

## The Nature of the Church

What is the church? The church is both a very familiar and a very confused topic. People go to church on Sunday. They belong to a church. The church is referred to, often without much specification as to what it means. In the United States, the church is to be kept separate from the state. There are frequently considerable misunderstandings concerning the church. Part of the confusions results from the multiple usages of the term “church.” Sometimes it is used to refer to a building. Often we use it with respect to a particular congregation of believers; for instance, we might speak of The First Presbyterian Church. At other times, we use it to refer to a denomination; for example, the Baptist Church or the Methodist Church. There is confusion at a more fundamental level, a lack of understanding of the basic nature of the church.

What is church? As a social institution, the church has been an attractive object of sociological study. However, the church is far more than a social institution and therefore we must define it in terms beyond the merely human-empirical. In order to answer the questions about the church, we must begin with the biblical testimony itself.

### 1. The Basic Meaning of the Term Church

#### A) The Term *ekklesia*

The word “church” and cognate terms in other languages (e.g. in German *Kirche*) are derived from the Greek word *kuriakos* (κυριακός), which means “belonging to the Lord.” However, the Greek term for the church in the New Testament is *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία).

The New Testament term *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) provides an important link between the church of Jesus Christ and the Old Testament nation of Israel. The translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek (the Septuagint) chose *ekklesia* to render the Hebrew word *qahal* (קהל). This was used to refer to Israel as the “congregation” or “assembly of the Lord” (Deut. 23:1ff.; 1Chron. 28:8). It is a designation of the occurrence of assembling. It denotes the actual meeting together of the people, particularly as a worshipping community (W. Gesenius, Hebrew Lexicon).

In common use in the first-century Roman world, *ekklesia* connoted an “assembly,” the citizens of a given community called together to tend to city affairs (Acts 19:32, 39, 41) (J. Roloff, “ecclesia,” in EDNT). The early Christians saw themselves as a people called together by the proclamation of the gospel for the purpose of belonging to God through Christ. The choice of *ekklesia* as the designation of the Christian community suggests that the New Testament believers viewed the church as neither a building nor an organization. They were a people brought together by the Holy Spirit; they were a people bound to each other through Christ; they were God’s people standing in covenant with him (2 Cor. 6:16).

#### B) The use of *Ekklesia* in New Testament (The church is local and universal)

1) The term *ekklesia* usually has reference to a group of believers in a specific place. We find Paul’s letters addressed to “the church of God in Corinth (1Cor1:2; 1Thess1:1), “the churches in Galatia”

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<sup>1</sup> Presented at the UBF Staff Meeting in Chicago. References: E. Clowney, *The Church*; J. Calvin, *Institutes*; W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*; L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*; S. Grenz, *Theology*; M. Erickson, *Systematic Theology*; D. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*; Life together; M. Volf, *After Our Likeness*; H. Koeng, *The Church*; J. Moltmann, *The Church*; Karkkainen, *Ecclesiology*.

(Gal1:2), “the church of the Thessalonians” (1Thess1:1). In Acts also this term primarily applies to all the Christians who live and meet in a particular city such as Jerusalem (Acts5:11; 8:1; 11:22; 12:1,5) or Antioch(Act13:1). This is the local sense of the church.

There are also references to churches meeting in individual homes. In Romans16:5, Paul greets “the church that meets at their house” (cf. 1Cor16:19). In the Colossians, Paul writes, “Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and Nympha and the church in her house” (Col4:15).

The individual congregation, or group of believers in a specific place, is never regarded as only a part of component of the whole church. “The sum of the individual congregations does not produce the total community or the church. Each community, however small, represents the total community, the church” (K. Schmidt, “ecclesia”, in TDNT). The church is not a sum or composite of the individual local groups. “It is one throughout the whole world and yet is at the same time fully present in every individual assembly” (L. Coenen, “Church,” in NIDNT).

2) The church is universal in nature. Jesus says, “I will build my church” (Matt16:18). The church is Christ’s body, and all things are under him (Eph1:22-23). “There is one body” (4:4). “Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior” (5:23). The church is subject to Christ (5:24) and is to be presented before him (5:27). All these verses suggest the universal nature of the church (cf. 1Cor10:32; 11:22; 12:28; Col1:18, 24).

The church includes all persons anywhere in the world who believe in Christ. Hebrew12:23 speaks of “the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.” It includes all who have lived and been part of his body, and all who will live and be part of his body. In view of this inclusiveness, we can theologially define the church as “the whole body of those who through Christ have been savingly reconciled to God and have received new life” (M. Erickson).

While universal in nature, the church finds its expression in local groupings of believers that display the same qualities as does the body of Christ as a whole. Therefore, we must maintain that the group of God’s people at any level from local to universal can rightly be called a “church.”

## 2. Biblical Images of the Church

The church is different from a human institution because it is not simply a human institution, but God’s creation. What are the qualities or characteristics that are present in the true church? We can describe the church by using certain biblical images. I will focus on the most significant ones. In Paul’s writings, there is an implicit Trinitarian structure (A. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the NT*; M. Volf, *After Our Likeness*), according to which, we can describe the church as the people of God, the body of Christ, and the dwelling of the Holy Spirit.

