

WHAT IS THE CHURCH AND WHAT IS ITS PURPOSE?

Introduction

With the damning critiques brought against the Roman church by the Augustinian monk Martin Luther, the question, ‘What is the church?’ became critical for all Christendom. During this seismic theological rediscovery of ecclesiological importance, new denominations frequently sprang up across Europe and this trend eventually stretched across the oceans to the New World, each claiming to be the ‘true church’ in some respect that made it distinct from others. In the midst of war, persecution and epistemological development, the ‘church’ question grew from being disputed to being convoluted; soon it became misrepresented until, in our own generation, it has become unconsidered. This paper will seek to articulate the basic, Biblical principles of what the church is, and subsequently what its purpose should be.

Methodology

In this position paper, I will discuss the reformed position of what the church is and what its primary purpose is. In doing so, I will firstly explain what the church is according to Scripture, demonstrating how Scripture ought to influence not simply our perception of ‘church’ but must be the fabric from which the church is woven. After highlighting key tenets that act as identifying marks of the church, I will then argue that the purpose of the church is not, firstly, to be *seeker sensitive* or as an *exclusively evangelistic* organization, but, rather, that the church’s purpose is to be a family, a body, first, and through obedience to Scripture and the correct administration of the Biblical commands and ordinances it will become a living, breathing evangelistic organism foundationally built upon sound teaching and faithfulness to Scripture.

What is the church?

The first question to be considered, therefore, is the question that Luther sought to address: ‘What is the church?’ In answering this, Luther was attacking a tradition that claimed to go all the way back to the Apostle Peter; a theological worldview that claimed the church as a spiritual entity with political, monarchical and pan-European legal authority. For Luther, the Leviathan-killing weaponry he wielded in his assault was Scripture. He appealed to the words of God found in the Greek texts of the Bible as the means to explain why the papacy was not the true inheritor of the Gospel, and therefore why the Roman church was not the church of Christ. He called this theology the *theology of the cross* and pitted it against the *theology of the glory*. Subsequent leaders and reformers developed Luther’s theological war, using the same sword: Scripture.

The answer that had been rediscovered had always been present in the pages of Scripture. Although the word in the Greek, *ekklesia*, simply means ‘gathering,’ it came to be something unique to the followers of Jesus, as Leeman explains:

In Matthew 16, 18 and 28, he [Jesus]...hands the apostles a rolled-up scroll...when the apostles open the scroll, they find a charter for...the church, a word they have heard before but which he is now putting to a new, formal use.¹

Throughout salvific history God has ‘formed a people for [Him]self that they might declare [His] praise.’² Under the Mosaic Covenant that people was Israel; they had been redeemed by God, given land and the law as a means to demonstrate their separation from the world and dedication to God. Under the New Covenant that people is the church, comprised of individual Christians who profess Jesus as Lord and ‘hold fast the confession of our hope.’³ Dever defines the church

¹ Leeman, Jonathan. *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*. Crossway, Illinois. 2010. p. 173

² Isaiah 43:21. All Biblical quotations from the ESV unless otherwise stated.

³ Hebrews 10:23.

as, ‘a body of people who profess and give evidence that they have been saved by God’s grace alone, for his glory alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.’⁴ Stott agrees:

It is not a divine afterthought...on the contrary, the church is God’s new community. For his purpose, conceived in a past eternity, being worked out in history, and to be perfected in a future eternity, is not just to save isolated individuals and so perpetuate our loneliness, but rather to build his church, that is, to call out of the world a people for his own glory.⁵

The church, therefore, is, at its most fundamental level, a gathering of people who hold to the same beliefs. It is a holy, Catholic community. It is a community of those who believe in the Gospel message and have, at least, this one thing in common. However, football teams have supporters yet they don’t conglomerate into ‘churches,’ so there must be something deeper than simply a ‘shared interest’.

