

Big Words You Need to Know, Love, & Share The Church

There is in our day a great deal of confusion that prevails on the doctrine of the church – from what it is to how it functions to what it is supposed to do. *The deplorable state of what is called 'Christianity Today' is directly traceable to a defective ecclesiology.*” (Pastor Tom Lyon).

First we must identify the church. When we discussed election we noted a panoramic eternal plan to redeem certain sinners from the beginning of time to its conclusion. As we identify the church we must think in these terms – from eternity past to eternity future.

I. The Identity of the Church:

Definition: (1) NT Gr. “ekklesia” – *assembly, gathering* (2) OT – Dt 4:10 “Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words”: Heb *qahal* “gather” from “assemble”. NT references to OT people as a church ... congregation in the wilderness (ekklesia) Acts 7:38. Heb. 2:12 speaking of Jesus “I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.” – from Ps. 22, 25 (see also Ps. 40:10; 111:1). In the Bible the “assembly of God” is his chosen people bound by his covenant (whether assembled or not).

- With OT eyes: the OT nation of Israel was made up of believers and unbelievers; a smaller circle of believers within a larger circle of unbelievers. The OT predicted a time when that circle would be made up of only believers in the “new covenant” (Jer. 31:31-34).
- With NT eyes: *The church is the community of all true believers for all time*, (Grudem, ST, 853). Ephesians 5:25 ...Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,

A. The Universal (Invisible) Church - An *organism* often referred to as “the church militant” on earth/ & “the church triumphant” in heaven. Eph 2:19-22; Heb 12:22-23; Rev 21:12, 14

1. The universality of the church: the church is made up of both elect OT & NT saints in one body of Christ (Eph 1:23; 2:16; Rev 21:12,14), a building (1Co 3:9); a bride (Eph 5, Rev 21:9); the temple of God (1Co 3:16,17); a holy city (Rev 21:2); the heavenly Jerusalem (Gal 4:26, Heb 12:22); the new Jerusalem (Rev 21:2); etc.

Panoramic view of the universal church:

- Predestination: Before time God has chosen his elect (individuals who collectively make up the church) - “chosen in him before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4).
- Preparation: The OT age was a period where God dealt through Israel (it was predominantly Jewish),
- Transformation: the authority of the new covenant people of God (1) will no longer be the leaders in Israel who rejected Christ (Mt. 21:13-16). (2) but the Servant of the Lord (Jesus) would build his church as the new “people of God”. He would vest in them the authority of the keys of the kingdom (Mt. 16:16-19; 18:16-18).
- Inauguration: At Pentecost (Acts 2) (predominantly Jewish at the first then emphasis on the Gentiles with a remnant of Jews being added to the church).
- Consummation (Rev. 21) the heavenly eternal state will be all the elect both Jews and Gentiles (every nation, tribe, kindred and tongue) represented by the Apostles & the prophets (NT) (Eph. 2:20) “twelve foundations...were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the

Lamb.” (Rev. 21:14) and Israel (OT) “on the gates the twelve tribes of the children of Israel” (Rev 21:12)

2. The invisibility of the church. This universal church is only invisible in the sense that the internal work of the Spirit in joining its members together cannot be seen.

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- Entrance into the universal/invisible church is by way of the Spirit’s work in the new birth (1 Cor12:13): Anyone professing Christ may say they are members of the universal church. It is invisible in the sense that we will never be gathered together in one place at the same time until it is consummated in glory. There is no way to evaluate the state of grace of its professing members. Only God knows the true members of the universal church. God also ordained the *visible* church.

Does the Bible teach that this universal church is invisible? If we use the term, we must, like the Confession, use it very carefully, because there is no invisible church distinct from the visible church. (Dr. Sam Waldron, Confession, p313).

- B. The Visibility of the Church – the Local Church: The church is the invisible universal body of believers manifested & visible in biblically defined local assemblies.

