

Systematic Theology: The Doctrine of the Church

Definition (ekklesia – called out)

The Lutheran statement of faith (Augsburg Confession – 1530), defined the church as “the congregation of saints in which the gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments rightly administered” (Article 7).

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.”

God saves individuals through the death, burial, and resurrection of His Son, but He also calls those He saves to live in community. He invites us out of the world and into fellowship with other believers. This community, comprised of diverse individuals—misfits, underachievers, and recovering sinners—is what we commonly refer to as the church.

Confusion Regarding the Church

The church is a familiar topic, but one that is often misunderstood.

Part of this misunderstanding comes from the wide variety of ways we use the term.

How people of today describe it

When asked the question “What is the church?”, we get an array of answers. A building, an organization, a religious institution, a spiritual state of being, a people, a mindset, a movement, etc.

How do we use the term?

- When we tithe, we say we are giving our money to the Church.
- When we get in the car on Sunday, we say we’re heading to the Church.
- We gather for events like Church on the Lawn or Church at the Lake.
- During morning worship, we often hear, “Good morning, Church!”

While these uses reflect a healthy sense of community, it's important that we also hold a clear and accurate understanding of what the church truly is.

A shift in our culture has led toward a focus more on what a church does than what a church is.

The Empirical-Dynamic Definition of the Church: “Concrete historical manifestations of the church” or what and how the church functions.

* This concept focuses on describing the church based on its function. It’s gatherings, communities, structures, ministries, missions, etc.

* When our definition of the church is centered around what the church does as opposed to what it is, we stand the risk of redefining its essence. When a culture changes, a church may be tempted to make alterations in its doctrine to remain relevant to the times.

I liken this to making a cake based on observing what a finished cake looks like. – its shape, color, texture, how it feels when you slice it – without necessarily studying the ingredients or the recipe that made it.

The Biblical-Philological Definition of the Church: What the church is intended to be based on the idea of church from the Bible

It is helpful to define a church by what the Bible says it is first and, as a result, determine what it does based on its identity.

Or in keeping with the analogy of the cake, it is like studying the actual recipe and ingredients – the flour, sugar, eggs, and technique – to understand what truly makes a cake a cake.

To bring this analogy to its ultimate end,

If you only go by what a cake looks like, you might accidentally bake something that resembles a cake, but isn't truly one — just like if we only focus on the outward activities of the Church without understanding its true biblical identity, we might end up with something that looks "churchy" but misses its true calling.

How the Bible describes the Church?

The Bible uses metaphors and images to describe to us what the church is like.

A family

* 1 Timothy 5:1-2 - Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to him as a father, and to the younger men as brothers, 2 to the older women as mothers, and to the younger women as sisters, in all purity.

* Ephesians 3:14-18 - 14 Do not be mismatched with unbelievers; for what do righteousness and lawlessness share together, or what does light have in common with darkness? 15 Or what harmony does Christ have with Belial, or what does a believer share with an unbeliever? 16 Or what agreement does the temple of God have with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said,

“I will dwell among them and walk among them;

And I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

17 Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate,” says the Lord.

“And do not touch what is unclean;

And I will welcome you.

18 And I will be a father to you,

And you shall be sons and daughters to Me,”

Says the Lord Almighty.

A Bride

Ephesians 5:28-32 - 28 So husbands also ought to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; 29 for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, 30 because we are parts of His body. 31 For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. 32 This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.

2 Corinthians 11:2 - 2 For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.

Plants and trees

* John 15:4-5 - 4 Remain in Me, and I in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit of itself but must remain in the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in Me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches; the one who remains in Me, and I in him bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

* Romans 11:17-24 - 17 But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, 18 do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. 19 You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20 Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear;

* 21 for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. 22 See then the kindness and severity of God: to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; for otherwise you too will be cut off. 23 And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in; for God is able to graft them in again. 24 For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?

The body of Christ

* 1 Corinthians 12:12-14 - For just as the body is one and yet has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 For the body is not one part, but many.

* Romans 12:4-5 - 4 For just as we have many parts in one body and all the body's parts do not have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually parts of one another.

Special Problems

There are 4 relational challenges we need to address when we talk about the church.

Challenge 1 - The Church and the Kingdom

* The terms kingdom of God and kingdom of Heaven are used in the New Testament to refer to the dynamic or kingly rule of God. The term Kingdom of heaven is only used in Matthew and parallels the same accounts in the other gospels that use the term kingdom of God. Matt 11:11-12 / Luke 7:28, Matt 13:11 / Mark 4:11

There is a close relationship between the Church and the Kingdom, but they are not the same thing. The Church is a realm of the Kingdom rather than the entirety of the kingdom. The church is a concrete manifestation of God's sovereign rule in our hearts, but additionally it can be found wherever His will is done.

Matthew 6:9-10 - 9 "Pray, then, in this way:

'Our Father, who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.

10 Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven.

The kingdom was not just manifested in New Testament believers. Under the old covenant, the kingdom was also expressed through national Israel.

Challenge 2 - The Church and Israel

* There are varying opinions on the how to deal with the nation of Israel.

