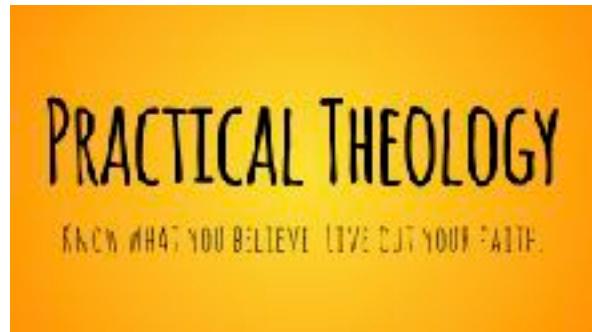


ECCLESIOLOGY: Doctrine of the Church



Ecclesiology is the study of the organisation life that God has planned for His saved people during this age. Although His methods have changed, God has never changed. From Abraham to Christ, God's attention centred around the nation of Israel. Since Christ, God's work has been with and through the Church.

I. The Origination of the Church

The Greek word translated “church” (*ekklesia*) means *a called-out assembly or group*. Scripture never speaks of a church as *a building* where believers meet, *an association* of churches, nor of *a denomination* to which churches belong. The church is always spoken of as being a group(s) or a assembly(ies) of believers.

A. A Definition of the Church:

The local church is a congregation of baptized believers, 1) associated by a doctrinal statement of faith and fellowship of the Gospel, 2) observing the ordinances of Christ, 3) exercising its offices and gifts, 4) sovereign in polity, and 5) banded together for the world-wide proclamation of the Gospel.

In Acts 2:42-46 there are several marks of a organised local church: 1) a Doctrinal Standard, 2) Fellowship, 3) Ordinances, 4) Public Worship, and 5) Support of the needy.

B. The Church’s Two-fold Distinction:

1. The General Assembly¹

The word “church” occurs 117 x’s in the NT.² At least twenty of these occasions refer to a grouping of all believers from Pentecost to the Rapture. Hebrews 12:23 speaks of this “general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven.”

¹ Often referred to as the “Universal,” “Invisible,” or “Catholic” Church, the biblical terms are: Body of Christ, Bride of Christ, the Mystery, and General Assembly.

² In this syllabus a capitalised “Church” will indicate the General Assembly, while the lower case “church” will indicate a Local Assembly.

1 Corinthians 12 teaches that at the moment of salvation, all believers are “baptised” (placed by identification) into the “body of Christ” (vv. 13, 27). The Church is also spoken of as the “bride of Christ,” espoused to Him and awaiting His coming (2 Cor 11:2-3; Eph 5:24-25; Rev 19:7).

Paul also speaks concerning the “mystery” of Christ’s Church (Eph 3:1-12; 5:32). This mystery—a *truth hidden by God in times past*—is now revealed in the NT. Paul explains that this is God’s purpose of uniting the Gentile believers and the Jewish believers into one Body, the Church (cf. Eph 1-2, the Unity in Christ)

2. A Local Assembly

The local church is the current practical manifestation of the Body of Christ, and forms the major emphasis of the NT. It is used of a group of professed believers in any one locality. The importance of the local church is minimised by some who refer to the Church as the “true church,” so that they may neglect accountability and responsibility to a local body of believers—i.e. baptism, membership, giving, etc. (1 Cor 5:13; 16:1; 2 Cor 8-9).

C. The Church’s Foundation

Jesus Christ began unveiling the truth of His Church in Matthew 16:18: “I will build my church.”³ Jesus promised that He would not only build His Church, but also that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” This relates not only to the Churches beginning because of Christ, but also to its preservation because of Christ.

