

Doctrine of the Church: Nature of the Church

Let us begin with prayer.

Father, thank You for Your good Word and all that it teaches us in so many different areas. Thank you for what it teaches us about the Church. Lord, we confess that, along with other topics, we have neglected this one. We have not given enough thought about what Your Word says the Church is, let alone what it ought to be and what it ought to do. Lord, teach us, encourage us, build us up in our faith, and strengthen us so that we might serve You and help others. We will give You thanks through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

We have spent a couple of weeks studying the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. We then spent 3 weeks studying the doctrine of election. In this lesson, and for the next couple of weeks, we are going to study the doctrine of the Church.

In this lesson our plan is to talk about the nature of the Church, the marks of the Church, and the Church's attributes. Next lesson, Lord willing, we will discuss the issue of ecclesiastical separation. Is it ever proper to withdraw from a church or denomination? What about the church's service? What should it consist of? The topic for the last week will be how the church should be governed. Then, we will discuss the role of women in the church, a topic that is important in our time. We need to address that in a biblical way. We will not only talk about the prohibitions, thus being negative, but we will also look at what the Lord says about that important aspect. So, we begin with a doctrine of the Church. Now, I have a deliberate order to this. The question we want to answer in this lesson is what is the Church?

The modern tendency is to ask, first of all, what the Church should be doing. That is an important question, but there is a much more fundamental or foundational question. That is, what is the Church? Tell me what it is and then we will be better able to tell what it should be doing. Because of secular philosophies and wisdom of our day, the modern tendency to ask what the Church should be doing has crept into evangelical thinking. This runs across Christian theology. For example, there is a tendency to discuss the work of Christ with a real lack of interest in His person. That is a big mistake. The person of Christ (who He is) is foundational to His ministry (what He does). It would not be sufficient to study His person and then stop. We should go on to discuss His work. The second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, became a human being. The idea of God and man in one person is crucial to understanding His work of making atonement on the cross and rising from the dead. Likewise, modern theology has expressed an interest in what the Church should do and has little interest in what the Church should be. That is our first point: to think about what the Church is.

We begin with the nature of the Church. We will do a couple of things here. We will look at historical theology a little later on. That is the study of what different thinkers and writers throughout the history of the Church have thought about the Church. That is important. But more important are the biblical pictures of the Church. We want to look at three of those pictures that correspond with the three persons of the Trinity. First of all, and the order is not crucial here, the Church is the people of God. Second, it is the body of Christ. And third, it is the temple of the Holy Spirit. There are many more biblical images of the Church than these. These are three of the big ones. So, we are not trying to be comprehensive here but rather representative in selecting these three biblical pictures or themes of the Church.

Pastors, Christian workers, and other concerned believers often use 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 to caution their Christian friends against marrying an unsaved person. That is a fair use of the passage, but, in its

context, that is not exactly what the passage is talking about. I would say that the prohibition against marrying an unsaved person is a good application of the passage. In context, the passage is talking about the need for believers to not be yoked in church union with unbelievers—the need of separation from unbelief. I am not saying that we should totally cut ourselves off from unsaved people. That is certainly not the will of God, but the Church should be represented by belief and not a combination of faith and idolatry or faith and unbelief.

Throughout this text Paul uses a number of words that mean unity, communion, togetherness, and sharing. There is a word that speaks of unity and then a word that speaks of believers and then a word that speaks of unbelievers. “Do not be yoked together...” He is writing to the Christians in Corinth in 2 Corinthians 6:14. “Do not, [believers],”—it is implied—“be yoked together...”—Do you see the word for unity?—“...with unbelievers. For what do righteousness”—speaking of believers—“and wickedness”—speaking of the unsaved—“have in common?”—the word for “unity.”—“Or what fellowship”—there is the word that speaks of unity—“can light [belief] have with darkness [unbelief]?”

