

English Transcript

Foundations of the Christian Faith – Course 3

Lesson 3: The Church - Its Nature and Purpose

Welcome back to Foundations of the Christian Faith – Course 3. We are continuing with Lessons 3-5 that focus on the doctrine of The Church. The formal term for this is Ecclesiology.

In Lesson 3 we will explore the Nature and Purpose of the Church.

Lesson 4 will focus on the Purity, Unity and Power within the Church.

Lesson 5 will explore the Governance, Ordinances and Worship within the Church.

We begin Lesson 3 on page 22 of your handout.

In this lesson, we will explore the nature of the Church, considering the metaphors used to describe it. We will also deal with the purposes for which the Church exists. Finally, we will consider the various ways in which grace is expressed in and through the Church.

The theology of the Church is very important, since the Church is the primary means by which God is working in the world today! What is the Church? What is its purpose? How should it function? How should believers function within it? We will begin to explore these questions in this lesson.

Let us read Ephesians 3:8-10.

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

There are a few words that stand out in these three verses, grace, mystery, wisdom, and heavenly places.

- *According to this passage, what does God intend to accomplish through the church?* God will make known the manifold wisdom of God related to the gospel of grace in this world and also in the heavenly realms.
- *Who are the ruling authorities in the heavenly realm?* In lessons 1 and 2 we discussed the realm of spiritual beings. The New Testament makes it very clear that even angels are watching how God is working in this day through the Church to bring salvation to all people, Jew and Gentile, through the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- *What does it mean to you that God has chosen the church to demonstrate his wisdom?* The Church has been called to be witnesses and ambassadors for Christ with a specific message of reconciliation that is available between God and mankind through the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

Turn with me to the top of page 23 as we begin our discussion on the Nature of the Church.

It is always good to start with a definition of terms. The word “church” is translated from the Greek word “*ekklesia*.” The word means “called out assembly” or an “assembly of those who have been called out.” The church is an assembly of those whom God has called out of the world for his own purposes.

The church is the community of all true believers from Pentecost in Acts 2 until the time that Jesus comes again for His Church. “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25). Here the term “the church” is used to apply to all those whom Christ died to redeem, all those who are saved by the death of Christ for our sin.

This definition is not in your handout and you may want to write it down.

“God’s people, redeemed by Jesus Christ, baptized into his body by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:12-13), called to glorify God through Christ-centered worship, service, and witness.”

The New Testament church of the Lord Jesus, the Body of Christ, was birthed at Pentecost (Acts 2) and will be completed at the Rapture. The Church is distinct from Israel. In eternity, all who have trusted in the Lord Jesus for salvation will be part of God’s family in the New Jerusalem as part of the New Heavens and New Earth.

Since the Church is a “called out” gathering of people, it helpful for us to articulate clearly what we have been called out from and what we have been called into. When we respond to God’s offer of salvation by grace through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Bible tells us that ...

- we are “born again” [John 3:3],
- we are “made alive” [Ephesians 2:5],
- we are transferred from the “domain of darkness” into “the kingdom of his beloved son” [Colossians 1:13],
- we are forgiven of sins [Ephesians 1:7],
- we are delivered from wrath [Romans 5:9],
- we are reconciled to God [2 Corinthians 5:18],
- as Jesus put it, we pass “from death to life” [John 5:24].

We can summarize these truths in the following format to emphasize the concept of being a called out gathering of people.

- We have been called out of the kingdom of darkness and called into the kingdom of Light.
- We have been called out from spiritual death and called into spiritual life.
- We have been called out from being objects of God's wrath and we are called innocent and righteous.
- We have been called out from being enemies of God and called into a place of reconciliation.
- We have been called out from slavery to sin and called into the place of the redeemed.
- We have been called out of a place without hope and called into new birth through a living hope.
- We have been called out from being aliens in the world and called into being citizens of heaven.
- We have been called out from living as a stranger and called into God's family.

Praise God that He has also placed us within a new community to grow and mature in our faith as we live our lives for His glory!

Who is the Leader of the Church?

Pastors and elders have been given responsibility and authority by Jesus to serve as under-shepherds in local churches to the Chief Shepherd. Ultimately, there is only one leader of the Church, and that is the Lord Jesus. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus states that he will build "his" church.

"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

In Ephesians 2:19-21 we read that Jesus is the cornerstone upon which the Church is built.