1. Christ is the Rock

³ This much disputed passage is used by the RCC to support the Papacy, and by the Fundamentalist to deny the same. Barnes gives an honest and realistic observation:

“Some have supposed that the word ROCK refers to Peter’s *confession*, and that Jesus meant to say, upon this rock—this *truth* that thou hast confessed, that I am the Messiah—and upon confessions of this from all believers, I will build my church.... Others have thought that Jesus referred to himself. Christ is called a *rock*, Is. Xxvii. 16; 1 Pe. II.8. And it has been thought that he turned from Peter to himself, and said, “upon this rock, this truth that I am the Messiah—*upon myself* as the Messiah, I will build my church.” Both these interpretations, though plausible, seem forced upon the passage to avoid the main difficulty in it. Another interpretation is, that the word *rock* refers to *Peter himself*. This is the obvious meaning of the passage; and had it not been that the Church of Rome has abused it, and applied it to what was never intended, no other interpretation would have been sought for. ‘Thou art a rock. Thou hast shown thyself firm, and suitable for the work of laying the foundation of the church. Upon thee will I build it. Thou shalt be highly honoured; thou shalt be *first* in making known the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles.’ This was accomplished. See Acts 2:14-36, where he *first* preached to the Jews, and Acts 10, where he preached the gospel to Cornelius and his neighbours, who were Gentiles. Peter had thus the honour of laying the foundation of the church among the Jews and Gentiles; and this is the plain meaning of this passage. See also Gal 2:9. But Christ did *not* mean, as the Roman Catholics say he did, to exalt Peter to supreme authority above all the other apostles, or to say that he was the *only one* upon whom he would rear his church. See Acts 15, where the advice of *James*, and not that of *Peter*, was followed. See also Gal 2:11, where Paul withheld Peter to his face, because he was to be blamed – a thing which could not have happened if Christ (as the Roman Catholics say) meant that Peter was absolute and infallible. More than all, it is not said here, or anywhere else in the Bible, that Peter would have infallible successors who would be the vicegerents of Christ and the head of the church. The whole meaning of the passage is this: ‘I will make you the honoured instrument of making known my gospel first to Jews and Gentiles, and I will make you a firm and distinguished preacher in building my church.’”

Peter, Paul and Christ Himself each said that Jesus Christ was/is the Rock (cf. Isa 28:16; Mat 21:42; 1 Cor 10:4; Act 4:11-12; 1 Pet 2:4-8). In the OT, the rock was a symbol of Christ (Ex 17:6 and Num 20:8 with 1 Cor 10:4).

2. Christ is the Head _____ of the Body

Colossians 1:18 states that Christ is “the head of the body, the church.” As the spiritual Head, Christ is worthy of this pre-eminence because He gave His life for the Church (Act 20:28; Eph 5:23-25; 1 Pet 5:4).

3. Christ is the Chief Cornerstone _____ of the Building

Isaiah prophesied of Christ being the foundational Cornerstone of faith (28:16). The Jewish nation rejected this Rock (Psa 118:22), and Christ said that His gospel would then be given to the Gentile people (Matt 21:42).

4. Christ is the Chief Shepherd _____ of the Flock

While in a local church there is a pastor(s), or (under-)shepherd, Christ is always the Chief Shepherd. Peter refers to Christ as the “Shepherd and Bishop of your souls” (1 Pet 2:25); He watches over one’s soul in protection and provision (cf. Psa 23).

D. The Church’s Birth

The Church was purposed in the mind of God throughout the ages. It was promised by Christ during His earthly ministry; it was purchased on the cross. However, it was not produced as a living reality until the Day of Pentecost, fifty days after Christ’s resurrection.⁴

The Church’s beginning is indicated in the following Scripture:

1. The Church is the Body of Christ (Eph 1:22-23).
2. The Body is formed by baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13).
3. The disciples were not baptised with the Holy Spirit at time of Christ’s ascension (Act 1:5).
4. Believers were first baptised at Pentecost, and the Church was born (Act 1-2).

II. The Organisation of the Church

The form of church government is tremendously important for both the harmony and the permanency of a church and its testimony. Scripture and history witness to the dangers of centralised authority that exalts an individual or specific group into a place of authority over the Church. Voluntary cooperation with other churches (of like faith and practice) is Scriptural, but the centralising of finances and authority immediately exposes the Church and its local churches to danger.

⁴ Stephen’s usage of “church” (Acts 7:38 when speaking of Moses), is in the general sense of an *assembly*, and not of the specific Church of Christ’s founding.

Historically, Baptists have been congregational in government and independent in structure, taking their sole authority from Scripture.

A. Forms of Church Government

1. Papal

This form is most clearly seen in the Roman Catholic Church with its hierarchical system.

