

# **RIVERVIEW CHURCH**

## **ECCLESIOLOGY for CHURCH PLANTERS/STAFF**

**by Gregg R. Allison**

### **introduction**

- what comes to mind when you hear the word “church?”
- where in Scripture is the church addressed, and what do we learn about the church from these passages?
- why does the study of the church matter for you as a church planter or staff?

### **Bible study**

- Paul’s teaching on the church in Ephesians

1:22-23 (vv. 18-23)

- context (vv. 18-21)
- what metaphor for the church appears in this passage, and what does it signify?
- what do we learn about the church in this passage?

2:19-22 (vv. 11-22)

- context (vv. 11-18)
- what metaphors for the church appear in this passage, and what do they signify?
- what do we learn about the church in this passage?

3:10-12 (vv. 1-12)

- context (vv. 1-11)
- what is this mystery, and what does it mean for the church?

○what do we learn about the church in this passage?

4:11-16 (vv. 1-16)

○context (vv. 1-10)

○who are the specific gifted people Christ gave to the church, for what purpose did he give them to the church, what is the goal of the church, and how is the church to go about fulfilling this goal?

5:22-32 (vv. 22-32)

○context (don't lose focus by discussion of the proper relationships of subjection and love between wives and husbands)

○what parallels between the relationship between husband and wife are applied to the relationship between Christ and the church?

○what do we learn about the church in this passage?

- small group interaction and large group discussion

### **the term “church”(ἐκκλησία) in the New Testament**

- “church” can refer to the event of people meeting together; a gathering of Christians

Paul's instructions about silence in the church (1 Cor. 14:28, 34-35)

- “church” can refer to a group of people; a group of Christians in a location whether or not they are in the process of gathering together

the church of God that is in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1)

the church in Cenchrea (Rom. 16:1)

persecution of the church of Jerusalem resulted in members scattering (Acts 8:1)

the church in a geographical area (Acts 9:31)

- “church” can refer to the general concept (like the word “humanity”)

Jesus promised to build his church (Matt. 16:18), the new people of God identified by their confession of Jesus' identity as Messiah and Son of God

“give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God” (1 Cor. 10:32)

- “church” can refer to all Christians everywhere, composing the body of Christ (the passages in Ephesians)
- “church” can refer to Christ-followers who have died and are now in heaven (Heb. 12:23)
- conclusion: the “church” is not:
  - a building
  - a denomination
  - a national church
  - avatars worshipping together in the virtual world of Second Life
  - Christians in the “universal” church but not in a local church
- conclusion: the “church” is:
  - local
  - universal

## **the seven attributes of the church**

the identity of the church consists of seven essential attributes

the first three concern the origin and the orientation of the church:

- (1) *doxological*, or oriented to the glory of God;
- (2) *Word-centered*, or focused on the Word of God, understood to refer to Jesus Christ the incarnate Word and Scripture the inspired Word;
- (3) *Spirit-activated*, or created, gathered, gifted, and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

the final four concern the gathering and sending of the church

- (4) *covenantal*, or gathered as members in (new) covenant relationship with God and in covenant relationship with each other;
- (5) *confessional*, or united by both personal confession of faith in Christ and common confession of the historic Christian faith;
- (6) *missional*, or identified as the body of divinely-called and divinely-sent ministers to proclaim the gospel and advance the kingdom of God; and

(7) *here and not-here* (already, but not yet), or assembled as a historical reality (located in space and time) and possessing a certain hope and clear destiny while it lives the strangeness of its existence in the here-and-now.

from these seven characteristics of the church flow its ministries, which include worship, the proclamation of the Word of God, engagement with non-Christians, discipleship, care for its members, and engagement both for and against the world

### **three attributes of the church that concern its origin and orientation**

- **the church is doxological**

*doxa*: the church sings the *Doxology*, with these words: “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost”

in one sense, all that God has created is characterized by this doxological orientation.

Psalm 19:1; Psalm 108:5

Psalm 29:1-2

Psalm 8:5; Romans 1:23; Romans 3:23; Ephesians 1:11-12

Ephesians 3:21

specifically, the church is to be oriented to the proper glory of God; implied in this imperative is the possibility for the church to engage in false glory giving, or idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 John 5:20-21; 2 Cor. 11:1-4)

today, what are some of the “idols” that the church substitutes for the true God?

