

Understanding the Church

1. INTRO

- a. Much of our understanding of spiritual things is shaped more by culture than the Bible.
 - i. God helps those who help themselves
 - ii. God works in mysterious ways
 - iii. An apple in the garden...
 - iv. Three Wise Men (three gifts + magi)
 - v. Be in the world but not of it → concept that may be true, but isn't a quote from the Bible
 - vi. Steeple, a building, pews, so on and so forth
- b. Similarly, much of our understanding of "church" is more Western and European than global.
 - i. Family integration, tables vs. chairs, a building vs. a tree, multiple sharing vs. one person sharing, for believers or for all who would come
- c. During this series, we hope to establish, as much as we can, a biblical understanding of the church. Today we intro this topic.

2. Understanding the Church

- a. **The New Testament teaching on church makes it clear that the question shouldn't be "What is the church?" but "Who is the church?"**
 - i. The church is not a denomination
 - ii. The church is not an institution or a power structure
 - iii. The church is not a building
 1. In the New Testament, nothing is said about the church's place and much is said about the church as people. And just to give a few examples:
 - a. Matthew 16:18, Jesus says to Peter, "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." That was not a building he is talking about - more like people carrying a battering ram.
 - b. Matthew 18:17 in church discipline he says, when all private efforts fail, "tell it to the church." That doesn't mean "talk to bricks."
 - c. Acts 9:31, it says, "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up."
 - d. Acts 13:1, it says, "Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers" meaning, among the people, those were some of the gifted folks.
 2. In all of the NT, church always refers to people, not a place
 - iv. The church is a gathering of people who belong to the Lord.

1. The English word church came from the old English kirch or kirche, and that comes from the Greek kuriokos (cure-e-AH-kos) which means “belonging to the Lord.”
 2. So, the word church etymology is “belonging to the Lord”
- v. So, the church is the people of God, his new covenant family
1. The New Covenant (or New Testament) is the promise that God makes with humanity that He will forgive sin and restore fellowship with those whose hearts are turned toward Him. Jesus Christ is the mediator of the New Covenant, and His death on the cross is the basis of the promise (Luke 22:20).
 2. In the Bible, the NC has two signs associated with it - communion and baptism.
 - a. After a covenant was established, the parties involved celebrated with a meal together. We see this in Ex. 12:24; see also Gen. 14:17–20; 18:1–13; 27; Prov. 9:1–6).
 - b. At the last supper, Jesus announced, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (1 Cor. 11:25; see Matt. 26:28). By participating in the meal, the covenant with Christ is confirmed and ratified - almost like saying that it’s a done deal
 - c. Practically and biblically, communion was design to look like a meal - a supper - with covenant participants
 - i. If you are not a believer, communion is an invitation from Christ beckoning you to His table. Partaking in the meal doesn’t make you a follower, but it represents the meal of the New Covenant which the cross establishes
 - ii. If you are a believer, the supper is a poignant reminder that one was outside of God’s covenant family and but now has a seat at the table.
 - d. Similarly, baptism replaces the marker of the covenant. For a marriage, it is a ring. For the Old Covenant, it was circumcision. Now, baptism has replaced circumcision, an outward sign showing that the old you has died and the new you is reborn into a new family.
 - i. Again, this doesn’t save a person, but represents a New Covenant reality
 - e. So, God’s people are really given to main ordinances - communion and baptism - and both of them look to this idea of being reborn into a new family, a new covenant, the people of God.
- vi. Who is the church? God’s people.

