

Basic Christianity

Jim Leffel, Instructor

Week Five

What is the church?

Common misconceptions. When you ask most people "what is a church?" they point to a building. That's the way we think about church. Sometimes the building is referred to as God's house, or even a temple. The idea is that the building is somehow different. It's as though God lives there. So people talk about "going to church." They talk differently "in Church," dress differently and act differently. One consequence of this is that most people think if they're going to a Church, then they're Christians. "Of course I'm a Christian, I've been a member of St. James all of my life."

Many people are actually offended by the suggestion that being a Christian is other than going to church, and that being a church has nothing to do with bricks and mortar. But that's what the Bible teaches.

New Testament meaning of "ekklesia"

The word for "church" in the New Testament is *ekklesia*. This Greek word means "the called out ones," or "the assembly." So clearly, the church has to do with the people. There are other terms used for the church that also fill out the biblical view. We are called "the body of Christ" (Eph. 1:22,23; 1 Corinthians 12:13), "household of God" (Eph. 2:19), "kingdom of God's beloved Son" (Col. 1:13), "People of God" (1 Peter 2:19). Let's take a closer look at the New Testament understanding of the church.

A new people of God

- **Israel and the church.** The descendants of Abraham, the Jews, are God's chosen people. In one way, the church overlaps with Israel as a new people of God (1 Peter 2:6-10). As God has been faithful to his promises to Israel, so he is faithful to the church as well. A second kind of overlap is that God had a strategic purpose for Israel and he has one for the church too. It is in this sense that Paul referred to the church as "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16).

Yet the church is not merely a continuation of Israel. Israel is under the Law of Moses (Exodus 19 ff.), while the church is free from the Law (Galatians 5). God also has a distinct purpose for Israel that he does not have for the church. We find that after the rapture of the church, God begins to work again through Israel. So while the church and Israel are related, the church is not merely a continuation of Israel.

Sometimes we get the message that the church is a continuation of Israel by the way church services function: priest, altar, incense, etc. But the church of the New Testament didn't look anything like that.

- Fulfillment of Genesis 12:3 and Jeremiah 31. Remember that when God called Abraham, he told Abraham that he would bless the world through him. Israel was to serve a strategic purpose in God's plan to save humanity. But in Christ, this role comes to an end. It's time to begin a new program, one that had been planned all along. The New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 37:24-28) would be a time of blessing, when God would rule forever from within. The permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit marks the beginning of the church (Acts 1:4,5; 2:14ff). Now the people of God are not ethnic Jews, but anyone who has the Holy Spirit indwelling them (Romans 8:9).
-

- A radical community
 - Inclusive (Galatians 3:28). Even though the fallen humanity is divided along racial, gender and economic lines, this is not so for the church. What a radical message this is for its own day and for ours. Obligations were placed on husbands, masters were encouraged to free their slaves, and so on.
 - Tangible love (John 17:19-26). More than anything else, New Testament believers were to love one another. This is no mere sentiment either. It means offering informed counsel, encouragement, exhortation, practical service, etc. See 1 John 3:16-19.
-

A people with a mission.

- The whole dynamic of Christian community was revolutionary. But the church exists for a reason. Without clear understanding of the church's role in the world, it loses its dynamism.
-
- The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 5:14-20). This is why there is a church. We have a charter, a mission. God has called us to reach the world with the liberating message of grace in Christ. That means that we need to orient our community life around our mission.
 - A place of learning (1 Peter 3:16)
 - A place that reflects God's love (Philippians 2:1-8)
 - A place that is culturally engaged (1 Cor. 5:9,10; 9:19-27)
 - A place of results-oriented activism (1 Thessalonians 1:8-10; Acts 1:8).
-
- Finding a place in God's work (Ephesians 2:10; 1 Corinthians 12). God has a unique role for each person to play a role in God's work through the church. Everyone is needed. Consider the metaphor of the body: 1 Corinthians 12:13-27.
 - We all have gifts given by God (1 Cor. 12:4-6).
 - Gifts are given for the common good (v.7). You'll find your area of gifting as you step out in service.
 - All of the ministries of the church have an impact on the depth and authenticity of our faith. So even if you have gifts that seem far removed from evangelism, that's not really so.
-

It has always been helpful for me to conceive of the church as a military outpost. We are concerned for our safety within, but we are where we are for a reason. It puts things in perspective.

What about the Devil?

What do you think? Most people believe in God, or at least some kind of infinite spiritual being. Faith in "guardian angels" and other supernatural beings is on the rise too. Occultic activity is also on the rise today. Greely's work shows that:

- 67% have had ESP experiences
 - 42% believe that the dead can be contacted
 - 31% have had some kind of clairvoyant experience
-

But according to these same surveys, fewer than half believe in a literal hell. Fewer still believe in a real Satan. It's okay to be spiritual, but the presumption today is, "if its spiritual, its got to be good." This view is both recent and Western. I guess the medieval images of the devil and demons are just too strange to be believed. But the Bible is clear on the existence of Satan and of demons. In fact, the universe is seen as a cosmic spiritual war zone between powerful spiritual armies (Ephesians 2:1-3:6:10-20). As Christians, we align ourselves against a real, powerful enemy. It's important that we understand Satan and what he's up to.

Is belief in Satan just a matter of primitive superstition? There are good reasons to believe in a personal evil spiritual being. God is spirit. We know that he created beings that are both physical and spiritual. Certainly, he could create purely spiritual beings also. Further, we recognize that people can be evil--sometimes extremely evil. So, why couldn't a spiritual being also be evil? It certainly follows from the other points, upon which most people agree. So it is at least reasonable to accept the Bible's position on the devil. I think we don't like the idea of Satan and we've had our image of him skewed by superstitious and sensational characterizations. We could put it this way: Jesus certainly took Satan seriously.

