The Church Reading(s): Ephesians 4:1-16

To live biblically Christians need to know what "church" is according to the Bible. The word can refer to professing Christians of a specific geographic area, usually a city, i.e., the "local church". Or it can refer to all true believers in Christ and only true believers in Christ, living or dead, since Pentecost, i.e., the "universal Church" or "the Body of Christ". Local churches should be an expression of the invisible church, being composed of those who have professed faith in Christ, although there may be those who do not truly belong to Christ (cf. 1 John 2:19). Misconceptions about the church are understandable but not excusable since we have the Bible. Metaphors, commands, and examples in the Bible help us understand the essence and function of the church.

I. ***The founding of the church***

1. Jesus Christ is the founder of the church (Mt 16:18).
2. The church came into existence when Jesus poured out the Spirit of God on the day of Pentecost, which was the start of the baptism of the Spirit by which Jesus brings true believers in the universal church. Cf. Acts 1, 2, 10, 11 and 1 Cor. 12.
3. For the church there is only one foundation and that is Jesus Christ (1 Cor 3:11). Only through faith in Christ can a person be born again and thereby become part of the Body of Christ. Jesus is also the chief cornerstone of the church (Eph 2:20) which is the absolute orientation for the building and the apostles and prophets have accurately communicated and recorded the truth about Jesus (hence Paul calls them a foundation as well).

II. ***The essential nature of the church: what <u>is</u> the Church?***

The two primary pictures of the church help define the essential nature of the Church and can be applied to the manner in which the visible church should exist.

1. *The Body*

   Every born-again believer has a living, spiritual connection to Jesus Christ and hence to one another as well forming a unit, called the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-13).
2. *The Temple*

   The church is called a a building and specifically a Temple (Eph 2:21-22; 1 Peter 2:5; 1 Cor 3:16) emphasizing the orderly relationship to one another and especially that fact that the Church is a dwelling place for God.

III. ***The function of the church: what should the church be doing?***

The Bible defines not only the nature of the Church but the function of the church as well.

1. *On the basis of our mutual connection to one another as expressed in the pictures of the church we must care for one another.* See the "one another" commands, e.g., Romans 12:10, 16; 15:5, 7, 14; Gal 5:13; 6:2, which are impossible to do by oneself.
2. *On the basis of the centrality of Christ, we must grow up into Him* (Ephesians 4:15-16). This is a primary reason for the centrality of the Word of God as expressed in the same passage (Eph 4:12) and illustrated in the early church (Acts 2:42) and in Paul's ministry (Acts 20:27). Teaching the Word of God is central in order that we grow up into Christ, but only "as each part does its work".
3. *As the Temple of the Holy Spirit we should be concerned with worshiping God.* Our reasonable worship to God is an entire life of sacrifice, not simply 1 hour on Sunday (Romans 12:1). Our worship to God is expressed everyday as we relate to one another as Paul continues to develop in Romans 12 and explains as well in Ephesians 4.

IV. ***Common failures in our practice as "church"***

Our thinking concerning the practice of church should be transformed by the Word of God rather than conformed by the world around us.

1. *Failure to treat the church as people.* N.T. believers faced pressure to adopt O.T. practices against which the N.T. warns. Never-the-less there is the continuing tendency today to re-establish holy places, holy mediators, and holy practices. E.g., God dwells in those who are born again, not in "houses of God".
2. *Failure to treat the church as the Body of Christ.* By persecuting the church, Saul persecuted Christ (Acts 9:4-5); by lying to the church Ananias and Sapphira lied to God and were killed (Acts 5); by mistreating fellow believers, believers at Corinth were struck with illness and some died (1 Cor 10-11). The way we treat other believers, i.e., the church, is the way we are treating Jesus Christ. Such abuse may be lying to one another (Eph 4:25) or being jealous and quarreling (1 Cor 3:3-17).
3. *Failure to appreciate our dependence upon other believers.* When we neglect the Body we neglect Christ. Paul argued this in 1 Corinthians 12 with the illustration of the body. Today the focus may be less on gifts and more on tasks. E.g., "I'm not doing anything today, so I'm not needed." A consumer mentality makes this worse.

Further failures in our practice of church can be discovered as we meditate on what God has said about the church in His Word.

It is most important to remember is that a person becomes a member of the Body of Christ only when he or she is born again by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. It does not happen by membership in a local church, being baptized, taking communion, living a good life or affirming a correct doctrinal statement. A person must experience the new birth to be a child of God. Those who place their trust in Him, that He died for their sins and was raised again, are born again. By His Spirit Jesus places each and every true believer into His Body of which He is the Head. It is in light of that truth that we should treat one another.

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