

Objective: What is the church, and what significance does it have to the believer?

Church as a holy convocation

“...the Church is not formed by a human gathering of people who would have the same opinions, but by a divine convocation...” (Barth 1958:136)

A modern view is that church is engaged when people of similar Christian beliefs choose to meet together for worship and instruction. However, that is not, strictly speaking, a biblical perspective.

Christ stated that He would build His church and that the gates of Hell would not prevail against it (Matthew 16:16-18). It is not the church of the people, but it is the church of Christ, “the church of the living God” (1 Timothy 3:15), and congregations are “churches of Christ” (Romans 16:16).

Thus church fulfils a divine purpose. It is His will that we do not forsake “the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some” (Hebrews 12:25). Church is not as optional as some might think: it is the desire of God that Christians assemble.

The Greek term for the church, which is also related to the Hebrew terms for assembly, is *ecclesia*, and it implies a group of people who have been called out for a purpose.

God has always been involved in creating communities of faith. It is God who gathers people into the church.

In the New Testament the words church or churches are used to describe what today we would call house groups (Romans 16:5; 1

Corinthians 16:19; Philemon 2), urban congregations (Romans 16:23; 2 Corinthians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1), churches spread throughout an entire area (Acts 9:31; 1 Corinthians 16: 19; Galatians 1:2), and also the entire community of believers in the then known world (Ephesians 5:25; 1 Corinthians 12:28, 14:12; Philippians 3:6).

Hence church is a group or groups of believers and the name applied to the company of the faithful. As “the Lord knows those who are His” (2 Timothy 2:19), He alone knows the composition of His church.

Just as Jesus is the “Lord of both the dead and the living” (Romans 14:9) so His church encompasses those who have died in the faith and those who will come to faith through the promise of the Spirit (Acts 2:38-39) as well as present believers. Through faith Christians enter “the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven” (Hebrews 12:23).

Reflection

If church is God’s idea and not man’s, what implications does that have for you personally?

Fellowship and togetherness

Church is participation in the fellowship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christians are called into the fellowship of the Son (1 Corinthians 1:9), of the Spirit (Philippians 2:1), with the Father (1 John 1:3) so that as we walk in the light of Christ “we have fellowship with one another” (1:7).

Those, who accept Christ, endeavor “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). Although there is diversity among believers, their togetherness is stronger than any differences. This message

is stressed through one of the major metaphors used for the church: that the church is the “body of Christ” (Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 10:16, 12:27; Ephesians 3:6, 5:30; Colossians 1:18).

The original disciples came from different backgrounds and were not likely to fellowship naturally together. God calls believers from all walks of life into spiritual togetherness.

Believers are “members individually” within the worldwide or universal church community (1 Corinthians 12:27; Romans 12:5), and this individuality need not threaten our unity “for by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

However, obedient believers do not cause division by bickering and selfishly arguing their point of view; rather they give honor to every member so that there is “no schism in the body” and so that “the members have the same care for one another” (12:25).

“The church...is a living organism that shares the same life, the life of Christ” (Jenkins 2001:219).

Paul also likens the church to “a dwelling place of God in the Spirit”. He says believers are “fitted together” in a whole building that “grows into a holy temple in the Lord” (Ephesians 2:19-22). He also refers to this idea of the church being the temple of God in 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 2 Corinthians 6:16. Similarly Peter compares the church to “a spiritual house” in which believers form “a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Peter 2: 5, 9).

Reflection

In what ways do you care for other members of the body?

Is it helpful to be a Christian in isolation, away from community?

The family as a metaphor for church

From its inception the church was often referred to as a kind of spiritual family and functioned as such. Believers were referred to as “brothers” and “sisters” (Romans 16:1; 1 Corinthians 7:15; 1 Timothy 5:1-2; James 2:15).

Through sin we become separated from God’s purpose for us, and each of us becomes, spiritually speaking, alone and fatherless. God’s desire is to set “the solitary in families” (Psalm 68:6), to bring those who are estranged spiritually out of separation into the community of the church, which is the “household of God” (Ephesians 2:19).

In that “household of faith” (Galatians 6:10) believers can be nurtured safely into the image of Christ because the church, also likened to the Jerusalem (city of peace) from above (see also Revelation 21:10), is like “the mother of us all” (Galatians 4:26).

Reflection

How does the metaphor of the church as family suggest ways in which we should function as a church?

In what ways do you need your brothers and sisters in the household of God?

The Bride of Christ

A beautiful biblical imagery is that of the church’s being the bride of Christ. Through typology this is hinted at in various scriptures, including the Song of Solomon. A key passage is 2:10-16 where the Beloved tells the Bride that her time of winter is over and that now is the time of singing and rejoicing (see Hebrews 2:12), and also where the Bride says “My beloved is mine, and I am His”. The church, both collectively and individually, belongs to Christ, and He belongs to the church.

