

Sermon Notes
“The Church”

Material for this message was drawn from a series of sermons by Dr. Calvin Wittman (2009)

Focal Scripture Reference: Matthew 16:13-18

Article six of the Baptist Faith and Message says the following about the church:

"A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture."

The New Testament speaks also of the church as the Body of believers which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people and nation."

The doctrine of the church has fallen on hard times these days. As with many other foundational teachings, some in our day seem to be willing to sacrifice doctrinal soundness on the altar of earthly success and the consequences are disastrous. To many, church membership means little or nothing.

We live in a day of church hoppers and church shoppers; a day when commitment to a local body of believers is viewed as antiquated or unnecessary. That is why if there was ever a day when Christians need to know what they believe about the church and why they believe it, it is today.

When we speak of the church, we do so in two different senses. The first and most common sense of the word is the local church, which is a local body of believers like our church. The second refers to all of the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people and nation.

In this study we will be talking about the local church, so, let's begin by examining the foundation of the Church.

The Head of the Church is Jesus Christ

In every sense of the word, Jesus Christ is the foundation of the Church. He ordained the church and founded it on the confession of Peter as recorded in **Matthew 16:13-18**.

¹³When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

¹⁶Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, a the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

Jesus founded the church on the confession that He is the Christ.

1 Corinthians 3:11 says, **“For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”**

Thus, Jesus is the founder, the head, the Master and the Lord of the Church. It is comprised of those whom He has redeemed or purchased with His blood. The Church exists for Him, by Him and in Him. Without Jesus, there is no church. This is important to remember because everything the church is and does should originate from this truth. Many groups calling themselves churches today are no longer recognizable as being founded upon the person and work of Jesus Christ. Let us never forget that everything we are is about Him.

The Marks of a Church

In recent years, even among some calling themselves Southern Baptists, there has been a great deal of confusion about what makes a true church. Therefore, we need to recognize that not every group that calls themselves a church is truly a church.

So, from a biblical perspective, what makes a church a church? What are the distinct characteristics that we find in scripture that differentiates a group of religious people from a church? Let me share with you three things that make up a church.

A. Its Members are Baptized Believers

The principle thing that designates a church is its members. We believe that the only people who can be members of the local church are those who have been born again and have given witness to that conversion by following the Lord's command and being baptized. To be a believer does not simply mean that you have given mental consent to the moral and ethical truths of scripture or that you are in philosophical agreement with the biblical teachings concerning Christ. To be a believer means that you have trusted in Christ and that you have surrendered your life to Him. It means that He is living His life through you and that you are a reflection of His character to the world around you.

In short, it means that you have been radically changed and are in the process of being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. The problem in a great many churches today is that they have unsaved people as church members. How could you say such a thing? You might ask. I can say it because I have seen it evidence of it. There is no way that a person who is truly born again could say some of the things, do some of the things and be as mean as some of the people who call themselves Christians and church members.

Jesus tells us simply in **Matthew 7:16**, "**By their fruit you will recognize them.**"

You should also notice that one of the important elements of the statement we read from the Baptist Faith and Message is that it says we are associated by covenant. That means that we are in agreement with one another to be the people God has called us to be. Now, many of you may not know it, but our church has adopted a covenant. ***See Church Covenant Provided in a separate PDF document.***

Our covenant sums up clearly and succinctly what it means to be a part of this body of believers. We need to be careful, then, about granting the privilege of membership into this fellowship of believers. Membership has its privileges, but it also has its responsibilities. If you are a church member God has called you to be a part of this local body so that He can both bless you and use you to bless others.

B. Its Ministry

While the ministries of a church are numerous and varied, here are three things Scripture teaches us are essentials.

a. Preaching the Word of God

Paul told Timothy in **2 Timothy 4:2** to preach the word. A true church is a church that preaches the word of God, and preaching the word of God means preaching the whole of God's word. When it is in season or out of season, when it is convenient or inconvenient; and when it makes you popular or makes you unpopular. It is preaching which brings conviction for sin; preaching centered on the person and work of God; and preaching which exalts Jesus as the only Lord and Savior. Preaching which calls the lost to be saved and calls the saved to reach the lost. It is preaching which keeps the saints in the paths or righteousness. Preaching which comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable, and preaching which never compromises the truth just because it is unpopular. Preaching which knows nothing of political correctness and seeks to expose the truth of God's word to God's people. Biblical preaching is one of the essential marks of a true church. Where this type of preaching is absent, there is no church.

b. Observing the Ordinances

Matthew 28 and **1 Corinthians 11** outline the two ordinances of the church, which are Baptism and the Lord's Supper. We examined these in a previous message, but suffice it to say that a true church is one where these two ordinances are observed and done so regularly.

c. Exercising Its Gifts

A church is a body of believers wherein the members use their gifts. **1 Corinthians 12** and **Romans 12:4-8** outline this truth. Upon accepting Christ as his or her Savior, every believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God and is given at least one spiritual gift, which he or she is to use within the body of Christ for the building up of the body, as **Ephesians 4** instructs us.

Ministry, then, is not just for pastors, teachers, deacons, or leaders in the church. Every member should be involved in some type of ministry. One of the richest, untapped resources of most churches is sitting in its pews every Sunday morning. Can you imagine the impact we could make on our community and our world if all church members took it upon themselves to do the work of the ministry as they are so called? Can you imagine what this community would be like if each church member would only win one person to Christ each year? If just the members of Southern Baptist Churches in the Las Cruces area did this, we would win the entire population of Las Cruces, some 90,000+ people, to Christ in as little as five years.

The Mission of the Church

One scholar puts it this way, "The church remains on earth to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth, by bearing witness to Christ in all places at all times." (Malcolm Yarnell in Blount and Wooddell.) Many so-called churches have become anything but a New Testament church and no longer fulfill their biblically assigned role. Some have turned into political action committees or are nothing more than religious institutions whose sole purpose is to keep people from feeling guilty about their sin. Others have become places of mere entertainment.

However, the preaching of gospel of Jesus Christ is what must be central in our churches. We are not here to be political; we are not here to be comforted, and we are not here merely for us and ours. We exist for those who have not yet come. As a church, our mission is to spread the gospel and expand the kingdom of God, in Fairacres and Las Cruces, in New Mexico, in the United States and to the uttermost parts of the world.