

BASIC DOCTRINE – THE FUNDAMENTALS

PART 11: THE CHURCH

Members of God's adopted family are not saved so that they may remain as isolated individuals but they are adopted in order to live in a close association with other believers, ministering collectively to the Lord in worship and service, to each other in fellowship, and especially to the world as a unified witness. In other words, the union that Christ has with the church as whole should be expressed in the fellowship that believers have with each other. In regards to this idea of the community, theologian Floyd H. Barackman in his book Practical Christian Theology says: "Our being called unto the fellowship not only of God but also of other gospel believers is a blessing of salvation".

The promise of Christ to Peter and the rest of His disciples is that: *"And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it". (Matt 16:18)*

The word church in the New Testament comes from the Greek word "ekklesia" which is a compound of the words "ek", "out of," and "klesis", "a calling." So believers are the "called out ones;" that is to say, called out of the world, out of the kingdom of darkness and into the Kingdom of Light.

In fact, every use of the word "church" in the New Testament refers to that group of people who have come into a relationship with God through their confession of

faith and a belief in their heart that God had raised Christ from the dead (Rom 10:9-13) and who meet with each other on a regular basis sharing a common welfare.

This unity of believers made into a coalition by God was testified to in the first chapters of the book of Acts when on the day of Pentecost, as a result of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and Peter's sermon: *Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:41-47)*

One metaphor used in Scripture to describe the sacred bonding of the church to their Lord is the term "the bride of Christ" which borrows the imagery of the love of a husband for his wife.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians emphasizes this point when he instructs the husbands to: *love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish*

(Eph 5:25-27)

Notice the close connection between the love Christ shows the church and the word—Scripture. For it is the centrality of the word of God, both in the sense of Jesus as the Word of God and God’s revealed word in Scripture—that captures the essence of what the Church is supposed to be all about. The Church is, primarily, the place where God’s word is proclaimed and lived out among God’s people. God’s people do this because we have been saved by God and are now indwelt by the Holy Spirit who imparts to us that same love for each other that Christ demonstrated for us. Thus believers should express a Christ-like care toward one another.

This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

(John 15:12)

Paul also called the church God’s building (1 Cor 3:9) whose members are: *being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Eph 2: 22)*

Peter even went so far as to call the members of the church *“living stones”* who though: *rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God (1 Peter 2:4) were: being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, (1 Peter 2:5-6)*

Theologians have described several distinguishing characteristics that have defined the church throughout its history. First there is the church visible and the church invisible.

The visible church is that body or members who claim to be a part of the church by identifying themselves with the Lord Jesus Christ. Unfortunately not all who claim to be true believers are what they claim. Only God, who knows the heart (1 Sam 16:7), can make the final determination about a person’s true spiritual condition. Satan, the enemy of our Lord and His elect, will always do what he can to weaken the welfare, faith and testimony of the church by compromising its membership.

Jesus warned of this hazard in His parable of the wheat and tares being sowed in the same field. Jesus is the true farmer who sows the wheat but Satan is always trying to compromise the wheat by sowing tares.

He answered and said to them: "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. (Matt 13:37-42)

Jesus also cautioned His disciples to: *"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. (Matt 7:15)*

Paul echoed the same when he forewarned the church at Ephesus: *For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves (Acts 20:29-30)*

In common grace and faith it is usually expected that the church will accept everyone into fellowship who claims to be saved, barring evidence to the contrary. But it is the duty of the leadership of the church to examine the candidates for membership within the guidelines of their fellowship or denomination. This should be done not only for the sake of the health of the church, but for the sake of the candidate who may have a false assurance of

saving faith evidenced to the Pastor by a lack of understanding of what it really means to be saved, to have the risen Jesus as one's Lord and Savior. With so many wrong ideas about salvation floating around in our very diversified culture, people may think they are saved when all they have really done is had some kind of religious experience that has little if anything to do with the God of Scripture.

The church invisible is comprised of all of God's chosen children who have ever existed and will exist, brought together by God into one body, with Jesus as the head. These are the ones who have made a true confession of faith with their hearts and have been changed by the Spirit. Although they may be unknown to us, they are surely known to God.

