



Core Seminar Systematic Theology II Session 23: Doctrine of the Church (pt. 1)

I. INTRODUCTION

We just spent the last four weeks 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 on Capitol Hill today? Why did you come to church today?

A better question for you is “how important is the church to you?”

Throughout the course of the class today, I hope to highlight for you why the importance of the church may be much more than you think it may be. And if I'm right, you may just have a completely new dynamic to your life that will upend the way you use your time, think about your life, and how you plan to spend the next 10, 20, or 50 years of your life.

Today and next week, Lord willing, we'll be thinking about how individual believers live together as the people of God. This is an area of theology known as “ecclesiology.” Look to your neighbor and say “ecclesiology.” The usual Greek word for “church” in the Bible is *ekklesia*, (ek-klay-see'-ah) which literally means ‘gathering’ or ‘assembly.’¹ Ecclesiology, then, is the study of the church.

Throughout history, people have debated how to understand the church. We are familiar with the few controversial issues: Are women allowed to be pastors? Should infants be baptized?

Next week, Lord willing, 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.

What is the nature of the church? What are God's intentions for the church? What are the characteristics of a healthy church? And maybe the best place to begin is to actually define what a church is.

You can see in your handouts the definition of a gospel church from our church's statement of faith. It reads ... “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.”

There is a lot there, and while we won't have time to get into everything this morning, I do want us to go over the highlights of what the Bible teaches us makes up and defines a church. To do that, let's move to point #2 on the front of your handout: The Church Defined.

¹ NDBT, 408.

And, again, as we go through this survey this morning, I want you to be thinking to yourself, “if this is true, what does this mean for my life as it concerns the church.”

II. THE CHURCH DEFINED

Who makes up the church? Notice that I didn’t say *what* makes up the church, but *who*.

The church may be defined as “the community of all true believers in Jesus Christ for all time.”² This is why the nursery rhyme, “here is the church, here is the steeple” though cute, is wrong. Rather than get our understanding of the church from nursery rhymes, the Bible says in Ephesians 5:25 that, “**Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy.**” Here the term ‘the church’ applies to all those who are saved by the death of Christ. That necessarily includes all true believers for all time – both believers in the New Testament age and believers in the Old Testament age.³

To be clear: “the church” does include true believers from before the time of Christ. However, this is not to say that the entire nation of Israel constituted the “Old Testament church,” but only those that God had brought to Himself through true faith during that time...

Paul has this notion of a believing remnant — this group of faithful Israelites — clearly in mind in Romans 9-11 when he, like Jesus in John 8, clarifies who is the true Israel. “**Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel,**” he says in Romans 9:6. Paul claims that it’s not the physical descendants of Abraham who are God’s children. The real descendants of Abraham who are God’s children are those who have faith in the promises of God.

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 in 1 Peter 2, “**a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God**” (1 Pet. 2:9). Nor does it surprise us to see James writing generally to many early Christian churches and referring to them as “**the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.**” The church is the Israel of God, the church is the true successor of Israel (Gal. 6:16).⁴

If that is true, friends, what that means for you and for me is that we are the church. Meaning, that we are the true successors of Israel. Which means that the entirety of the OT is pointing to us. The entirety of the NT is pointing to us. Not as the heroes. But rather as the heirs to the promises of God. And what this all means, friends, is that our identity as the church becomes the singularly most important part of our character, our person, and our life. If all of history is pointing to us, and what we have become in Christ, we need to see it for what it is ... a miracle that we are living out on a daily basis. Friends, your identity as the church is the unparalleled, unprecedented, and unimaginable point of life. Which means that we have, most likely, greatly underestimated our place in this story of God and the importance we play in the narrative of God’s glory as His church. More on that to come.

But let’s move on to point III on the front of your hand out: the church of Jesus Christ.

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 854

³ Id.

⁴ In a dispensational system an unnatural dichotomy, or separation, is forced between Israel and the church. While there are some differences, Israel was not called to be an end in itself. Israel was pointing to the church as the spiritual Israel, which fulfilled to some fuller measure the promises made to Abraham through Christ’s work. To be a “Jew” was not to be one externally, but internally (Romans 2:28-29). When Jeremiah announced the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34, it was made with the house of Israel, but Israel was already exiled at the time. He was speaking of the true, spiritual Israel. Even passages like Luke 13:28 show that not all of Israel will be saved but those who follow Jesus.

III. THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST

The next thing we should see, as it pertains to the church, is that the church belongs to our Lord Jesus Christ. It's His church, because he brought it into being, and he's the one who purchased it 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."⁵ Reconciliation of worldly divisions is finally accomplished in Christ.

Within the church, according to Paul in Colossians, **"there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all"** (Col. 3:11). At the cross, Jesus not only made reconciliation possible between man and God (most importantly) but between man and man. 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, Gentiles are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people.

Now, does this mean I stop being "white" or a "man" once I become a Christian and join the Church? Not at all. God does not abolish all constructs of our identity. Rather the point is that our central identity is no longer the fact that we're a man or a woman or black or wealthy but that we are Christ's — right, we are Christians, ChrIst-ians. We are Christ's and he is ours; he is our ultimate identity.

And, friends, don't miss this point. We are not just invited into church. It's not just some institutional organization that we have been adopted into. It's not a country club that we have successfully gotten into. No, it's anything but those things. We have been invited into Christ's church! His blood was shed for what we have become. We are adopted into His family. And, so we are joined to, banded with, and affixed to not just one another but to Jesus Christ himself. Each and every time we step into church, we should be reminded that we are part of a much more important body than we realize with a much more important mission than we often recognize – to represent and be the face of Jesus Christ to the nations. Being a part of Christ's church means we have duties and responsibilities far more important than our jobs, our futures, and even our families.

I want to pause here for: Questions or Comments?

MOVING ON TO POINT IV. ON THE INSIDE OF YOUR HANDOUT ON THE LEFT HAND SIDE: BIBLICAL METAPHORS FOR THE CHURCH

In order to help believers better understand what the nature of the church is like, Scripture uses a lot of word pictures, a lot of metaphors to clarify how we should think about it.

Generally speaking, these metaphors can 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 can we live out the metaphors that Scripture lays out? Let's turn to them now...

1. Family Images

The first group of metaphors, and I think the sweetest, pertains to the image of a family. Paul regards the church as a family when he tells Timothy to act as if all the church members are part of a larger family. We're

⁵ NDBT at 408.

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). Isn't that wonderful?

These images remind us of how deep the 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, dealing 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.

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 ... what? ... Nothing."** In 1 Corinthians 3, the church is compared to a field of crops that was planted by man but grown by God.

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 a meeting place may be called a church in our speech today, Scripture speaks to a church as a corporate assembly of believers in Christ. That's why you'll hear Mark when he leads service, say welcome to "this gathering" of the Capitol Hill Baptist church.

Peter says in I 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. The Old Testament Temple was to portray God dwelling with his people; it is where he showed off his glory to the world. 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 who we share in Jesus.

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 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 should appreciate the diversity of gifts that different members have. We all use our different gifts for the good of the whole body so that God might be glorified. And the head of our 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.”**⁶

Friends, don't miss this. The purpose of all of these metaphors is to spell out for us just what it means to be grafted into Christ's church. It's meant to show us with exceptional imagery the importance of our existence as part of Christ's church. We are to show the world a love for one another that can only be recognized as that found in a family. We are to hold fast onto the Lord, following all of his ways, showing the world that we are not our own, but beholden to someone much greater. We are to be the new temple of God in the world, drawing all men to Christ. And we are to be the body of Christ to one another, showing a stunning display to the world a unity that shocks the senses. This is what we have been called to as Christ's church.

Let's move on to point five on the inside of your handout. The church—visible and invisible.

V. THE CHURCH - VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE

In its true spiritual reality as the fellowship of all *genuine* believers, the church is invisible; we can't yet see this church. 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 a 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. That's why when we excommunicate someone, we're not – like the church of Rome – saying this person is no longer a Christian; what we're saying is that we can no longer affirm this person's profession of faith.

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”** (Matt. 7:16).

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 evidence their profession by fruit 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 I Corinthians. Paul writes to **“Philemon...and to the church that meets in [his] home”** in Philemon 1:1-2.

