

What Is The Church

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[0:00] God's Word in two places this morning, Ezekiel chapter 36 and John chapter 10.! It is our usual habit to preach verse by verse through the scripture. We are in the book of James right now.

We finish chapter 2. Lord willing, next week we'll begin chapter 3. But we've seen it fitting to take a couple of weeks break to discuss a couple of topics.

I want to give a bit of a warning, as I typically do when we're preaching something in a more topical fashion, to be extra discerning. So we'll begin with these texts today. I'll make a brief point of them. I hope that you'll spend more time in these texts than we'll have time for today. But then we're going to go elsewhere. And I want us to think together about something in particular.

But you have to be sure that I'm not making sure the text says what I want it to say, but rather that the text actually communicates what is being said. So I want to caution you in that way this morning.

[1:09] Today, as already mentioned, immediately following this sermon, we're going to commission four couples who have decided, through much prayer and a lot of counsel to leave our fellowship and join a very good gospel work at a church called Emanuel Community Church.

That's in Gillsville. So it's close by, but they won't be fellowshipping with us any longer. And we have been in relationship with the pastors of this church for some time.

They've been doing a very patient work there. They've managed to lead that church through what's often called a replant. And we're just seeing good work happening in that place.

And so we're working at being excited about sending people there. But it is not an easy thing to see people that we love go elsewhere.

We've spent a lot of time with these individuals. If you're new to our fellowship or visiting possibly this morning, I know that there's not a weight to me saying that. But if you know these couples, you know and you're feeling what I feel this morning.

[2:17] Perhaps it's even more difficult to be part of the process of sending them, right? It's one thing, a couple, a guy gets a job and they decide that they must go. But to actually be part of the process of helping them decide to go has been particularly difficult.

To heartily agree that their departure and the work they're going to is the right thing to do. I'll admit in me there's an inclination to say, no, you shouldn't go.

I mean, hang on to you as long as I possibly can. So how do we do it? How ought we send people? How are we to find joy amidst the sorrow of our goodbyes?

Beloved, we must underpin what we're doing today with clear minds concerning what the church is. What is this thing that we belong to?

And if we get this right, if we have a clear understanding what the church is, it will not make saying goodbyes less difficult. It will not cause us to miss people we love any less.

[3:31] But it will bring us joy as we see ourselves in some small way as part of the global salvific purpose of our God. For as long as the Lord sustains my life and for as long as he carries, I believe that I'll spend myself for your sake to his glory by answering the following four questions.

First, who is God? Second, what is the Bible? Third, what is the gospel? And fourth, what is the church?

Third, what is the church?

In a very academic way, ecclesiology or the study of the church is one of my favorite topics. I love to talk about what the church is. It's pressing in our day.

It has real application to our day. As many institutions claiming to be churches are not churches at all or fairly irregular churches.

[4:59] Not normative, not biblical. So it has a practical application, not just an academic one. It has a special and specific application for us today.

I'm really grateful. It's a great grace of personal conviction and wise counsel through a lot of various means that early in the life of this church and the planting of Christ family church some 13 plus years ago, that we believed in the sufficiency of scripture that the Bible has in it everything we need to know about how we ought to conduct ourselves as a church.

That it answers the question. What is the church? I will admit to you as a younger man, it would have been very tempting for me to pick up whatever great and popular leadership book was out there and try to model the ministry after that.

I am grateful and it is all of grace that I understood that the Bible, the Bible was the sufficient instruction guide for us and that I had other people around me who believed the same.

That we were able to encourage one another to go to the text. Just one small example of that great grace to me is my father, who's a member of our church. And he worked in church planting for 30 years, something like that.

[6:26] Worked for the North American Mission Board and he traveled with the Bible that he's now given me. So I'm thankful to have it. It's got his name on the bottom of it. And he had an embossed young people. This this was when we used to put words on the front of our Bibles and we usually wrote our names on the inside.

I don't think anybody hardly does that anymore. But he had originally embossed on here church planting manual. And then someone wrote a book called the church planting manual. So he added the original church planting manual.

And if you're ever in my study, this actually sits next to a chair that I have that I read in. And it's always a pleasant reminder, right? The scripture itself is sufficient for the task.

A contemporary pastor named Mark Dever once said, The Bible certainly doesn't teach us everything, 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.

And so we want to do that as we think together today about what the church is. So Ezekiel chapter 36, I'll begin reading in verse 22.

[7:45] Let me remind you before I do, beloved, that this is God's word to us written for his glory and our good. So we would all do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and to obey its commands.

So Ezekiel 36, beginning in verse 22. 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.

