

MILILANI COMMUNITY CHURCH
ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASS

WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES
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LESSON 9: THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

I. The Nature of the Church

A. The Church is INVISIBLE yet VISIBLE

The invisible church is the church as God sees it made up of all who genuinely belong to Jesus Christ (II Tim. 2:19; Heb. 12:23)

The visible church is the church as Christians on earth see it (I Cor. 1:2; I Thess. 1:1; Philemon 1-2). The visible church will always include some unbelievers, and individual congregations will usually include some unbelievers because we cannot see hearts as God sees them.

Realizing this distinction between the church invisible and the church visible, Augustine said of the visible church, "Many sheep are without and many wolves are within."

B. 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 all the way to the group of all true believers in the universal church.

The local church is the universal church manifested in any particular place. The universal church is manifested on earth in local churches

The universal church contains only true believers, and includes those on earth and in heaven. The local churches have to do with members on earth only, but may include both true believers and mere professors (I John 2:19; Revelation 3:20).

When we speak of "the church" we mean the whole spiritual body of true Christian believers, regardless of location or circumstances.

C. The Unity of the Church

There is only one church, which is the body of Christ.

This is proved:

1. By the symbolic term used to describe it. One head and one body.
2. By the plain statement of Scripture (Ephesians 2:14-15; Ephesians 4:4-5)

3. Can this one body be identified with any one existing organization? No. All such attempts are futile and foolish. Some organizations do make this claim: e.g. the Roman Catholic Church and the cult of Mormonism. For any organization to claim to be the one true church, means that all outside are lost, because there are no saved persons outside of the church.

D. The Membership of the Church

1. It includes ALL true Christians in the present age (I Cor. 12:13).
2. It includes ONLY those who are true Christians (Ephesians 5:23)
3. Induction into the Church is the work of Christ through the Holy Spirit. This is not man's work. We can preach the Word, call upon men to believe, baptize them, write their names on church rolls. But only Christ through the Spirit can add a soul to the body of Christ.

E. Descriptive Images and Metaphors for the Church

To help us understand the nature of the church, Scripture uses a wide range of metaphors and images to describe to us what the church is like.

Robert Saucy says, "The nature of the church is far too broad to be exhausted in the meaning of the one word *ekklesia*. To describe its manifold meaning the New Testament writers employed many descriptive expressions. They explained the concept of the church both in literal terms and in rich metaphorical descriptions." Saucy notes that Paul S. Minear, Images of the Church in the New Testament estimates there are more than 80 images referring to the church in the New Testament. (Saucy, The Church in God's Program, 19).

Some of the descriptive expressions used of the church in the New Testament:

- The elect of God - Eph. 1:5,11; Eph. 1:4; Rom. 8:33; col. 3:12; I Peter 1:2; II Tim. 2:10; I Peter 2:9; Romans 8:29-30.
- A people for God's own possession - I Peter 2:10 (The church is God's people in this age, but Israel will yet enjoy this position as a nation - Rom. 11:26-29).
- A people for God's own glory - Titus 2:14 (Deut. 7:6-8)
- Saints - I Cor. 1:2 (Those who are sanctified or set apart by the action of God - God's holy people)
- Members of Christ - characterized as being "in Christ" - II Cor. 5:17; called into fellowship with God's Son - I Cor. 1:9; sharing in his death, resurrection, His present sufferings and the glory to follow - Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:19; Eph. 2:5-6; Col. 2:12; Romans 8:17; II Tim. 2:12.
- The fellowship of the Spirit - Christ lives in His church through the indwelling of the Spirit. John 14:16-20; I Cor. 12:13; Phil. 2:1; Eph. 4:3-4; Our ministry performed through the gifts of the Spirit - I Cor. 12:8ff; Witnessing and proclamation done in the power of the Spirit - Acts 1:8; Missionaries sent out and directed by the Holy Spirit - Acts 13:2,4.

