

Ecclesiology

Semester 2 – Topic 1 – Introduction and Review

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Introduction

During the spring semester, we began a study of the doctrine of the church (ecclesiology) which is the category of systematic theology looks at the church's definition, purpose, organization including leadership, ordinances, and practices. During the first part of the class, we added studies on church discipline, local church membership, the distinction between the church and Israel, a survey of church history, and a survey of denominational beliefs.

This fall, we will continue this study by focusing on practices in the local church and examine Valley Bible Church in light of those biblical principles. We will look at the marks of a healthy church (the things to look for when searching for a local church body), the biblical definition and practice of worship, body relationships, the usage of spiritual gifts, a philosophy of missions, current theological and philosophical ministry issues in the church (like the biblical counseling movement, the church growth movement, etc.), ecumenicism and para-church and inter-church relationships, and biblical ministry within the local church.

Our hope is that we will each grow in our love for and commitment to the (our) local church.

First we will begin with a review of some key points from last semester to bring us all up to speed.

Fundamental Truths

Since we want to understand what God says about His church, we need to start with understanding the nature of the information (revelation) He has given us.

1. The Bible is the inspired Word of God. God is the source of Scripture. The Bible is the inspired (God-breathed), plenary (inspired in equal parts), verbal (extending to the very words), infallible (completely incapable of error), inerrant (completely without error) in the original manuscripts Word of God (2 Tim 3:14-17; 2 Pet 1:20-21; Titus 1:2; John 17:17; Matt 5:18; 22:31-32; Gal 3:16). The Scriptures are God's complete moral will for us. An appreciation of the Scriptures' qualities is necessary to understand the need for obedience to God's Word. It is impossible to neglect the Bible when we truly accept it as His very Word.
❖ What daily impact does inspiration have on your life?
2. The Scriptures are authoritative and fully sufficient for all matters of faith and conduct. This presupposition flows from the first. If the Bible is God's inspired Word, then it is fully sufficient to meet all the spiritual needs of God's people. It is authoritative (see Matt 4:4, 7, 10) and therefore the standard for faith and practice for every believer.
❖ As you live your days, what authorities do you place in your life?
3. The Bible must be approached with a plain, literal, grammatical, and historical hermeneutic. Hermeneutics is the art and science of Biblical interpretation. Literal (or plain or normal) hermeneutics takes the plain literal sense while understanding the historical, immediate, and wider contexts; uses of figures of speech; and the type of literature. This is also called the plain, literal, grammatical, historical method of interpretation. Literal hermeneutics adheres to the golden rule of interpretation, "if the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense". VBC believes this is the correct method of interpretation.
❖ What impact does your hermeneutic have on your daily life?

4. Since we are attempting to understand what the Bible teaches, it is necessary that the student be a Spirit-indwelt (i.e. a Christian) and Spirit-led believer (1 Cor 2:10-16).

❖ **Before you come to take in God's words, do you ensure you are Spirit-filled?**

New Testament Usage for "Church"

The Greek word for "church" is "ekklesia". It means an assembly or congregation of any kind (secular or religious), whether physically assembled or not. "Ekklesia" is found 114 in the NT. Three times it is used of a secular or political assembly (Acts 19:32, 39, 41). Two times it refers to the nation of Israel (Acts 7:38; Heb 2:12 quoting Psalm 2:22).

One hundred and nine times it refers to groups of Christians in two different ways. First and most frequently, the word is used in reference to a local group or groups of professing believers (Matt 18:17; Acts 20:28; Gal 1:2; Phil 4:15-16; Col 4:15-16; 1 Cor 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1; 1 Tim 3:5; Philemon 1-3; James 5:14; 3 John 5-6; Rev 1:11, etc.). This is also called the "visible" church because it is what other believers and the world can see. A unique aspect of the local or visible church is that it is comprised of the redeemed and unredeemed.

Second, the word takes on a more technical and fuller meaning referring to the universal church which is the total group of believers, and only believers, during this present age (Matt 16:15-18; Eph 1:22-23; Eph 3:8-12; Col 1:15-20). The universal church is also called the "invisible" church. The invisible church is only comprised of the redeemed and it is a group that only God can see and know the size and members.

❖ **When you think of "church" do you think of a building or meeting time or a family?**

The universal church is a united spiritual organism consisting of all members of the body of Christ (Matt 16:18; 1 Cor 12:12-13; Col 1:18; Eph 2:11, 3:6; 3:10). The universal church is not comprised of people who simply profess to know Jesus nor those who identify themselves with a particular Christian group nor those who may attend a local church. The church is the total group of individuals who place their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Upon salvation, each believer is immediately placed by the Holy Spirit into one united spiritual Body – the church.

