

What Is The Church: Ezekiel 36

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[0 : 00] If you will please take out your copy of God's Word and turn to Ezekiel 36 and John 10.

! We have over the past two weeks and now this morning, been considering what I think are the most pressing questions to be answered. And I've had some other questions posited to me and they're also good questions, although I think all of them are somehow answered within the answers of these three questions as we consider all of the implications of the answers of these three questions. We've talked about what is the Bible. Two weeks ago, last week, we talked about what is the Gospel. And that brings us today to the final question, what is the church? Now, the study of what the church is, is a study called Ecclesiology. And it is one of my favorite topics. I found myself a pastor giving leadership to a church. It matters a lot that I know a fair amount about this, but I also just enjoy it. It's a thing that I am particularly intrigued by. It's also important in our day. It's a pressing matter in our day.

There are many institutions led even by Christians that claim to be churches but are not churches at all. There are also some claim to be churches but we would call them irregular churches. And that would be to say they don't really abide by what the Scripture would say they ought to be as a church.

So we then kind of have these three categories. We have regular churches, which we want to find ourselves being. We have irregular churches. And then we have some meetings of people that aren't churches at all. And we need to know this. If we want to be faithful in service to our God, we want to be sure that we gather as a church as we should. And we talked two weeks ago about the Bible and one of the doctrines of the doctrines of the Bible we talked about at length was the sufficiency of Scripture.

That is to say that the Bible contains in it all that we need for life and godliness. It contains within it, in application to the question, what is the church? Everything we need to know in order to gather properly as a church in a way that's pleasing to our Lord. Too often these days, people are innovating out and beyond the text. What a dangerous thing to do. I'm very thankful, having now served here as a pastor for the past 10 years, that at a very early stage, God gave me such great grace to just plant deep within me a conviction about the sufficiency of Scripture as it regarded our fellowship. And he did that in a number of good books. I've read in the past couple of years more living guys than I've ever read, but I used to read all the old and dead saints, and they had much to say about the sufficiency of Scripture as it concerned the church. I also received, by God's grace, much wise counsel. And I want to give you probably the most prominent example of that, which is my father, who's a member of our fellowship, sitting in the third row over to my right, as he always does.

[4 : 19] Growing up under his instruction and hearing his concern for the church and its departure from its sufficiency was shaping for me. He worked for one of our denominations entities, and he worked in church planting. He did so for various ways, 30 plus years. And I can remember him carrying a Bible, which I have with me up here. He's given it to me, which I'm going to cherish forever. I don't think he even realizes how much I cherish that he gave this to me. But a Bible that he had foiled. Many of us don't do this anymore, but you remember this? You could foil your name onto the Bible, so his name is on here.

Off-centered, which bothers me, but it's on there. But he had foiled on here church planting manual. So as he was traveling around the country and working with people in our denomination to start new churches, he put, I think, predominantly as a reminder to himself, the sufficiency of scripture. This is a church planting manual as it concerns the starting of churches. And then at some point, I think, I believe it was a boss of his, wrote a book called The Church Planting Manual. And so in a bit brighter foil, because it was added at a later date, my dad added above that the original church

planting manual.

So God has been gracious to me and really concreting in my heart that he has given us all we need for the task ahead of us. The scripture is sufficient for this. Mark Dever wrote in a book I'm going to cite from a fair amount today, the Bible certainly doesn't teach us everything. It doesn't teach us about quantum mechanics, as an example, but neither does it teach us nothing. It should be our desire to search out everything that God has revealed about himself and then to joyfully accept it, adopt it, explore it, submit ourselves to it, and enjoy God's blessing in it. We have a church, the original church manual. We have it in abundance. We should trust it to answer this question, what is the church?

So we're going to look in Ezekiel chapter 36 and in John chapter 10, but for a bit. Typically, we would pull all of the points of the sermon out of the particular text. I don't believe, and please correct me if I'm wrong later, that there's a single text that we can quite answer this question from, and I won't even fully answer it this morning. So we're going to look briefly at this text together. I hope what it does is it ignites in you a love for the church. It helps you to lean into what's going to be said concerning the church, and then we're going to go to other texts across this morning's time together.

So I'm going to read from Ezekiel chapter 36, verses 22 through 28, and then 37 through 38, and I'll point that out to you, and then we're going to go to John chapter 10 and read a few verses there. Beginning in verse 22, Ezekiel 36. God says through the prophet Ezekiel, Therefore, say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God, It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.

[8 : 39] I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I give to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. So this is exiled Israel that the prophet Ezekiel is writing specifically to, but not all the promises of this prophecy are fulfilled in ethnic Israel. This goes much beyond to the church of God. Look now at verse 37 of Ezekiel chapter 36. Thus says the Lord God, this also I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them, to increase their people like a flock, like the flock for sacrifices, like the flock at Jerusalem during her appointed feasts, so shall the waste cities be filled with flocks of people. Then they will know that I am the Lord.

