

I. Christ's Church in Biblical Perspective

The Ekklesia

“Christ's Church for All the Ages”

Matthew 16:13–20

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What does the church of Jesus Christ look like? I have tried to outline seven distinctives where we will be taking a closer look at the first one in the next study but in this study I want to lay a foundation for us. I acknowledge that some of this you have already heard but I believe this will be important for us to grasp and understand the importance of Christ's church.

When I was going through college and entering into seminary it was the time of the ascendancy and maybe even the blind ascendancy of the para church movement. There were some wonderful movements like Campus Crusade, InterVarsity, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Navigators, Bible colleges had begun and there were various para church ministries that had developed then. I would say those I went to seminary with who were the most gifted fellows were almost always navigating themselves or were being drawn into these para church ministries and that took precedence over the church with one's gifts and ministries. This happened particularly in a local church.

Initially I didn't have great insights here but I was just kind of looking at the Word of God. By the way, the PCA makes a thoughtful use with para church ministries and I am very grateful for our evangelical spirit to do that. As I began to think of my own calling and ministry and in working my way through it, I became principally, personally drawn to, convinced of and devoted to being a churchman with no apologies. I love the Lord's church dearly. I am glad to give my life to Christ in His church. I have never even thought about anything else. In fact, it is my conviction that I don't think there is a higher calling in this world than to be an ordained officer in the Lord's church and then to be a teaching elder or pastor/teacher in His church.

People might think being in those positions one would get attacked the most and the reason they would get attacked the most is because Satan knows how important it is. That is why he attempts to attack that office by attempting to distract them or detour them or deform them in whatever way he can do. So some of what I am talking about is really a burden or conviction in my life but I don't think it is just because of the personal dynamic in my life. I think it's your life.

With all due respect to para church ministries, when the adversities and crisis in life comes, those who will be there for you is the Lord's church. They will be there to help in any way you need it and the Lord has designed and called them to be there. I think it's crucial for you to understand the Lord's church and I don't think we do. I'm not thinking of any individuals in particular. I've just been in the pastorate long enough to see things. When people work through things like a geographical dislocation the last thing they usually think about is a church. Do I have a job, a place to live, what are the schools like, a hospital nearby? They will work through all of those things before they make a move but never even think about the church.

Is there are solid, Bible believing, evangelical, faithful church that is serving the Lord effectively? I can't tell you how many times I've followed up with people on this. God's providence is amazing and how He has used this. There have been times when I have followed up with people on this who didn't check to see about a church in the area they were moving into

and then God enabled us to plant a church there so He does work those things out but my point is I don't think we really understand the importance of Christ's church.

This is the one institution that you are involved with that is headed to the new heavens and the new earth – the Lord's church. When Jesus came into this world, as I understand the Bible, He went to the cross to do three things. Matthew 1:21 says [21] *She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus (Yeshua), for he will save his people from their sins.* He went to the cross to pay for all the sins of all of His people for all of eternity. Secondly, He went to the cross to defeat Satan and all of His enemies. I John 3:8b says [8b] *The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.* He hasn't destroyed Satan and His enemies for He will do that when He comes the second time but the first time He came to defeat them and He has won the victory over His enemies at the cross.

The third reason Jesus went to the cross is found in Ephesians 5:25–27 which says [25] *Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, [26] that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, [27] so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.* Jesus went to the cross to purchase His church. It is not just another organization that I give my time to or am a member of. No, this is the Lord's church that has been sprinkled with the blood of Jesus.

Paul says to the elders at Ephesus in Acts 20:28, [28] *Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.* He did not die on the cross for my business or for a civic club. Now He died on the cross to save us to go to those places but He didn't die for those. He died for His people, to defeat Satan and his works and He died for His church that He would wash her with the water of the Word and cleanse her by His blood.

So I believe it is absolutely crucial that we recapture once again a high view, not an idolatrous view but I high view of the Lord's church. We need to pass this onto our children. Most children do not get a high view of the church from their parents. It is something done if it works into the schedule. The gathering of God's people in worship, in discipleship is not a priority or the priority it should be. Part of the reason is because we as pastors have not done what God has called us to do.