¹²For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. ¹³**For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body**, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 1 Cor 12:12-13

²⁶For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷**For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.** ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Gal 3:26-28

❖ **What do you think is the most amazing thing God did to you at salvation?**

Uniqueness of the Church

The church is a NT revelation of an OT mystery.

⁴By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; ⁶*to be specific*, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, Eph 3:4-6

The church is what Jesus promised to build.

¹⁸"I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. Matt 16:18

The head of the church is Jesus.

¹⁸He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. Col 1:18

The church is distinct from Israel.

³²Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; 1 Cor 10:32

The Birth of the Church

There are two primary views of when the church began, although there are several lesser held views as well. The two primary views are:

- Covenant theologians believe that the church began in the OT and continues throughout all time. According to this view, the universal church consists of all believers (OT and NT) of all time.

Covenant Theology is a system of interpreting the Scriptures on the basis of two covenants: the covenant of works (covering Gen 1-3) and the covenant of grace (covering Gen 4 to Rev 22). According to this theological view, the covenant of works is a covenant that God made with Adam promising eternal life for obedience and death for disobedience. Adam failed at the Fall and sin entered the human race (Rom 5:12). God then entered into a covenant of grace with the elect (this word is chosen specifically) through which the problem of sin could be dealt with and He offers salvation to the elect sinner.

In Covenant Theology, there is a strong sense of uniformity throughout the Bible; a strong sense of continuity between the OT and NT. In the Covenant Theology hermeneutic, there is less acceptance of progressive revelation, and more of a thought of amplifying or explaining with greater clarity or precession what has been there from the beginning. Some call this a hermeneutic of uniformity. There is a tendency to look back into the OT and view the things we know from the NT as always having been true and revealed in the OT. Examples of this are the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the peoples of God (Israel and the church).

Covenant Theology has an aspect of its teaching that is termed “Replacement Theology”. In this doctrine, the church has replaced Israel in God’s program and the promises that God made to ethnic/national Israel have been and will be fulfilled in the church. This essentially means that literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutics have been replaced with allegoricalization in eschatological and ecclesiological passages.

- Dispensational theologians believe the church began on the day of Pentecost and consists of all believers of the present age (the church age).

Dispensationalism is a framework for interpreting the Bible that recognizes that God has dealt with people differently through the ages or dispensations. This system understands that all Scripture is for me (all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable), but not all Scripture is to me (many of the commands and promises are not addressed to me, but rather to people living under other dispensational arrangements). Dispensationalism has been described by Ryrie as having three primary distinctives.

1. Dispensationalism maintains a consistently literal interpretation of Scripture. More precisely, the difference between dispensational and covenantal interpretation is that dispensationalism believes that the OT should be interpreted on its own and not through the lens of the NT. In other words, dispensationalists do not use the NT to cancel authorial intent of OT passages as determined by literal interpretation. The primary impact of dispensational (consistently literal) interpretation of Scripture is on eschatology (prophecy) and ecclesiology (the church).

2. Dispensationalism maintains a clear distinction between ethnic/national Israel and the church. This is really just an application of the first distinctive. Covenant Theology blends the church and Israel together. A dispensational approach allows us to understand that at one time, God was dealing with Israel, He is now dealing with the church, and one day He will deal with Israel again. Eschatologically, this drives the interpreter to see Christ's second coming as premillennial to set up His 1000-year earthly reign where God will fulfill His promises to national Israel.
3. Dispensationalism tends to focus on the glory of God as God's ultimate purpose in the world. Covenant Theology is centered primarily on the idea of salvation. God's saving of people throughout the Bible is what they base their understanding on. For the dispensationalist, salvation is important, but more important is God's Glory. More precisely, dispensationalists take a broader view of God's work in history, emphasizing not just the spiritual, but the physical fulfillment of God's promises.

Holding to a plain, literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic (i.e. dispensationalism) leads us to understanding that the church began at Pentecost for the following reasons:

- The church was an OT revelatory mystery, not revealed until the NT (Col 1:24-27).
- The Lord Jesus spoke of the church as being future (“will build”). Indicating that it did not yet exist (Matt 16:18).
- The means of placing individuals into union with Christ, into the church, the body of Christ, is Spirit baptism (1 Cor 12:13). In Acts 1:5, Jesus stated that the baptism of the Spirit on His followers had not yet occurred, it was future. The baptism of the Spirit occurred at Pentecost for the first time with the giving of the Holy Spirit and continues with each individual when they accept Christ as Lord and Savior. In Acts 11:15, Peter recounts Cornelius's conversion and the baptizing of the Spirit and likens that to what happened at Pentecost.
- The church's foundation of Christ and then NT apostles and prophets had yet to be laid (in context prophets used here is NT prophets, see Eph 4:10-11) (Eph 2:19-20).
- The resurrection and ascension of Jesus are necessary for Him to be the head of His body and for the provision of the Spirit and spirit-giftedness. The church's being built on the resurrection and ascension of Christ makes it distinctive to this age. Spirit-indwelling and Spirit-gifting are unique to this age (John 7:39; Eph 1:18-23; 4:7-16; 1 Pet 4:10-11).

