

deeper

word faith life

Season 4

The Doctrine of the Church
The Priesthood of Believers
The Mission of the Church
Church History
The Reformation
Calvinism and Arminianism

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Episode 2 – The Doctrine of the Church

The Marks of a Church?

There are several distinctive characteristics that are essential for a church to be a church. During the first century of church history, it was relatively easy to distinguish the true church from a false one. If you preached a different gospel, or went against the apostolic teachings, you were simply excluded and everyone would know about it. Later on the church acquired buildings and a clergy which made it very visible and easy to recognise. During the Reformation a crucial question arose, “How can we recognise a true church?” In order to answer this question, they had to decide what were the marks of a true church.

There was agreement between the reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin on this issue. The Lutheran Augsburg Confession of 1530 defined the church as,

“The congregation of the saints in which the gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments rightly administered.”

John Calvin said, “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.”

In contrast the Roman Catholic position is, and has always been, that the visible church that descended from Peter and the apostles is the true church. We take the view of the Reformers for many good reasons which we will cover later on.

The _____ of the Word of God - If the Word of God is not being preached and adhered to, but rather false doctrines or doctrines of men are being taught, then we can’t call it a church. Equally if the preaching conceals the true message of the gospel of salvation by faith alone, then it is not a church. Sometimes it may be difficult to determine exactly when it ceases to be a true church on this basis, but there are many clear cut examples. The Mormon Church or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS for short) does not teach the important Christian doctrines of salvation, or the person of God and the person and work of Christ. These are fundamental to distinguishing a true church from a false one.

Another example is the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who teach salvation by works not faith, they deny the deity of Christ, and don’t teach the Word of God. Their doctrine comes from the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society which is essentially a doctrine of man. They have their own translation of the Bible which is intended to serve their false doctrines. Clearly this is a false church.

There exists in the world today, groups who appear to be legitimate but who preach a false gospel, they cannot be regarded as true churches.

Right _____ of the Sacraments - By sacraments or ordinances, we mean baptism and the Lord’s supper, or communion, or simply breaking of bread as it is often called. The true church understands that these sacraments don’t save you, they are symbolic; a reminder in the case of communion, and a declaration in the case of baptism.

Baptism is the means for inclusion in the church; you are only baptised after you are saved, it comes after salvation. And if you are saved, then you are part of the church. Baptism is a symbolic burial and resurrection to new life, a public declaration of faith in Christ.

Communion is the means for continued inclusion in the church. Jesus instructs us to do this often. It is a constant reminder of what He has done for us in terms of our salvation, and it allows us time to reflect on the implications of this salvation on our daily lives. Communion is also symbolic; the wine and the bread represent His blood and body. We don’t hold to the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation.

Groups who do not administer these sacraments cannot be regarded as true churches.



Church Leadership

Government is probably one of the most challenging issues in all of human history, and the church has not been immune. Although leadership is not a core doctrine of our faith, Christians have argued over forms of church government for centuries. Consequently there are many models of church government in the world today. We have the papal or episcopal model. This essentially is a top down system, which in political terms would be likened to a dictatorship. Then we have the congregational model which sees the congregation vote on all decisions. This in political terms would look like a democracy. As a reaction to the excesses of both of these models we see a swing of the pendulum to phantom church, no form of church government. In political terms this would be likened to anarchy.

While there are no implicit instructions for church government in the New Testament, if we take the time to dig a little below the surface, we will discover a pattern that the early church generally followed in matters of structure and governance. So a forth model emerges, often called apostolic/prophetic, or simply the New Testament model. Our cue comes from Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Philippians 1:1 - "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons."

In this passage, we find four distinct groups of people.

God's _____ - The church, the gathering of believers. Sometimes the New Testament refers to this group as "the saints", or "the priesthood of believers". These are all terms for the church.

1 Peter 2:5,9 - "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... But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light."

The priesthood functions together, each one has a role to play in the mission of the church.

Nobody has all the responsibility, and nobody has no responsibility. Each one brings their part. Paul unpacks this in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. The church functions on Spiritual gifts rather than elected officials.

The _____ - The elders, the shepherds, those who superintend. These are all terms that the New Testament uses to describe this role in the church.

Acts 20:17,28 - "...Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God."

These descriptions, not titles, are used interchangeably for the same group of people; elders, overseers, and shepherds. They are included in the group of believers or saints, they simply have a specific function.

The elders are responsible for direction, doctrine, and discipline in the local church. This group only ever functions in plurality, as a team, never individually. They create space and an environment for the body to grow and flourish. One could say that they guard, guide and govern the flock, as loving fathers and shepherds. They are the highest human authority in the local church.

