

Sermon outline for Sunday, March 30, 2014

What is the Church?

The central question to be asked and answered in this sermon is – What is the nature of the church, as described in scripture? And given a properly-defined nature of the church, what should that mean to each of us? Further, given sufficient answers to these questions that are strictly grounded in scripture, the final question to be asked and answered in this sermon is – is the church a necessary component of any Christian walk – whoever or wherever that believer might be?

This will no doubt take some unpacking – so we will take, Lord willing, two consecutive Sundays to look into this ever-pressing matter. The church is amongst the most fundamental of scriptural concepts for us – we call ourselves Westboro Baptist Church; we meet together as a church; we admit brothers and sisters as members of the church; we exercise church discipline and have even excluded persons from being members in good standing within the church. And, we have quite regularly told people who we have come upon in our dealings with this world, through this ministry that the Lord our God has entrusted us with – these who have spoken or shown some evidence that the seed sown in them did not merely fall by the wayside – whether the seed that was sown in their hearts fell on stony ground, among thorns or on good ground - that they need to get to the church. That is a big claim. And I respectfully submit to you all, that it is a claim most easily made by those who are already here, now having been on both sides of the claim. For that necessity to be claimed, we must have the fullest sense of understanding of what the church is, does, and what therefore that should properly mean to us as those who claim to make a proper, bible-based profession of faith. In short, what is the nature of the church?

The word that is translated ‘church’ or ‘churches’ does not appear in scripture until the New Testament, first in the book of Matthew:

*“And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build **my church**; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” – Matt. 16:18*

The Greek word that is usually translated "church" in the Bible comes from a Greek word that originally had no inherent religious meaning. Instead, the Greek term EKKLESIA originally referred to a group of people. A good illustration of this meaning is found in Acts 19. While Paul was preaching in Ephesus, a mob formed in opposition to his message. In verse 39, the town leader insists that proper charges, if to be brought, be brought before the "lawful assembly." The word "assembly" here is EKKLESIA. So the root meaning of the word "church" has to do with a group of people, and not necessarily in a religious context, though we always mean a religious context when we use the word. Similarly, in the book of Ecclesiastes, the word, “ecclesiastes” is a Greek translation of the title by which the central figure refers to himself – the Hebrew word *Qoheleth*, which means something like “one who convenes or addresses an assembly.”

The church, in scripture, is not a building, or a place, though it sometimes appears to refer to such –

*“For first of all, when ye come together **in the church**, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it.” – 1Cor. 11:18*

*“And God hath set some **in the church**, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.” – 1Cor. 12:28*

Though the preposition ‘in’ is here used, the word church does not signify a building or physical place of worship. The word church, here, or *ekklesia*, signifies a ‘local assembly of professors of faith’.

There are 2 main senses in which the word ‘church’ or ‘churches’ is used in scripture. The first of these two senses is ‘the church’ as **the body of Christ** *written large*:

*“And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build **my church**; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” – Matt. 16:18*

When Christ proclaimed he would "build [His] church," He was describing a spiritual bringing together of a group of people – His elect. Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it (Ephesians 5:25). He did not die for bricks and two-by-fours, or for a cluster of congregations, or for a hierarchical organization. He died for people, and those whose hearts are brought into submission to Him in obedience are brought together into the church – the sum total of all God’s elect throughout time.

Another metaphor that is often used to describe Christ's church, as the sum-total of all of the saints throughout time, is the term "the body." This term is synonymous with the term "church," as is evident from comparing Eph. 4:4 and Eph. 1:22-23.

*“The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, **which is his body**, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.”*
– Eph. 1:18-23

*“**There is one body**, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” – Eph. 4:4-6*

In this sense, the one body is equivalent to all those who have had the eyes of their understanding enlightened and who have been quickened, while dead in their sins, and whose hearts have been turned to a child-like trusting in Christ, unlimited by time or geography. And we are added to this body, in our own

consciences, though always having been members of this body, if we are truly His, when our faith culminates in baptism.

*"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." - 1Cor. 12:13*

"And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, see, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? and Philip said, if thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him." - Acts 8:36-38

The one body, then, refers to all Christ's people from a universal perspective, all the saved of all time. It is important to recognize, here, that the sense in which 'the church' means 'the body' as described in the Bible, 'the church' is never seen as a collection of churches, or individual geographical assemblies of believers. It is neither a collection of local churches nor a collection of denominations. It is simply the collection of all individual Christians.