- **the church is Word-centered**

*Word* (sense 1): Jesus Christ, the *Incarnate Word* of God

John 1:1, 14, 18

it should go without saying that the church is centered on him as the Word of God; indeed, Scripture makes this explicit (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:20; Eph. 1:20-13)

the church is Word-centered—focused on Jesus Christ, the Word of God

“An *ecclesia* [a church] is not just a God-community—there are many such religious communities around. We are defined by our relationship to the Second Person of the Trinity, the Mediator, Jesus Christ. A covenant community centered around Jesus participates in the salvation that he brings. We receive the grace of God in him.”

*Word* (sense 2): Scripture, the *Inspired Word* of God

this saving grace of God is made known through the Word of God, intended in a different sense of *Word*; in this second sense also, the church is Word-centered—focused on Scripture, the inspired Word

inspired

sufficient

necessary

truthful (or inerrant)

clear

authoritative

productive

as P. T. Forsyth urged, “If we are not going to use our Bible, it is of no use building our Churches”

- the word of the gospel (2 Thess. 2:13-14; 1 Pet. 1:23)

through the gospel comes the call of God to salvation (2 Thess. 2:13-14)

through the gospel comes the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit (1 Pet. 1:23)

as John Webster explains, “Scripture is not the word of the church; the church is the church of the word....The church exists in the space which is made by the Word”

unsurprisingly, then, the church’s communication of the gospel is absolutely necessary in order for people to be saved and for the church to exist (Rom. 10:13-17)

P. T. Forsyth exhorts the church: “Our first business is neither to gather men nor to move them, but to preach in the speech of our time. . . the universal and moving Gospel. Let *it* gather them, and let *it* stir them. The first condition of a true revival is a sound Gospel. To revive the Church, revive its Gospel as given once for all in its Bible.”

- the word of sound doctrine; the word against false doctrine (Titus 1:1; 1 Tim. 4:6; 2 Tim. 1:13-14; 1 Tim. 6:3)
- the word against the church

as John Webster notes, “Scripture is as much a de-stabilizing feature of the church as it is a factor in its cohesion and continuity”

the sins for which Scripture chastises the church

- the church as “a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15)

- **the church is Spirit-activated**

the church is Spirit-activated, or created, gathered, gifted, and empowered by the Holy Spirit

the new covenant work of the Holy Spirit in the church consists of numerous ministries (John 16:8-11; Titus 3:5-6; John 3:3-5; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 1:13-14; Rom. 8:23; 2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5; Rom. 8:16; 1 Cor. 12:13)

this powerful working of the Spirit continues throughout the lives of Christians as he progressively transforms them into greater and greater conformity to the image of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3:18; 1 Pet. 1:2; Gal. 5:16-23; Rom. 8:4-8; Eph. 5:18; Rom. 8:26-27)

while these various ministries of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christ followers is of great importance, we are reminded: “The gift of the Spirit is not just for individual believers but aims at the building up of the fellowship of believers, at the founding and the constant giving of new life to the church....”

specific ministries of the Holy Spirit are directed at the building up and strengthening of churches

Acts 2:1-5

Acts 1:8

1 Corinthians 12:7, 11

Ephesians 4:3; Romans 15:30; Colossians 1:8; Romans 14:17

Acts 20:28; 13:2-3

## **four attributes that concern the gathering and sending of the church**

- **the church is covenantal**

the church is covenantal, or gathered as members in (new) covenant relationship with God and in covenant relationship with each other

*the church in new covenant relationship with God through Christ*

God always relates to people in a covenant relationship

Old Testament covenants

Adamic  
Noahic  
Abrahamic  
Mosaic/old  
Davidic

the church of the new covenant

in the Old Testament, two themes regarding the old covenant

John the Baptist

Jesus Christ

the day of Pentecost

the New Testament view of the old and new covenants

the church is the church of the new covenant, which (1) is a unilateral agreement, established by God and God alone that (2) creates a structured relationship between him and his covenant partners, Christ-followers “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9); (3) features binding obligations on the part of both God and his covenant partners (e.g., 2 Cor. 6:16-18; Matt. 22:37-40; 28:19-20; Gal. 6:2); and (4) is sealed by two covenantal signs, baptism and the Lord’s Supper