### A) The People of God

Paul writes of God’s decision to make believers his people in 2Cor6:16: “I will live with them and walk among them, and they will be my people.” The church is constituted of God’s people. They belong to Him and He belongs to them. According to 1 Pet. 2:9, the church is a chosen people and a holy priesthood belonging to God.

This metaphor is connected with the Old Testament basis of *ekklesia*. In the Old Testament, Israel is identified as God’s people (Ex15:13,16; Num14:8; Deut32:9-10; Isa62:4; Jer12:7-10; Hos1:9-10; 2:23; Romans9:24-26 ). The concept of the church as the people of God emphasizes God’s initiative in choosing them. In the OT God actually created a people for himself. He chose Abraham and then through him brought into being the people of Israel. In the NT this concept of God’s choosing a

people is broadened to include both Israel and Gentiles. Now people from the Jews and Gentiles are called together to belong to God; the church is an international fellowship comprising persons "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9).

The concept of Israel and the church as the people of God implies certain covenantal characteristics. Most importantly, God cares for his people and protects them. He keeps them as "the apple of his eye" (Deut. 32:10).

In turn, God who covenanted with his people expects that they will be his people without reservation and without dividing their loyalty. The Lord's exclusive claim on his people is one of the main themes in the Bible, as it is exemplarily pictured in the prophet Hosea's exclusive claim on his unfaithful wife. In the OT, circumcision was the sign of God's divine ownership. In the NT, we find an inward circumcision of the heart as God's claim on his people.

The people of God should live up to a particular quality of holiness. God expected his people to be pure and sanctified. In the NT, as Christ's bride the church must be holy. Eph5:25-27 says, "Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless."

#### B) The Body of Christ

The body of Christ is the most extended image. Some scholars regard this image as virtually a complete definition of the church (e.g. Berkhof, Systematic Theology). This emphasizes that the church is the locus of Christ's activity now just as was his physical body during his earthly ministry. This image is used both of the church universal (Eph1:22-23) and of individual local congregations (1Cor12:27). The universal church: "God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body" (Eph1:22-23). The individual local church: "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1Cor12:27).

The metaphor of the body of Christ also accentuates connections of the church as a group of believers with Christ. Christ is the head of this body, of which believers are individual members or parts (Col. 1:18; Eph1:22). This metaphor is parallel to Jesus' image of himself as the vine on which believers are branches (John15:1-11). Christ is the Lord of the church. "God purposed to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, Christ" (Eph1:10).

The image of the body of Christ also expresses the interconnectedness between all the persons who make up the church. Christian faith is not to be defined merely in terms of individual relationship to the Lord. 1Cor12 stresses the dependence of each believer upon every other. The church is not organization, but organism. Especially in terms of the gifts of the Spirit we must say that, "though all its parts are many, they form one body" (1Cor12:12). We all, whether Jew or Gentiles, have been baptized by one Spirit into one body, and have been made to drink of one Spirit (1Cor12:13). All of the various members have been given gifts, not for personal satisfaction, but for the building-up of the body as a whole (1Cor14). While there is diversity of gifts, there is not to be division within the body. No one gift is for every one; no one person has all gifts (12:27-31). Each member needs the others, and each is needed by the others.

Each believer encourages and builds up the others. "We will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Eph4:15-16). Members are to bear one another's burdens (Gal6:2). There is also the aspect of the church discipline (Matt. 18:8,17; Rom. 16:17; 1Cor. 5:12-13).

The church is to be identified by genuine fellowship. This goes beyond merely social interrelatedness; it means an intimate understanding of one another. "If one part suffers, every part

suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it” (1Cor. 12:26). The early church in the Acts shows this by sharing even material possessions among the members.

The church is a unified body. Members of the church have to overcome divisions (1Cor. 1:10-17; 3:1-9; 11:17-19). It’s because all believers are baptized by one Spirit into one body (1Cor. 12:12-13). Eph.4:4-6 emphasizes, “There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

The body of Christ is universal. All barriers have been removed through Christ. Paul emphasizes this saying, “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (Gal 3:28; cf. Col 3:11; Rom 11:25-26,32; Eph2:15).

As the body of Christ, the church is the extension of his ministry. Jesus as Lord of lords and King of kings sent his disciples to preach, baptize and teach (Matt. 28:18-20). The work of Christ will be done by his body, the church.

### C) The Temple of the Holy Spirit

It is the Holy Spirit who brought the NT church into being at Pentecost. We believers are all baptized by one Spirit into one body (1Cor. 12:13). In the OT, the temple was in some special way God’s earthly dwelling place (2Chron6:1-2). The Spirit now indwells the church, both individually and collectively. A collective dimension: “*Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple, and God’s Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him; for God’s temple is sacred, and you are that temple*” (1Cor. 3:16-17). An individual dimension: “*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own*” (1Cor6:19). We Christians are “a holy temple in the Lord, a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Eph. 2:21-22). We are “a spiritual house” where Christ is the cornerstone of the temple (1Peter2:5).