The _____ - These are the faithful servants or ministers in the life of the church. They co-lead alongside the elders and are valuable, highly versatile members of the church.

1 Peter 4:10 - "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms."

Words like gift, serve, faithful, steward, and grace are all expressed in this vital ministry. These people get the job done, and without them the church would struggle to



function effectively. This is a deeply spiritual ministry and should not, as some believe, be relegated strictly to menial tasks.

The _____ - This is represented in our text by Paul and Timothy. They were called to be apostles and had responsibility to strengthen and encourage the churches with whom they partnered in spreading the gospel. It is critical that a local church partners with a five-fold, or Ephesians 4 ministry team, such as Paul's one in the New Testament. Ephesians 4:11-16 - "So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of Him who is the head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

This partnership or relationship is vital for the growth, maturity and stability of the local church. It is invited authority, never imposed; local church autonomy is a non-negotiable New Testament value. But no church should be out in the cold on its own, it is a dangerous place.

The Purpose of the Church

The church is called to minister in three directions simultaneously.

Ministry to _____ - Worshiping God, bringing honour and praise to His name. Declaring His goodness and faithfulness whenever we gather.

Colossians 3:16,17 - "Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him."

True worship is more about every other day than it is about a Sunday morning.

Romans 12:1 - "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, this is your true and proper worship."

Ministry to _____ - Through nurturing, encouragement and building up. Encouragement is the currency of the local church.

Colossians 1:28 - "He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ."

Over the years the church has sadly been accused of being the only army who shoots its wounded. This ought not to be, we should instead endeavour to bear each other's burdens and help those who are weak.

Romans 15:1 - "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbours for their good, to build them up."

Ministry to the _____ - Through sharing the gospel and showing mercy.

Matthew 28:19,20 - "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

This is why the church exists, it is why the church is in the world today. We have a mission to fulfill, a mission that is not optional. The pattern in the New Testament is that the good news should be heard in word and deed. Our ministry to the poor and oppressed has to come behind the gospel. If we as the church, put our acts of mercy in front of the gospel, we will eventually lose the gospel. A good question to ask in evaluating the

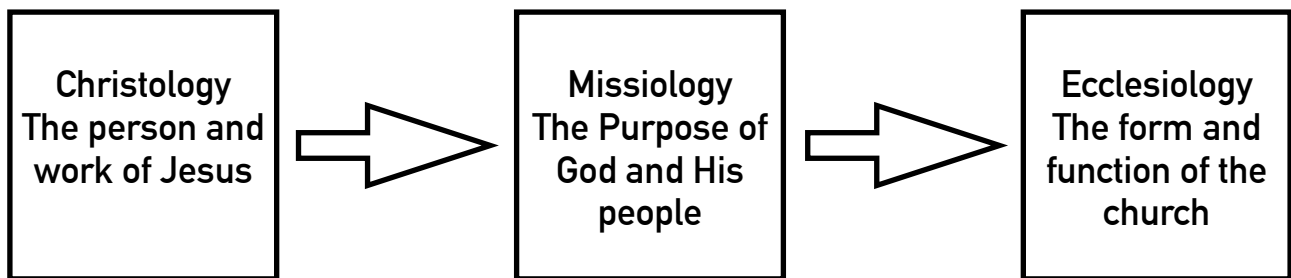


church's effectiveness in this area of ministry is, "If our church were to close its doors tomorrow, would our community know or care?"

There is a lot to cover in the subject of Ecclesiology, more than we have time for in this series but as a parting shot, here is an excerpt from *The Shaping of Things to Come* by Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch.

"Our Christology informs our missiology, which in turn determines our ecclesiology. If we get this the wrong way around and allow our notions of the church to qualify our sense of purpose and mission, we can never be disciples of Jesus, and we will never be an authentic missional church. Churches that have got this basic formula wrong never really engage in mission and so lose touch with Jesus. These churches spend all their time discussing (or arguing) about the forms of worship, the church furniture, and the timing of services and programs, and fail to recognise that our ecclesiology flows more naturally out of our sense of mission. These churches become closed sets as a result, and their experience of Jesus at the centre fades into a memory of the time when they were really doing something. It becomes a matter of history rather than an experience of mission now. It is important to recover the idea that the church connects with Jesus through mission, not through getting church meetings right!"

The diagram below is very helpful in our understanding of the church. Our Christology must inform our Missiology, and our Missiology must inform our Ecclesiology.



Memory Verse

1 Peter 4:10 - "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms."