1. 1 Peter 2:9-10, 9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may proclaim the virtues of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 You once were not a people, but now you are God's people. You were shown no mercy, but now you have received mercy.
- b. The only way to become part of the people of God is through Jesus.**
- i. Gospel explanation
 - ii. You cannot reject Jesus and be a part of the church
 1. Mormon, JW, liberal protestantism, etc
- c. The New Testament portrays the people of God gathering in assemblies as the local expression of the universal church.**
- i. The global church is all believers everywhere across time. There is a global, universal gathering. God is gathering us to himself.
 1. We will stand before him, one day, as ONE assembly (Rev 7:9)
 2. But we aren't there yet. Today we live as nomads, waiting for the time when we finally arrive at our destination. (1 Peter 2:11, strangers and sojourners)
 3. In this in between time period, we gather together locally, waiting, while we are enroute to the New Jerusalem (ex: life as pilgrimage)
 - ii. The word we translate as church is Ekklesia, but it doesn't actually mean church, it means a gathering or an assembly
 1. Not a religious word, any kind of assembling of people
 2. Senate gathering at congress is ekklesia
 3. A protest or a march is ekklesia
 4. Fans gathering at the beach for a concert is ekklesia
 - iii. When followers of Jesus used this term - it became synonymous with what we call "Church" - they meant something very different than any of the above.
 1. There is a physical aspect to the church. It is not a building, but there is a physical aspect to it. They are gathering together.
 2. More importantly, they are gathering to Jesus and being gathered to the Father through the son.
 3. As they are gathered closer to him, they gather more so together
 4. Gathering physically today is the physical manifestation of the spiritual reality of our supernatural gathering to God
- d. This complex idea of ekklesia is consistent with Old Testament theology**
- i. God gathered his people out of Egypt
 - ii. They gathered at Mt Sinai
 - iii. When they were in the land, they were all his people, but they gathered together for festivals and feast days → sometimes locally, sometimes all together
 - iv. They were gathered in tribes, under tribal elders

- v. Within the Old Covenant people of God, Israel, there were a spiritually gathered group known as the “Righteous Remnant”
 - 1. This looks forward to New Covenant faith
 - vi. The Exodus draws a picture of God gathering his people out of slavery into his care and kingship. It looks forward to Christ gathering us out of Satan’s grasp into his care
 - vii. The Exile and “re-gathering” draws a picture of the Exile from the Garden and God’s re-gathering through Jesus → it also pictures how we live today, as exiles waiting to return to the true Promised Land, a heavenly dwelling place
 - viii. So you see that even in the OT the idea of gathering was layered
 - 1. There was a big picture, universal idea, also a local idea, a spiritual, and a physical
- e. Because of this complexity, the New Testament uses numerous terms and metaphors to explain this idea of the church**
- i. Church / Ekklesia means gathering, but don’t get fixated on a word. Think about the concepts that the NT teaches about the people of God.
 - 1. Yes, we do gather as the assembled New Covenant people of God to worship him, but we need to understand church far beyond that
 - 2. These metaphors help us to understand
 - ii. The church is the body of Christ with him as the head. (most used description)
 - iii. The church is the bride of Christ.
 - iv. The church is the family of God.
 - v. The church is God’s house.
 - vi. The church is the temple of God, built with living stones, with Christ as the foundation and cornerstone, and the Holy Spirit indwelling it.
 - vii. And to a lesser extent, other metaphors include: a kingdom, a field, the vine, the olive tree, a flock
- f. The Church exists for the glory of God and the salvation of those who do not yet belong to it’s new covenant community.**
- i. Jesus said he is building his church - establishing his called out, community, creating his new family
 - ii. How? He is doing that as his family expands their family tree by having “kids”
 - iii. This is why being entrusted w/ the gospel is so important
 - iv. Gospel sharing is how we spiritually procreate, it is how Jesus “builds his church”
 - v. If we buy into this idea, Jesus is building his church every single moment of every single day through his people in the world.

- vi. Therefore, everything that we do counts. We hear, obey, and share the gospel until the whole earth is saturated w/ the glory of God from the worship of his ppl
 - vii. Church, in its essence, is not just about a few hours a week, or isolated professionals, but about all of God's people , but about God's people glorifying him all the time in every area of life.
3. Summarizing...
- a. On the most basic level, the church is the new covenant people of God, God's family. You need to be reborn into this family by the power of the Spirit and the Word. You exist for God's glory and the spreading of the gospel.
 - i. **So, the Church is the New Covenant people of God (all over the world and since the resurrection), reborn by the power of God, unleashed for the purposes of God.**
 - ii. God is growing his family, gathers his people, builds his church → His people spiritually procreating by proclaiming a Spirit-empowered Word, thereby saturating the earth with God's glory.
 - b. Where are we going from here?
 - i. Next week: Understanding that God expects all believers to be covenanted to a local gathering
 - ii. Begin walking through the aforementioned metaphors to help understand the nature and purpose of the church
 - iii. Walking through some functions and characteristics of a healthy church
 - c. Application / Discussion:
 - i. How has today shaped, confirmed, clarified, or changed your understanding of "church" on the broadest level?
 - ii. How should that change the way you think or act?
 - iii. What is one question that you want clarified or answered in the coming weeks - email it to pastorbill@revolvechurchnj.com