

Harvest Christian Fellowship
05 February, 2012
Theology @ 9
“The Church”
Facilitator: Pastor Joel Bradberry

“And I also say that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”

-Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God

“If you call yourself a Christian but you are not a member of the church you regularly attend, I worry that you might be going to hell.”

-Mark Dever, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill BC

“Which service, mama, the morning or night?”

-Little boy, somewhere.

The Nature of the Church

Etymology: The English word church is the translation of the Greek word “ecclesia,” which referred to any gathering or called out assembly (ek=out; kaleo=to call).

Definition (Grudem): “The church is the community of all true believers for all time.” This definition understands the church to be made of all those who are truly saved.

Definition (Erickson): “[The church is] the whole body of those who through Christ’s death have been savingly reconciled to God and have received new life. It includes all such persons, whether in heaven or on earth. While it is universal in nature, it finds expression in local groupings of believers which display the same qualities as does the body of Christ as a whole.”

- Jesus died to redeem those who are saved.

Ephesians 5:25 *“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...”*

- The church exists in, through, and because of Jesus Christ. Thus it is a New Testament reality. Yet it is at the same time a continuation, through a new phase of redemptive history, of Israel, the seed of Abraham, God’s covenant people of Old Testament times. The differences between the church and Israel are rooted in the newness of the covenant by which God and His people are bound to each other
- The new covenant under which the church lives is a new form of the relationship whereby God says to a chosen community, “I will be your God; you shall be my people.”

1 Cor. 11:25 *“In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”*”

Hebrews 8:7-10 *“For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. For he finds fault with them when he says: ‘Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.’”*

Exodus 6:7 *“I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.”*

Jeremiah 31:33 *“For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”*

- It is not surprising then that the NT authors can speak of the OT people of Israel as a “church” (ecclesia).

Acts 7:38 *“[Moses] is the one who was in the congregation [ecclesia] in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us.”*

Psalms 22:22 *“I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation [ecclesia] I will praise you.”* [rendered as ecclesia in Hebrews 2:12]

- The author of Hebrews understands the present-day Christians who constitute the church on earth to be surrounded by “a great cloud of witnesses” that reaches back to the earliest eras of the Old Testament. Moreover, later in chapter 12 the author of Hebrews says that when NT Christians worship we come into “the assembly (ecclesia) of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven.”

Hebrews 12:22-23 *“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly [ecclesia] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect...”*

- There is much uncertainty among the best bible scholars regarding God's future plan, if any, for ethnic Israel. What is certain, however, is that the predominantly Gentile character of the church is due not to the terms of the new covenant but to Jewish rejection of them, and Paul taught that this will one day be reversed (Romans 11:15, 23-31).
- The church is visible and invisible. In its true spiritual reality as the fellowship of all genuine believers, the church is invisible. This is because we cannot see the spiritual condition of peoples' hearts. Thus it is impossible for humans to accurately identify, know, or see (hence it is invisible) the true church. Jesus taught that in the organized church (visible) there would always be people who thought they were Christians and passed as Christians, some indeed becoming ministers, but who were not renewed in heart and would therefore be exposed and rejected at the Judgment.

2 Timothy 2:19 *"But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."*

Matthew 7:15-27:

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

²¹ *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³ And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'*

²⁴ *"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."*

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43:

²⁴ *He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, ²⁵ but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. ²⁷ And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' ²⁸ He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹ But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the*

wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’ ”

“Then left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” ³⁷ He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, ⁴² and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.”

- The church is local and universal. In the NT the word “church” may be applied to a group of believers at any level, ranging from a very small group meeting in a private home (local) all the way to the group of all true believers of all the ages (universal).

Romans 16:5 “Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia.”

Acts 9:31 “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.”

- The “church” is a large topic to discuss in such a limited amount of time. The next 8 Theology @ 9 classes expound the topic of the church, including: Word and Sacrament (ordinance), Elders, Sacraments, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, Church Discipline, Missions, and Spiritual Gifts.

The Marks of the Church

- In their break from the Roman Church, the Reformers settled on two marks of the genuine church; the proper ministry of the Word, and the proper administration of the sacraments (ordinances). We will cover these two in depth next week.

Marks of a Healthy Church

In his book *“What is a Healthy Church,”* Mark Dever lists 9 distinguishing marks of churches he considers as healthy. Three of these marks he defines as “essential” marks of a healthy church; those characteristics that necessarily give life to a church. Absence of any of the three essential marks of a healthy church leads to certain death.

1. **Expository Preaching.** There are varying understandings of the nature of expository preaching; however, the essential criteria of expository preaching relates to a faithful exposition of the biblical text. The main idea of the text is the main idea of the sermon.
2. **Biblical Theology.** A healthy church is steeped in theology that is biblical. It means a church will tackle complex, difficult doctrines, but not “major” in the “minors.”
3. **A Biblical Understanding of the Good News.** The law is what we do; the gospel is what He has done. God is sovereign. Man is a mixed bag that is corrupted by sin yet bears God’s image. Jesus died, was buried, and rose again. We are called to respond to this news.

The remaining 6 marks are “important marks” of a healthy church. If your church does not exhibit the first three essential marks...you probably should leave. A church may be healthy yet still be getting healthier...it may have expository preaching, biblical theology, and a biblical understanding of the gospel, yet still need growth in other important areas of church.

4. **A Biblical Understanding of Conversion.** In its simplest terms conversion means repentance and faith.
5. **A Biblical Understanding of Evangelism.** God is sovereign and no person comes to Christ unless the Father draws him first. All authority is given to the Son who has commissioned the church to take the gospel to every person in the world. We are to proclaim the good news and leave the results to God.
6. **A Biblical Understanding of Membership.** In short, membership is commitment, taking responsibility, affirming salvation, and meaningful.
7. **Biblical Church Discipline.** This refers to holding one another accountable, in love, to the teachings of the Bible. It means that we help one another stay inside the boundary lines that we’ve all agreed are essential to church membership. The primary motivation for church discipline is not punishment, but restoration.
8. **Biblical Discipleship and Growth.** Healthy churches are committed to members’ spiritual growth in holiness and understanding of the bible.

9. **Biblical Church Leadership.** A healthy church is led by a plurality of spiritual men, surrendered to the health and well-being of the membership.

Questions and/or discussion.

Much of the above material was derived from *Concise Theology*, by J.I. Packer, *Christian Theology*, by Millard Erickson, *Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem, and *What is a Healthy Church?*, by Mark Dever.