The End of the Church

The formation of the church, what Christ is building, will come to an end or be completed at the rapture when Christ comes for his saints (1 Cor 15:51-52; 1 Thess 4:13-18).

The Purpose of the Church

The purpose of the church is to glorify God (Eph 1:13-14; Eph 3:20-21).

❖ **What is your daily, moment by moment purpose?**

The Mission of the Church

The mission of the church is to make disciples (Matt 28:19-20) by going (evangelizing), baptizing (identifying with Christ), and teaching to observe all that Jesus commanded. The church's disciple making activity includes building itself up in the faith through teaching, fellowship, remembering Jesus' sacrifice, and prayer (Eph 4:11-16; Acts 2:42).

❖ **What is your daily, moment by moment mission?**

Local Church Organization

Members of the universal church are to gather together in local assemblies or bodies (Acts 14:23, 27; 20:17, 28; Gal 1:2; Phil 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:11 Cor 11:18-20; Heb 10:25). The local church is organized for the purpose of ministry (Titus 1:5; Acts 20:28; Phil 1:1; Acts 6:1-4).

❖ **Do you order your life to make God's priority of body involvement a priority?**

New Testament Words for Church Leaders

There are three words in the NT that are used to refer to local church leaders. The NASB translates these words as "overseer", "elder", and "pastor" or "shepherd".

Elder – "Elders" translates the Greek word "presbuteros". It refers to men who were older or more senior with no negative connotations but rather a sense of venerability. It refers to spiritually mature leaders of the church. It used with this reference in Acts and the epistles (Acts 14:20-23; Acts 20:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Pet 5:1).

Overseer – "Overseer" translates the Greek word "episkopos". It is literally one who looks over closely or intently, who views carefully. It describes one who exercises oversight or watches over others, or is a guardian (Acts 20:28; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet 2:25).

Shepherd/Pastor – "Shepherd" is literally is one who herds sheep and tends flocks as a shepherd. It is translated "pastor" only in Eph 4:11 where the English word comes from the Latin meaning herdsman. Metaphorically it refers to one who performs functions including feeding, oversight, protection, leading, and guiding. The noun form is used 18 times in the NT (Matt 9:36; John 10:2, 11-12, 14, 16; Eph 4:11; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25) and the verb form is used 12 times in the NT (Matt 2:6; Luke 17:7; John 21:16; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:1-2; Jude 1:12).

It seems from the usages in the NT that these three words are describing the same person. In Titus, Paul, under the inspiration of the Spirit, uses "elder" and "overseer" interchangeably (Titus 1:5-7). Peter, under the inspiration of the Spirit, uses "elder", "shepherd", and "overseer" interchangeably (1 Pet 5:1-4). Paul, when speaking to the Ephesian elders, referred to them as "elders", "overseers", and "shepherds", all interchangeably (Acts 20:17-28).

The conclusion is that "elder", "overseer", and "shepherd/pastor" all refer to the same person but emphasizing a particular function of the office. Elder emphasizes their *spiritual maturity and strength*. Overseer emphasizes their *authority and leading*. Shepherd or pastor emphasizes their *care, feeding, protection, leading, and guiding*.

Development from Apostolic Rule to Elder Rule

Within a few years of Pentecost, the NT pattern of elder rule was established and propagated to the churches founded during the missionary journeys and through continued disciple making efforts. It is only after the close of the apostolic age that we see development of different forms of church government looking like hierarchical or episcopal leadership.

The Work of Elders

It is important to note that there is always a group of elders, a plurality, that lead a local congregation. We always see "elders", "leaders", "those" in plural. This is a group of equals. Yet each one has a diversity of gifts and talents (Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17; Phil 1:1; 1 Thess 5:12-13; 1 Tim 4:14; Titus 1:5; Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:1).

From a human perspective, elders are appointed by other qualified elders. Yet, it is the Holy Spirit who makes them qualified, gifted, and fruitful for the purpose of being an elder (Titus 1:5; Acts 20:28).

The work of elders is ministry in the lives of the local body by prayer and ministry of the word (Acts 6:4). Elders are men (1 Tim 3:1; Titus 1:5-6; 1 Tim 2:12) who are the caretakers of the church (1 Tim 3:5). They rule and exercise oversight (1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 5:17; 1 Pet 5:2).

They preach and teach the Word (1 Tim 5:17; Eph 4:11-12). They shepherd the flock of God (Acts 20:28) to feed (1 Tim 3:2), lead (Heb 13:7; 1 Pet 5:2), protect and watch over (Heb 13:17), and care for (1 Thess 2:7). Elders lead by example (1 Pet 5:3). They select other leaders within the local body (1 Tim 4:14).