...there is no evidence for the notion of the “church” as an invisible entity distinct from the church visible...the church universal, the church throughout the world, is not to be thought of apart from the particular components that make up the church universal, and therefore not apart from the visibility characterizing its components, (John Murray, Collected Writings, Vol 1, 234; Vol 1, 232-33). *While the universal church is not perfectly or completely visible, it is practically visible,* (Waldron, Confession, *ibid*, p314). The Bible knows nothing of the individualism or isolation of the modern world.

1. The fact of the visible local church. Christ did not establish an organism apart from its visible organization.

It is all-important to bear in mind that the church of God is an institution. It may never be conceived apart from the organization of the people of God in visible expression and in discharge of the ordinances instituted by Christ. (John Murray, Works, Vol, 238)

A survey of the NT will demonstrate that the preponderance of the use of the word church is visible assemblies. When Jesus said “upon this rock I will built my church” (Math.16:18), he indicated in the following verses that the church is something to be administered upon earth. It is one in which ministry is exercised. In Matt. 18:17, in exercising church discipline Jesus says, “tell it to the church”. The church must be regarded as an organization to which information is communicated and decisive corporate action takes place.

In the NT, of the 110 or 111 times the Greek word “ekklesia” is translated “church” all but a handful (95% to 96% of the time depending on who is counting) is used of local, visible organized bodies of worshippers.

2. The Christocentricity of the visible local church:

- Christ is the head of the church - Eph 1:22,23; 4:15; 5:23; Col 1:18
- Christ came to build the church – Mt. 16:18
- He purchased the church with his own blood – Acts 20:28

- Christ loves the church and gave himself for it – Eph. 5:25
- He constantly nourishes and cherishes the church – Eph. 5:29
- He lives to intercede for the church – Hebrews 7:25
- He is in the midst of his churches when they gather – Mt 18:20; Revelation 1:11-13a, 20
- He speaks to his churches through his messengers – Revelation 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14
- He constantly interacts with his churches – Revelation 2:6, 9, 16, 24; 3:2, 8, 18-19

3. The importance of the visible local church ...if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress [foundation] of truth, (1 Timothy 3:15). 2

- It is the means of presenting the gospel to the world – all five times the great commission was given it was to the church (Mt. 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-18, Luke 24:44-49, John 20:19-23 and Acts 1:4-8)
- It is the means of protecting the people of God from false doctrine – “the pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15).
- It is the means for perfecting the people in sanctification
 - Through its preaching & teaching (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 1:21; 2 Tim. 4:2).
 - Through its elders who watch over you and care for your souls as those who must give an account (Heb. 13:17).
 - Through its members who are to provoke one another unto love and good works; to confront erring brethren (Heb 10:25; Gal. 6:1), etc.
 - Through its discipline of sinning members (Mt. 18:15-8, 1 Cor 5:1-5).
- It is a means for providing an environment that serves as a safeguard to guard you from apostasy or going astray “pillar and buttress of truth”
- It is a means of personal interaction with members undergoing various experiences: those engaged in trials – members find that in the church they have the advantage of those who weep with those who weep; those with answered prayer - rejoice with those who rejoice; those with various needs - it is a place to serve one another - there is a walking side by side wherewith the three fold chord cannot be broken. *Attempts to grow outside the church are like trying to learn to swim without ever getting into the pool! ...the follower of Jesus Christ cannot profess allegiance to Him and deny His Church.* (Dr. Wayne Mack, Life in the Father’s House, 13, 17)

Those who are members become the first priority for oversight by the elders, benevolence by the deacons, “one anothering” by the members”, caring for qualified widows, exercising church discipline, etc. Without a formal membership it seems more likely that people may slip in and out of fellowship with little or no accountability (especially in a large congregation). “they were added to the church” (Acts 2:47); there was a widows’ roll – an accounting of those within their membership; after death of Ananais & Saphira” “no one dared join them”

4. The procedure of joining a local church. How does a person become a member of the visible, local church?

All persons throughout the world who profess to believe the gospel, and to render obedience unto God by Christ are, and may be called, visible saints, provided that they do not render void their profession of belief by holding fundamental errors or by living unholy lives; and of such persons all local churches should be composed, (LBC 26:2).