- Believers - the *pistoi*, the "believers" or the "faithful" - Acts 2:44; 4:32; I Thess. 2:13; I Thess. 1:7.
- Disciples - John 8:31; Luke 14:33; Acts 9:1; Acts 6:1; Acts 14:21-23
- Christians - Acts 11:26 (term coined by pagans at Antioch); Acts 26:28; I Peter 4:16 (used as a term by which the world knows the members of the church).
- Brothers - All members of the church of Jesus Christ belong to the family of God as sons and are therefore related in a spiritual community of life (Romans 8:29; Eph. 6:23; I Tim. 6:2). Implies personal equality before the Lord - Matt. 23:8; I Tim. 6:2. This community of life expresses itself in a community of love - I John 3:14, I John 2:10-11; Col. 4:9; I Tim. 6:2. We are the community that has experienced the love of God in salvation. This same love has been poured out into the hearts of believers through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Some of the major metaphors for the church in the New Testament:

1. The Family of God: The church is like a family - I Timothy 5:1-2; Ephesians 3:14; II Cor. 6:18; Matt. 12:49-50
2. The Bride of Christ: The church is referred to as the Bride of Christ - Ephesians 5:22-32.

Stages in oriental wedding custom:

- a. Betrothal - This engagement period was considered as legally binding as marriage and could only be broken by divorce (II Cor. 11:2)
 - b. Wedding - When the husband came to take his bride to be with him (John 14:1-3; I Thess. 4:16-17; Eph. 5:27)
 - c. Wedding feast - At the time of Christ's return when the church will be presented to him as his bride (Rev. 19:7-9)
3. The Vineyard of God: The church is compared to Branches on a Vine who is Christ- John 15:1-11
 4. The Flock of God: The church is likened to a Flock of Sheep with Christ as the Shepherd - John 10:1-15, 26-30
 5. The Temple of God: The church is viewed as God's new Temple not built with literal stones but with people who are "living stones" (I Peter 2:5), build up on the "cornerstone" who is Christ Jesus (I Peter 2:4-8).
 6. A Holy Priesthood: The church is pictured not only as a new temple for worship of God but as a "holy priesthood" that can offer up "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God" - I Peter 2:5-9; Rev. 1:6.

In the OT only the Tribe of Levi had the privilege of being priests. In the NT every believer is a priest unto God. The offerings of the believer

priest: (1) Romans 12:1-2; (2) Hebrews 13:15; (3) Hebrews 13:16; (4) Philippians 4:18.

7. The Body of Christ: The church is the Body of Christ. He is the Head and we are the members of the body - I Corinthians 12:12-27; Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18; Eph. 2:16; 4:4; 4:12,16; Col. 2:19; I Cor. 10:16-17.

The Apostle Paul's favorite description of the church is the metaphor of the Body of Christ. The church is not a physical building, but a group of believers, not a denomination, sect, or association, but a spiritual body - and every believer is a member.

"Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."
I Corinthians 12:27

In I Corinthians 12:12-27 Paul develops the analogy of the body of Christ along three lines:

Unity (vv. 12,13)

Diversity (v. 14)

Harmony (vv. 15, 21-27)

F. Marks of the Church (distinguishing characteristics)

1. There are true churches and false churches

What makes a church a church? What is necessary to have a church? In the Reformation a crucial question came up: How can we recognize a true church? What are the "marks" of a true church?

- Pagan temples were false churches (I Cor. 10:20; 12:2)
- Scripture speaks of a religious assembly that is really a "synagogue of Satan" (Revelation 2:9; 3:9).

Two marks of the church:

The Lutheran statement of faith, called the Augsburg Confession (1530), defined the church as "the congregation of 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 to the view of Luther and Calvin, the Roman Catholic position has been that the visible church that descended from Peter and the Apostles is the true church.

2. True and false churches today

- a. The Jehovah's witnesses teach salvation by works, not by trusting in Jesus Christ alone. This is a fundamental doctrinal deviation because if people believe the teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses, they will not be saved. So the Jehovah's Witnesses must be considered a false church.
- b. The Mormon Church does not hold to any major Christian doctrines concerning salvation or the person of God or the person and work of Christ. It is clearly a false church.
- c. In light of the question posed during the Reformation, what about the Roman Catholic church today? Is it a true church?

R. C. Sproul has written, "...since the Reformation the doctrine of sola fide (faith alone) has been the defining doctrine of evangelical Christianity. It has functioned as a normative doctrine because it has been understood as essential to the Gospel itself. Without sola fide one does not have the Gospel; and without the gospel one does not have the Christian faith. When an ecclesiastical communion rejects sola fide, as Rome did at the Council of Trent, it ceases being a true church, no matter how orthodox it may be in other matters, because it has condemned an essential of the faith. Whereas at Worms Luther stood, at Trent Rome fell and remains fallen to this day." (Justified By Faith Alone, R. C. Sproul, 9-10).