The Bible uses images to explain the church. The one most widely known, arguably, is the bride of Christ. In 2 Corinthians Paul writes, ‘For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.’⁶ A bride is one who has declared intentions to be loyal to only one man, preserving her purity and love for him alone. Whilst other suitors may come to tempt her away, she has covenanted to remain pure and holy to her promise. Likewise, the church is to be fully loyal to Christ. The church is to remain true to her creed ‘Jesus is Lord’ and to ‘love one another as Christ loved the church.’⁷ As a bride remains true to her husband, the church must remain true to Christ by adhering to His words, by obeying His commands and by honoring His will. This comes from a heart attitude of love, not law, just as a wife honors her husband through love, not law.

Another image used in the Bible to describe the church is the body. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul speaks extensively about the church as a body. ‘Just as the body is one and has many

⁴ Dever, Mark. *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. 3rd Edition. Crossway, Illinois. 2013. p. 157

⁵ Stott, John. *The Living Church*. IVP, Nottingham. 2007. pp. 19-20

⁶ 2 Corinthians 11:2.

⁷ John 13:33-34.

members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.⁸ This has the obvious effect that, ‘If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.’⁹ The body, therefore, is more than simply a loyalty to a shared ideal or concept, but an intrinsic bond whereby we can ‘rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.’¹⁰ The clear implication is that the church is comprised of believers who are to love each other because of the love Jesus bestowed upon them individually. Thus, when one is experiencing trials, we are able to care for them, love them, encourage them and bless them with the love of Jesus and the physical, tangible attributes we can offer.

The church is also to be an entity marked by clear leadership that is based upon godliness; not wealth, power, age or race. In Titus 1 and 2, as well as 1 Timothy 3, Paul explains how the church is to function at a local level. There are to be elders who oversee the teaching, there are to be deacons who serve the various needs of the church and these men (elders and deacons) and women (deacons) have a standard to live up to if they are to be considered worthy of serving as leaders in the church. Yet, in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul explains that the church is to have an overarching authority; if any member, be it a leader or otherwise, is found to be in unrepentant sin, the church is to expunge the member until he or she repents, whereupon they can be restored to fellowship. This delineation is also marked out in 1 Corinthians 12, where the body imagery climaxes with the realization that not all are called to be leaders, prophets, teachers or miracle workers, but are to submit to their leaders and trust them.¹¹

⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:12.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 12:26.

¹⁰ Romans 12:15.

¹¹ A study on the principal of congregational trust towards elders can be found here: <http://timkdunn.blogspot.co.uk/2014/09/thoughts-on-titus-14-9-model-of.html>.

What is its purpose?

In Matthew 28 the Disciples were commissioned by Jesus, and as the Apostles they were to establish the church with a mission statement:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.¹²

This mission statement explains what the church is to *do*, yet it is also worthwhile to note that the church must have these things to *be* the church. An organization can call itself a church, but unless it identifies with the historic creeds of the faith, remains faithful to the Word of God and follows this mandate from Jesus, it cannot be a church in the Biblical sense.

The church must be a community in which people are able to grow spiritually in the knowledge of the Lord, meaning that the church is to ‘make disciples’ not simply count converts. This places a requirement upon the church to be sound in doctrine; it must be a place where truth is prized and taught to all the disciples. Thus Paul could write to the Colossians, ‘Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.’¹³ To be a church, therefore, the community must have a passion and zeal for the Word of God (which, incidentally, is Luther’s answer to Papal succession; this is where we find the true apostolic teaching and succession), both on an individual level and on a corporate level. This leads to proclamation and evangelism, as well as training and spiritual growth, which means that there is a critical place within the church for ‘non-evangelistic’ work.