They are baptized “by the Spirit” into the universal church at the time of regeneration. They are received into the local church usually through the outward sign of baptism, a credible profession of faith (testimony) and whatever other means that church has in place for receiving members (i.e. interview with elders, suffrage of the congregation, etc). Membership must be as far as possible made up of regenerate believers who are not professing heresy and walking in a holy manner. *Unconverted members lower the whole tenor of the church. Do what we may, Judas will come in; but let us not invite him in. To mix up the world with the church, is a crime; it brings with it and awful curse, and acts upon godliness as a blast and a mildew. As you love your Lord, and value men’s souls, guard well the entrance of the church.* (C.H. Spurgeon)

5. The purpose of the local church

...Those who are thus called, He commands to walk together in particular societies or churches, for their mutual edification, and for the due performance of that public worship, which He requires of them in the world. (LBC 1689, Ch. 25, para 5)

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(1) Relative to God – ...to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Eph 3:21).

(2) Relative to Believers - corporate worship and the edification of the saints

- Mutual edification includes church discipline, Matt. 18:15-20, “provoking one another unto love and good works” (Heb 9:24-25), all the “one anothers”, etc.
- Corporate worship to the glory of God regulated by the Word of God elements of worship:
 - Prayer (1 Tim. 2:1,2) – some say “pray the Word”
 - reading the Word, preaching the Word & hearing the Word (1 Tim. 4:13,17; 2 Tim. 4:2; Luke 8:18)
 - singing the Word (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19)
 - administering baptism & the Lord’s supper (visible sermons of the Word) (Matt. 28:19,20; 1 Cor. 11:26)

(3) Relative to the world? “evangelize the world” (Matt 28:18-20)

6. The practice of the early church – an example (see Acts 2:40-47)

- A visible body of regenerate believers – v40 “be saved”; “those who receive the word” v41
- A visible body of baptized believers 41a
- A visible body with order, structure & a recognizable membership “added” 41b (see acts 4:4)
- A visible body under authority 42 Apostolic authority is Christ’s authority; though the “keys” are given to the members of the church (including elders), rule is not first and foremost by the people nor its elders, but under the authority of Christ through the Word of God.
- A visible body that “continues” under the Apostle’s doctrine/teaching/proclamation 42 “continued steadfastly” is connected to what follows as well.
- A visible body constantly interacts with one another in fellowship (Gr. *koinonia* – common, community, communion); they hold communion together through the “breaking of bread” 42
- A visible body that regularly engages in corporate prayer 42d
- A visible body engaged in meeting one another’s needs 44-45
- A visible body opening homes in hospitality for meeting together, eating together, etc. 46
- A visible body given to praising God in worship, evangelism and proclamation of truth 43, 47a
- A visible body being built by God And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. 47b

II. Three things that guarantee the success or destiny of the church:

- A. A Proper Confession: Mt16:16-17a – Jesus is Lord! Based on this confession, historical Reformed churches have always held to Confessions and Creeds binding them together. The evangelical church should have these confessions in common.
 - B. A Promised Covenant: Mt. 16:18 a,b - Peter confession – Jesus is Lord and the promised covenant are inseparable. The Lord of the confession seals the promise with his blood.
 - C. A Powerful Conquest: Matthew 16:18c
- *gates* = the entrance of a fortress. Gates are also a place in the city where counsel and plans are made. The gates symbolize a strategic plans and aggression by whomever or whatever is behind those gates. Both death & the devil are behind those gates of hell.
 - *shall not 'prevail' against* = all one word; the gates will not *overpower*; NASB, overcome, overthrow; conquer NIV; defeat – *overwhelm*. Since *prevail* - indicative future active: it is a guaranteed fact – the gates of hell will never overcome the church! It will continue to the end – that is the grand consummation.
 - *I will build* is indicative future active. It is guaranteed; there is no doubt; no matter what comes against it be it death or the devil, it is Christ's church and he will build it. It is an ongoing process until the last stone is in place.