The Holy Spirit imparts his life to the church. The “Fruit of the Spirit” is found in the church: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5). The Spirit’s fruit shows genuineness of the church.

It is the Holy Spirit who conveys power to the church to carry out her mission. Acts 1:8: “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” Filled with the Spirit, the disciples testified to Jesus’ resurrection with boldness and great power (Acts4:31, 33). These results were a consequence of the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit produces a unity within the body. This is not uniformity, but a oneness in aim and action. The early church is described as being “one in heart and mind” (Acts 4:32). The Spirit created in them a strong consciousness of membership in the group. So they viewed their possessions not as “mine” but as “ours.”

The Holy Spirit, dwelling within the church, also creates a sensibility to the Lord’s leading. The indwelling Spirit is the means of Jesus’ presence with us (Matt. 28:20; John 16:7). As the Spirit indwelt Jesus’ disciples, he helped them to remember the Lord’s teachings and guided them into all truth (John14:26; 16:13). Think about Acts10:11-13. In a vision Peter was told to kill and eat certain unclean beasts. Peter’s first response was “Surely not, Lord.” Peter soon realized that the essence of the message of the vision was that he should bring the gospel to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews. The Spirit is also the Lord of the church. It is he who equips the body by dispensing gifts. He decides when a gift will be bestowed, and upon whom it is to be conferred. “He gives them to each one, just as he determines” (1Cor. 12:11).

The Holy Spirit makes the church holy and pure. Just as the temple was a holy and sacred place in the OT because God dwelt in it, so also are believers sanctified under the new covenant because they are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1Cor. 6:19-20).

### Attributes of the Church

What are the attributes by which the true church could be identified? The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (A.D. 381) confessed: We believe “in one holy catholic and apostolic church (εἰς μίαν ἁγίαν καθολικὴν ἐκκλησίαν).” It defines the attributes of the church as “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.” These four attributes are appropriate to describe the church when viewed biblically (cf. L. Berkhof; R. Reymond).

When we view the church in terms of the gospel, we can easily see how the various descriptions of the church fit together (E. Clowney). The church is apostolic, because it is founded on the apostolic gospel and called to fulfill the apostolic mission. The holiness of the church requires that life of the church and the behavior of Christians mark Christ’s church following the way of the gospel. The unity of the church means a new community that is joined through the gospel under the one Shepherd Jesus. The universality of the church means that it includes all the nations through preaching the gospel.

#### 1. The Apostolicity of the Church

The sure sign of Christ’s true church is the preaching of the apostolic gospel. Jesus called the twelve and appointed them to be his apostles (Mt10:2; Mk3:16; Luke6:13). They were called to be with him, so that they could be his witnesses.

Jesus made the confessing Peter a rock of foundation in his church. The apostles were given the authority of the keys of the Kingdom. The use of the keys is not to be limited to the twelve, but is an authority possessed by the church. Yet Peter and the eleven bear the keys with distinctive authority. The foundation of God’s house does not run on indefinitely, but is laid once for all. Jesus Christ gives this authority to those who are his original witnesses (the first eye-witnesses).

Here we must emphasize the meaning of apostolicity. To be apostolic, the church must be built upon the witnesses of the apostles (Eph2:20; 3:4-5). Therefore, the Reformers contended that not the pretended chair of Peter, but the teaching of Peter was the real mark of apostolicity.

The church is apostolic because it is built upon the apostolic foundation. The foundation itself is Jesus Christ and other teachers might build on that foundation, but they can lay no other foundation (1Cor3:1). The foundation of the church was unique and unrepeatable. They received the revelation of the risen Christ. Through the Spirit they remembered Christ’s words and deeds (Jn14:26; Acts10:41).

The founding authority of the apostles was sealed by the mighty works they performed in the name of Jesus. The church carries the apostolic gospel down through the centuries and around the world. What the church bears is the apostolic gospel, recorded in the inspired words of the Bible. Paul delivered what he had received: “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1Cor15:1-4).

The NT apostles and prophets are the foundation of the church because they have received by revelation the mystery of the gospel. What was not made known in other generations has now been “revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets” (Eph3:5). The church is not the source

of the divine revelation given through the apostles (Gal 1:1; 6-9). No, the apostolic gospel is the foundation on which the church stands.

We can call the Bible “the apostolic witnesses of the gospel.” We should not compromise the authority of the Bible as the apostolic gospel. Does the church authority precede NT Scripture, as the Roman Catholicism teaches? The doctrine of apostolic succession in the Pope gave tradition an authoritative source, but they misunderstood the calling of the apostles. Popes cannot claim to have seen the risen Lord. They are not direct eye-witnesses and messengers of the risen Lord. So in this strict sense the apostles can have no successors (cf. J. Calvin; H. Kueng). The apostolic gospel brought into being the church, not the opposite. Therefore, the Scripture as the apostolic gospel has a supreme authority over any other traditions.

The church is apostolic because it is founded on apostolic teaching, and also because of its charge to carry out the Great Commission. We church have a mission. Some don’t take seriously the mission of the church in the pluralistic world (e.g. the liberal wing of WCC). But the difference between the church and the world is that the church is aware of the world’s salvation (Clawney, *The Church*, 78). The risen Christ expected his church to continue the mission. We are an apostolic church as long as we participate in Christ’s apostolic ministry.