1. Some Reformed theologians see national Israel as being displaced or replaced by Spiritual Israel or the Church. Nothing of the promises made to the nation are left to be fulfilled.
2. Dispensationalists regard national Israel and the church as two distinct and eternally separate entities that God deals with in different ways.

How do we reconcile this? As George Eldon Ladd puts it, "the truth here, as in so many matters, lies somewhere between the two poles."

Scripture does describe spiritual Israel as taking the place of national Israel in many respects. Paul stresses this in Romans and Galatians.

Romans 2:28-29 - 28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. 29 But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from people, but from God.

Galatians 3:28-29 - 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.

The Bible does however describe a future for national Israel. Paul describes them as still a special people of God.

Romans 11:15 - 15 For if their rejection proves to be the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

Romans 11:25-27 - 25 For I do not want you, brothers and sisters, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; 26 and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written:

“The Deliverer will come from Zion,
He will remove ungodliness from Jacob.”
27 “This is My covenant with them,
When I take away their sins.”

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Though Israel still holds a special standing, they will be saved by entering the church just as do the Gentiles.

Acts 4:12 - 12 And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among mankind by which we must be saved.”

There is a special future coming for national Israel, however, through large-scale conversion to Christ and entry into the church.

Challenge 3 - Invisible / Visible Church

Invisible Church –

In its true spiritual reality as the fellowship of all genuine believers, the church is invisible (Grudem). The true condition of one's heart can only be known by its creator.

2 Timothy 2:19 - 19 Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal: “The Lord knows those who are His;” and, “Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to keep away from wickedness.”

The invisible Church is the church as God sees it. (Grudem).

Visible Church –

A group of true believers who regularly come together to worship, profess and express their faith in Christ would constitute the visible church.

Unlike the Invisible church, this assembly can and does have those that are unbelievers.

Acts 20:28-30 - 28 Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 29 I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after them.

Challenge 4 - The Beginning of the Church
When did the church begin?

During His earthly ministry, Jesus referred to the Church in future tense.

Matthew 16:18 - 18 And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

Matthew 18:15-17 - 15 "Now if your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that on the testimony of two or three witnesses every matter may be confirmed. 17 And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, he is to be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

These passages are the only two references that Jesus makes to the church.

Luke never references the Church in his gospel, but in the book of Acts he uses the term 24 times.

Based on the timing of the usage of the word church, we can conclude that the church started at Pentecost.

Does this create a separation from the Old Testament Believers and the Church?

Purpose of the Church

The purpose of the Church is Three-Fold. Worship, Nurture, Evangelism and Mercy

Ministry to God: Worship

Worship is the praise and exaltation of God. In this the church centers its attention on who and what God is and not on itself.

Colossians 3:16 - 16 Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

Ministry to Believers: Nurture

It is the responsibility of the church to not only bring people to initial faith but also continue the investment towards their full maturity.

Colossians 1:28 - 28 We proclaim Him, admonishing every person and teaching every person with all wisdom, so that we may present every person complete in Christ.

b. God has gifted the church with abilities that are useful towards this end.

Ephesians 4:12-13 - 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ; 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

Ministry to the World: Evangelism and Mercy

The primary ministry that the church has towards the world is evangelism.

Matthew 28:19 - 19 Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to follow all that I commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The last charge Jesus gave His disciples recorded in the book of Matthew was to go and make disciples of all nations.

Mercy towards those outside of our church must also be part of our ministry to the world. Compassion reflects how Jesus approached the world around Him.

Luke 10: 36-37 - 36 Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" 37 And he said, "The one who showed compassion to him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."

John also writes in 1 John 3:17-18 - 17 But whoever has worldly goods and sees his brother or sister in need, and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God remain in him? 18 Little children, let's not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.

The church should be ready and willing to help wherever it sees need, hurt, or wrong.

All three of these purposes Worship, Nurture, Evangelism and mercy, the Lord charges the church to perform and none should be neglected. To focus on one or two only would bring ruin to a church.

It is a careful balance that we must perform to be the church most effective.

Though a church must maintain a balance between all three, its individual members are not constrained to this. It is necessary that those within the church champion certain purposes of the church that their gifting most aligns with. If you have a talent for music, then worship may be your focus. If teaching, then nurturing would be your focus. And again, if evangelism, then outreach. It is the responsibility of the church to work towards a balance of all three.

The Heart of the Ministry of the Church is The Gospel

This gospel or good news is the central message that the purposes of the church revolve around.

The essential points of this good news are Jesus Christ's status as the Son of God, his genuine humanity, his death for our sins, and his burial, resurrection, subsequent appearances, and future coming in judgement. It may well be said that, in Paul's view, Jesus Christ is the gospel (Erickson).

It is on the basis of this message that each person will either be condemned for rejecting it or saved by accepting it.

Paul states in Romans 1:16 - 16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Again, Paul states in Ephesians 1:13 - 13 In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of the promise,

The most recognized verse in scripture even outside of Christendom is John 3:16 - 16 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life.

This message has no limits. It cuts across all ethnic, social, economic and educational lines even spanning time itself.