*church members in covenant relationship with one another*

as P. T. Forsyth urged: “Therefore the same act which sets us in Christ sets us also in the society of Christ. It does so *ipso facto* [by the fact itself], and not by a mere consequence or sequel, more or less optional. To be in Christ is in the same act to be in the Church. . . . The act of faith which saves us from self would only have a negative meaning if it did not save us at the same moment into a society which is a centre of service and sympathy. It puts us into a relation with all saints which we may neglect to our bane but which we cannot destroy.”



this covenantal relationship may express itself in a commitment of church members to each other by means of a church covenant, an agreement that binds those who affirm the covenant to life together in the church

definition, “a church covenant is a series of written pledges based on the Bible which church members voluntarily make to God and to one another regarding their basic moral and spiritual commitments and the practice of their faith”

an example of an early British Baptist covenant was that formulated by Benjamin Keach and his son Elias; the members of the church agreed to “solemnly join ourselves together in a holy union and fellowship, humbly submitting to the discipline of the gospel, and all holy duties required of a people in such a spiritual relation”

the “holy duties,” or commitments:

- (1) walk in a Christian manner
- (2) avoid sinning against each other and “to stir one another to love and good works, to warn, rebuke and admonish one another with meekness”
- (3) pray
- (4) care for one another
- (5) forbear with one another
- (6) avoid divisions and work to maintain unity
- (7) meet together on Sundays and other times if possible
- (8) support the pastor of the church

the benefits of a church covenant

the order: first and foremost, the new covenant with God; second, and derivatively, the covenant relationship between church members

application: as D. A. Carson reminds us

The church itself is not made up of natural “friends.” It is made up of natural enemies. What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs, or anything else of that sort. Christians come together, not because they form a natural collocation, but because they have all been saved by Jesus Christ and owe him a common allegiance. In the light of this common allegiance, in the light of the fact

that they have all been loved by Jesus himself, they commit themselves to doing what he says—and he commands them to love one another. In this light, they are a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus' sake.

Carson explains this radical community in light of one of Jesus' imperatives

That is the only reason why John 13:34-35 makes sense: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” If Christian love for other Christians were nothing more than the shared affection of mutually compatible people, it would be indistinguishable from pagans love for pagans or from tax collectors' love for tax collectors. The reason why Christian love will stand out and bear witness to Jesus is that it is a display, for Jesus' sake, of mutual love among social incompatibles.

P. T. Forsyth contrasts a club with a church

In a club the membership is egoistic. It is cooperative egoism. The individual joins in order to utilize for his convenience and comfort the like desire in a number of other people. They pool their social self-interest. And a Church may be joined and used for a like reason—for the religious good to be had from religious association rather than out of the love for a common Lord or the sacrificial service of His kingdom. It may be composed of a number of people who have been persuaded that it would be for the good of their souls. But that is not a community, but only a combination. It is not a Church.

a second application is the responsibility to be thankful recipients of Christian fellowship (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)”

If...we only keep complaining to God that everything is so paltry and petty, so far from what we expected, then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow....A pastor should not complain about his congregation, certainly never to other people, but also not to God. A congregation has not been entrusted to him in order that he should become its accuser before God and men....He had better examine himself first to see whether the trouble is not due to his wish dream that should be shattered by God; and if this be the case, let him thank God for leading him into his predicament....What may appear weak and trifling to us may be great and glorious to God.

- **the church is confessional**

the church is *confessional*, or united by both personal confession of faith in Christ and common confession of the historic Christian faith (faith in the first sense refers to the act of faith, whereas faith in the second sense refers to the substance of faith)

*personal confession of faith in the saving lordship of Jesus Christ*

Romans 10:8-13

a verbal confession: “with [one’s] mouth”

the visible expression of this confession (Acts 2:38; Acts examples)

personal confession of faith in Jesus Christ as a requisite element of salvation

*a common, corporate confession of the church’s faith*

in addition to this personal confession of faith in the saving Lordship of Jesus Christ, the church as a corporate assembly makes a common confession of the Christian faith

in terms of the support of Scripture, in the pages of the New Testament, splices of early church confessions are to be found (1 Tim. 3:15-16; Phil. 2:5-11)

beyond these actual examples, the New Testament also demands that the church “speak” or “confess” the truth in love (Eph. 4:15)

when we go outside of the New Testament and look at the practice of the early church, we find several examples of confessions of faith