## 2. The Unity of the Church

The church is one by virtue of its union with Christ. As for Roman Catholics, the unity of the Church consists in its imposing worldwide organization, which aims at the inclusion of all nations. It centers especially in the hierarchy. But we should maintain that the unity of the Church is primarily of a spiritual character. All its members are baptized by the Spirit into one body having one Head and one Lord. It is the unity of a body, the mystical body of Christ, of which all believers are members. This unity expresses itself to a certain extent in Christian profession and conduct, in public worship, and in the external organization of the church.

Dissensions and divisions among Christians obscure the oneness of the body of Christ. Hence, we have various appeals in the Bible for unity through patience and love. Particularly Jesus taught church’s unity as both fact and ideal to be achieved: John10:14-16: “There shall be one (μία) flock and one (εἷς) shepherd.” Jesus prayed in John17:20-23: “I pray ... that all of them may be one (εἶν united) ... that they may be one as we are one (εἶν).”

Paul labored to insure that Christ’s church would be one. He emphasized the unity of the Christ’s Church and especially put his efforts in bringing to unity the Gentile churches and Jewish church (Rom15:5-6; Gal3:28; 1Cor12:12-13; Eph2:14-16; 1Cor1:10-13; Eph4:3-6; Phil2:2; Col3:12-14).

## 3. The Holiness of the Church.

The church as the corporate assembly of the saints is holy in an absolute sense in that it is in Christ. It is holy in that it is separated from the world in its consecration to God. On the other hand, it is holy in a relative sense in that its sanctification is progressive. Calvin remarked: “The church is holy ... in the sense that it is daily advancing and is not yet perfect; it makes progress from day to day but has not yet reached its goal of holiness” (*Institutes*, IV 1, 17). So, as the holiness of the individual believer is both definite and progressive, the same must be said about the church as the corporate assembly of the saints: the holiness of the church is both definite in the sense that it is in union with Christ and progressive in the sense that its sanctification must and will follow its justification. This holiness finds external expression in our practical life devoted to God.

Biblical references (John17:15-17; 1Cor3:16-17; 2Cor6:14-7:1; Eph4:24; 5:25-27; 1Thes5:23-24; 1Peter1:15-16; 2:9).

#### 4. The Catholicity/Universality of the Church

Roman Catholicism speaks of the catholicity of the church in view of the fact that she is spread over the whole earth, has existed from the beginning and continues to exist. However, we should emphasize that the invisible Church is the real catholic/universal Church, because it includes all believers of all ages. The church is the visible expression of the reconciling work of Christ for the entire world. It breaks down all kinds of barriers ethnic, geographical, and social. The real universal church has its members among all nations of the world, and it cannot conform to the social castes and sectarian goals that divide a fallen world (cf. Clowney, 73).

### The Visible Church and the Invisible Church

#### 1. The Distinction between the Visible and Invisible Church

Now we need to deal with a specific issue the distinction between the visible and invisible church. It appeared as early as Augustine, but it was articulated by Martin Luther (Preface to Revelation) and John Calvin (Institutes). This distinction is not the same as the distinction between the local and the universal church. Here, we are dealing with the question of the extent to which the true church is to be identified with the present earthly institution. Is it possible that persons within the visible church are not true believers, not part of the body of Christ? Conversely, can there be membership in Christ's body apart from some segment of the visible church, some local church?

Does connection with the institutional church make one a Christian? The traditional Roman Catholicism holds this view; it is also characteristic of Anglican and Eastern Orthodox communions. For the Roman Catholics, a major mark of a true church is apostolicity. A true church is one that can trace itself back to the apostles and thus to Jesus' act of establishing the church. Without such a pedigree there is no church, no salvation, and no Christians. What authenticates a group of people as a church is visible connection to a present-day organization. Those who hold this view set extreme importance on the order of the church and the ordained clergy.

Or is the church constituted by the individual Christian experiences of its members? This is the opposite extreme view which we can call the individualistic approach to the church. The emphasis here is on the individual's direct relationship to God through Jesus Christ, which alone makes one a Christian. The visible organization is relatively unimportant. Some deny the necessity of being part of an organized body. Compare Quakers or Plymouth Brethren. Church membership as a permanent commitment to a given group of believers is minimized in this individualistic approach.

There is a balanced view which can be called "parish" view (cf. M. Erickson). It stresses both the visible and invisible church. The visible church includes all who make an outward profession and come together to hear the Word and celebrate the sacraments. The believers within this visible church constitute the true church, the invisible church.

We need to maintain the distinction between the visible and invisible church. Yet we must say that not only the invisible church, but also the visible church is the community of the saints. These are not two churches, but one, and therefore have but a single essence (cf. J. Calvin). The one as well as the other is essentially the community of the saints, but the invisible church is the church as God sees it, a church which contains only believers, while the visible church is the church as man sees it,

consisting of those who profess Jesus Christ (L. Berkhof). This may contain weeds amid the wheat (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43), and there are sheep and goats according to Matt 25:31-46.