❖ **How highly do you value the work of your elders?**

The Responsibility of the Body

Members of the local body have responsibilities toward their leaders:

- To appreciate (or respect) and highly esteem (or value) (1 Thess 5:12-13). Each elder is unique with their own personalities yet each is to be appreciated and esteemed very highly because of their: diligent labor, placement over the body by the Lord, important task of teaching, and work of shepherding difficult sheep.
- To obey and submit and be subject (Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:5).
- To support them financially (Gal 6:6; 1 Tim 5:17; 1 Cor 9:14). Elders who are dedicated full-time to the work are to be supported from the congregation from their purposed (2 Cor 8:3, 9:6-7; 1 Tim 6:18) and regular giving (1 Cor 16:1-2).
- To test what elders teach against Scripture (Acts 17:11). They must test what they are being taught against Scripture. They are not to blindly follow someone's teaching.

❖ **What is your attitude toward your body's elders? How do you practically demonstrate your support of their leadership?**

The Qualifications of Elders

There are specific character and ministry qualifications for elders. Elders are the most mature within the body of Christ. In 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, Paul describes the qualifications for the recognized positions of leadership within the church. These are not people who are popular or are successful in their vocation. They are called by God to shepherd His people and are therefore gifted and qualified to do so. Interestingly, the two lists of qualifications are not the same. This leads to the conclusion that each list is not exhaustive in itself nor are the lists exhaustive when combined, but are indicative of the character and giftedness of a mature believer who is being set apart by the Holy Spirit to oversee/shepherd Christ's body.

❖ **Are you striving towards spiritual maturity in your life? What is your plan?**

The Work and Qualification of Deacons

While elders are the overseers of a congregation, deacons are the recognized servants who lead certain church ministries and advise the elders in their shepherding role. As deacons are set apart to manage the ministries within the congregation, the elders are better able to fulfill their primary function of oversight, giving full attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word. "Deacon" and the related Greek terms "to serve" and "service" are used ~100 times in the NT. Only in 1 Tim 3 and Phil 1:1 and perhaps Rom 16:1 do they appear to specify an office.

Deacons, like elders, must meet certain character qualifications. The only difference in their qualifications is the ability to teach. Deacons are men (or women) of good reputation, who are full of the Spirit and of wisdom (1 Tim 3:8-13).

❖ **Are you demonstrating servanthood in your life?**

Selection of Elders and Deacons at VBC

VBC currently has five elders. A question might be, “Why only five? Shouldn’t every man who meets the qualifications be recognized as an elder?” There are two ideas that provide an answer.

- First, many individuals may meet the character and ministry qualifications of an elder/overseer/shepherd, but they do not aspire/desire to minister in this way (1 Tim 3:1). Aspire/desire is a necessary prerequisite to being appointed an elder.
- Second, as long as the church is “set in order” (Titus 1:5), there is no reason to add additional elders that complicate the functioning of a unified plurality. When there are elder ministries within the body that are going unfulfilled, then the body is not set in order. In those times, additional oversight is needed and other elder(s) would need to be appointed to set in order what remains.

At VBC, once there is a need to set in order what remains and an individual is identified and is believed by the elders to be qualified and willing, he becomes a candidate. The elders of VBC then notify the congregation that this particular individual is being considered for the office of elder and then the congregation has thirty days to speak to the man if they have any reservation. If the one who expresses the reservation is not satisfied with that conversation and the candidate does not withdraw himself from being considered, then the person with the reservation can then go to the elders with their concern who will decide if it is valid.

The goal of the VBC elders is to have every one of the ministry leaders to be recognized as a deacon. The same vetting process is used for deacons.

Summary

The church is that which Jesus loves and gave Himself up for her.

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, **just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her**, ²⁶so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷that 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. ²⁸So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; ²⁹for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also *does* the church, ³⁰because we are members of His body. ³¹FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. ³²This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. Eph 5:25-32

The local church is the way in which God brings about his mission of disciple-making. I pray our commitment to the local body will grow and be demonstrated in our priorities.

Questions to Ponder

1. What is the first thing that comes to your mind when the word “church” is mentioned? Why?
2. Do you feel a greater sense of reverence, awe, inspiration, or the presence of God in a church building than you do outside a church building? Is that right or wrong and why?
3. Why is organization of the local church important?
4. How do you think of, speak about, and treat your elders?
5. Think of several ways you can help your spiritual leaders serve with joy and not with grief.
6. Read through the character qualities for elders. Pray for God to reveal to you where your character does not match mature character. Which ones do you need to change in?
7. In what ways are you serving the local body of Christ?