"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

This principle is re-stated in 1 Peter 2:1-11, where Jesus is The Living Stone, and every believer comes to him as living stones that are being built into a spiritual temple in the Lord. The Church is not defined by a building or a location. The Church is a spiritual organism made up of all those who have turned from sin and the worship of idols and false gods and have turned to serve the Living God!

The Church is both INVISIBLE and VISIBLE! What do we mean by this statement?

In its true spiritual reality as the fellowship of all genuine believers, the church is invisible. This is because we cannot see the spiritual condition of people's hearts. We can see those who outwardly attend the church, and we can see outward evidences of inward spiritual change, but we cannot view their true spiritual state – only God can do that. *“The Lord knows those who are his”* (2 Timothy 2:19).

The invisible church is the church as God sees it.

On the other hand, the true church of Christ has a visible aspect as well.

The visible church is the church as Christians on earth see it.

The visible church includes all who profess faith in Christ and give evidence of that faith in their lives. It is understood that there will be unbelievers in local churches. There will be some who have made a profession of faith that was not genuine, who appear to be Christians but will eventually fall away, because there was never a true conversion. No one can tell with certainty who those people were in the past and will be in the future.

We should recognize as members of the church all who “by confession of faith, by example of life, and by partaking of the ordinances, profess the same God and Christ with us.” (John Calvin, *Institutes*)

It is not that there are two churches but that the visible community regularly contains imitation Christians whom God knows not to be real, and who could know this for themselves, if they would examine themselves to see if they are in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Matthew 13:24-30 is one passage that helps to clarify this concept of the church being both visible and invisible.

He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, “Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.””

In this passage of the wheat and the weeds or tares, Jesus says that the kingdom of God heaven is like this field. The wheat and Tares look identical as they are growing in the field. The only way to distinguish between the two is at the harvest. The wheat, because the kernels are heavier, will bow down while the lighter tares will stand more upright. This is an illustration of the spiritual difference between the saved and lost as well. The true believer demonstrates humility toward the Lord Jesus much like the wheat bows down at harvest time. The false believer remains prideful and self-reliant in relationship to Jesus much like the Tares remain standing tall at the harvest. Jesus is saying that there will be many who say, “Lord, Lord, I did this or that in your name.” And Jesus will reply, “Away from me, I never knew you.”

This is one reason for faithfully preaching the gospel in every local church, so that even those who think they may be saved, will have an opportunity to hear, see, and respond to the gospel of grace.

The Church is both UNIVERSAL and LOCAL

The word “church” can refer to the “universal church,” meaning all Christian believers across time. It can also refer to an individual local church composed of believers who are gathered in a particular place. The universal church is “the community of all true believers for all time”. The local church is “an assembly of professing believers in Christ who have been baptized and who are organized to do God’s will” (Ryrie, 1972).

In the New Testament, we see the word “church” used in various ways.

1. The church can be a gathering in a home (1 Corinthians 16:19 and Romans 16:5).
2. The church can be a gathering in a village or town, like the church in Corinth (2 Corinthians 1:1).
3. The church can be a gathering of numerous churches in a region or area, like the churches of Galatia (Galatians 1:2 and Acts 9:31).
4. The church can also be represented in a global manner (Ephesians 3:20-21, 1 Corinthians 12:28).

To summarize some of these points relate to the definition and nature of the church that have been discussed.

- The Church, ekklesia, is a called out gathering.
- The Church is God’s people, redeemed by Jesus Christ, baptized into his body by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:12-13), called to glorify God through Christ-centered worship, service, and witness.
- We should be able to clearly articulate what we have been called out from and what we have been called into.

- Jesus is the head of his church.
- The Church is a spiritual house that Jesus is building.
- The Church is both visible and invisible.
- The Church is both local and universal.

To help us understand the nature of the church, the Bible uses many different pictures and metaphors. These word pictures are provided by God to better understand and appreciate the fullness of what the Church represents.

Here is an activity you may do on your own. Review the list below of some of the more well-known metaphors for the Church. Describe the spiritual significance of each metaphor. For example: a priest is a kind of go-between, offering sacrifices to God on behalf of the people and teaching the people God's Word. As a holy priesthood, the church stands between God and the world. We represent God to the world as we proclaim the gospel, and we represent the world before God in prayer.

