

It's my purpose for the next several weeks, to consider with you a topical study on the theme of Church Life. By this is meant, life within the church.

I suggest this takes three directions: the church is to look up (in worship), within (for edification), and without (in evangelism). All three of these constitute the life of the church. And brethren, to put it rather plainly, all three are equally necessary. If either one of these ceases, the health of the church will be jeopardized, and the life of the church hindered. The church must worship, the church must edify, and the church must evangelize.

As a result, I want to consider all of these over the next several weeks, as we examine life within the local church. I want to talk about – what is public worship, how are we to interact with each other, and how are we to share our faith to those outside the church?

But in this first sermon, which will serve as an introduction, I merely want to underscore the centrality or utter importance of the local church. Why spend weeks studying the church? Isn't the church outdated? Hasn't the church become a thing of the past? Isn't the church optional? Something we can live without?

Well, my simple answer to these questions is, NO! And so, I want to consider the topic of the church's importance under these two headings – Five Reasons for the Church's Importance, and Five Reasons for the Church's Neglect.

I. Five Reasons for the Church's Importance

II. Five Reasons for the Church's Neglect

I. Five Reasons for the Church's Importance

A. The Church has been Bought with Christ's Blood

1. Acts 20:28—"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."
2. These are Paul's words to the elders (pastors) in the church at Ephesus—he was about to depart from them, and left them good counsel.
3. They were basically to do two things—first, take heed of themselves, and secondly, take heed to the flock.
4. If you think about it, this includes everything a pastor is to do—he must first heed to himself (which includes his home).
5. Secondly, he must take heed to all the flock, "among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God."
6. Now, for our purposes I want to notice the motive Paul gives—"which He purchased with His own blood."
7. Here we find that "God purchased the church with His own blood"—what does this statement mean?
8. Well, in the first place, by "God" is specifically meant Christ, for only God incarnate possesses blood.
9. Brethren, I trust it's evident, because God does not have a body, He does not have any blood—this is only true of Christ (who is God incarnate).
10. Thus, what we actually have here, is one of the clearest affirmations in the NT about the divinity of Christ.
11. Simply put—Christ is God—and yet, we also learn, that Christ is Man, because only Man has blood.

12. And thus, in the strictest sense, Christ did not shed His blood as God, but He shed His blood as Man.
13. Put another way, Christ's divine nature never died (because God cannot die), but His human nature died (as Man can die).
14. But because Christ is two natures in one person, what is strictly true of one nature is ascribed to the person.
15. In other words, it was because His human nature was joined to His divine nature that His death has infinite value.
16. Canons of Dort (2:3)—"The death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sin; and is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world."
17. How can it be, that Christ's death has such worth or value that it can atone for the sins of the whole world, but because He is the GodMan.
18. Canons of Dort (2:4)—"This death derives its infinite value and dignity from these considerations, because the person who submitted to it was not only really man, and perfectly holy, but also the only begotten Son of God, of the same eternal and infinite essence with the Father and the Holy Spirit."
19. This is why, my dear brethren, the death of Christ has such value! It's because it's the death of the GodMan.
20. Now, let me say a few things about this word "purchased"—"the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."
21. To purchase is to buy—Christ bought His church with His own blood—this is the language of redemption.
22. Redemption is a big word that's found throughout our Bible—it basically means deliverance by payment.
23. It brings to mind the idea of a slave market—slaves in the OT were redeemed by those who qualified.
24. One obvious qualification was that the redeemer had the means whereby to redeem the slave (he had to have the necessary silver or gold).
25. Christ purchased us out of the slave market of this world, not with silver or gold, but with His precious blood.
26. 1Pet.1:18-19—"knowing that you were no redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot."
27. Thus, Christ death was a ransom paid for our redemption—He redeemed us from our sin with His blood.
28. Now, how does this fact render the church important? Put another way, in light of this fact, why should we love the church?
29. (1) We should love the church because the Father uniquely loves the church—remember, the Son came into this world to redeem a love gift.
30. The church was given to God the Son, by God the Father, from eternity in the covenant of redemption.
31. Why do we call this covenant "the covenant of redemption" but because, it concerned the redemption of a people!
32. The Father and Son covenanted together concerning the redemption of a specific and beloved people.
33. (2) We should love the church because the Son uniquely died for the church—He died to redeem the church.