- d. Are there false churches within Protestantism? In light of the distinguishing marks of the church, it seems appropriate to say that many liberal Protestant churches are in fact false churches today.

II. The Purpose of the Church

We can understand the purposes of the church in terms of ministry to God, ministry to believers, and ministry to the world.

A. Ministry to God: Worship

In relationship to God the church's purpose is to worship him (Col. 3:16). God has destined us and appointed us in Christ to "live for the praise of his glory" (Ephesians 1:12). Worship in the church is not merely a preparation for something else; it is in itself fulfilling the major purpose of the church with reference to its Lord. See Ephesians 5:16-19.

B. Ministry to Believers: Nurture

According to Scripture, the church has an obligation to nurture those who are already believers and build them up to maturity in the faith. Paul said that

his own goal was not simply to bring people to initial saving faith but to "present every man mature in Christ" (Colossians 1:28).

C. Ministry to the World: Evangelism and Mercy

Jesus told his disciples to go and "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). This evangelistic work is the primary ministry the church has toward the world. Accompanying the work of evangelism is also a ministry of mercy, caring for the poor and needy in the name of the Lord (Luke 6:35-36). We are to imitate God in being kind to those who are being ungrateful and selfish as well.

These three purposes of the church are commanded by the Lord and therefore all three are important and none can be neglected. A strong church will have effective ministries in all three of these areas.

III. The Five Essential Functions of the Church

Gene Mims points out in his excellent book, Kingdom Principles For Church Growth, that the Great Commission defines God's mission (which is our mission) in the world. The Great Commission is the Lord's marching orders for every believer and church. Understanding the meaning and full implication of the Commission is crucial if we are to do the work of the church in God's way.

The New Testament outlines five functions every church can and must do in order to be obedient to the Lord in fulfilling the Great Commission. Each believer must do the same five functions to fulfill his or her calling in the world. These five functions are God's way of growing churches and building His kingdom in the world (These are also explained and developed in Rick Warren's books, The Purpose-Driven Church, and The Purpose-Driven Life).

1. EVANGELISM

No church can grow without evangelism. Christian evangelism is believers sharing the gospel with lost persons. It is asking them to repent of their sins, to put their faith in Christ for forgiveness of sins and the free gift of eternal life, and to follow Him forever as Lord.

We are saved from our sin and separation from God, in part at least, to become involved in His work of reconciling lost persons to Himself. God's mission is to redeem people from sin. His method is for believers to share the redemptive Word and to do the ministry of redemption in this world. If we fail to evangelize persons separated from God, we fail to obey him, and we fail to join Him in what He wants believers and churches to do.

2. DISCIPLESHIP

Discipleship is a process that begins after conversion and continues throughout a believer's life. It occurs when one believer engages another and the result is that both become more Christlike in what they think and do.

Discipleship is not an option for any church or believer. Christ mandated it in the Great Commission.

Mature discipleship means that believers are living for the Lord in all areas of life. The life of Christ is the center and focus of their lives. Holiness is the center of Christ likeness.

3. MINISTRY

Ministry naturally follows evangelism and discipleship in the Christian developmental process.

Ministry grows out of a transformed and serving life.

Paul explained to the church at Ephesus (Ephesians 4) that they were to equip or disciple the saints to do the work of ministry.

The Holy Spirit opens additional doors of ministry to local churches through the lives of growing believers.

4. FELLOWSHIP

As believers share with others their salvation experiences, practice living Christlike lives, and demonstrate their faith by serving others, fellowship flourishes as sure as summer follows spring.

A church whose fellowship is broken usually is a church that has lost sight of its other main functions – evangelism, discipleship, ministry, and worship. Churches cannot have the kind of fellowship we want and our Lord expects unless they focus on evangelism, discipleship, ministry, and worship.

5. WORSHIP

Worship is one of the most vital, if not the most vital, functions of the church.

The NT lists at least eight elements of worship:

- 1) Prayer
- 2) Praise
- 3) Confession of sin
- 4) Confession of faith in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- 5) Scripture reading and study
- 6) Preaching
- 7) Lord's Supper and Baptism
- 8) Offerings

We are to obey the biblical admonitions to worship the Lord in corporate worship, in our families, and in our personal walk with the Lord.