Paul also frequently mentions – both generically and by name – false prophets, or those who appeared to be believers but then renounced the faith. In other words, because of sin and human error, the visible church will

⁶ Grudem at 859.

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 – in other words we want all of our members to be born-again, to be Christians.⁷ Otherwise our witness as a church will be compromised. 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. **Why?** So that CHBC will better display the gospel to those in our community.⁸ If you leave with nothing else, leave today knowing this: The church is a display of God’s glory. It is the gospel made visible.

Let’s move on to Roman Numeral VI.

VI. THE CHURCH - LOCAL AND UNIVERSAL

This is another distinction that Christians have made: 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 few people 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 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 CHBC are a local church, but we’re also part of the universal church that churches—such as 4th Presbyterian—are part of. So why is this distinction between a local and universal church important? Because the NT expects Christians to join their local church. As Mark says, local church membership is basic, not optional, for the Christian. The universal church reminds us that we are not alone and can partner with other gospel believing churches for the sake of the gospel. A lot of people will say, “well, I can just be part of the Universal church, not the local church.” But that’s like saying I can be a baseball player without being on a team; it doesn’t make sense.

Let’s move quickly to point VII: **THE CHURCH – MILITANT AND TRIUMPHANT**

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

⁸ While we try to make church membership as close as possible to the invisible church, at some point we must define boundaries for those in a church to worship together.

constantly. She is called into holy warfare. This doesn't mean that the church uses the weapons of this world (2 Cor. 10:4). 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 and spiritual armor to that end. 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, amen?

Questions or Comments?

VIII. THE ATTRIBUTES OF THE CHURCH

Finally, let's discuss the attributes of the church.

We occasionally read the Nicene Creed during our Sunday gatherings. Well, what does it mean in the Nicene Creed when it refers to the church as "**one Holy Catholic and Apostolic church**"? Let's think about each adjective separately.

First, the church is one. Ephesians 4:4 reads, "**There is one body.**" The oneness of the church signifies its unity in Jesus. 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 truthfulness 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."⁹

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."¹⁰ 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. We are holy as Christ is holy. The bride is made holy by the holiness of the bridegroom.

Third, the church is catholic. What does catholic mean? Catholic basically means universal [not Roman Catholic]. The church is universal. We already discussed this in talking about the universal and local church. It is made up of all believers for all time, and that is something to praise God for.

Fourth, the church is Apostolic. Roman Catholics would say that being an apostolic church means 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

⁹ R. Phillips, *The Church*, p. 38.

¹⁰ P. Ryken, *The Church*, p. 50.

what the apostles did in the early church” with their miraculous signs and wonders.¹¹ 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 the 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. The apostles were commissioned and we now take that commissioning to the world in the form of gospel proclamation.

So, the attributes of the church consist of one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

Next week, we’ll get into the marks of a true Christian church, but let me stop there for today and see if there are any questions.

Let me end with this. If the church is, indeed, Christ’s. And if it is true that Christ died for his church, founded his church, built his church, and now leads his church, we should look at the church in a very profound way. What way? Well in a way that sees the church as Christ’s bride. As Christ’s glory. As Christ’s legacy. As Christ’s body mortalized in the lives of you and me. We should never talk poorly of the church. We should never neglect the church. Instead, if it is Christ’s church we are to become, then our lives should be centered around the very body of the one we claim to follow with full-hearted devotion. So, my question to you is, how important is the church for you? Anything less than the pinnacle of life, and I believe we have misunderstood both the purpose of the church and of the cross. Let us glorify the Lord today through our participation, service in, and dedication to the church of Jesus Christ. Amen? Let’s pray.

APPENDIX A

Possible Quotes to Add

What are the purposes of the church?

To glorify God through...

- Worship (Ephesians 1:12)
- Evangelism (Matthew 28:19)
- Discipleship (Colossians 1:28)

In referring to the Body of Christ image

“The local church is not regarded here as merely a part of a larger body of Christ, but as *the* body of Christ in that place. This is another support for a proper understanding of the autonomy of the local church. No local church should be isolated, but no local church needs a larger body to complete it or enable it to function. It is the body of Christ, possessing full ecclesial status.” (J. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, p. 37)

¹¹ P. Ryken, *The Church*, p. 94.