There are many I could call out by name who I have learned much from about the importance of the church. I will not name them all but I cannot tell you the churchmanship I learned first from afar and then secondly, intimately and personally from Dr. Frank Barker. This happened early on in my life. I was learning from him and watching him starting from when I began in the ministry. We have a standing joke between about 30 of us when we go to the General Assembly and we ask each other 'are you prepared?' and we say 'no, I'm just going to sit near Frank and I'll vote however he votes.' But he taught me that I need to be prepared also. So I'm grateful for that example to learn from and be challenged by. Frank was pastoring a church where he didn't really need the Presbytery or the General Assembly because Briarwood itself was a Presbytery and General Assembly but it was by conviction and I learned from that. I also learned from others as well. God continues to be patient with me to teach me that and I'm grateful for how He does it.

Some of these things that I am trying to teach you so that you will pass it onto your children, like being a part of a small group Bible study. One of our misuse of saving grace that is free and unmerited is we think we have a grace that carries with it no obligations for the Christian life. It's like the hymn *Come Thou Fount* says;

*O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.*

The Christian life has many 'ought to's' but it is not I ought to do this to be saved. It is I ought to do this because of the love for my Savior. I ought to love what He loves.

If He loved His church to give Himself for her then I love her. I love her covenants, her vows, her assemblies, her courts and all that God has put there for her. I don't want it to be an empty organization but I realize the body of Christ is organized. Yet I also believe it is an organism that's alive, functioning and ought to function in a certain way. What does it look like if a Biblically organized organism called the church of Jesus Christ is functioning by the revival presence of the Lord? It is that journey that I want to walk us through in this study. I want to give three preliminary thoughts as we move into those seven distinctives in the coming studies. For each preliminary thought I will give a conviction and a concern.

So here is the first preliminary thought with its conviction and its concern. My first conviction is that Christ has designed His church for all of the ages. Matthew 16:13–20 says [13] *Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"* [14] *And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."* [15] *He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"* [16] *Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* [17] *And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.* [18] *And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.* [19] *I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."* [20] *Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.*

Here they are only a week away from the Mount of Transfiguration and just a couple of weeks away of Jesus heading to Jerusalem to go to the cross. This is what I call the first evangelism explosion where you first get permission to ask a couple of questions but here Jesus doesn't ask for permission He just asks two questions. Question number one is His transitional question and the question is 'who do people say that I am?' They say 'You are a great preacher! Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, others Jeremiah or even one of the prophets! Everybody is talking about You. You're in league with the big guys!' Then He goes from a transitional question into the qualifying question by saying 'who do you say that I am?' Then Peter immediately says 'You're the Christ, the Son of the living God.'

Jesus basically responds to him by saying 'Peter grace and peace has been multiplied to you,' no He didn't say that but it could have been interpreted that way but He did say "*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.*" In other words, this is something that has come to Peter by grace for he had now been given the ability to know who He was, Christ, the Son of the Living God. Jesus goes onto say "*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build **my** church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*" Now I don't believe Peter is the rock or the confession is a rock but I believe it's Peter confessing that Christ is the Rock. The confessing church is the rock upon which He builds His church and Peter represents the Apostles and the Prophets and that is the foundation of the church, Christ the Cornerstone.

Jesus says He will build His church. Briarwood is not Harry's church, Frank's church or the PCA's church. Any local church that stands faithful to Christ is there because of Christ. We belong to Christ. It is Christ's church. Christ will build His church – I will build My church. Lately I have seen so many brochures that say something like this – 'Come to this conference. We are going to re-engineer the church for the 21st century' or 'Come to this conference, we're going to update the church.' I hear many people who are perhaps well meaning, say 'Come to our church, it is the church that has been invented for the 21st century.' The result is this unbelievable plethora of hyphenated churches – seeker-centered churches, seeker-sensitive churches, contemporary this and classical that, etc.

Where in reality I believe the Bible is teaching Jesus has purchased the church, designed the church, it's His church and He never says pray for architects. He tells us to pray for workers. He is the Architect. We are not to pray for architects or engineers but we're to pray for workers. Now some are master workers like Prophets and Apostles. Christ has put His church in place and it doesn't matter if it's 200 AD or 2000 AD or Kansas or Kenya for this is His church. This is what He has designed it to do. We don't need to invent a church for this century but to understand the church that He has revealed in His Word that stands in every century. I fully understand that, that church will have to be contextualized like what language it will speak in the nation it is planted or where it will meet and how it will meet but I am convinced that there is something revealed in the Bible that is Christ's church that stands for all the ages and over all the ages. So what is my concern?