Do you see what Paul is doing? He is varying his vocabulary, but the same idea occurs again and again. Believers do not enter into ecclesiastical union with unsaved people. In 2 Corinthians 6:15 Paul says, “What harmony”—there is the unity word—“is there between Christ and *Belial* (a Jewish name for the Devil), or what does a believer have in common”—there is the word speaking of unity—“with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?”—Paul has warned us repeatedly against ecclesiastical union with unbelief. We will be back to this passage later when we talk about that whole issue of ecclesiastical separation. As a matter of fact, a couple of different biblical issues come into play there. So it is not a simple matter to apply the principles, but this is the foundation.—“For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will live with them and walk among them and I will be their God and they will be my people.’” The Church is the people of God. It is those people whom God has claimed for Himself and who, therefore, belong to Him. Continuing on in verse 17, “‘Therefore come out from them and be separate,’ says the Lord. ‘Touch no unclean thing and I will receive you.’” In what capacity, we might ask? Verse 18 tells us, “‘I will be a father to you and you will be my sons and daughters,’ says the Lord Almighty.” Undergirding this picture of the people of God is the concept of adoption, God placing us into His family as His adult sons and daughters. So, by virtue of adoption, we, believers in Christ, are the people of God. We are the people who belong to God the Father (verse 18). A consequence of that in this context is that it is forbidden for us to enter into union with unbelief.

“Now,” you say, “how does that come around and talk about marriage?” This is not really a course on marriage at this point, but it is an application of the passage. You say, “You did not say anything about marriage in that passage; you talked about Church union.” That is true. I talked about religious union. What does it have to do with marriage? Well, marriage is the deepest union that two human beings can experience, and marriage is, among other things, a spiritual union. So, if the passage forbids spiritual union with unbelievers in Church life, an application of it is that we ought not to marry an unsaved person because that would involve a spiritually divided home. If you want a more specific reference, in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul tells those whose spouses have died, for example, that they are free to remarry. But he says, “Only in the Lord.” So I think this passage does apply to that “unequally yoked” concept. It can even be used more broadly than that—perhaps for business partnerships and some other things too. But in context, it is talking about Church union.

The nature of the Church involves a number of things. We begin with biblical pictures, and the first one is that the Church is the people of God—the people upon whom He has put His name, the people to

whom He has said, “I will be your God and you will be my people”—the people He has adopted as His sons and daughters and has brought close to Himself and the people who belong to Him because of Christ’s work on their behalf and the Spirit’s work in their lives as well.

In Ephesians 1 we see another picture of the Church—as the body of Christ. In this context, Paul says that he gives thanks for the believers in, probably, Ephesus and other early Christian communities. To the best of our knowledge, Ephesians is what we call a circular letter and some of the manuscripts have, in Ephesians 1:1, “To the saints in Ephesus.” Others have a blank there. It looks like Paul wrote it with a blank there, and then different churches penciled their names in, so it went to the Ephesians and to others as well. He gives thanks for the testimony of these believers in Christ (Ephesians 1:15-16). He also makes prayer requests on their behalf. Ephesians 1:17 says, “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart”—what a beautiful expression—“may be enlightened in order that you may know...” and he prays for three things. In verse 17, the three things seem to give more detail to the concept of knowing the Lord better.

The three things are curious to me. They are three things that they already know or they would not be Christians in the first place. You mean to tell me he prays that they might know three things they already know? Exactly. Obviously he wants them to know those things in a deeper way, and it applies to us as well. “I want you to know the hope of your calling...” The NIV explains it correctly when it renders, “the hope to which He has called you.” That means, the hope of heaven, the hope of glory, the hope of the resurrection of the dead, and the life forever with God on the new earth. You say, “Well, that is something they already know. When they believe the Gospel, they believe in order to go to heaven.” It is true, but I think we would agree that heaven is not nearly as real to us as it should be.

The Lord is leading and it looks like I am going to be working on the subject of heaven. Thinking about those matters and writing on that subject after working on the other destiny (hell) for a couple of years will be a welcomed change. Although there are big debates as to who is going to hell and what happens there, there are no debates like that concerning the topic of heaven. It is not controversial at all. It is just neglected. I have read Calvin’s *Institutes*, and he has one chapter that is entitled, “Meditation on the Future Life.” I think that is an unknown art to us. We really do not think about the resurrection of the dead that much, nor do we meditate on heaven. So, somebody else has already used the title I would like to have used. I am being somewhat facetious, although it is a good title.

