

LESSON 2 – WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

PURPOSE OF THIS LESSON

In this lesson we will learn the purpose and the nature of the Church according to God's design, and the importance of local church participation and membership in any believer's life.

THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

MATTHEW 16:13-18

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But **who do you say that I am?**" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18 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.**"

What can you pick up from this passage about the nature of the Church?

- It is built on the foundation of the identity and accomplishment of Jesus Christ
- It is meant to be firm, strong, and advancing ("overpower" can also translate to "stand against")
- "Church" here in Greek is "Ecclesia", which means "those who are called out to assemble together."

EPHESIANS 2:11-22

11 Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," which is performed in the flesh by human hands — 12 remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 **But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall,** 15 by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, 16 and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. 17 AND HE CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR; 18 for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are **fellow citizens with the saints,** and are of **God's household,** 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into **a holy temple in the Lord,** 22 in whom you also are being built together into **a dwelling of God in the Spirit.**

What can you pick up from this passage about the nature of the Church?

- It is made up of Jews and Gentiles, unified into one body
- It is like a people belonging to the same country; a family; and a dwelling place of God made up by many people (stones) fitted together.

1PETER 2:4-5, 9-10

4 And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, 5 **you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...** 9 **But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him** who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; 10 for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY.

What can you pick up from this passage about the nature and the purpose of the Church?

- *God is the one who builds us to be the church in His mercy, we belong to Him as His special people.*
- *We are called to worship God, serve Him, and declare His glory.*

EPHESIANS 3:10-11

10 so that **the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church** to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. 11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.

What can you pick up from this passage about the nature and the purpose of the Church?

- *God has designed to use the church from eternal past.*
- *God has chosen to use the church to display His multifaceted wisdom and glory.*

EPHESIANS 4:11-16

11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, 12 **for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to 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.** 14 As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; 15 but speaking the truth in love, **we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ,** 16 **from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.**

What can you pick up from this passage about the nature and the purpose of the Church?

- *The church is organic like a body. It is meant to grow in maturity.*
- *The church is the place where God's truth is taught for the maturing of the believers.*
- *Every member of the church has a purpose to function together with each other.*
- *God has given leaders in the church for the primary purpose to train and mobilized the whole church.*

A definition of the church: A community of people called out and formed by God through the salvation work of Jesus Christ, for the purpose of worshiping and serving God, loving one another, and proclaiming His salvation to the world together.

The various expressions of the church: 1) **Universally** as the world-wide people of God past, present, and future. 2) **Locally** as a particular community of God's people that regularly meets together to fulfill God's purpose for them. 3) **Regionally** as a united entity of God's local churches in a city or a region, to partner together for the furtherance of His gospel.

THE CHURCH IS GOD'S MEANS OF GRACE IN OUR LIVES

With all these truths about the church, what are the implications in our lives?

God had instituted the church so that it can be the means for his grace to flow into our lives. A nonbeliever hears the gospel proclaimed to him through the church. In this way we say that the church is the means of God's grace to this person. Likewise for Christians, God continues to use the local church to give grace to his people through the preaching of his Word, the sacraments, the faithful administration of church discipline, and authentic community life.

The preaching and teaching of God's Word properly done shines light on the gospel every time. And so God's grace shown in the gospel continues to work in the hearts of God's people. As the "Gospel Grid" in Lesson 1 shows us, as we grow in our understanding and belief in the gospel, we mature as Christians.

The sacraments (Baptism and the Lord's Supper) are also means of grace because they make what is spiritually true visible and tangible. Again and again they help us to experience the ways through which God loves us. When we see water sprinkled on a person, we are reminded of the truth that God's Spirit has been given to all believers. When we see a person submerged in water, we are reminded of the truth that we have been washed completely clean by the blood of Jesus. When we take the Lord's Supper, we are reminded that Jesus' body was broken so that we can become his body. As we continue to remember the truths of the gospel, we mature as Christians.

Church discipline is also God's means of grace, although it is not often thought of as grace nor is it often administered with grace. But by God's design, church discipline is to be done with the purpose of restoring a brother or sister caught in sin. Through the authority given by God to the church, discipline also provides a structure and accountability for brothers and sisters to repent and mature. Even in case of excommunication, church discipline is God's means of protecting his church.

Finally, **the church community** is God's means of grace. The local church is where we get to live out and "experiment" with the implications of the gospel. God uses the local church community to sharpen and grow us. What does it mean to forgive someone? What does it mean to be humble? What does it mean to make sacrifices? How do we do these things by the grace of God? In the local church community we have people at different places of their Christian maturity. Both conflicts and unity are used by God to grow us.

THE MEMBERS PRIVILEGES AND RESPONSIBILITIES BEFORE GOD TO THEIR LOCAL CHURCH

- A Commitment to regular attendance and encouraging one another to serve in love. (Heb 10:24-25)
- A Commitment to respect and obey the leaders as spiritual authorities by God. (1Thess 5:12-13, Heb 13:17)
- A Commitment to strive for the unity of the church through proactive love and forgiveness. (Eph 4:1-6)
- A Commitment to discover, develop, and use our God-given gifts to serve together. (1Pet 4:10-11)
- A Commitment to regularly give financially to the work of God in the church (Mal 3:8-10, Matt 23:23)

Choosing a Good Church: Marks of a Healthy Church

Finally, if the local church is so important to any Christian, how do you choose a good church to attend? There are tons of churches, how do you know which one will be good for you?

Acts 2:42-47, 4:31, 11:19-30, and 13:1-3 provide some examples of what a good church looks like:

1. A Devotion to the Teaching of God's Word (2:42, 11:26)

Does the church teach "the whole counsel of God" in light of the gospel?

Does the church teach it in connection with our daily lives? With practical applications?

Does the church teach these truths and applications in a way that always makes Christ the center both for us to worship and depend on?

Does the church teach with authority and purpose?

2. A God-Centered Focus (2:42-43, 4:31, 11:23)

Does the church lead you towards a sense of awe about God and seeing His work in your midst?

Is the church actively promoting and relying on corporate prayer?

3. A Loving Concern for the Needs of the People (2:44-47, 11:27-30)

Is there good fellowship (worshipful, loving and caring interaction) among the members?

Do people make sacrifices for and support each other?

Are the members taken good care of?

Is there a concern for people outside of the church?

4. A Committed Vision to Local and Global Evangelism (2:47, 4:31, 11:19-21, 13:2-3)

Is the church actively and faithfully reaching out to their local geographical sphere as well as other areas around the world with the gospel?

5. A Multiplicity and Diversity of Servant Leaders (13:1)

Is the church leadership a team made up of people from different backgrounds instead of only one authoritative or charismatic leader? Is the church leadership transparent to the congregation and serve with humble love?