

The Nature of the Church

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Introduction.

- A. Anybody here familiar with the painting of Jackson Pollock? Basically, he was a modern artist who did his painting during the middle part of the 20th century, and he created his art by basically throwing buckets of paint on a huge canvas and then rolling around in it. Some say it's art; I say it's a chaotic mess.
- B. When we consider the modern American churchscape, we are forced to recognize that it is equally messy and chaotic. We see thousands of different churches, teaching different things, yet claiming to be in some way the church that Jesus Christ established. That can't be right. The Bible tells us in 1 Corinthians 14:33 that God is the author of peace, not confusion, so all of this religious confusion is the product of Satan, not God.
- C. So what do we do? Do we just assume that everybody's equally wrong, that no one is obeying God? Or, even if there is a right church, is finding that church about as easy as finding a needle in a haystack? Thankfully, the situation is much less bleak than that. Within the pages of the New Testament, we have preserved for us a blueprint of the original first-century church—what it believed, what it taught, and what it practiced. If we follow that blueprint, we too can be assured that we are a part of the church that Christ established. Let's turn to God's word this morning, then, to learn about the nature of the church.

I. What Is the Church?

- A. As the first step of our inquiry this morning, we need to ask ourselves, "What is the church?" Most people, if you asked them what a church was, would tell you that it's a building with a steeple on top where people come on Sundays. However, nowhere in the Bible is a building ever called a church. Instead, the word "church" in our Bibles is a translation of the Greek word *ecclesia*, which means "assembly." This *ecclesia* could be a good or a bad thing. In Acts 19:41, Luke describes an angry mob as an *ecclesia*. It's a group of people, no more.
- B. In Scripture, we see the word "church" used in two main ways. We see an example of the first of these ways in Colossians 1:18. This passage tells us that Christ is head over all things to the church, and this is not talking about just one particular group of Christians, but about all Christians everywhere. We often call this collection of all Christians everywhere the "universal church." **Scripturally speaking, then, we can define the universal church as "the assembly of everyone who submits to the headship of Christ."**
- C. Back on the day of Pentecost in about 33 AD, this assembly of everyone who accepted Jesus as Lord was an actual phenomenon. Every Christian could come together in one place at the same time. As time went on, though, this ceased to be possible. Some Christians died; others were driven out of Jerusalem by persecution. As a result of this, the actual assembly of the universal church can no longer occur on earth, and will not occur again until the Day of Judgment. The universal church today exists in spirit, not in a real-life gathering.
- D. When Christians left Jerusalem to go to other places, though, they did not cease assembling with other Christians to praise God, and the Bible also uses the word "church" to describe these smaller gatherings. For example, in Galatians 1:1-2, Paul addresses his letter to the churchES, plural, of Galatia. This is the second way the word "church" is used in the Bible. It deals with small, local assemblies, so we tend to call it the local church. **A local church is "a portion of the universal church that habitually gathers to worship."**
- E. As far as any other structure that exists between the local church and the universal church, any diocese or synod or convention or denomination or anything like that, the Scripture is completely silent. There is no evidence in the New Testament of any earthly structure beyond the local church. God was certainly smart enough to create such a structure if He had wanted to, so the fact that He did not tells us that He does not want any of these larger structures to exist. Here is the way the Lord's church is organized: it has local churches that operate independently of one another, one abstract universal church, and nothing else.
- F. So . . . in a world which has so many different organizations claiming to be churches that are part of the Lord's church, how do we figure out who is and who isn't? Simple! We use the standard that Jesus uses. Look at Revelation 2:5. Jesus here warns the Ephesians that He will extinguish their church unless they repent and do the first works, that is, unless they do the things they did when they were first established as a church. Our challenge as a church today is not to come up with new things to do. It is to do the first works, just like they did. Jesus judges us and every other church according to that standard. Shouldn't we do the same? **Only the churches that follow the Scriptural pattern stand approved by God.** Any church that does not, no matter how well-intentioned its members may seem, is not approved by God. That's what the Bible says.
- G. Now, folks, here's why this is important. It's our understanding of all of this that keeps us from falling prey to denominational thinking. The churches of Christ are not a denomination, and the words "Church of Christ" are not a denominational title. They are just a description of the Lord's church that is found in the Bible, and there are many other such descriptions. It's just that most faithful churches in the United States happen to describe themselves as a "Church of Christ" for the sake of convenience and to avoid confusion. But just because we

habitually use this description, does that mean that we should consider another congregation to be right with God simply because they have those words on the sign out front? Absolutely not! It's what that congregation does, not just what it calls itself, that's important. Any congregation that chooses not to practice the first works is not a faithful body of the Lord's people, and any congregation that does practice the first works is a faithful body of the Lord's people. That's how Jesus judged churches, and it's how we should judge them too.