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.

[9:00] 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 gave to your fathers and you shall be my people and I will be your God.

Now skip down to verse 37. 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. So we have this prophecy about how God is going to make his name great.

He's going to do it through a people. And he picks up this flock language in verse 37 and 38. So turn with me now to John chapter 10.

[10:06] Here Jesus beginning in verse 14 picks up this same language and he says, I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me just as the father knows me and I know the father and I lay down my life for the sheep.

And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

What is that flock that Jesus is talking about? He's talking about the church. All those who will be redeemed in Christ.

Because of his person and his work by faith in that all of those that will belong to the church. He will be the great shepherd of the church. So this important connection between these texts, God is calling together for his praise of people.

And he is doing so through the personal work of Jesus Christ. So beloved, we should care about the church because Jesus cares about the church.

[11:18] He gave his life for the sake of the church. He is its founder. He is its head. She is his bride.

He died. He died for her. If you are in Christ this morning, it is true that Jesus died for you. We don't want to belittle that fact.

Jesus bore your sins on the cross. But do not lose sight of the fact that he died for you as one amongst many. He died for a people.

And he died to save a people for the eternal glory of God the Father. John Stott, the 20th century British theologian, this is the quotation on your bulletin today, said, 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. So what is the church? There are many layers of answers that could be given to this question.

[12:24] We could talk and talk and talk about it. Definitions both simple and complex. So my strategy for today is to give a simple definition. And it's a definition that comes from a book simply entitled The Church by Mark Dever.

And then to develop the idea further with four points. Much of what I will say today, in fact, can be found in that very book, which I strongly recommend to you. So, simply, in the most simple of terms, what is the church?

Dever says the church is the gospel made visible. It is the good news of Jesus Christ made visible, made observable.

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, by his grace, to bring people to saving faith.

This is the mission of the church. The evangelization of the world. The preaching of the good news everywhere. As God uses his church to this great end, we should be deeply concerned about how he does so.

[13:42] I once heard a pastor say, if you want to know how to grow the church, go out into your community and interview every lost person you can find and ask them what they would need to find at your church in order to come to church.

And once you have taken all of that survey answers, compile them all together and go back to your study and turn out the lights and close the door and lay on the ground on your face and pray to God that you never do any of those things.

We see so many churches in our day that do this very thing. What's it going to take to get them in the door?

I think it has good motivation at its core. But in the process, many of these groups of people, many of these institutions cease to be churches all together.

They stop caring about the very means that God intends to use to bring about the salvation of his people. Spurgeon once said, that very church which the world likes best is sure to be that which God abhors.

[14:51] So it matters. And we're not left without instruction. So if it matters, Jesus Christ died for the church. God cares about how we conduct ourselves at a church.

This is a problem that needs an answer. Praise be to God. He's been gracious to us. He's given us a book. We have the original church planting manual.

So let's consider the idea that the church is the gospel made visible further by first thinking together about the nature of the church. And I think first it must be said what the church is not.

And this could go on and on, but just briefly. The church is not property and programs. The church is not a social club. It's not simply a place for you to gather and to make all of your best friends. Although we do make good, deep, special relationships in the church. The church is not just a place for you to simply come and consume information. It's not a lecture hall.

[15:56] It's not primarily what we do. It's part of it, but not primarily. The word most often translated church in our New Testaments is the Greek word ekklesia.

Ekklesia. Those of you who know Wes Shelnut, who used to lead our music, is part of a church in Utah called Ekklesia. And so I jokingly call it church church because it was called Ekklesia Church. That'd be amazing. But it's just called Ekklesia. But this word is used 114 times in the New Testament. Twice to refer to groups of people gathered for a specific task.

So it's a general Greek term. Stephen references God's people as a congregation in the wilderness in Acts 7:38. And we can see the term congregation again in Hebrews 2:12 as its author cites Psalm 22:22.

But the other 109 times when the New Testament uses the term ekklesia, it is referring to a Christian assembly. People redeemed by Christ, assembled together, and most regularly a local assembly.

[16:59] Sometimes it's used more broadly, but most regularly it's used of a local assembly. People gathered who can be together. They're actually together in their gathering.

Now our English translation of Ekklesia into the word church is kind of an unfortunate translation. Church derived from Old English. It's an Old English version of the German word kirk, which was a place, a gathering place where Christian people met.

So this term, when we use the term church to call this building a church, it's actually consistent with the Old English version of the German word. But it's not consistent with the Greek word for church. It's not a good word. Gathering would maybe be a good English equivalent to the word. So that's not enough, is it?