A man named A.J. Conyers wrote a good book, which is now out of print, called “The Eclipse of Heaven.” That is exactly the problem. There has been a solar eclipse, a heavenly eclipse, if you will. That is, as Christians, we live our lives on earth usually forgetting about heavenly realities—do we not, if we are really honest? That is why Paul prays. In the first century, the beliefs were the same way. He says, “I pray you might know more deeply the hope to which God has called you.” Second, “I pray you might know the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints.” Is this the same as the first thing? Is it the inheritance of the saints? Is it the inheritance of heaven? That is the biblical teaching, but that is not the teaching here. Paul is not praying for the same thing again. He is praying that they might understand that they are God’s inheritance. It is a tremendous concept. “I pray that you might know,” he says, “the riches, the greatness, and the value of God’s glorious inheritance in the saints.” The meaning is awesome. It is that God has an inheritance Himself, and we are His inheritance. Before you just push it off and say, “I think the Lord got the booby prize here,” remember Ephesians 5. Christ gave Himself for the Church. He cleansed and washed her, making her holy and blameless. In that day, all of our sins will be gone and the Church will be the radiant bride of Christ. That is a beautiful idea, and it is a promise of

God. Now we are humbled and we praise God that Paul prayed for the early Gentile believers—that they are the riches of God’s glorious inheritance. In other words, it is like saying, “I want you to realize more deeply that you are of great value to God. He gave His son for you. Not only is He giving you an inheritance, but you are also his inheritance. God thinks so highly of you, His people.” They already knew that when they understood the Gospel, but again, it is the idea of knowing it in a better way than they had before.

The third thing Paul wants them to know they already know on one level, but he wants them to go deeper. Ephesians 1:19 says, “I pray that you might know [...] God’s incomparably great power for us who believe.” They certainly knew about God’s power when they were saved. The Gospel is not only the message about the cross, that He died for our sins. It is also, according to the Scriptures, that He rose again on the third day (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). You cannot be a Christian without hearing about Jesus’ resurrection and the power of God involved in that. But they—and we—for application, need to think more deeply about this. We need to realize, more than we have, God’s super power for us who believe. Paul keeps thinking about this third topic when he says, “That power is like the working of God’s mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead.” What power is this? It is the resurrection power of the Lord. Do you think our God is too small? The resurrection power of Christ—seated as Lord for the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way—what great power!

Here we learn that the Church is the body of Christ. What a picture! He is the exalted head. The Church is His body in the world. It is the point of location of Christ’s activity now. We are not limiting His activity to the Church. He upholds the worlds by His power, and He is Lord over all the nations whether people know Him or not. But in a special way He is Lord over the Church, because the Church acknowledges His rule and bows before His scepter, which is His Word. Seeing it as the body of Christ is one way of looking at the Church. The Bible looks at it a couple of different ways. In 1 Corinthians 12-14, it looks at the individual church members in relation to each other. It looks at church members as members of Christ’s body in their mutual relation to and respect for one another. It talks about their need for one another, ministries to one another, and all of those “one another” things. But the Scriptures, in Ephesians and Colossians, also view the Church in terms of Christ the Head and the Church as the body of Christ in relation to Him. He is the life-giver of the Church. He is the Lord of the Church. We receive life from Him and we obey Him who is our Lord. So the Church is the people of God, the Father. The Church is the Body of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 12:27 Paul uses more of that context of the body, life, and members to one another when it says, “Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.” You know, modern human beings, certainly in Western societies, suffer from an identity crisis. They do not know who they are. It is my contention that we, as believers in Christ, more than all people on the earth ought to know who we are. It is no wonder that people are confused in the West. They are being taught by evolutionary science teachers that they are mere animals. It is no wonder that people are confused—because they say we are a product of mere chance. This leaves out the notion of God, the Designer, and the fact that we are made in His image. It is no surprise that people are confused today, but we should not be confused. Who are we? We are the people belonging to God the Father. We are the members of the body of Christ. It is adoption that undergirds that picture of the people of God. The Father names His children and brings us into His family with all of the undue privileges and rights. It is union with Christ that puts us into the body of Christ. It is God, the Holy Spirit, who joins us spiritually to the Son of God so that we belong to Him. We are one with Him. We become part of His body.