"The Lord knows those who are His," (2 Tim 2:19)

There is also the universal church, which is the body of Christ world wide, and the local church made up of the neighboring community of Christians.

It is the duty of all believers, regardless of where they live, to be active members of a local body with regular attendance when possible. This will always mean being active in a local body that is imperfect. There are no perfect local bodies, for all local bodies are made up of imperfect people. Even if we found a perfect church, we would make it imperfect as soon as we joined! Believers nevertheless have a duty to be active somewhere where Scripture is believed in and

proclaimed. Scripture does not give us the option of sitting at home because we cannot find a “good enough” place to attend, because we cannot find a place where everything is believed in just the way we believe and like. True, we will avoid all so-called churches that deny the basic Gospel message and that do not hold to Scripture as the one infallible rule of faith and life, but we will not forgo attendance for any other reason. What we may consider as less than ideal worship or less than ideal preaching can never count as an acceptable reason for forgoing active membership in some local body.

And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, (Heb 10:24-25)

The church is also an organism, made up of individuals, which functions as an organization in orderliness with leaders and administration.

An organism is simply defined by Merriam-Webster as an individual living thing; a system with many parts that depend on each other.

In line with this thought, Paul described the church as an body, Christ being the head (Col 1:18), with each member having an unique purpose, calling and gift (1 Corinth 12), functioning in care for one another (1 Corinth 12:25), comforting one another (1Th 4:18), praying for one another, and building up one another by using their spiritual gifts as listed and described in Scripture (1 Corinth 12:7).

But throughout the New Testament we see that the church also functioned as an organization possessing effective leadership such as pastors, elders and overseers.

In the book of Acts Paul and Barnabas: *appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23)*

The "elders" of the New Testament church were the "pastors" (Eph 4:11), "bishops or overseers" (Acts 20:28), "leaders" and "rulers" (Heb 13:7; 1 Thess 5:12) of the flock. Thayer's Greek Lexicon notes that the Greek word for "overseer" is "*episkopos*" (the same word for Bishop) meaning: "a man charged with the duty of seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly, any curator, guardian, or superintendent."

The calling to be an elder, as with any position of leadership within the church, is a sacred obligation not to be taken lightly. Paul instructed his friend and protégé Timothy in the qualifications of eldership writing: *This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having*

his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. (1 Tim 3:1-7)

Paul spoke of the honor due to elders when he wrote: *Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer is worthy of his wages." Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear. (1 Tim 5:17-20)*

The apostle Peter also said: *The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, (1 Peter 5:1-2)*

Scripture often reminds us of the importance of the office of elder and of the duties of their leadership, such as overseeing, caring, teaching and preaching the word to the flock.

And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. (2 Tim 2:2)

It is in this respect that one of the tasks given to church leadership is the administration of discipline when necessary. This authority was assigned to the church by direct commands from both Christ (Matt 18:15-17) and Paul (1 Cor 5:5).

Although discipline may seem like an unpleasant duty, it is necessary in order to keep sin from spreading, to protect the purity of the church and the honor of Christ, and to help in the restoration and reconciliation of the one who has gone astray.

The means of discipline can vary among denominations but in all cases it is important to consider the following points. First, all believers struggle with sin at some time in their life (1 John 1:8), so when correction is called for, it should follow only after thorough investigation. Second, the person or persons to be disciplined are first given time to repent and correct the problem. Third, if discipline becomes unavoidable, it must be given in love and prayer, with the knowledge that reconciliation is offered if and when genuine repentance is shown.

Within the local body there is also the office of Deacons.

The ministry of the deacon has usually been understood as a lay servant to the church and or assistant to the elders.

Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary says that the term deacon: “was used to describe the work of a servant—a person who waited on tables or ministered as a religious official. When the office of deacon was established in the New Testament church, it may have paralleled the function of the Jewish synagogue assistant—an official who took care of the administrative needs of the assembly.”