2. Episcopal

This is a more simple form of the papal, where a bishop is appointed to supervise the activities of a given church.

3. Presbyterian

This is a representative form of government that places authority in sessions, presbyteries, synods and assemblies rather than in the local church. While rules and extent of power vary, the idea is that appointed representatives constitute the authority of the local church.

4. Congregational

This is a democratic form of government where the authority remains with the local church. Each member has basically the same rights and privileges as every other member. This is the Scriptural example; the NT churches were completely autonomous and self-governing.

B. Independence

By "independent" we do not mean *isolation, self-sufficiency or self-will*. A church who isolates itself from other like churches, robs both from the blessings of fellowship.

Independency is not *lawlessness or irresponsibility*. Churches must be cautious about thinking they are responsible to no one, failing to remember that the Lord is the Head of each church.

1. The Church is independent of the State

God established both civil government and the Church. However, the Church has no instructions concerning the administration of civil affairs, nor does the State have any God-given jurisdiction over the Church. Where the Church infringes in civil matters, that State punishes according to its laws. Where able, the members of the Church may participate in civil matters—voting, holding office, etc. See Romans 13.

2. The Church is independent of ecclesiastical authority outside its own membership.

Each local church has the final say in its own matters: church discipline (Matt 18:15-17; 1 Cor 5), church offices (Act 6), doctrinal matters (Act 15:22-25), etc.

III. The Officers of the Church

A. Pastor

The NT Scriptures use the terms “pastor” “elder” and “bishop” to refer to different aspects of a singular office.

1. Scriptural usage of the terms:

In Acts 20:17-8 Paul calls the *elders* of the church(es) of Ephesus to talk with them. In the final verse, he calls these elders, *overseer* (same as “bishop”). He charges these elders/bishops to do the work of the *pastor* (or shepherd). In Titus 1:5-7 the terms “elder” and “bishop” are applied to the same person. In 1 Peter 5:1-4 the role of church leadership is to “feed the flock of God” (pastor); he is called an “elder,” and given the responsibility of oversight (bishop-ing).

2. Scriptural explanation of the terms:

- a. The Elder – This emphasises the respect _____ due his office, and the spiritual quality of the individual. The Greek word (*presbuterios*) denotes a *mature leader*.
- b. The Bishop/Overseer – This emphasises the responsibilities _____ of his office. The Greek word (*episkopos*) denotes one who *watches over*.
- c. The Pastor – This emphasises the relationship _____ of the pastor to the “flock of God.” The Greek word (*poimen*) is the same for “shepherd,” one who *looks after*.

B. Deacon

Deacon (*diakonos*) means *a minister/servant* of others, and as such is even applied to Christ (Matt 20:28). The primary purpose of the deacon is to aid the pastor and serve the church body (1 Tim 3:8-13).

Acts 6:1-8 records the selection of the first servants of the Church (likely the predecessors of the office of deacon) for responsibility over the physical burden of ministry so that the apostles could give their time to study and prayer.

IV. The Ordinances of the Church

There are two ordinances given to the NT Church. They are not “sacraments,” for this term has come to denote the *imparting of grace*—that “they communicate saving benefits to

those who receive them.⁵ Jesus Christ gave only two ordinances: Baptism and Communion/The Lord's Supper. Both are observed as memorials and identification with what they picture—the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

1. Baptism

The Greek word (*baptizo*) means *to dip* or *to immerse*.⁶ The whole of Scriptural teaching supports that baptism follows the individual's salvation, and that it is immersion in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is significant to observe that the Greek Church has always baptised by immersion.

2. Communion (The Lord's Supper)

Believers partake "in remembrance" of Christ's suffering for their sin. The heretical teaching of Transubstantiation asserts that when partaking of The Lord's Supper, the elements are changed into the literal body and blood of Jesus Christ. Jesus did not teach this (Jn 6:56, 63; 1 Cor 10:16; 11:20)!

⁵ ISBE, "Sacraments."

⁶ See ISBE on "Baptism." The author cites Didache as teaching the strong preference of the early Church baptising by immersion, in "living" (running) and cold water. However, if these were not available, baptising by pouring with still and/or warm water would suffice as long as the individual was still baptised in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.