There are many pictures of the Church in Scripture, but another one is that of the Church as the temple of the Holy Spirit. Again, our order is the people of God the Father, the body of the Lord Jesus Christ, and now the temple of the Holy Spirit.

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-13 it says, “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts.” It is talking about the human body here. How many bones are in the human body? I think the answer is 206. That is a lot of parts, and there are even other parts besides bones in our body. Although all of the body’s parts are many, it is a wonderful thing when you think about it. I usually think about it when one of the parts is awry. When something as little as a toe or a little part of my ear or a tooth is hurting, my whole body hurts. The body is a unit. It is made up of many parts and all of its parts are many, but they form one body. Paul shares the same principle in 1 Corinthians 3:6. He is the planter, in verse 6, who planted the seed. After the church planter, the next guy comes along, keeps the seed going, and builds on it. He is the church “waterer,” if you will. Paul gives God the credit for making it grow. So, Paul plants, somebody else waters, and the elders (especially the leaders) in Corinth are to cultivate. I am using that example to further the horticulture image. They are to cultivate that ground. Some of you who are gardeners know what I am talking about.

Another image of the Church is that of a building. In 1 Corinthians 3:10 Paul is the foundation layer. “By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation...” Others, of course, build upon the foundation to form the rest of the building. The Corinthian believers, in light of the gardening and the building examples, were “God’s fellow workers.” Paul is trying to bring about unity. He says, “Look, I am not at odds with Peter. I am not against the palace. We are all working together. Do not divide up into factions and take our names.” We have to chuckle because the real spiritual group took the name, Christ, separating themselves from their brothers. Verse 9 says, “You are God’s field, God’s building,” so Paul really pursues the imagery. He plants the seed and others water and cultivate. Paul lays the foundation and others build upon the foundation. That is the context for the teaching about being careful how you build on a foundation. In verses 12 and following, the text speaks directly to the leaders of the church in Corinth. It also speaks to every Christian. We are to be careful how we build upon that foundation.

In verses 16 and 17 we learn what kind of building he has been talking about. “You are God’s building,” it says in verse 9, and in verse 16 it says, “Do you not know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him.” Those are strong words, but God’s temple is sacred and you are that temple.

Those of us who live in individualistic societies tend to emphasize one part of this temple imagery. We emphasize the part that we find in 1 Corinthians 6:18-20 where it says that believers’ individual bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. We know it is an individual reference because in that context it speaks against sexual immorality. That is the truth. Each of our bodies is a temple, but 1 Corinthians 3 is not talking about our individual bodies being temples of the Holy Spirit. It is saying that corporately, as a body of believers, as the people of God, we constitute a temple of God, the Holy Spirit. What a beautiful image. It speaks of how special it is for the people of God to gather. Someone might say, “I can worship God on the golf course.” Well, maybe you can, but do you? Furthermore, is that what it is about—your own private worship? Or has God constituted a group of believers as His Church that they might come together to do certain things and be characterized by certain things? We will get to that, but the very nature of the Church is a temple. It is a corporate structure made up of the people of God.

In light of the Old Testament background of the tabernacle and temple, the structures in which God chose to manifest His name, Solomon said, “Lord, you fill the heavens. You fill the highest heavens.

Will you really dwell in this house that I built?" He does not mean that he built it with his own hands. The other guys did all the work, but he is the king so he gets the credit for it. What a beautiful attitude he takes. He is like a child before God, his father. It is beautiful. Would Solomon keep that attitude? Unfortunately he did not, but he acknowledged that God was present everywhere. That is what made His special presence in the temple so wonderful. God did not reduce His divinity to dwell in the temple. No, He filled the heavens, the earth, and everything (and Solomon knew it), but He still stooped to dwell with His people, Israel, in the temple in a special way. Well, God still fills the heavens and the earth, but we are individually temples of God. It is an incredible thing and we, as we corporately gather for worship with like-minded believers on Sunday, are the temple of God.