My concern is our fascination with contextualization. When we feel like the church is marginalized what do we tend to do? We want to be successful so we go and find out what somebody is doing in some local and we unplug to think we can plug that one in right where we are. We go to these contextualized models unplug them and then plug them in where we are. I am going to give an example of one of my good friends, Tim Keller. If you go to Redeemer Church you are going to find out by in large that all the same principles we are committed to here they are committed to there. But you will see that plugging that in, in Manhattan is not the same as plugging it in here in Birmingham. One of the worst things you could do is to go and try to unplug and plug here.

Go to a faithful Biblical church that is meeting in a college place and you will see that it will be doing what we're doing here – worshipping, witnessing, evangelism, discipleship, small group discipleship, loving one another, showing hospitality etc. all those things that the church is supposed to be doing. But they may not be doing it the same way. Go to a small group discipleship meeting in Uganda and see how it's done. Then go to one of our small group discipleship meetings and you'll see about 12 to 20 people. A Uganda small group will probably only have about 4, 5 or maybe 6. When you see the places they live you'll understand why they are that size. That very Biblical principle of how you do discipleship is taking place but once it gets contextualized it is contextualized as it is in that situation. There are some places that have two translators in order to minister in a certain setting and it has to be done but what you still have there is the preaching of the Word. God owns the foolishness of preaching in Uganda just like He does in Birmingham.

So how do you plug it in? For instance, I'm not going to send up our Sunday school ministry to Manhattan at Redeemer Church. Here we have 84 percent attendance at Sunday school between the first and second Sunday morning services, praise the Lord but there is not that big of attendance in Sunday school at Redeemer primarily because there aren't that many children. So when a church needs to be planted in a specific area there are some things you have

to take into consideration about the area that you don't take into consideration in another area. It is not even the same when living in the same state. It is different from city to city.

How do you revitalize a church? I know what the Biblical principles of a church are and that they need to be applied in revitalization but what does it look like in a small town, a suburb or in a downtown area in an urban setting? That is contextualization and the last thing you want to do is take a contextualized model unplug it and plug it in but you what you need to do is go back to the Biblical model. Then you take the Biblical model and contextualize right where you are.

I was at Pinelands Presbyterian Church in Miami, Florida and it was my first congregation. When I arrived there I had five elders and only two knew the Lord as their Lord and Savior, only two were saved. I couldn't bring charges or discipline the other three because they would out vote me. The two that knew the Lord within three months one died and the other one was transferred somewhere else. The average age in the church was 69. The lady that figured that out had been 59 for ten years. My kids were the only children in the Sunday school ministry. I get a phone call from one of the 9 previous pastors asking me if I had really prayed about being the pastor here. He went on to tell me the first pastor was stabbed with a knife by his wife when she found out he was having an affair with the choir director. Then he told me he thought this church has the mark of Satan on it. That is not really encouraging with just being out of seminary in your first church. He said the second pastor is out of the ministry due to prescription drugs and the third pastor was out of the ministry due to his wife's alcoholism. The one who was telling me all this was the fourth pastor and he didn't want to tell me what happened to him. This was also the only church that the office supply place would not give any monthly credit to and on the account it said 'cash only.'

There is so much more I could tell you about my first pastorate. The first Sunday I was there I finished the service at 3 minutes after 12 and by the time I got to the back to shake hands with everyone they were all gone. I went out to the parking lot trying to stop people just to shake their hand before they left. They might have been old but they were out of there quickly. I was apologizing as I was greeting them saying 'I'll try to better next Sunday' and at about 5 minutes after 12 I was heading back into the church to get the keys to our car which were in my wife's purse in the church and the door was already locked. I had to break into the church to get my wife's purse to drive home. The next Sunday I preached the choir director gave her life to Jesus, the chairman of the deacons gave his life to Jesus and publically professed his faith the following Sunday as 28 out of the 55 came forward to give their lives to Jesus. God began to do a work of grace in that congregation.

So how did it get started? I did not reinvent the church. We just preached the Gospel. We did evangelism and discipleship. It was a multi-racial, multi-ethnic church that began to reflect that community and it was so encouraging. Through His Word, Jesus showed us what to do in that church. We said 'no' to the fascination with contextualization and said 'yes' to the idea that Christ has designed His church and that's the model we need to follow.

Conviction number two church health is the objective of a Gospel revival ministry, not church growth. If church growth becomes your objective then it's just a matter of time until they compromise the message to get the numbers and they lose sight of the fact that methods affect message. It's not just compromising the message to get the numbers, sometimes it's the very methods that are adopted compromise the message.

