salvation of others. We can be very confident in someone’s salvation based on the fruit in his or her life. Jesus says, “**by their fruit you will recognize them.**” While the work of the Spirit is invisible and internal, it does have visible and external implications.

Nevertheless, we are fallible and cannot make infallible judgments about the truthfulness of someone’s profession of faith. So ultimately it’s God alone who knows those who are true believers with certainty and without error. In that sense, we can say that the *invisible church* is “the church as God sees it.”

On the other hand, the church does have a visible aspect as well. We can say that the *visible church* is “the church as true Christians on earth see it.”

In this sense, the visible church includes all those who profess Christ and show evidence of this in their lives. We see this implication several times in Scripture.

Paul addresses many of his letters to contingents of the visible church as we have defined it. “**To the church of God which is at Corinth,**” he writes in 1 Corinthians 1:2. Paul writes to “**Philemon...and to the church that meets in [his] home**” in Philemon 1:1-2. The same goes for 1 Thessalonians 1:1 and so forth.

As we have seen in past classes, Paul also frequently mentions – both generically and by name – false prophets, or those who appeared to be believers but then renounced the faith or fellowship of the true church. In other words, because of sin and human error, the visible church will always include some nonbelievers, but the Lord is sovereign over the integrity of the true church, and He will recognize the true believers when the time comes.

One of the things that we strive for as a church is to have a membership that is made up only of Christians. We want our church to consist of a regenerate church membership. This has a far-reaching effect in our corporate witness of the gospel. We believe that to the extent possible the membership in the visible church should match up with membership in the invisible church. That's why when someone wants to become a member of this church they have to profess faith in Christ, have made that profession publicly at one time in baptism, have their knowledge of the gospel examined, and covenant with us in submitting to the discipline and doctrines of this local congregation. We think that by this EBC will better display the gospel to those in our community.

In summary:

The *invisible church* is "the church as God sees it."

The *visible church* is "the church as it appears to Christians and to the world."

VI. THE CHURCH - LOCAL AND UNIVERSAL (PG. 43)

Another distinction within the definition of the church that Christians have made is the distinction between the local church and the universal church. In the New Testament, the Greek word for "church" is used to describe a group of covenanting believers at nearly any level, ranging from a very small group meeting in a private home all the way to the group of all true believers in the universal church.

For example, Paul writes in I Corinthians 16:19, "**Aquila and Priscilla, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord.**" Here is a local church meeting in a member's home. Likewise, the book of Revelation is addressed to seven specific churches in Asia.

In Acts 9:31 we see the church mentioned in a more universal sense, "**Then the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace.**" Also, in I Corinthians 12:28 Paul says, "**God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, and third teachers...**"

If you know how the term "apostle" is used in the New Testament – that it's someone not given to any particular church body, such as an elder or teacher would be – then it's clear that the reference here is to the universal church.

The application point here is that a group of believers at any level, who meet the biblical criteria for a church, can rightly fall under either the specific or general definition of the word 'church.' We at EBC are a local church, but we're also part of the universal church. So why is this distinction between a local and universal church important? [*Because a church is local it means that we should be a part of it, if we are Christians. The universal church reminds us that we are not alone and can partner with other gospel believing churches for the sake of the gospel.*]

VII. THE CHURCH – MILITANT AND TRIUMPHANT (PG. 44)

So what does it mean when people say that the church is militant and triumphant? Well, the church is militant in the sense that it's comprised of those who are still living and engaging in spiritual warfare constantly. She is called into holy warfare. This doesn't mean that the church uses the weapons of this world. II Corinthians 10:4, "**For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.**" No one can become a Christian by being coerced like a person can in becoming a Muslim. A Christian is given a new heart by God's Spirit to live a life of repentance and faith. The Christian's armor is a shield of faith, the belt of truth, the helmet of salvation, and sword of God's Word. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil in this world and in the heavenly realms (Eph. 6:12)

The church is not only referred to as militant but also as triumphant. This just means that it's comprised of those who are in heaven, and in heaven the church will be shown to be victorious. Christ said that he will build his church and that the gates of hell will not overcome it (Matt. 16:18). We're not fighting a losing battle but a battle that is already won in Christ.