Do you understand now what I mean when I say we should know who we are? We are the sons and daughters of the living God. We have great worth in that relationship to our Father. We are the body of Christ. As insignificant as we might think we are, remember the truth about the least honorable parts of the body in 1 Corinthians 12. Some parts of the body think that they are very insignificant. I mean, who worries about an elbow much? But, if you hit your elbow, you will worry about that elbow. Or you might think, "I am just a little toe." However, you would not have proper balance without a little toe. If something goes wrong with it the whole body will ache. Likewise, we are the temple of God, the Holy Spirit. We are the special dwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Let me talk a little about historical theology. We moved from biblical theology to historical theology. We move from the biblical pictures to the writings of some of the great fathers of the Church and to some of the confessions and creeds of the Church. This is not our authority in the same way that the Bible is our authority. The Bible sits in judgment on all the counsels, creeds, and confessions of human beings. Nevertheless, we do not need to re-do what has already been done. As we study these things, we will see some very good ideas—and some bad ideas. We will have to sift through them as we go, but the study of historical theology gives us background. It helps us understand where we are. It gives us a framework from which to evaluate. First of all, Cyprian, in the first half of the third century, said, "He cannot have God for his father, who has not the Church for his mother." He also said, "There is no salvation outside the Church." In one sense, we could say amen to these statements. That is, each of us heard the Gospel from somebody who was part of the Church. We do not come to know Christ through Buddhism, Hinduism, or Islam. It is through the Christian Church and through somebody who is a member of the Church sharing the Gospel with us. On the other hand, as this idea developed within Roman Catholic theology it fostered a great institutionalization of grace. Eventually, not in Cyprian's time, the church became viewed as the sole dispenser of the grace of God. That indeed is problematic.

In the Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 come these famous words: "We believe in the one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church." These are very important words, and we will study those later on. These are the four attributes or characteristics of the Church. I am going to argue that they are biblical if we understand them in a biblical fashion. So, for example, the word "catholic" has a small "c" to it. It does not mean "Roman Catholic," but rather "catholic" meaning "universal." There is one Church. That does not mean one denomination, of course. Obviously, it does not now. There is one holy Church. The church is sanctified by God. It is catholic—it is universal—and all true believers are part of the one church. And it is apostolic. I am going to argue that it is not ultimately a literal apostolic succession, but rather it is apostolic in that there is no true Church apart from the teaching of the apostles. We will come back to these things. This is a great concept, and here are its formulations in a creed. This one has biblical roots, as I will try to argue from John 17 and Ephesians 4, among other places. I am not saying any of these are exactly right, although that one, correctly understood, is a beautiful summary of what the Church is.

We are still thinking about the nature of the Church and we are looking at some of what people have said in history—great and significant people such as Augustine. Around the year 400 he said, “There are many Christians, but only one Christ. The Christians themselves along with their head, because he has ascended to heaven, form one Christ. It is not a case of His being one and our being many, but we, who are many, are a unity in Him. There is therefore one Man, Christ, consisting of head and body.” Now again, that could be misunderstood. Jesus is not lacking a body in heaven, but his point is to speak of this unity of the Church with Christ, its head. Nevertheless, in actual practice, he has to admit, the Church is a mixed company of good and evil people. That is a real problem. How do we handle that problem? We do not handle it by denying the reality of it. The Bible itself presents the church as mixed. Therefore, the only true members of the Church are, in Augustine’s words, the fixed number of the elect.

So, here we have three ideas. First, we have the unity of the Church (under the body imagery). Then we have this notion of the mixed church, which frankly is the way every church under heaven is unless you have one with 12 people who are all believers. I mean, any pastor with a heart for his people has a committed core group of people. When you move out from the core, the people are not as active as he would like. And as you move further and further, you get out to the periphery, and the pastor is not sure whether Mrs. Jones’ husband knows the Lord. Mrs. Jones is not sure, or maybe she is sure he does not know the Lord. Anyway, that is the mixed company concept. Finally, notice the line drawn between election and the Church. One way to define the Church historically is by the number of people who have been chosen by God for salvation. It is a concept that we will come back to again and again.