There are a number of metaphors that the Bible uses to describe the church. The church is called an army, a family, the bride, a building, a sanctuary, a temple, a field and every word

picture of the church you find in the New Testament you will find in the Old Testament speaking of God's covenant people except for one and that is the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ that is used to refer to Christ's church is only found in the New Testament. Take that seriously just for a moment.

If you have children, do you make your children grow or do you feed them, exercise them, make sure they go to bed? Do you focus on how tall they are or do you focus upon their health? When my kids were growing up we did three things on their birthdays – had a party and presents, a birthday spankings and then we'd have a place in their room where we would measure how tall they were that year. Then we would recognize how tall they had gotten in that year. I don't ever remember a time looking at that and saying 'Son, you only grew a half inch, what's the matter with you?' We don't do that as parents. You would feed them, exercise them etc. because you knew God has built a DNA and my job as a parent was not to manipulate that DNA but to nurture the body in which that DNA resided. My goal was his health not his height.

I believe every local church of where God places them and what He puts into that church has a DNA. Our job as the leaders of a church are to focus on the Gospel health of that church. Then God begins to grow it in terms of its breadth, height, the money that comes in, the people that are converted, as He desires to grow it. My concern here is that there is an overreaction. I don't believe big is good and small is bad. One of the churches in the Bible that is honored is the church at Jerusalem which probably had about 18,000 and yet another church honored was the church at Philemon which was a healthy church that met in a house. It's also not small is good and big is bad. It is not about either one of those. It is healthy that is good and God builds a DNA. You don't focus on the size but you focus on the church's health.

So what's my concern? You do need to remember that church growth is a desired and expected blessing of church health. I'm not opposed to church growth for the Bible puts a lot of numbers in the book of Acts but it's just not the objective. It's a consequence. I want to see more people come to Jesus. I want to see more missionaries sent. I want to see more finances for world evangelism. I want to see more people disciplined, more called to the ministry and metrics that grow. I am all for that but that cannot become my objective for if it does then I'll become a pragmatist. It must be a desired outcome and consequence, a blessing that normally is there although sometimes it's not.

I was in a church one time in a county that didn't have a traffic light. There was one road that went in to the coal mines and to leave you have to turn around and go back out that road. I am with the pastor and the pastor is weeping. The pastor had felt like a failure because when he got to the church there were 200 attending and now there was about 150. I asked him how many were in the county and he said 'about 8,000.' I asked him how many were there when he got there and he said 'the coal mines were booming them and so I'd say there were about 20,000 in the county then.' I said 'Brother, first of all I would love for your church to have 8,000 in it but your 150 is a bigger slice of the pie than the 200 of the 20,000, not only that you stayed here as a pastor to help your people through an economic depression and you did what a pastor was supposed to do. I don't think you see yourself as a failure for I think God has done a great work in and through your life and that is the way you need to work at it and look at it.' So my simple concern is that I don't want you to dismiss church growth but it's simply a desired and expected blessing as a result of church health in normal situations.

Conviction number three is that Christ has designed a spiritual fitness plan to guide His church. That is what the Lord has put in place. My concern is that we don't follow the fitness plan of the Lord because of our fascination with innovation. I will give you the Lord's fitness

plan in the next study. I'm all for signs and pushing information through social media but I don't think the key to the church is a better marketing plan but a better fitness plan. I believe God has given us that fitness plan in the Great Commission and in the book of Acts. Gospel health is what we are aiming at and that normally has statistical increase where people give more, more come to Jesus, more are called to the ministry, more are being disciplined, more small groups are started etc. but that is not the objective.

The illustration I'd like to use here is the figure of the church being the Body of Christ. I played football when I was in high school and one of my favorite players back then was a left tackle who played for the Oakland Raiders named Lyle Alzado. Then one year I saw the number on his uniform was 74 but I looked out, saw the number but the person wearing that number didn't look like Lyle. I thought 'where is he' but someone said it was him. Later he came for an interview and they asked him what he had done to look so different. He said he had gone on this real focused program to be bigger, stronger, faster and play better. Later it was found out that he had started taking steroids which is the quick way to get bigger and stronger. The steroids were definitely working because his eyelids even looked like they had muscles. He wasn't even recognizable but he did achieve what he was hoping in pro football but 11 years later he is dead because the very thing that made him stronger put death in his body.