II. Who Is Part of the Church?

- A. Now that we recognize what the church is, we can ask, "Who is a part of it?" We see the way in which one enters the church described in Acts 2:47. This passage tells us about events in the very earliest church, immediately after the foundation of the church on the day of Pentecost. The church at that time was growing by leaps and bounds. Every day, new people were coming to the Lord and claiming their salvation. What this passage tells us is that every time a soul was saved, the Lord added that soul to the church.
- B. We see the means by which this salvation was accomplished outlined in Acts 2:38. Even though it is not much practiced in the religious world today, the entire New Testament makes quite clear that salvation comes to the sinner through the act of being immersed in water for the forgiveness of his sins—through baptism. However, although that is the most important effect of baptism, it is not the only one. **People become members of the church when they are baptized.** Baptism joins us to the universal church, the body of the Lord, and this means that anyone who has not been baptized for the forgiveness of sins is not a member of the church.
- C. So, then, if it is our salvation that metaphorically gathers us together with every other person who has ever been saved, how is it that we come to be numbered with a particular local church? Once again, this is not a hard thing to follow. When we become Christians, it changes our lives completely. We gain a number of rights we did not have before, but we also shoulder a number of responsibilities we did not have before. One of these responsibilities is described in Hebrews 10:25. Basically, Christians are required to join themselves to other Christians. **Once we are added to the universal church, we are commanded to assemble with a local church.** Sometimes, this is not possible. For example, I know a brother who was a doctor on a hospital ship in the Navy about 10 years ago. There were no other Christians on board his ship. As a result, when he was out sailing the deep blue, which he sometimes was for months at a time, there was no way for him to fulfill this command. For the rest of us, though, who are blessed with living on dry land, because we can assemble with a local church, we are required to assemble with a local church, which is why we are here.

III. How Is the Church Led?

- A. Once we've figured out what the church is and who is in the church, we can ask, "How is the church led?" In answering this question, we need to begin at the top, with Jesus Christ Himself. As Ephesians 1:22-23 shows, Jesus is head over the church in all things. This is an exclusive statement. Jesus has complete control over everything in His church, and no one else can claim to be head but Him. Thus, applying this to what we've said earlier, we learn that **Jesus is the head of both the universal and the local church.** This helps us to discern which earthly churches are part of the true church. Because Jesus is the only head, we can be certain that any so-called church that gives any kind of headship to any other man has rejected the authority of Christ. They are a false church, and no longer abide in the doctrine of Christ.
- B. However, besides Jesus, the local church today also has some other leaders. Philippians 1:1-2 explains. This tells us that we can group Christians into three categories: saints, who are just ordinary members of the church; elders, and deacons. Elders are the leaders of the church under Christ. They can also be called overseers, bishops, pastors, or shepherds, but all of those descriptions refer to the same office. The Bible also tells us that there can never be just one elder in a church; rather, there must be at least two. We see the qualifications of these men described in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. These qualifications also tell us that many in the denominational world who claim these offices are not entitled to them. For example, 1 Timothy 3:2 tells us that bishops must be married, so anyone who is not married cannot be rightfully called a bishop.
- C. By contrast, deacons are servants rather than shepherds. They are men who see to the day-to-day workings of a congregation under the guidance of the elders. If a congregation has deacons at all, there must be more than one, and they also must meet a list of qualifications described in 1 Timothy 3. **Together, elders and deacons are the leaders of the local church.**
- D. In many churches around us, we see so-called bishops, and sometimes men who wear other titles as well, elevated to authority over several local churches. Once again, though, we need to compare this practice to what we read in Scripture, and the Bible reveals something quite different. 1 Peter 5:1-2 tells elders that they are to shepherd the flock of God which is among THEM. They are to carry out their leadership role only among the Christians who are a part of their local church. Now, as we've already seen, deacons have less authority than do elders, so if elders are limited in authority to one local church, deacons must be as well. **Thus, it's fair to say that no earthly church officer has authority beyond the realm of his local church.** Anyone who claims more authority than that is not following Christ.

Conclusion. Remember: only the saved are part of this church, so if you need to be saved, come to God today.