Who is Satan?

- Ezekiel 28. Satan is a powerful, beautiful spiritual being who became corrupted through arrogant defiance of God's design for him. Since the fall of Satan, he has mounted a revolution among the angels, taking with him a third of them (Revelation 12:4).
-
- *What's he trying to do?* Convince as many persons as possible that God wants to suppress our freedom to serve his interests at our expense. Remember Genesis 3:4,5. That was his line to Eve, and it really hasn't changed much since then. So contempt for God's rulership and slander of his nature are central to Satan's schemes.
-
- *The battle lines are drawn.* Satan was successful in bringing out rebellion with humans. God allowed Satan to tempt Adam and Eve, because man needs the opportunity to choose God's way. The choice to accept Satan's lie had a profound consequence: Satan was given substantial authority over the world.
 - 1 John 5:19, "The whole world lies in the power of the evil one." Satan is also referred to as "the god of this age," "prince of darkness," "ruler of this world."
 - Note Christ's interaction with the devil in Luke 4:6. Jesus does not challenge the devil's contention.
 - Satan's hold is not absolute. God gives him a measure of freedom, but he can't do what ever he wants to do. And he is neither omnipotent or omniscient.

- Spiritual battle centers on who will rule: God or Satan. While the devil has taken rule by deceit and maintains it through lies and corruption, God is establishing his kingdom. The death of Christ has broken Satan's hold on humanity (John 12:31; Colossians 2:15). As the good news of liberation goes out through the church, captured territory is taken back.
 - We have the promise that one day, God will put an end to the destructive usurpation of the evil one. But this is where the church comes in. We are seeking to reclaim captured territory from Satan's clutches. So we are, as Christians, in a war zone. Like it or not, we will either join the resistance or capitulate to the occupation. This is the same imagery Jesus used when he said, "he who is not for me is against me, and he who is not with me scatters" (Matthew 12:30).
-

Spiritual warfare

As combatants in spiritual warfare, it is vital that we understand our enemy.

- Overt Satanic attack. This is when Satan comes out from behind cover and acts in obvious ways. Primarily we recognize this as demon possession (Mark 5; Acts 19). This is rare, at least in the West. Though it does happen. See the description in Mark 5:1-10.
 - Covert Satanic attack. Like a master tactician, Satan prefers to work behind the scenes. We shouldn't expect him to address us with, "Hello, I'm the devil. I'm involved in a cosmic battle with God and I consider you my territory." Mostly the devil would like to distract us away from even considering the reality of spiritual warfare at all. The ways he seeks to blind us from his scheme are:
 - *Seduction by the "kosmos."* We read that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. The word "world" is *kosmos* in Greek. It refers both to the physical universe and to a worldly value system. The latter sense of the word is found in words like "cosmetics." In fact, that's a pretty good illustration of what the kosmos is: Something that is made to look better than it really is. Biblically, the kosmos is a counterfeit value system, taking things which are a meaningful part of the life God wants for us and makes them the central purpose in life.
 - 1 John 2:15-17.
 - Lust of the flesh
 - Lust of the eyes
 - Boastful pride of life
-

So when we find that our resources and most gratifying experiences are caught up in these things, we realize we've been deceived. Affluent Americans are especially easy to seduce because we have so much time and opportunity to indulge ourselves--with no clear moral consensus against it.

Let's remember that these things are good, but not ends in themselves. We can put life into perspective only when we have a clear sense of values and purpose for life. Seduction takes opportunity when we are confused about what's really important and what's not. We'll all struggle in these areas. The question is whether we are going with the tide or against it?

- Are we able to do without? Do we have good habits of giving our time and resources to others and to God's work?
 - What do you think of the idea that the relative impotence of the American church is tied to its affluence?
-

- *Temptation/Accusation.* This is closely related to the alluring influence of the world system. We are all drawn away from God's will for us at times. Satan is good at exploiting our natural weaknesses--He points the accusing finger:
 - Character weaknesses. James 1:13-15. We may be prone toward bitterness and judging others. Satan loves to divide churches this way. Lack of control over drinking or in the sexual area can also destroy a Christian walk.
 - Natural desires. Matthew 4:2,3. Desire for a mate or for recognition are common examples. Some people think that because God has not delivered up a spouse, that he can't be trusted. We'll just have to go out and do it our way. The need to feel significant can turn into an idolatrous demand for recognition.
-

Many Christians are crippled by moral failure. They know they've blown it. Violating our conscience is a serious matter. In defeat, we can stray away from God. There are a couple of things that are important to remember:

- 2 Corinthians 7:9,10. Repentance is key. This means to "change our minds."
 - Luke 4. Jesus always rebutted temptation with God's word. So should we. And with accusation, we should stand our ground. Romans 8:38,39 teaches that nothing can separate us from God's love. Remember that God will transform us "through the renewing of our minds" (Romans 12:2).
 - Ephesians 6:18,19. Prayer is a key. Regular prayer helps us stay alert (see Luke 4:13). Also, we need to draw on the power of God in these difficult areas. Will power is not really going to work. We need to be transformed--which is a work of the Holy Spirit.
-

- *Deception.* Our minds are a key battle ground. 2 Corinthians 10:3-5. Remember that Satan is a liar: Rev. 12:9; John 8:44; 2 Cor. 11:14. There is so much confusion and distortion of the truth. So few people even know what a Christian really is. But it isn't just non Christians. We need to be able to "take thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ." All of us can be deceived. Church history is filled with examples of people getting off track doctrinally. E.g.: Counseling theory is one of the problems we've seen in recent years.
 - The solution to deception is to learn the word. That's really the only objective gauge of truth we have.