What has the priority regarding salvation? When questioned about salvation, the Bible never suggests that it depends on connection with a group of believers. Peter preached, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness for your sins” (Acts 2:38). Paul replied to the Philppian jailor, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household” (16:31).

## 2. The Importance of the Visible Form of the Church

Having assigned to faith the priority, or given precedence to the invisible over the visible, we must nevertheless not minimize the importance of the visible form of the church. Evangelicals have often excused a deep neglect of the order of the church by emphasizing its invisibility. If only the church invisible matters, there is little need of concern about the unity, holiness, catholicity, or even apostolicity of the church. But we should emphasize that every believer becomes an integral part of a group of believers and makes a firm commitment to it. Christianity is a corporate matter and the Christian life can be fully realized only in relationship to others.

The church as it actually exists on earth is to be regarded as the community of saints (*communio sanctorum*). Following Calvin, *Barth* emphasized that there are not two churches visible and invisible, but one: The visible church is “the earthly-historical form of existence of the on living Lord Jesus Christ” (Church Dogmatics IV 1). *Bonhoeffer* highlighted the importance of the visible church saying, “any community of Jesus which wants to remain invisible is no longer a community that follows him” (Discipleship).

The church is no ordinary collection of persons. Rather, because the church has been called out of the world by the preaching of the gospel in order to live in covenant, it is constituted by people with a special consciousness. Because they all confess allegiance to Christ, participants in the church are conscious that they stand as a body under his lordship.

At the same time, their mutual confession of Jesus as the Christ means that the members are conscious of their special standing in fellowship with each other; their shared commitment to be disciples of the Lord entails a commitment to one another. The church-constituting covenant is a mutual agreement to walk together as the people of God. Because of this mutual covenant, each member senses a responsibility not only to belong to God but also to nurture the confession of Christ in all others. In short, because of Christ the church is a company of believers in covenant with God and each other (S. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*).

We must balance the individual and the corporate aspects of Christian identity. Specifically, the church and the believer are mutually interdependent. Because the coming together of believers in mutual covenant constitutes the church, it is the covenant community of individuals. At the same time, the church possesses a history and tradition that transcends its present membership. Therefore, through the proclamation of the gospel it gives birth to the faith of those who enter the covenant people.

On one hand, we acknowledge the distinction between the visible/empirical church and the invisible/spiritual church. On the other hand, we should do whatever we can to make the two identical. Just as no true believer should be outside the fellowship, so also we should be diligent to assure that only true believers are within. While perfect purity of the membership is an ideal that cannot be realized within this life, we should not tolerate open unbelief and sin.

## Objective Marks of the Church

The Reformers rejected the way the Roman Catholics tied them all to the institutional papacy. They made the gospel, not visible organization, the test of the true church. Yet the Reformers sought biblical standards for the visible church. There are not merely qualities of the individuals making up the group, but of the local assembly quite apart from the spiritual condition of the individuals within it. There are certain objective marks by which the presence of the true church can be detected. The Reformers, particularly the Lutherans, urged that at least two marks distinguished the true from the false church. Later Reformers (Calvin) added a third (cf. Berkhof; Clowney). Where these are present, there the one holy catholic and apostolic church is present; where they are absent, it is not the true church.

### 1. The True Preaching of the Word of God

The first mark is faithfulness to and the pure proclamation of the Word of God. This is the most important mark of the Church. The true preaching of the Word of God is the great means for maintaining the Church and for enabling her to be the mother of the faithful. This is evident from such passages as John8:31,32,47; 14:23; 1John4:1-3; 2John9.

The apostles established the church by preaching the gospel. The fellowship of the church in the Acts exists among those who continue in the apostolic teaching (Acts2:42). Luke describes the growth of the church as the growth of the Word (Acts6:7; 12:24; 19:20). The ministries by which the church is built up are ministries of the Word (Eph4:11). Therefore, the apostolicity of the church means that the church is built on the foundation of the apostolic gospel. All other attributes of the church derive from this.

However, ascribing this mark to the Church does not mean that the preaching of the Word in a Church must be perfect before it can be regarded as a true Church. Calvin allowed for errors in preaching, so long as the “grand doctrine of Christianity is not injured” and the basic articles of faith are not suppressed (Calvin, Institutes, IV 2.1; cf. Clowney). Only relative purity of doctrine can be ascribed to any Church.

### 2. The Proper Administration of the Sacraments

For the Reformers, the second mark of the true church is the proper administration of the sacraments. That means that a duly authorized person administers the sacraments in an appropriate way to people entitled to receive them. The sacraments should never be separated from the Word, for they have no content of their own, but derive their content from the Word of God. They are in fact a visible preaching of the Word. Those who say that church membership is not necessary, fail to grasp what the NT teaches about the church and the administration of the sacraments. That the right administration of the sacraments is a characteristic of the true church is based on such passage as 1Cor10:14-17, 21; 1Cor11:23-30 (cf. Reymond).