Questions or Comments?

VIII. THE ATTRIBUTES OF THE CHURCH (PG. 44)

If you've ever read the Nicene Creed, you may have wondered what it meant when it refers to the church as "**one Holy Catholic and Apostolic church**"? Let us think about each adjective separately.

1. First, the church is one. Ephesians 4:4 reads, "**There is one body.**" The oneness of the church signifies its unity in Christ and the gospel. In John 17 Jesus prays to the Father for all believers that "**they may be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you [the Father] sent me [Jesus]**" (John 17:23). This unity is built upon Christ and glorifies Christ, and it becomes stronger as we "**make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace**" (Eph. 4:3).

So why are churches split into denominations? Because God gave his perfect Word to a fallen people! Christians are fallible and differ on doctrinal matters of secondary importance. These differences in no way reflect poorly on the clarity or veracity of Scripture. The Christian's unity is spiritual and not necessarily organizational. In one way, denominations help to make organizational unity in the church possible by removing barriers that may cause disagreements in a church. But "perhaps the Lord leaves us with differences to work out in order to teach us how to love."

2. Second, the church is Holy. Phil Ryken says that, "*With the exception of the prison system, the church is the only institution for bad people.*" It's not our own righteousness that makes us holy, but Christ's righteousness. The church is purified by Christ's blood and made holy. As we learned last lesson, God's Spirit in sanctification is making each of his people holy so that the church will be a display of God's glory. In this way, the church is separated from the world and devoted to God.
3. Third, the church is Catholic. What does Catholic mean? Catholic basically means universal. The church is universal. We already discussed this in talking about the universal and local church.
4. Fourth, the church is Apostolic. Roman Catholics would say that being an apostolic church encompasses the idea that there is an apostolic succession of bishops who have inherited the apostles' authority to exercise rule over the church. Charismatics, on the other hand, would say that being an apostolic church means that the "church can do today what the apostles did in the early church" with their miraculous signs and wonders. Paul says in Ephesians 2:20 that the church is "**built on the foundation of the apostles,**" and this is where we must start.

The apostles were commissioned by Jesus to represent Him to the world and to spread his gospel. Jesus is the cornerstone and the apostles laid the foundation. The Holy Spirit gave them the power and authority to speak and act in the name of Christ. And it was on this foundation of acts and teaching that the church holds to and is built upon.

IX. THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH (PG. 44)

While Scripture sheds light by discussing in one manner or another the definition of a church generally, there is also ample discussion on the marks that are to help us "be better at being the church," and to enable believers to better discern the difference between a true church and a false one.

Paul taught that the pagan temples in Corinth were making their sacrifices to demons and not to God (I Cor. 10:20). Also, scripture speaks in Revelation of Jewish religious assemblies that were really “synagogues of Satan” (Rev. 2:9). They had the appearance of religion generally, but were not faithful to Christ.

In other words, there is scriptural evidence for false churches, or groups that lay claim to the name of God or the title of church, but are not filled with believers and do not preach the truth and do not glorify God. These false churches will be judged rather than glorified on the last day.

Every group that says it's a true church does not necessarily meet that standard. In our modern day, we can speak of Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and some would say the Roman Catholic Church as not being true churches in the biblical sense. In addition, many would say that the very liberal protestant churches that continue to exist but that do not preach the gospel are not true churches. On what are these claims based? What is a true church in the biblical sense, as distinguished from a false church?

Since the Reformation (when there was first room for these questions to come up), Christian theologians have largely settled on two distinguishing marks of a Christian church. Those marks are [1] the right preaching of the Word and [2] the right administration of the sacraments (the sacraments include baptism, the Lord's Supper, and, indirectly, church discipline). Again, the two marks of a biblical church are the **right preaching of the word** and the **right administration of the sacraments**.