*the rule of faith or the canon of truth*

*Nicene-Constantinople Creed; Apostles’ Creed; Chalcedonian Creed*

as P. T. Forsyth underscored, “a Church is made by what it believes”

a modest proposal

such a regular and thoughtful corporate confession by the church is important for several reasons

for most of its existence, the church has identified itself as a confessional community

a confession of faith contributes to the cohesiveness of the members of a church

corporate confession fosters a deepening of trust in the faith and personal commitment to it

a confession of the common faith provides a hermeneutical framework for the church and its members

- **the church is missional**

the church is missional, or identified as the body of divinely-called and divinely-sent ministers to proclaim the gospel and advance the kingdom of God (John 20:19-23)

John 20:19-23

the Father commissioned the Son: what is this commission, the *missio Dei*?

as the Son was commissioned by the Father with this mission, so the Son commissioned his disciples with that mission

two metaphors of the missional church

a lit lamp (Luke 8:16, 18)

a lamp stand (Rev. 2:5-6)

three implications: the missional church is

expansive (Acts 2:47; 5:14; 6:7; 9:31, 42; 11:24; 12:24; 13:49; 16:5; 19:26; 28:30-31)

contextually sensitive (compare Acts 2:14-41; 14:8-18; and 17:16-34)

(potentially) catholic or universal (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; Rev. 5:9)

how does the missional identity of the church differ from what the church has practiced, more or less, from its inception in terms of evangelism, sending and supporting missionaries, and other types of missionary endeavors?

Jürgen Moltmann emphasizes the importance of understanding “not that the church ‘has’ a mission, but the very reverse: that the mission of Christ creates its own church. Mission does not come from the church; it is from mission and in light of mission that the church has to be understood”

George Hunsberger underscores the focus on and necessity of seeing “the fundamental missionary character of the church”

*missional* is a matter of corporate identity first, then individual engagement

moving to become a missional church (or ensuring that a new church is missional from its inception)

- **the church is here and not-here (already but not yet)**

the church is here and not-here, or assembled as a historical reality (located in space and time) and possessing a certain hope and clear destiny while it lives the strangeness of its existence in the here-and-now

the church’s spatial characteristic

“church” = building (common notion today)

Hunsberger: the church is the “place where certain things happen”

Bonhoeffer: “The Body of Christ takes up physical space here on earth.”

specific churches were established in specific places with concrete addresses (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:2)

“God called the churches *there* for his purposes—and the *there* was not inconsequential, seeing God’s providential ordering of peoples, times, and places (Acts 17:26)”

the *location* of the church is not an essential matter (John 4:23-24)

a *building* is not an essential matter for the church, particularly a building owned by the church; but most churches in our culture own/lease a building

specifically, a church that owns or at least meets in a building must give careful consideration to the following questions

Does the physical space—the building—advance or obstruct what the church is seeking to be and do?

Specifically, does the space in which the members gather together for the weekly service(s) enhance or hinder the worship of God?

Does the space in which the educational programs are conducted contribute to or detract from learning and life transformation?

Does the space in which the congregants come together stimulate or encumber genuine fellowship?

the church’s temporal characteristic plays a role in this discussion

unless a church has been recently started, it has a heritage that goes before the current manifestation of gathered people

moreover, if the Lord wills, the church will have a future that goes beyond the current manifestation of gathered people

beyond its being “here,” the church is also “not here”

as “here” yet also “not here,” the church lives in a “boundary epoch” between the two advents of Jesus Christ; hence, the church is composed of “sojourners and exiles” (1 Pet. 2:11)

the church has experienced the decisive intervention of the age to come, bringing salvation (in part), the knowledge of God (in part), deliverance from sin (in part), the power of the Holy Spirit (in part), purity and unity (in part), eternal life (in part)

when Christ returns in glory, then the “not yet” will be fully realized: the church will be presented to Christ “in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing...holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27), experiencing salvation (in full), the knowledge of God (in full), deliverance from sin (in full), the power of the Holy Spirit (in full), purity and unity (in full), eternal life (in full)

this “already-not yet” reality means that the church must develop realistic expectations of itself

on the one hand, the “already” aspect encourages the church to have high expectations for its worship, obedience, faithfulness, unity, holiness, consecration to the Lord’s will, spiritual fervor, fruitfulness, purity, good decision-making, and so forth

on the other hand, the “not yet” aspect cautions the church not to overreach with its expectations