### 3. The Faithful Exercise of Church Discipline

This is quite essential for maintaining the purity of doctrine and for guarding the holiness of the sacraments. A church that would remain true to her ideal in the measure, in which this is possible on earth, must be diligent and conscientious in the exercise of Christian discipline. The Word of God insists on proper discipline in the Church of Christ (Matt18:18; 1Cor5:1-5,13; 14:33,40; Rev2:14,15,20).

## The Church and the Kingdom of God

The church consists of those whom the Spirit has called out of the world through the gospel proclamation to walk together as God's people. This covenanting people, however, are not an end in themselves. Rather, the church as a people-in-covenant is related to God's kingdom. The topic of the kingdom of God is important when we deal with the church. Indeed, the kingdom of God lies at the heart of the Bible, which modern exegetical results highlighted (J. Jeremias; W. Kuemel; O. Cullmann; G.E. Ladd). Consequently, we must set forth the ecclesiology within the context of God's reign (H. Kraus; J. Moltmann; S. Grenz).

### 1. The Kingdom of God is both present and future.

The biblical drama of the kingdom climaxes by moving from the past and present to the future. The biblical story focuses on Jesus who came as the bearer of God's reign. On the one hand, the divine reign is related to Christ's first advent. He embodies the kingdom of God. Jesus' life, death, resurrection demonstrate God's claim of the right to rule. Through his exaltation, Jesus has been installed as Lord of the universe. It is a reality that people can enter (Mark 9:47; Matt. 21:31-32), for it is the kingly power of God (Joel Marcus). Hence, the kingdom is a "sphere of existence" in which people are called to live. It is God's powerful invasion into our world. As such it consists in doing the will of God (Matt. 6:10; 7:21-23), and it demands a radical decision (13:44-46). To enter the kingdom means to participate in "the already inaugurated explosion of God's power into the world," (Joel Marcus, *Entering into the Kingly Power of God*).

On the other hand, although the kingdom is here, this presence is partial and not yet consummated. For this reason there remains a future aspect of the kingdom. One day, all peoples will acknowledge the lordship of Jesus (Phil. 2:10-11). Likewise one day the principles of God's kingdom will be universally actualized in the new human society that God will inaugurate. Then, "what is God's by right (*de jure*) will also be true in fact (*de facto*)" (S. Grenz). The entire universe will be the realm of God's rule. Only then will the kingdoms of this world truly become the kingdom of God and God's will truly be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Nevertheless, the power of the kingdom is already at work, for it breaks into the present from the future (cf. J. Moltmann; H. Kraus). As a result, we can experience the divine reign in a partial yet real sense prior to the great eschatological day. The already/not yet character of the kingdom provides the context in which we may raise the question of the kingdom and the church. The link of the church to the reign of God means that ecclesiology has an unavoidable future reference. This eschatological orientation leads to a dynamic ecclesiology. This future - the eschatological reality - and not the past or even the present constitutes our corporate life, just as it determines our individual identity.

### 2. The Church is not the kingdom

Is presence in the visible church equal to being in the kingdom of God, coupled with the sacramental system and excommunication, invested great power in the clergy? Yes, says medieval Roman Catholicism. Can we equate the kingdom with the invisible church, the spiritual body of Christ? Yes, say many Protestants. Is the kingdom only the future, temporal (one-thousand-year) rule of Messiah over the earth? During the millennium, Israel and not the church will enjoy prominence (dispensationalists).

We should neither equate nor radically separate the church and the kingdom. Rather, we must understand the church in the context of the kingdom (G. Ladd; J. Moltmann; S. Grenz). A proper ecclesiology understands the church within the context of the kingdom because the biblical concept of the kingdom of God is broader than the church. The reign of God includes his inherent right to rulership. The kingdom concept encompasses God's domain in all of its aspects, which includes the entire created universe as well as the heavenly court.

### 3. The Kingdom Creates the Church.

The church arises from God's program in calling out a people to belong to him through Christ. We must understand the church in the context of the kingdom not only because the kingdom is broader in scope than the church, but also because the church is dependent on the kingdom. God's right to rule which Jesus declared and demonstrated, produces the church. And the Holy Spirit creates an obedient human response, which includes building the corporate fellowship of the people of faith. The church, therefore, is called forth by the proclamation of the kingdom of God. It is the product of the kingdom produced by the obedient response to the announcement of the divine reign.

### 4. The Church Witnesses to the Kingdom.

The church derives its purpose from God's activity in the world. The Holy Spirit calls the community of faith into being, in order that it might proclaim Jesus' kingdom message and live in the world as the company of those who acknowledge in the present the coming reign of God. In this sense, the church is the "eschatological company," the body of those who bear testimony by word and deed to the divine reign, which Christ will consummate at his return and hence will be present throughout the cosmos. Christians are the fellowship that pioneers in the present the principles that characterize the reign of God. Hence, we Christians point the way toward the kingdom. So, the church in the world does not focus merely on bringing into the fold those whom God elected (against the static view). Rather, at its heart is the goal of modeling in the present the glorious human fellowship that will come at the consummation of history. Therefore, the church is a foretaste of the eschatological reality that God will one day graciously give to his creation. In other words, "the church is a sign of the kingdom of God" (S. Grenz).