Now turn to John chapter 10. Jesus here picks up on this idea of God's people being like a flock. And if you have been in the church very much, you're not unfamiliar with this idea. But in John chapter 10, beginning in verse 14, he says, one shepherd. Amen to the glory of God. God is about the saving work of gathering together a people for his praise. Beloved, we should care about the church because Jesus cares about the church.

He is its founder. He is its head. She is his bride. He died for the sake of the church.

If you're in Christ, it is true that Jesus died for you. But do not lose sight of the fact that he died for you as one amongst many. Jesus died for you as one amongst many. Jesus died to save a people for the eternal glory of God, the Father. John Stott, who's a 20th century British theologian, once wrote, the church lies at the very center of the eternal purpose of God. It is not a divine afterthought. It is not an accident of history.

[12 : 22] So, what is the church? There are many layers of answers that could be given to this question.

Definitions both simple and complex. So my strategy for today is to give a simple definition from a book called *The Church* by Mark Dever, which I mentioned previously, and then develop the idea further with five points.

Much of what I will say today is found in this book, *The Church*. So if you're interested in that, I encourage you to pick it up and to read it at length. It's out there in the book now. I heartily recommend it to you.

So what is the church? Mark Dever gives this very simple definition, which I love, as we've been talking about what the gospel is just recently, and he says, the church is the gospel made visible. The church is the effect of the gospel, and it is the agency of the gospel. When people come to Saving Faith, they are brought into the church, and it is the church that works by God's working to bring people to Saving Faith.

This is the mission of the church, the evangelization of the world, going out in order to bring in.

[13 : 56] As God uses His church to this great end, we should be deeply concerned about how He instructs us to play our part in doing so.

How is it that we are to measure any degree of success as we conduct ourselves in this mission if we're not doing things God's way?

I can tell you now that I can manipulate people into buying into something. There have been and will be cults throughout history where people do crazy things because somebody charismatically leads them to do such crazy things.

The largest supposed church in our nation right now is a church that doesn't preach the gospel of Jesus Christ at all. These are examples of what I mean.

How can we know that we are seeing God's result if we're not doing things in God's way? I once heard a pastor say, probably one of the old dead pastors, something like this.

[15 : 08] If you want to know how to grow the church, go out into your community and interview every lost person that you can. Ask them exactly what they would like to see as the church gathers together.

What that would look like for them. And make a very careful list. And then go back to your study and shut the door. Lock it. Turn off the lights. Lay on your face. And pray to God that you never do any of those things.

Amen. We're a new society. We're a people set apart from the world for the praise of God.

Spurgeon once said, this is on the front of your bulletin, The very church which the world likes best is sure to be that which God abhors. Let that sink for a second.

Now, let's consider the idea that the church is the gospel made visible further.

[16 : 10] And I have provided an outline on the back of your bulletin. This may or may not be helpful to you. There's almost no space for notes. My apologies. But maybe it'll help you track where we're headed together.

Number one, let's talk a bit about the nature of the church. First, I think it must be said what the church is not.

And there's a lot of not that we could talk about. But I want to very quickly and pointedly say the church is not property and programs. The church is people.

We are the church. This building is not the church. The particular set of events we put together are not the church.

Gatherings of? Sure. But not the church itself. The Greek word that we most often see in the Scripture as church is the Greek word ekklesia.

[17 : 13] And I've said already, the study of the church is the study of ecclesiology. It's the Greek word ekklesia. Ekklesia. This word is used 114 times in the New Testament.

Twice to refer to groups of people gathered for a specific task. Stephen references God's people as a congregation in the wilderness from the book of Exodus.

In Acts chapter 7 verse 38. And we can see the term congregation again in Hebrews chapter 2 verse 12 as its author cites Psalm chapter 22 and verse 22.

The other 109 times when the New Testament... Oh, excuse me. I didn't count for three of them, did I? In the book of Acts, when there's a riot at Ephesus, in that chapter, that riot, that gathering of people coming to riot against the gospel are called an ekklesia, a gathering of people.

The other 109 times when the New Testament uses the term ekklesia, it is referring to a Christian assembly. And most regularly, a local assembly of Christians.

[18 : 26] I think that the word assembly would have been a better English word to use in this place. But back in our long line of English translation history, something unfortunate happened.

This word that we use today for church is derived from an old English version of a German word, kerk. I'm probably not pronouncing it correctly.

And that word meant building. Church building. Church building. Right? A better equivalent to kerk in our day might be chapel.

Right? But the word church was used instead. And so the way we often use the word to refer to a building as the church is very consistent with its etymology back to the German word kerk. However, because the scripture, now these translations we have use the word church to speak of God's people assembled, we shouldn't use the word that way anymore. Don't call this building the church.

[19 : 36] It's not. If this building burned to the ground, will we still exist as a church? Yes. We absolutely would. And you better believe we would meet that Lord's Day.