I believe if church growth becomes the objective I believe that is what is happening to the church today. Worship is no longer worship, it's entertainment. We are using cultural steroids and pumping them into the body of Christ because it will get the numbers. Can't argue with the numbers, can you? Then a man like Bill Hybels so courageously took a look and thought 'we're five miles wide and one inch deep, there is something we're not doing right.' You don't want to react to that and say 'we want to be one inch wide and five miles deep, us four no more shut the door, see how faithful we are nobody comes.' That is not what we are looking for either.

When you get fascinated with smallness what happens to your body? There's a floor at the hospital for you, for people who think they are too big no matter what size they are and they just quit eating but their bodies have to be nourished so it just turns on itself and eats itself to death organ by organ. We call those eating disorders because that is what the focus becomes. Small has to be everything. So we want to say 'no' to big is good and small is bad and 'no' to small is good and big is bad. Our aim and focus is for Gospel health. I believe God has given us a fitness program to guide us through that. We will look at this in the next study and that will bring to the church Gospel health in the presence and power of the Lord and see what the Lord does in glorious ways. Our Gospel health here is fantastic.

Going back to my days at Pineland Presbyterian, my first pastorate, the next Sunday I preached my goal was while they were bowing their head in prayer I wanted to invite them to Jesus before they beat out to the parking lot. I told the organist to play a hymn while invite people to Jesus. We get to the end of the service after I had preached on II Timothy 1:12 which says *[12] which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me.* As I started to close in prayer the organist is not playing. I looked out of one eye and she wasn't even at the organ. Roxanne was our organist and our choir director. She was a really talented young lady. Then I saw Roxanne in that green chiffon dress and she said to me 'I don't have what you said today, can I be a Christian?' I said 'Sure' so I walked down to pray with her and my wife Cindy came up to pray with her.

Then I walked to the back of the church and the chairman of the deacons met me at the back with a red face and said 'Harry what are you doing up there?' I said 'Jack, she wanted to

become a Christian' and he said 'I thought that is what was happening.' I literally thought he was going to hit me but he said 'I'm just like her, I'm a hypocrite and I want to be a Christian too.' It didn't look like a broken and contrite spirit there in front of me but I took him at his word and then he said 'Can I come up there next Sunday and do that in front of everybody?' I said 'You don't have to do that' and he said 'I knew you would say that but I've been the chairman of the deacons for 14 years and I want to come up there and do it publically.' So I told him we could arrange that.

Not too long after that Jack cut his thumb off and I met him at Jackson Memorial Hospital. He was their second patient doing microsurgical surgery using this particular machine at this hospital. They sewed it back on and I saw him in the bed with his arm up and all. I put my arms around him and said 'I want to tell you two things. You have committed your life to Jesus and Satan is after you but secondly you have to promise you didn't have last Sunday and that's Romans 8:28 which says [28] *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* So God has never told you all things are good but that He has something good in this.' I was about to find out part of it. He said 'I know Harry, we prayed together.' He was getting ready to go back home and the doctor said 'If you smell something then come back.'

The next Sunday at beginning of the service I gave the call to worship and there is Jack sitting in the back with his hand up in the air from the recent surgery he had done. Any moment in that service I could have had a Billy Graham evangelistic moment by saying 'I see that hand, come forward the buses will wait for you' but I didn't do that. I got to the end of the service to bow in prayer and Jack is up coming down the middle isle with his hand up in the air. I put my arm around him and said 'Jack, I didn't expect you to be here today.' Jack said 'Harry, if Satan had taken my arm off I would have still been here today.' Behind him came his wife and 28 other out of the 55 that were there that day, to give their lives to Christ. Gospel health began to flow.

Nothing had changed in the infrastructure yet but Gospel health was beginning. We only had 14 men in the church and my session was scrambling to fill spots for elders with one who said 'Hey if we make George and elder maybe he'll come back to church.' That was where this church was. Then God brought Gospel health and vitality and that's what the exciting thing is. Then comes the spiritual fitness plan which we will cover in the next study. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could be together in Your Word. Receive our thanks and praise to You for all of Your goodness to us. I thank You for the privilege to serve this congregation as we walk our way through Your church, designed for all the ages, prayerfully, Spirit-led, contextualized in our location and our generation. Then Father help us enact a Spiritual fitness plan whereby Your people are growing Spiritually with Gospel health. Help us absorb these very foundational issues of Your church for all the ages because this age desperately needs a Gospel healthy church, revived by Your Spirit for I pray in Jesus' Name, Amen.