Christ is the groom who “loved the church and gave Himself for her” (Ephesians 5:25). He sanctifies and cleanses her and prepares her so that she becomes “the glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing” (5:27). This relationship, says Paul, “is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church” (5:32).

John takes up this theme in the book of Revelation. The triumphant Christ, the Lamb of God, marries his Bride, the Church (19:6-9, 21:9-10), and together they declare the words of life (22:17).

There are additional metaphors and images used to describe the church. The church is the flock that needs caring shepherds to pattern their care after the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:1-4); it is a field where workers are required to plant and water with love (1 Corinthians 3:6-9); the churches and their individual members are like branches of a vine (John 15:5); the church is like an olive tree (Romans 11:17-24).

As a reflection of the present and future Kingdom of God the church is like a mustard tree in which all the birds of the air find refuge (Luke 13:18-19), and like yeast that works its way through the dough of the world (13:21), etc.

Reflection

What is your favorite metaphor or image of the church, and why?

The church as mission

From the beginning God called certain people to do His work on earth. He sent Abraham, Moses and the prophets. He sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus Christ. Then He sent Christ Himself to be our salvation.

He also sent the Holy Spirit to establish His church as a vehicle for the gospel. The

church is also sent into the world. This gospel work was foundational and fulfils Christ’s words in which He sent His followers into the world to continue the work He began (John 17:18-21). This is what “mission” means: being sent by God to accomplish His purpose.

A congregation is not an end in itself and should not exist just for itself. This can be seen in the New Testament book of Acts. A main activity throughout the book was the spreading of the gospel through preaching and the planting of churches (Acts 6:7. 9:31, 14:21, 18:1-11, 1 Corinthians 3:6, etc).

Paul alludes to congregations and specific Christians as being part of the “fellowship in the gospel” (Philippians 1:5). They labor with him in the gospel (4:3).

It was the church in Antioch that sent Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journeys (Acts 13:1-3).

The church in Thessalonica “became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia”. From them “the word of the Lord” sounded forth, “not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place”. Their faith toward God went out beyond their own borders (1 Thessalonians 1:7-8).

Reflection

Does your congregation see itself as the church in mission? If not, what should you do about it?

What are you doing to promote the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Activities of the church

Paul writes so that Timothy should know how to conduct himself “in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and the ground of truth” (1 Timothy 3:15).

Sometimes people can feel that their perception of truth is more valid than the received understanding of the church. Is this likely, bearing in mind that Paul identifies the church as the “ground of truth”? Church is where truth is established through the teaching of the Word (John 17:17).

In reflecting the “fullness” of Jesus Christ, its living Head “who fills all in all” (Ephesians 1:22-23), the New Testament church was involved in acts of service (Acts 6:1-6; James 1:17, etc), community (Acts 2:44-45; Jude 12, etc), sacramental life (Acts 2:41, 18:8, 22:16; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, 11:26) and worship (Acts 2:46-47; Colossians 4:16, etc).

Churches were involved in assisting each other, as demonstrated by the help given to the church in Jerusalem at a time of food shortage (1 Corinthians 16:1-3).

Upon close examination of the letters of Paul it is clear that the churches communicated and connected with each other. No church existed in isolation.

Study of New Testament church life reveals a pattern of congregational accountability to church authority. Each individual congregation was accountable to church authority outside its own immediate pastoral or management structure. It can be noted that the church in the New Testament was a fellowship of congregations held together through collective accountability to the tradition of faith in Christ as taught by the apostles (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 2 Corinthians 4:13).

Reflection

If a group, claiming to be a church of Christ, is not grounded in truth, can it really be called a true church?

What pattern of accountability exists in your congregation?

Conclusion

The church is the Body of Christ and consists of all those recognized by God among the “churches of the saints” (1 Corinthians 14:33). This is significant to the believer as participation in church is the means by which the Father keeps us and preserves us spiritually until the return of Jesus Christ

From the Statement of Beliefs of the Grace Communion International/ Worldwide Church of God UK:

The Church

<http://www.wcg.org/lit/aboutus/beliefs/default.htm#Church>

"The church, the Body of Christ, consists of all who trust in Jesus Christ. The church is commissioned to make disciples of Jesus by reaching out in love to all people, nurturing and baptizing those who believe, and teaching believers to obey all that Christ commanded. In fulfilling this mission, the church is directed by the Holy Scriptures, led by the indwelling Holy Spirit, and looks continually to Jesus Christ, its living Head."

(1 Corinthians 12:13; Romans 8:9; Matthew 28:19-20; Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22)

Bibliography

See WCG literature on:
<http://www.wcg.org/lit/church/ministry/default.htm>

Barth, Karl. *The Faith of the Church: A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed according to Calvin's Catechism*. 1958. USA: Living Age Books.

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