And let me just emphasize that these marks were rooted around the gospel and were in contrast to the false claims being made by the Roman Catholic Church. During the Reformation, preaching the Word was essentially taken to mean preaching the true gospel message. In addition, the right administration of the sacraments positively showed the ongoing confession of faith in the gospel. At the same time it went against the Roman Catholic teaching that the observance of the Mass was necessary for salvation and that baptism actually conveys grace on anyone who is baptized.

We'll discuss both of these marks in greater detail next lesson. But it does need to be mentioned that we should still consider other evangelical, non-Baptistic churches, which hold to the true gospel message as we do but may practice the sacraments differently, such as with infant baptism, are still true churches. Yes, we think that the practice of infant baptism is not founded in Scripture and can hinder a church's health, but as long as it doesn't compromise the gospel message itself, we should not invalidate such a church.

The Augsburg Confession, which is the Lutheran statement of faith, states that the church is defined by **“the congregation of saints in which the gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered”** (Article 7).

John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* writes, **“Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.”**

As you can see, Calvin and Luther were largely in agreement about the basic criteria upon which we could say that a true church existed. While the state of these criteria is often difficult to determine, these are the litmus tests that the reformers used in assessing whether “we have a church,” or “we don't have a church.”

Well, if that's true, then how do we talk about a "good" church versus a "mediocre" church versus a "bad" church? There are a lot of churches that *to some degree* meet the above criteria, but what does this look like?

The answer looks very, very different as one explores different Christian churches. Modern Christian theologians have talked about churches (once they meet these basic criteria) as being on a continuum with respect to their purity.

We may define a church's *purity* as "its degree of freedom from wrong doctrine and conduct, and its degree of conformity to God's will for the church."

There does seem to be scriptural evidence for "more pure" churches and "less pure" churches. When we look at Paul's epistles, we see evidence of his great joy at the churches in Philippi and Thessalonica (see Phil. 1:3-11, I Thess. 1:2-10) and their relative lack of major doctrinal and moral problems. Place this up against the serious doctrinal and moral problems at the churches of Galatia and Corinth (see Gal. 1:6-9, 1 Cor. 3:1-4, and 2 Cor. 1:23-2:11), and you will see true churches that are at different ends of the continuum of purity.

So "how we do church," or our "church polity," makes a difference in the extent to which our church glorifies and pleases God. If we look more widely at the New Testament, we see Jesus' desire for a unified and pure church (John 17:21-23), and we see Paul spending considerable time giving instruction to that end.

The goal, in all cases, is a church that acts according to the biblical model to the glory of God. So, what does that look like? What does a "more pure" church look like? Well, there are many attributes, such as a devotion to prayer or unified fellowship. To help us think about this, let's record the 9 marks of a healthy church that Pastor Mark Dever describes:

- 1) Expositional Preaching (*the point of the passage is the point of the sermon*)
- 2) Biblical Theology (*commitment to understanding doctrine as Scripture teaches it*)
- 3) Biblical Understanding of the Good News (*God, Man, Christ, Response*)
- 4) Biblical Understanding of Conversion (*seeing a radical change having repentance and faith*)
- 5) Biblical Understanding of Evangelism (*presenting the gospel and trusting God to convert*)
- 6) Biblical Understanding of Church Membership (*meaningfully identifying with Christ's bride*)
- 7) Biblical Church Discipline (*lovingly admonishing unrepentant sin to bring about repentance*)
- 8) Concern for Promoting Christian Discipleship and Growth (*commitment to growing health*)
- 9) Biblical Church Leadership (*congregation has final authority but is led by a plurality of elders*)

We must pray that God would help us as his church to conform our corporate congregational behavior to the teaching of the Bible. To that end we must adopt the attitude that the Reformers expressed as *Semper Reformanda*: the church must always be reforming. We must pray that God would help us be an obedient church that honors Him and brings glory to His name in all we say and do.

Questions or Comments?