1. Family (1 Timothy 5:10-2)
2. Marriage (The Bride of Christ) (Ephesians 5:32, 1 Corinthians 11:2)
3. Branches in the True Vine (John 15:5)
4. Flock of sheep under the care of the Good Shepherd (John 10:6)
5. Physical body (1 Corinthians 12:12-27)
6. Spiritual temple (1 Peter 2:5)
7. Royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9)
8. Field of crops and a harvest (1 Corinthians 3:6, Matthew 13:1-30)

Pause the recording now and spend some time reflecting on how the Church is like each of these word pictures. What can we learn about the church from each picture/metaphor? When you are ready to continue, start the recording and we will continue our discussions on the nature of the church.

Welcome back!

Each metaphor used for "the Church" can help us appreciate more of the blessings that God has given us by bringing us into the Church. Here are some questions to consider to make these metaphors practical to our daily lives.

- Because the church is like a **family**, how should this increase our love and fellowship with one another?
- How should the thought that the church is like a **bride** stimulate us to strive for greater purity and holiness, and also greater love for Christ and submission to Him?
- How might the image of the church as **branches in the vine** cause us to rest in Christ more fully?
- How might the idea of a **field, crop or harvest** encourage us to continue growing in the Christian life on a daily basis, taking in the proper spiritual nourishment to grow?
- Because the church is **God's new temple**, how should this increase our awareness of His dwelling in our midst?
- With the church as a **royal priesthood**, how might we see more clearly the delight God has in the sacrifices of praise and service that we offer Him?
- How does the image of the church as the **body of Christ** increase our interdependence on one another and our appreciation for the diversity of spiritual gifts and abilities within the church?

The Purposes of the Church

In order to simplify the purpose of the Church, we might look at the first and second greatest commandments. The first and greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart. And the second is like it, to love your neighbor as yourself. Based on these two commandments that summarize the 10 commandments, we can identify the 3-fold purposes of the church in the phrase Upward, Inward and Outward.

Upward Ministry to God: Worship

The New Testament shows that that we exist individually and together as churches for the purpose of praising and bringing glory to God (Ephesians 1:12; Ephesians 5:16-19). Therefore, the church as a local group of believers has a purpose of glorifying God in corporate praise (Colossians 3:16) through the Word and prayer.

Inward Ministry to Believers: Nurture/Discipleship

The New Testament also gives us insight into the purpose of the church toward believers. The Great Commission involves making disciples (Matthew 28:18-20) and teaching them in order to bring them to maturity. The Apostle Paul's goal was to present everyone mature in Christ (Col. 1:28). The purpose of spiritual gifts is to enable ministry which results in the church being built up until it reaches the maturity appropriate for the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Outward Ministry to the World: Evangelism and Mercy

The disciple-making work of the church cannot be carried out without the accompanying work of showing mercy. Although there is an emphasis on doing good for those in need within the church (Acts 11:29), the Bible also affirms the need to help unbelievers in need whether or not they respond in faith. This is consistent with the example of Jesus who healed people whether or not they responded in faith (Luke 4:40). Mercy is shown not merely to evangelize. It is done to glorify God by reflecting his merciful and loving nature. While not carried out for the sole purpose of evangelizing people, showing mercy is powerfully attractive and often results in evangelism.

Keeping purposes in balance

None of these purposes are more important than the others. All are commanded by God and all must be carried out. Neglecting one or more of these purposes will always result in the church limiting the affect of its calling.

Questions for you to consider and discuss

In your opinion which of these purposes tend to predominate in most local churches?

What are some of the consequences of not providing a healthy balance in all three area?

Which purpose(s) receive the most attention in your church?

Forms of Grace in the Church

What are “forms of grace”?

The phrase “forms of grace” refers to the ways in which believers become the instruments by which God grants different expressions of grace to others in the church and in the world (I Peter 4:10-11).

“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

The following is a partial list of Christian activities through which God expresses grace inside and outside the church.

Read Acts 2:41-47

Identify the “forms of grace” or elements of a healthy church that were present in this first century church.

“⁴¹ So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. ⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

Spiritual leadership	Teaching/Preaching the Word of God	Fellowship/Love
Ordinances (Lord's Table/Baptism)	Prayer	Worship/Awe
Unity	Generosity/Giving/Sacrifice	Meet continually
Large groups	Small groups	Good reputation
Evangelism/Witness		

From the beginning of the Church, there were forms of grace present that helped the church to fulfill its God ordained purposes of being upward toward God, inward toward believers and outward toward the world.