34. Now, let me clarify—the Scriptures teach that because of who Christ, His sacrifice had infinite value.
35. Simply put, Christ's paid a sufficient amount on the cross to redeem the entirety of Adam's fallen race.
36. Christ paid a sufficient cost—He shed sufficient blood—to atone for the sins of the entire (evil) world.
37. This is why we have a sufficient gospel to take to every nation and to preach to every creature—"There's redemption in the blood of Jesus Christ!"
38. But, this in no way denies that this sufficient (and in this sense universal atonement), has a specific intention.
39. Christ not only shed His blood to provide a sufficient redemption, but He shed His blood to secure a certain redemption.
40. John MacArthur—"The Church is so precious that the Son was willing to suffer the agonies of the cross and die in obedience to the Father so that this eternal love-gift could become a reality."

B. The Church is Entrusted with Christ's Word

1. 1Tim.3:14-15—"These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."
2. This passage in many ways, provides the purpose behind Paul's letter to Timothy, his young son in the faith.
3. He wrote to Timothy, that he would know, how, he—"ought to conduct himself in the house of God."
4. There is a sense in which Paul is teaching Timothy how he ought to organize and run the church of God.
5. In order to underscore the important of this, Paul describes the church as the NC house or temple of God.
6. Everything in this description, describes the church as a temple—first, it's called "the house of God" the place where He lives.
7. It's called the pillar and ground of the truth, which points back to the OT temple with its pillars and foundation stones.
8. But here's the problem—this text describes the church as the pillar and ground of the truth, whereas, you would think it would be the other way around—the truth is the pillar and ground of the truth.
9. Well, the church is the "pillar and ground of the truth" in that she upholds and guards the truth—she's been entrusted with the truth.
10. There is a sense in which the church has been entrusted with a very important treasure—the truth of God.
11. Now, this does not mean that the church is to hide the truth in some vault so that no one else can see it.
12. This is what the Roman Catholic church did throughout the medieval ages, to keep the people in darkness.
13. It conducted its services in Latin, even though no one spoke Latin except the priests—this way they could deceive the people.
14. But the church is "the pillar and ground (support) of the truth" in that she alone has been entrusted with that truth.
15. O brethren, this is why the church is so important, because she has been entrusted with a precious treasure.

16. John Calvin—"The truth is preserved on earth by the ministry of the Church alone. What a weight, therefore, rests on the pastors, who have been entrusted with the charge of so immeasurable a treasure."
17. Jude 1:3—"I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."
18. By "faith" here is meant, that full body of truth, that can never be added to or subtracted from—it's called "the faith" because it's the sum of what's to be believed.
19. Notice it was "once for all delivered to the saints" which means, it was given to them once for all time.
20. It was "delivered to the saints"—that is, not Christians individually, but collectively as they form a people.
21. Jude is specifically written to local churches to warn them of false teachers who've secretly crept it (v4).
22. The word "contend" means "to struggle or oppose" it here refers to the earnest work of defending the truth.
23. Thus, while the elders have a unique responsibility to guard the truth, it's a responsibility for all the saints.
24. It's for this reason, the church must be viewed as important, for it has been entrusted with the truth of Christ.

C. The Church Advances Christ's Kingdom

1. Matt.16:17-19—"Jesus answered and said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 'And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. 'And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'"
2. I trust it goes without saying, this passage has been grossly abused by some and terribly misunderstood by others (allow me to briefly explain it by way of three simply observations).
3. (1) The church is built by Christ on apostolic doctrine—"And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church."
4. This statement has a rich OT roots, as Zech.6:12-15 foretold that the Messiah would build His temple.
5. Just the OT temple was built upon a great foundation, Christ's temple will be built upon apostolic doctrine.
6. Eph.2:20—"having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone."
7. The church is built upon Peter not as its first Pope, but as one of the apostles and prophets of Christ, through whom He would give the NT Scriptures.
8. The substance of this revelation is summarized in Peter's confession, v16—"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."
9. (2) The church is militant and advances against opposition—"I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."
10. This imagery portrays the clash of two kingdoms—the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of Satan.
11. The church of Christ is a military force waging war on the enemy, as sinners are translated from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.
12. (3) The church is closely related to the kingdom of heaven—"And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