## The Ministry of the Church

The church is a dynamic reality moving toward the future. The church as a covenant people pioneer in the present the principles that characterize the future kingdom of God, thereby it is a sign of the divine reign of God. As the covenant people of God the church is the eschatological community. The church existing as a special community in the world possesses a divinely given ministry. Its ministry arises from the church's identity as the people of God and a sign of God's reign. The functions of the church are very important topics, for the church was not brought into being by our Lord simply to exist as end in itself. Rather, it was brought into being to fulfill the Lord's intention for it.

### 1. The Heart of the Ministry of the Church: the Gospel

As we deal with the rule of the church, it is critical for us to see the one factor that gives basic shape to everything the church does. At the heart of all its functions lies the gospel, the good news. At the beginning of his ministry Jesus announced that he had been anointed specially to preach the gospel (Luke 4:18-19). He gave the apostles the command to spread the gospel.

The first recorded activity of Jesus is his preaching the gospel: "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:14-15). Matthew portrayed Jesus' ministry as "preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness" (Matt 9:35).

The key Greek word of the gospel is *euangelion* (εὐαγγέλιον): A technical term for news of victory (G. Friedrich, in TDNT). In the NT, Paul makes the greatest use of the term "*euangelion*." Paul viewed the gospel as centering on Jesus Christ and what God has done through him (cf. for the content of the gospel. Rom. 1:3-4; 1 Cor. 15: 3-4). We can say that Jesus is the gospel.

The gospel is all-important. Rom 1:16 declares that "the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." The gospel is absolute and exclusive. The gospel is the only route to salvation. This gospel cuts across all racial, social, economic, and educational barriers (Rom 1:16; Gal 3:28). It also spans the centuries of time.

The church has good news to offer to the world, the message that there is a hope in Jesus. The message and ministry of the church are unique in our world where there is little hope. The gospel offers hope and it comes to fulfillment when we believe and obey the gospel.

### 2. The Functions of the Church

What is the ministry of the church? Theologians usually summarize our vocation by appeal to three Greek terms, *martyria* (witness), *koinonia* (fellowship), and *diakonia* (service). However, we should not omit the foundational ministry: *latreia* (worship). In the church we are to seek to be a people of God in corporate worship, mutual edification, and outreach to the world (evangelism and service).

#### A) Evangelism

Christ calls us to reach out to the world. We are obedient to the outreach mandate Christ entrusted to the church. In Act 1:8 Christ says, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." In the great commission (Matt. 28:19), Christ instructed his disciples, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations." So, the call to evangelize is a command. Having accepted Jesus as Lord, the disciples had brought themselves under his rule and were obligated to do whatever he asked.

But the disciples were not sent out merely in their own strength. Jesus opens his command with the statement: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (28:18). Having all authority Jesus commissioned the disciple as his agents. Therefore, they had the right to go and evangelize all nations. They were both authorized and enabled for the task (28:20).

The extent of the commission: it is all-inclusive. Jesus speaks of “all nations” (28:19). Acts 1:8. There was no geographical restriction upon the commission. Jerusalem: the immediate location of Christ’s death and resurrection; it was also the site of Pentecost. Perhaps the most distasteful part of the commission for the disciples was the part “in Samaria.” This took them to the people whom they found most difficult to love because of the historical friction. Finally, the disciples have to bear witness “to the end of the earth.” They were to take the gospel message everywhere, to all nations and to every type of people. The mission of the church includes people whom we may by nature tend to dislike. Local evangelism, church planting, and world missions are all the same thing. The church must work in all of these areas.

The goal of evangelism is disciple making. Jesus did not call us to the task of evangelism with a view toward making converts, but disciples. The fellowship of Jesus’ followers is not merely a loose coalition of individuals who acknowledge Jesus. Rather, it is a community of disciples who seek to walk together in accordance with the principles of the kingdom. As Christ’s church, we desire to live out in the present the final reality that will come at the end of history.

If the church is to be faithful to its Lord and bring joy to his heart, we must be engaged in bringing the gospel to all people. The church is called to be the community of mission and always exist as the church of mission.

#### B) Edification

The work of the church includes edification of believers. Although Jesus laid greater emphasis on evangelism, the edification is logically prior. Paul repeatedly speaks of the edification of the body of Christ. Ephesians 4:12 says that God has given various gifts to the church “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body Christ may be built up.” Believers should grow up into Christ (Eph. 4:16). The potential for edification is the criterion by which all our activities including our speech are to be measured (Eph. 4:29).

In Paul’s discussion of certain controversial spiritual gifts, he sums up the matter: “All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church” (1Cor. 14:26; cf. 1Cor. 14:4-5, 12; 12:14-25; 12:27-31).

There are several means by which members of the church are to be edified.