Many parachurch organizations are evangelistic in nature, and exist largely because the church has been typically poor at evangelism. Clowney states, regarding the World Council of Churches, that, ‘In the sixties, the WCC developed the theology of the ‘servant church’, affirming that the church does not *have* a mission, but *is* mission.’¹⁴ This resulted in the

¹² Matthew 28:19-20

¹³ Colossians 1:28

¹⁴ Clowney, Edmund P. *The Church*. IVP, Illinois. 1995. p. 155, quoting, *The Church for Others and the Church for the World: A Quest for Structures for Missionary Congregations* (Geneva: WCC, 1967), p. 18.

development of congregations where the act of meeting became their evangelism, yet rarely stretched beyond the walls of the building. Evangelism became an open-door policy, whereby if you needed help, the church was there. The rebound from that was to be highly seeker-sensitive, which sought to undermine the role of exegetical preaching and eventually resulted in a ‘new’ Gospel for a ‘new’ church. Hence Dever’s critique that liberal churches tried to ‘rethink the gospel in contemporary terms,’¹⁵ whilst seeker friendly churches ‘tried to rethink the church...with evangelism always in mind – from the outside in.’¹⁶ Even evangelicals bought into this with, ‘the local church [being] treated as a stationary evangelistic rally.’¹⁷ Whilst the church *is* to have a definite evangelistic battle cry, Jesus, in Matthew 28, commands that the church teach *all* that He has commanded us. The church *must* be distinct from the world and a place that is discernibly different from it, with the result that unbelievers will be uncomfortable at times. And whilst it is certainly to be evangelistic, it must also, primarily, be a place where believers come for nourishment, encouragement, growth and to confess sins to one another. These very actions will be pictorially evangelistic, even as they bring about the growing godliness of the community. It is through this training and proclamation that the members are equipped to go and be missionaries in their homes, workplaces and life.

It must also be a community where proper administration of the sacraments is of the utmost importance, and grounded in sound understanding of the Gospel and knowledge of the triune God. The church, therefore, must be separated from other local groups and gatherings because it is unashamedly a gated community in that, ‘Though all are welcome to attend, the New Testament teaches that the church...is for believers, for those to whom God’s Holy Spirit has given the new birth and who join together in a covenanted community.’¹⁸ Delineation is

¹⁵ Dever. *Nine Marks*. p. 30

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 158

established through the act of baptism. One cannot be part of the church until he repents and is baptised. ‘Baptism, then, is putting on the new jersey. It’s when we publicly identify ourselves, by the church’s representative authority, with his death and resurrection.’¹⁹ It is only by the church’s authority that anyone can be baptised, for that act is the church declaring the individual a believer and part of the historical and worldwide church. Secondly, only baptised members are allowed to partake of the holy meal. This means that the church acts as a family, and others may attend a meeting where the church is gathered, but there ought to be things that occur to which the outsider is simply an onlooker. Communion is the high point of the meeting of believers, and it is a meal that is marked by its being reserved for the church only, and then only to members in good standing.²⁰

In all of this the key mark of a church is not *just* these things being performed, but these things done *as worship*. The church, therefore, is a covenant community of believers who are identified by their desire to worship God through public proclamation of his word, correct administration of the sacraments and who have a passion to bring people into the community through faith in Christ. The purpose of the church is to proclaim Christ, be this to one another in sanctifying discipleship or from the pulpit to the entire congregation or to an unbeliever. This purpose is manifested in worshipping together for, and to, the glory of God as a redeemed, covenant community.

Conclusion

To conclude, this essay has worked through explained the Biblical arguments for the church, demonstrating that it is a corporate body of believers who worship God together through hearing the proclamation of the Word, sharing in the Holy Meal together and welcoming new believers through the sacrament of baptism. The church is to have a distinct leadership and purpose in proclaiming Christ crucified. It was also noted that, although the church is to be

¹⁹ Leeman. *Surprising Offense*. p. 165

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 11:27-29.

evangelistic, when the church meets there is to be a teaching and discipleship focus specifically for the church body. This was in response to seeker sensitive models which were unbiblical as they replaced the primacy of the teaching of the word with evangelism. Finally it was shown that evangelism was to be the work of the church, but done by the church members who were equipped by the elders for such a task. All of the church's activities and actions are to be done as acts of worship, for the glory of God and for the purposes of mutual edification.

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