To just say, well, it's a gathering. It's a broad and general term. So we have to know more about the church. And it is a unique institution. There's no other institution like it.

[18:07] You can't say the church is like anything and it be sufficient. It can't fully explain. So the Bible uses tons of imagery to help us understand the church.

There are like 75 images for the church. There's a lot of minor ones that are used, bits and pieces here and there. You could probably think of some of those. I've used a couple of them already this morning.

But there are four major ones that are used consistently. First, the church is called the people of God. Places like 1 Peter 2, verse 9 and 10. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.

That you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

So set apart as a people of God. Secondly, as a major image of the church, we are called a new creation.

[19:12] 2 Corinthians 5, verse 17. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. 1 Corinthians 15, verse 20. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

We are a resurrected people, a new creation for the praise of God. Third image, prominent image, is a fellowship of the faithful.

Hebrews chapter 10, beginning in verse 19. Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh.

And since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

[20:23] So a people called by our faithful God who are faithful in our gathering together. And fourth, this one more prominently maybe in your mind, major image, the body of Christ.

Ephesians chapter 4, verse 15 and following, speaking the truth in love. We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head into Christ, from whom the whole body joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped.

When each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. And you may remember when Paul called Saul at this point in Acts chapter 9, encounters Jesus on the road. Jesus says to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? So the church is identified with, identified by Christ.

And all these images help us to understand, right, that we are not a lot of things, but we are a people made new who gather together regularly for the praise and for the mission of Christ.

[21:41] The people of God, a new creation, a fellowship of the faithful, the body of Christ. So these are the images of the church. Secondly, there are marks of the church, right?

What makes a church a church? And the most historical, and I think simple biblical definition of this, two things, church is a gathering of people who profess faith in Christ, who rightly preach the word and rightly administer the ordinances.

Rightly preach the word. God's people who have been redeemed by the word recognize that the word of God is what changes people.

There's no degree of gimmick that is going to bring people into the kingdom of God. But it's the spirit of God using the word of God to bring about conviction in people's hearts. I love the old story of Martin Lloyd-Jones, who's a wonderful preacher, who was once a medical doctor, many people call him the doctor, who decided to leave his medical practice and become a pastor.

And he was hired at a church that had become quite well known for their dramatizations. So that very often, on a Sunday morning, would drag the pulpit off the stage and put on plays for people.

[22:59] And on his first Sunday, he walked up to that movable pulpit, and he took out of his pocket a handful of nails and a hammer. And in front of that congregation, he physically nailed that pulpit to the center of that stage.

And he made the point, the gathering of our church will be centered on the preaching of God's word. Now, we practically put preaching at the center of our gathering for the sake of children.

There's a practicality to that. But we're also meaning to communicate something to you, that this is the central thing that we do when we gather together. We open up God's word and we preach it. But not only that, we sing it and we pray it and we see it in the Lord's Supper. Hebrews 4.12 says, For the word of God is living and active.

It is sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. This is not a thing that my words can do.

[24:04] This is a thing that the word of God does. Jesus said in Matthew 28, verse 18 and following, you're probably familiar with the Great Commission.

He said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

Not the next pop psychology phase, but all that I have commanded you, which we find in the word. And behold, I'm with you always to the end of the age.

So the church rightly preaches the word, but not just from a pulpit, but each of us, each and every one of us who are a member of God's church are those who spread the good news of Jesus Christ, who share what he's taught us with anybody who will listen.

So we rightly preach the word, and we rightly administer the ordinances. Jesus gave two visible signs of his special presence with his people, baptism and the Lord's Supper.

[25:18] He ordained them by example and by command. Baptism. Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist as an example, and he commanded baptism in Matthew chapter 28, which we just read.

The Lord's Supper. Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper at the last meal he had with the apostles, and he commanded it be done in remembrance of him. Right? We proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

The church should be concerned about gathering in all of God's people, and it should be concerned about marking off who is and who isn't part of the church through membership, which corresponds to baptism, and discipline, which corresponds to the Lord's Supper.

Both things ought to be an active part of the ministry of a church. So the church should be marked by these things, and if they're not, they're either not a church, or they're very irregular.

That's a gracious way of saying not biblical. Right? Churches need to rightly preach the word, rightly preach the gospel, and administer the ordinances.

[26:31] Right? These things matter. Thirdly, we should consider what the purpose of the church is. We get some idea of the nature of it, some idea of what we ought to do when we gather together, but why?

Why do we do these things? First, the church exists for the worship of God. I read previously Hebrews 10, 24, and 25.