13. The "keys of the kingdom" are given to the church (especially its leadership as illustrated in the apostle Peter).
14. The idea of binding and loosening have to do with entrance and removal from the kingdom or church.
15. This is evident from Matt.18:18, "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."
16. This statement comes in a context of church discipline, that takes place within the local assembly (v20).
17. Matt.18:20—"For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them (where the church has gathered to conduct His business – either to worship Him or conduct church discipline, Christ is uniquely present)."
18. Thus, the church is to advance upon the enemy—she is to take the truth into the world to make disciples.
19. As these disciples are made, that is as sinners are saved from their sins, they are to be added to the church.
20. It's for this reason the church has been handed "the keys to the kingdom" as the church opens the gates of the kingdom by way of membership.

D. The Church Nourishes Christ's People

1. By this I mean, it's within the church that God strengthens and encourages His covenant and beloved people.
2. Now here I don't have a single text to look at, for the simple reason, the entire NT bears witness to this fact.
3. God nourishes His people within the confines of the local church—it's here the public means of grace are enjoyed.
4. And so, those of you who were able to attend our conference yesterday will know, what chapter 14:1 of our confessions says.
5. It says that it's ordinary through the ministry of the word, the sacraments, and prayer, that the Spirit increases and strengthens our faith.
6. Now here, I want to discuss two phrases found throughout our reformed fathers, that can be misunderstood.
7. Let me give you the statements, and then I want to examine them (remember, these are Protestant statements).
8. "You cannot have God for your Father unless you have the church for your Mother" and "There is ordinarily no salvation outside of the church."
9. These are statements that many (most) Christians are uneasy with because they likely misunderstand them.
10. But the Scripture itself refers to the church as our mother, Gal.4:26—"the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all."
11. The church is likened to our mother because it's within her walls, that we are nourished by the means of grace.
12. When our fathers said, "There is ordinarily no salvation outside of the church" they do not mean the church saves us.
13. But they do mean that Christ, who alone saves, has ordained that those means He uses to strengthen us, be exercised within the church.
14. R.B. Kuiper—"Rome is in grievous error when it asserts that the church dispenses *saving grace itself*. But so are they in error who overlook the fact that the church must dispense *the means of saving grace*...It is because of this important role of the church in the birth of believers that the church deserves to be denominated *the mother of believers*."

15. Westminster Confession of Faith (25:2)—"The visible church, consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation."
16. This simply means, because God uses various means ordained within the church to strengthen His people, there's ordinary no perseverance outside of it.

E. The Church Glorifies Christ's Name

1. Ephesians 3:20-21—"Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."
2. This is a fifth and obvious reason behind the church's importance—it's the arena wherein the glory of God is displayed.

II. Five Reasons for the Church's Neglect

1. Here in closing, I want to suggest five reasons why many professing Christians fail to give the church its proper importance.
2. (1) Ignorance—by this I mean, Christians who simply never were taught about the church's importance.
3. For example, many of you have come to this church, with little understanding of the church's importance.
4. It's for this reason, we must always be patient with people—take them where they're at, and bring them where they need to be.
5. (2) Indifference—this is a more serious problem, and one that contains more of a criminal element in it.
6. Such Christians could take or leave the church if it were up to them—they go to church largely out of tradition.
7. It's for this, such people as this, are likely offended at what I've said this morning, or indifferent to it.
8. (3) Competition—by this I mean, like can compete with the church for our time, treasure, and affection.
9. And this is something that all of us must fight against, especially as our children grow and our calendars get filled (we time for everything else, except church).
10. (4) Bad theology—by this I mean, any teaching that would seek to undermine the centrality of the local assembly.
11. (5) Individualism—by this I mean, the tendency of many people to think of Christianity in terms of themselves.
12. Christianity is both personal and corporate, and yet, while it's highly personal, it's not individualistic.
13. Christ knows His sheep by name, He loves them individually, and yet, He saves them to gather them together.
14. They are individual sheep that make a flock; they are individual stones that make a building; they are individual citizens that make a city.
15. But an individual sheep is not a flock; an individual stone is not a building, and an individual citizen is not a city.