The following is a partial list of Christian activities through which God expresses grace inside and outside the church.

Teaching of the Word

Teaching the Word is an obvious means by which God demonstrates grace. All our speech should minister grace to those that hear (Ephesians 4:29). The teaching of God's word should do so even more.

Baptism

Believer's baptism is a picture of the regenerating work of God at salvation. It is a public testimony that a person has spiritually passed from one life to another. Those who are baptized find a new dynamic at work in their spiritual lives as they enter into community with other believers. Those who observe are blessed by the testimony of God changing another life.

The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper similarly recalls the death that Jesus died in order to give us new life. It pictures our reception of that new life and our resulting bond of unity with Jesus and one another. The Apostle Paul urges that it be accompanied by spiritual self-examination (I Corinthians 11:28). During the Lord's Supper, many sins are confessed, and many hearts brought back into tune with God's. Thus, it is a powerful means of grace.

Prayer for one another

The command to pray for one another (James 5:16) is a means by which grace is expressed. We intercede for one another and for the world. Paul urged that this be of highest priority (I Timothy 2:1-7).

Worship

The act of worshipping God is uplifting to believers. The words of the songs and prayers remind us of important truths. They may rebuke or encourage us. There is also a mysterious sense in which God himself ministers grace to us during the act of worship. God "'inhabits' the praises of Israel" (Psalm 22:3 KJV). Even more so, he inhabits the praises of the church since each believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit himself (I Corinthians 6:19-20)!

Church discipline

Believers are often concerned that church discipline will be divisive or present a poor testimony to the world. However, when carried out with the right spirit, it ministers grace.

First it gives grace to the one under discipline by strongly urging him/her to repent.

It gives grace to believers by warning them against sin and by affirming our mutual commitment to loving accountability.

It offers grace to unbelievers who observe a church that avoids hypocrisy. Respect for God's standards and his people grow.

Giving

Paul described generous giving as, “the grace of giving.” The poor are blessed by the giving of believers to help them. The lost receive grace when a missionary brings them the gospel. The church receives grace as nurturing ministries are funded and carried out. There are many other examples.

Spiritual gifts

The very purpose of spiritual gifts is to minister grace in lots of different ways (I Peter 4:10). Every believer has benefited in numerous ways by the spiritual gifts of others. Not only have we each received grace by this means, but we each also have numerous opportunities to show grace to others using our own spiritual gifts. The use of our own spiritual gifts not only ministers grace to others, but it inevitably blesses us too.

Fellowship

Fellowship involves all that we hold in common as believers. The word speaks of our bond as brothers and sisters in the family of God, the beliefs we share, and our interest in each other’s welfare. Fellowship involves all we do to strengthen one another, pray for one another, counsel one another, love one another, bear one another’s burdens, confess our sins one to another, etc. A mature spiritual life cannot be attained in solitude.

Evangelism

Evangelism is a very important function of a church (Matthew 28:19-20). The Great Commission is to “make disciples.” This involves all the effort leading up to evangelism and all of the ministries which lead a believer to maturity. Evangelism is part of the larger task of making disciples. The entire process is a means by which God demonstrates great grace.

Personal ministry to individuals

There are many practical ways in which a church ministers grace to the individuals in its midst. It may involve supporting widows (I Timothy 5:3- 16), counselling (Colossians 3:16), showing mercy (Galatians 6:10), or any of a hundred other ministries. In the church, those who have extra needs receive special attention (I Corinthians 12: 20-26).

Questions

Which “form of grace” have had the biggest impact on your life?

How do you tend to show grace to others?

How could your church become more excellent at demonstrating grace in its various forms?

As we bring Lesson 3 to a close, one cannot help but marvel at the complexity of the church! Its purposes encompass believers, unbelievers all over the world, and God himself. The church can be described using a wide variety of metaphors. There is an almost limitless variety of ways by which the church can and does channel God’s grace to people in need. Indeed, the exact nature of ministries in a church is as unique as the spiritual giftedness represented in the congregation.

As “called out” followers of Christ, how can we live in such a way to fulfill our purpose and calling individually and also as a member of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ?

When we continue with Lesson 4 on the doctrine of the Church, we will discuss the Church’s purity, unity, and power.