"For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to

*that part which lacked: That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. **Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.***” – 1Cor. 12:12-27

Christ is the head of the church – the church is His body and His bride:

*“And he (Christ) is **the head of the body, the church**: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.”* – Col. 1:18

*“Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as **Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body**. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing... For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak **concerning Christ and the church.**”* – Eph. 5:22-24, 31-32

The Lord Jesus Christ intimately identifies Himself with His church:

*“And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, **that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.** And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: and he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, **Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?** And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, **I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.**”*
– Acts 9:1-5

Saul wasn't going to the synagogues of Damascus to find and persecute the Lord Jesus Christ. Saul was going to find Christian men and women. The Lord Jesus strictly equated those who Saul sought to persecute with **Himself**.

*“Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou **me?**”* – Acts. 9:4

Not, "Saul, Saul, why persecutes thou those who believe in me?" This manner in which the Lord Jesus Christ equates himself with his church, his body, is fleshed out beautifully for us in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matt. 25, ending with the lesson that the main point of consideration at the time of what some of the old preachers called "The Great General Assize" (or Judgment):

"When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: and he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal." – Matt. 25:31-46

Recognizing this first main sense in which the concept of 'the church' is described, as the universal body of Christ - the sum-total of all His elect, or as His bride is vital in our practical, daily exercise of faith in terms of how we are to look at one another and how we, therefore, must act upon that understanding. A life's worth

of sermons could be dedicated to this glorious and mysterious topic alone, and the concept is one of great personal comfort and interest. I will borrow from this sense heavily, as scripture demands a thorough-going understanding of it, in terms of fleshing out the detail of the second main sense in which the term 'church' is used in God's Holy Book – which is finally the main object of inquiry.

This second main sense in which the word 'church' is used in scripture is to denote a local, particular assembly of saints meeting together, in one place, for religious worship. And, in course, I will maintain that this assembly of saints, in one place, for religious worship extends well beyond the important framework of worshipping God in this room at this hour on Sundays. It is this second main sense of 'the church' that I am interested in more fully fleshing out, that a fuller understanding of our duties may blossom therefrom. So as to the 'church,' or the local assembly of those who make and walk in a profession of faith: What is its nature? What should that mean to us? Is this sense of 'the church,' once fleshed out, seen as a necessary component of every Christian walk?

The church, as a local body, or a particular assembly of saints meeting together, in a local geographical setting, is seen throughout the scripture:

*“And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against **the church which was at Jerusalem**; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.” – Acts 8:1*

We are called Westboro Baptist Church, though we would probably more accurately be called 'the church which is at Topeka.' There is no necessity laid that there be only one 'church' in one province, or in one city, as practical matters of size of membership, place of worship, and logistical and disciplinary notions made for situations where there were multiple churches in one region:

*“Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to **the churches of Galatia**, even so do ye.” – 1Cor. 16:1*

*“And all the brethren which are with me, unto **the churches of Galatia**: Grace be to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ,” – Gal. 1:2-*

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Local 'churches' are also referred to in scripture in a more general sense – as individual assemblies of believers in Christ, regardless of geography:

*“But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the **churches of God.**” – 1Cor. 11:16*

*“So that we ourselves glory in you in **the churches of God** for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure:” – 2Thes. 1:4*

The seven candlesticks of the Revelation refer the seven churches which are in Asia – though most expositors agree that this particular grouping of churches is more emblematic of all of the New Testament churches, from the first established at Jerusalem unto the last of the church(es) that will be extant at the time of Christ's triumphant return, or second coming:

*“I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, what thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto **the seven churches which are in Asia**; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.” - Rev. 1:10-11*

Time runs short, for the present, to delve fully into this vital, practical sense of the church. In what follows next Sunday, Lord willing, we will attempt answers to the following questions which act to flesh out this second sense of the concept of the 'church,':

1. What constitutes the formation of a local church?
2. What are the proper bounds of the functioning of a local church, as described in scripture?
3. What is the nature of membership in a local church?
4. What are the duties of local church members toward each other?
5. Finally, what, if any, necessity is therefore laid upon the heart of one who makes a public profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ to seek

communion at a *bona fide* local church as a vital part of one's Christian walk?

In attempting this fleshing out, I will be drawing heavily, though not exclusively, from Gill's Body of Divinity, Volume II (commonly called Practical Divinity), Books IV and V. Gill does, I believe, a pretty thorough job for the most part, without putting us through his oft-used expositional paces of talking at great lengths about what something is not, before getting at what it most likely is. For those who are looking for some focused reading between now and then, I recommend both it and the scripture that it attends.

I love you all.

Amen.