Right? We're to gather together, to stir one another up to love and to good works. Right? We're meant to be about this together, encouraging one another, and all the more as we see the day drawing near.

I've said this earlier, but Ligon Duncan once said, read the Bible, preach the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible, and see the Bible. Right? We gather to make much of God when we gather together. If you're newer to our fellowship, you may wonder why we don't tend to do a bunch of seeker-friendly kinds of things. It's not that we don't like the seeker, we love the seeker.

[27:38] The one who is interested in the things of God, we want to gather, but we also want to rightly praise our God. And in an attempt to make things simple enough, sometimes we fail to worship God as he's instructed us to do.

Right? So we want to catch people up. Right? We want to help inform them. We want to walk beside them as they understand who our God is, the great need for us to praise him as we ought. We also gather for the edification of the church, Ephesians 4, 11, and 12. Christ gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds, and teachers for a purpose, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

So we want you, when you come here, to be equipped to go, minister to one another, and minister to those who are lost in our communities. Right? We go to gather, and we gather in order to go. Lastly, as a purpose, to evangelize the world. Jesus said in Acts 1, verse 8, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

[29:01] We know that before the throne of God, there will be people from every tribe, nation, and tongue. And many people have debated exactly what that means.

And the truth of it is, we don't know. But what we do know is that we have not yet preached the gospel in every place because Jesus has yet to return. So in the meantime, as the church, we are to be about that.

Sending, going, preaching the good news to anyone who will listen. Whether that's next door, in your workplace, in the classroom, or to the very ends of the earth.

Right? We are a going people. Again, Spurgeon once said, if there be any one point in which the Christian church ought to keep its fervor at a white heat, it is concerning missions.

And that includes local. If there be anything about which we cannot tolerate lukewarmness, it is the matter of sending the gospel to a dying world.

[30:10] This is why the church exists. So as we're grieving the loss of people that we love, right? We ought to be compelled by a love for people in Gillsville, right?

In the surrounding community. We ought to say, what good thing may God be doing by his grace to reach people in that place? Should we not be happy to join him in that purpose?

Which brings me to my last point, the hope of the church. The hope of the church is the consummation of the kingdom of God. It's the final day when Jesus will make all things new.

The church, beloved, is both militant and our ammunition is truth with love and the church is victorious.

Jesus has already declared the victory. It will be accomplished, right? this is our great hope in the working out of this gospel message to all people everywhere.

[31:21] A couple of biblical examples. Hebrews 11, 10 says, Abraham was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

And then later in Hebrews, chapter 13, verse 12 and following, so Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore, let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured.

For here, we have no lasting city, right? Christ Family Church is not a lasting city. This is temporal. But, we seek the city that is to come.

That's our great hope. As we have seen people come in and go out. Some people carry 10 years, like many of the couples who will be leaving us today.

And we have such opportunity to invest so much in them and to gain so much service from them. Some come more briefly than that. But all along, we as a church ought to be so welcoming to people, see the opportunity to invest, right?

[32:30] And also glad to see them go because all of us together are seeking the city that is to come. And this heavenly city, it will come down.

It will not be built up. It will be a divine work of God. John records in Revelation 21, verse 2, And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, adorned for her husband.

So it is that great and future reality that we are aiming at and that ought to pull us through the temporal sorrow of seeing people go.

Glad when they come, sad when they go, but all together rejoicing because we're aiming at that great and final day. So I've been sad this morning.

I'll just tell you, I really, we've had time to process this. We've been talking about this for quite a while. And frankly, I thought I was a little over it. I thought I was like, all right, I'm good.

[33:35] Like, process the emotions. I'm good. In fact, I might run the danger this morning of not emoting at all and people thinking that I'm cold to it.

I was a little worried about that and I'm not anymore because the people that are leaving us arrived. And as soon as they did, it became heartbreaking to me.

It is sad to see people go. I mentioned previously of these four couples, I officiated two of their weddings. It's part of another one of their weddings.

We've seen them be college students and get married and jobs and have kids. There's probably some dogs somewhere in there because that's part of what you do, I think.

A truck or two, more than likely. We've grown up, haven't we, with some of these families. And while they're not moving far away, it changes the nature of our relationships.

[34:30] We'll never stop being friends, we'll never stop loving one another, but we won't see each other the way we have seen each other. And so there's a sadness in that. There's some heartbreak in that.

But what will pull us through is a right and proper understanding of what the church is. Why do we do it? Why do we sin? Why do we want to sin well?

Why should we ultimately be able to rejoice? Because we know the church is the gospel made visible.

Let's pray together. as