Fellowship *κοινωνία (koinonia)* means a “having or holding all things in common.” Actually according to Acts 5, the members of the early church even held all their material possessions in common. Paul speaks of a genuine Christian fellowship in 1Cor. 12:26: “If a part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.” Such ministry includes sharing the burdens of those who are facing difficulties (Gal. 6:1-2), encouraging and admonishing each other (Heb. 10:24-25), and nurturing those who are new or weak in the faith (Rom. 14:1, 19). Such edification is crucial to all believers. The Christian life is not merely an individual struggle for perfection. Rather, it is in an important sense a community project. On occasion this can mean correction and rebuke, which should be done lovingly. In severe cases there may even be a need for excommunication from the group. The primary aim of such disciplinary action is not to rid the ground of the erring member, but to restore such a person to righteous living and thus to fellowship with believers.

Instruction or teaching. This is part of the broad task of discipling. In the Great Commission, Jesus commanded “Make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded

you” (Matt. 28:20). One of God’s gifts to the churches is “pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4:11) to prepare and equip the people of God for service.

Instruction may take many forms and occur on many levels: there is Christian education in the local church through discipleship programs. Beyond that level, there are theological seminaries and divinity schools which equip pastors, teachers, and others to instruct people in God’s Word. Christian liberal-arts colleges, mission school...

Preaching is another means of instruction that has been used by the Christian church from its very beginning.

For the purpose of mutual edification, God has equipped the church with various gifts apportioned and bestowed by the Holy Spirit (1Cor. 12:11). The New Testament contains four different lists of these gifts (charismata): Romans 12:6-8; 1Corinthians 12:4-11; Ephesians 4:11; 1Peter 4:11.

### C) Worship

In relation to God, the church’s purpose is to worship God. Although we may worship God privately in many ways, worship is also to be a dimension of the church’s corporate life. The early church gathered to worship on a regular schedule. The author of Hebrews admonished the community not to give up meeting together (Heb. 10:25). And Paul issued instructions to guide Christians when they "come together" (1 Cor. 14:26). We are to be a worshiping community, offering to God the glory due his name. For this reason we can speak of the church as being "gathered to worship."

The Focus of Worship. The worship lifts the attention of the believing community to the God who called us to be his people. The biblical writers encouraged the worshiping community to ascribe worth to God for who he is and for what he does. The church centers its attention on who and what God is, not on itself. We should worship God for who he is. The psalmist commanded: "Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness" (Ps. 29:2; cf. 96:8; 1 Chron. 16:29). In so doing we join with the angelic hosts who continually proclaim, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come" (Rev. 4:6-8; cf. Isa. 6:3). We also worship God because he is the Creator (Rev. 4:11). As the Creator, God is powerful and therefore worthy of awe and praise (Ps. 29:3-10). Above all, however, the biblical people worshipped God because of his saving acts. The Old Testament continually admonished Israel to worship God because he had graciously entered into covenant with them (1 Chron. 16:15), and as a result, he had done great wonders (v. 12), especially in rescuing them from their enemies.

According to the New Testament, the focal point of God’s saving work is Jesus. As the Savior, the risen Lord is now the recipient of worship. In Rev 5:9 the living creatures and the elders praised the Lamb: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation."

Through its corporate worship life, the community gathers to commemorate the foundational events of our spiritual existence, at the center of which is the action of God in Christ who delivers us from the bondage of sin. In so doing we extol God’s great love. We glorify the God who is eternally the community of love and especially the Father who "so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son" (John 3:16).

So, worship in the church is not merely a preparation for something else; it is in itself fulfilling the major purpose of the church with reference to its Lord. In worship we focus on God, while in instruction and fellowship, we focus on fellow Christians; in evangelism, we turn our attention to non-Christians.

#### D) Social Concern

If the church is to carry on his ministry, it will be engaged in some form of ministry to the needy and the suffering. Jesus expects this of believers when he tells the parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. Luke 10:25-37). The involvement of the church in social action is crucial. It is a natural extension of Jesus' own ministry as entrusted to us. It arises out of a holistic conception of the gospel. Jesus did not describe his task as proclamation in isolation, but as proclamation in the context of service. Jesus engaged in service to people in need (cf. Luke 4:18-19). The sick, the social outcasts, the demon-possessed, the sinners found in Jesus a friend and healer. Through his acts of compassion, Jesus demonstrated the presence of the kingdom (Luke 11:20). James 1:27 is stressing practical Christianity (cf. 2:1-11; 2:15-17).

The gospel is explicitly social. The church is a reconciled people who are concerned about compassion, righteousness, and justice. It demands that reconciliation with God be embodied in social relationships, even in earthly social institutions such as family, work, and government. Therefore, the church is a community interested in social fellowship. Social concern includes condemning unrighteousness as well. Amos and several other OT prophets spoke out emphatically against the evil and corruption of their day. John the Baptist condemned the sin of the ruler of his day, even though it cost him eventually his life (Luke 3:19-20; Mark 6:17-29).

The evangelicals have to develop the relationship between church and society based on the biblical witness: According to Luther's Doctrine of two realms, the church and society are to be distinguished, not mixed. The reformer Calvin spoke of Christ's kingly reign, which maintains that the risen Christ is Lord of lords and reigns over the church and society. While we should keep distinction between the church and society, yet the church has to take responsibility for the society based on the Christ's royal reign.

As a kingdom people we the church pray:  
 Hallowed be Thy Name!  
 Thy kingdom come!  
 Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!