

THE NEW TESTAMENT DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

We do a great deal of talking about the church – but if I asked each of you to write me a definition of the Church right now – I expect we would discover that we have not only widely, but wildly divergent ideas as to just what the church is. Some of us would define it in terms of buildings and be mostly interested in that. Some in terms of budgets and attached to this – some in terms of the bureaucracy – some would probably describe the church in brotherhood teams (this would be their interest – others would think of moral bettering and be concerned about that – others of beautiful music and devout prayers and fervent preaching and attend for this – and some of course would think of nothing in particular and be devoted to that! Some of these would have vaguely happy thoughts about the church – thoughts of food and flowers and weddings and candlelight and fellowship. And some would have vaguely unhappy thoughts about it – that the church is bossy, represents _____, condemns sin, is full of hypocrites, or is an uncomfortably dressed up place to be in. As one man morosely defined it: “As far as I am concerned church is just a place to which I have to get up and get on the one morning of the week I could sleep.”

Obviously, these are all inadequate – lopsided – ideas – and attitudes though I’ve heard them all expressed in the last few weeks.

Possibly we had better ask – What is the New Testament Doctrine of the Church? What, according to the New Testament, is the Church’s nature? And Mission?

To begin with – the New Testament does describe the church in down to earth terms. Paul writes a letter “to the Church of the Thessalonians” – this sounds as though it was made up of these quite ordinary people and belonged to them. The very word “church” indicates a group of people – for it is a translation of the New Testament Ecclesia – mean “called out” or “called together” – and you call people together. The one thing the word “church” never indicates in the New Testament no matter how down to earth it gets – is a building. The reason is – the early church had no buildings. Paul occasionally refers to “house churches” meaning the people who met in the homes of persons like Aquila and Nympha and Philemon – but there were no specially dedicated buildings. Buildings were a very late invention – largely to keep out the rain.

In those days – you might ask in whose house the church met – but you never asked about the style of architecture. Some years ago – before we added to and renovated our buildings here – someone in another city who had never seen Trinity Avenue asked me if our architecture

was early colonial or late Victorian or what not and I replied that I didn't know for certain what it was – but I would guess it was “late inadequate.” Well, we've changed things since then.

Certainly – we want an adequate building – and attractive one – in which to meet – but the church simply meets in the building – and is not the building itself. Martin Luther never liked the word church – “This blind obscure word” referred to Christian Holy People” Church in Latin means circle or circus (3 rings), a ring of people. Sometimes we confuse the _____ with the people and make a sort of fetish out of the structure. A Presbyterian Church spent millions on a building in the shape of a fish – as symbolic of the early church _____ -- and do you know what they young people call it? “Holy Mackerel!” – and this rather describes my attitude toward multimillion dollar – ornate – extravagant church buildings – “Holy Mackerel!”

When the New Testament describes the ecclesia in down to earth terms – mentioning churches in certain houses, certain towns or districts – like the Churches of Galatia – it is not things of edifices but of groups of people.

And it is not thinking of institutional structures either – though from the beginning the Christians did have some sort of rule and order. Paul makes it clear that because they have diverse special gifts – they can render various kinds of service (I Cor 2:28 and Eph. 4:11) – but nowhere does the New Testament identify the organization with the church.

So too – we need an adequate institutional structure with officers and committees and polity to direct and channel our activities – but simply to be in an organization – as bishop or a card-carrying member – doesn't mean one is in the church – no more than being in the building means one is in the church. Just because you're inside a chicken coop doesn't make you a chicken. So being in a church building or organization doesn't make you a Christian.

So in the second place, the church has to be defined in more than human terms – Paul write “to the church of the Thessalonians” – to a group of men and women who compose the church in a particular place called Thessalonica – but it is more than a group of people meeting in a particular place with an organization of some sort. Paul addresses himself “to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” That is to say the church has its reality and meaning only in God the Father and in Jesus Christ.

The church is always “of God.” The people who are “called together,” the ecclesia, are not just people, – they are “the people of God.” In the OT, the community of Israel was called

the _____ -- which the _____ translated in to Greek as ecclesia. It was natural, therefore, that the New Testament should use this work to describe the new Israel – the new covenant community – the new people of God.

We meet as a church – therefore – not because we are inclined to do so, not because it is the socially acceptable thing to do, not because we have chosen to do so for any reason whatever – but because the Almighty God has called us, summoned us, to meet with him. As his people, we have heard his call, and we are here. And why are we here? No simply to enjoy one another's company, not just to listen to lovely music or a lively sermon, not to give our opinions on timely topics – but to hear what the voice of God has to say – “to hear what the Lord God shall say.” – through his word in scripture, in sermon, sacrament and music.

The church then, according to the New Testament is more than a congregation of people – it's the people of God” – gathered by him to listen to him. Without a God who speaks, the church would have nothing to say. And how does God the Father speak to his community? Through the Lord Jesus Christ.

This mean – in the third place – that the Christian church is not only made up of people, the people of God, the church is “of Christ.”

Paul wrote “to the Church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Jesus intended from the beginning to found a church – a community of faithful followers, to form a “messianic people.” He called twelve to be the nucleus of this New Israel. Had not the old Israel had twelve tribes? In him, this new community was to fulfill the covenant made with Abraham – to realize the promises made to the fathers. So, you are mistaking the intention of Jesus if you think of him simply as a teacher or a saviour of separate individuals. He intended to found a new covenant of community and did so. Pentecost gives this community his spirit – the holy spirit which forged all who confessed Jesus Christ as risen Lord – whatever their nationality or race or tongue – into one fellowship, worshipping together, witnessing together, serving together, expecting together Christ's eminent return. Christ had given them a common way of entering the community – it was by baptism with the laying on of hands and prayer – he had given them a common tradition – in his teaching and his work. He had given them a common act of worship – the Lord's Supper and a common task – the proclamation of his gospel. By his

whole life of sacrifice, he had redeemed them from the power of sin, by his _____ death on the cross he had saved them – so he was to be forever the “head” of the church and they were to be his continuing “body” to do his will until he came again.

So the church today ought by very definition to live according to the mind and will of Christ. When we fail to do this – we are just a building, shabby or splendid – what difference does it make? – Or a group of pointless people meeting to share our inadequacies – or an organization with no purpose – or only another economic institution – or a troupe of amateur entertainers – or a city club – or callus what you want.

But when we do give expression to the mind and will of Christ –

When do we justly

Love mercy

And walk humbly with our God

When we forgive as our Lord forgives

Loves as he loves –

When we give evidence ourselves of covenant character

When we are righteousness in response to Divine command

When we confess Christ and act like it –

Leaving behind our self-pity and our fears – our guilt and prejudice – and striking out in faith and brotherhood, live the kingdom life with men and women of all classes, all races we are the very body of Christ under his heading – so it’s never the church, “they” – it’s always the church, “we” – “you can never get out of the church”!

We learn there is something better than just being a part of Trinity Avenue Church – something higher and holier than being a Presbyterian – it is being a citizen of the holy Catholic Church – the church universal – a part of the great ongoing cause of Christ – in all places – in all times.

And in this body – of which we are an organic part – we find out life’s deepest significance and our ultimate belonging. We find “grace” and “peace.”

Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus,
Unto the church of the Thessalonians
Which is in God the Father,
And in the Lord Jesus Christ:
Grace be unto you,

And peace,
From God our Father,
And the Lord Jesus Christ.

We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers;
remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labor of love, and patience of hope in our
Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God our Father.”