It is believed that the office of deacon began in the early church when in Acts it records: *Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.* (Acts 6:1-6)

The qualifications of deacons are similar to those of elders (1 Tim 3:8-13), and it should be noted that even though some think that the office of deacon is less important than that of an elder it is good to remember that the first martyr of the church was a deacon called Stephan who at his execution not only gave one of the most eloquent and forceful testimonies recorded in Scripture but was also granted a vision of the Lord moments before his death at the hands of the mob (Acts 6:8 – 7:60)

Different churches and denominations have diverse views on leadership and church government and how it is employed. Views can range all the way from a single pastor as the sole head of the church to plurality of elders, presbytery and in some cases (but rarely) to the point of almost no government at all.

There are many forms of church government, but it is widely believed that the most common form of church government within America is the single pastor with a group of elders and/or deacons under his leadership with the rest of the membership being under them. The single pastor is usually the founder of the church or is voted in by the congregation depending upon the denomination they are associated with.

Whatever the views of leadership within a local body or denomination, it is the command of Scripture that there is leadership within the church and a call by Scripture for submission of the body of believers under that leadership.

Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble." (1 Peter 5:5)

One of the one important and vital functions of the church is the dispensation of the ordinances commonly called sacraments.

The Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary defines sacrament as: "A formal religious act in which the actions and materials used are the channels by which God's grace is communicated, either actually or symbolically."

Throughout church history denominations have differed in what is to be specified as a sacrament. Generally speaking, Protestant Christianity recognizes only two sacraments from Scripture: Water Baptism and Lord's Supper.

The word baptize comes from the Greek word baptizo (bap-tid'-zo) which means to: "to immerse, submerge; to make overwhelmed (i.e. fully wet); used only (in the N. T.) of ceremonial ablution, especially (technically) of the ordinance of

Christian baptism” (New Exhaustive Strong's Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary)

The act of baptizing was first mentioned in the ministry of John the Baptist in his ministry as the forerunner to the work of Christ: *John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. (Mark 1:4-5)*

Jesus commanded the continuation of this rite when told His disciples to: *Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:19-20)*

The act of baptism does not save but Scripture clearly commands baptism of all regenerated believers following a confession of salvation (Matt 28:19-20, Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38). The act of baptism is the church’s witness to the individual’s new status as an adopted child, a symbolic reenactment of Jesus’s death and resurrection, and a pointer to the newly adopted believer’s cleansing of sin by the blood of Jesus and the newly indwelt Holy Spirit. Baptism is certainly a witness to the world of our new life based on our repentance, confession and belief in the resurrection to come.

Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (Rom 6:3-4)

Christ instituted the Lord's Supper, also known as the Eucharist or Communion, on the night just before His arrest and crucifixion, during the traditional Passover meal with His disciples. Scripture says that: *And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you. (Luke 22:19-20)*

Paul, in his first letter to the church at Corinth went on to add: *For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes. (1 Cor 11:23-26)*

When we participate in this sacrament by partaking of the symbols of Christ's body and blood, we not only celebrate the work of Christ on the cross, but we also receive strength as we enter into a deeper communion with our Lord.

Although the Lord's Supper continually remind us of the mercy of God and that we are continually under His grace, Paul warns the Corinthians not to take this sacrament lightly, because through it God communicates Jesus Christ and His Spirit to His adopted children: *Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.*

(1 Cor 11:27-29)

In conclusion we may say that the church was designed and ordained by God to represent His presence on this earth and to be that instrument through which He would manifest His authority, care and the expression of His Spirit in power and worship. As theologian Charles C. Ryrie writes: "The importance of the church can scarcely be overstated. It is that which God purchased with the blood of His son (Acts 20:28). It is that which Christ loves, nourishes, and cherishes (Eph. 5:25, 29), and which He shall present to Himself blameless in all her glory one day (v. 27). Building His church constitutes Christ's principle work in the world

today (Matt. 16:18) through His giving of spiritual gifts (Eph. 4:12), Thus the exercise of those gifts by believers aligns us with what Christ is doing today.”