**Theology of the Church – Core Seminar**

**Class #1 – “What is a Church?”**

**Introduction**

In January of 2012, Jefferson Bethke, a 22 year old from Seattle, posted a YouTube titled, “Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus[[1]](#footnote-1).” It quickly blew up on the internet, getting attention from The Washington Post, CNN, CBS, and many other media outlets - as of this week, it’s been viewed well over 28 million times.

Why all the attention? It reflects that today, *spirituality* is popular, but religion – not so much. When we think of religion, we think of rules, dogma, priests, institutions. We want Jesus but not all the strictures that come with it. For some, when the topic of ‘church’ comes up, their eyes gloss over and they’re left with a bad taste in their mouth.

Why? For some, the church has lost its way and has turned a blind eye in the community and world we live in and become irrelevant; the ship is sinking – time to get off. For others, the problem lays not so much with the institution but its people. Church is a place filled with hypocrites, judgmental, self-righteous, close-minded people. It’s boring: people holding onto traditions that make them feel good and pushing others into it through legalistic guilt.

So how important *is* the church? Isn’t Jesus what this is all about anyways? Why not just ditch all the baggage and rethink how we do things, right? Besides, wasn’t Jesus the one who said, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them[[2]](#footnote-2)”?

It sounds *right* to say, “I hate religion, but love Jesus.” It’s no wonder Bethke’s YouTube went viral like it did. But *is* it true? What is someone’s experience leaves them feeling the church is irrelevant and a waste of time? Can Christians do fine *with* God, and *without* the church?

To answer that question, we need to think carefully about what the Bible says about the church; to think about the theology of the church. What we’ll find is that far from being optional, the church is *central* to God’s plan. Far from being something that is reserved for scholars in ivory towers, the theology of the church matters for you and me because God has spoken.

So where are we headed over the next 6 weeks? We begin today by looking at the fundamental question: What is a church? If we don’t know *what* we’re building, we’re going to make a mess – definitions matter. From there we’ll unpack that definition looking at church membership (week 2), discipline (week 3), and the ordinances (week 4). If these are important for a healthy church, then it makes sense that there’d be people to guard that – so in week 5 we’ll look at church governance and the roles that both the congregation and church leadership have. Finally, we’ll talk about what the church should do when it gathers together (week 6). In all these things we are not so concerned about the latest book with the latest idea – we want to hear from God – to see what He says about the church and how we should organize our lives together. Let’s get started…

**What is a church?**

Imagine you take a flight this next week from DC to San Diego, CA. Could be for work, to visit family, or for a holiday. Whatever the reason, the plane takes off from DCA, you reach your cruising altitude and the seatbelt light turns off – *you are free to move about the cabin*. What if you found out in that moment that the pilot was frantically turning the pages of the manual on the plane trying to figure out how to land the thing once you got to California? He’d learned all he needed to about taking off, but never attempted a landing.

Sometimes we are so eager to get started on an activity that excites us, we skip over the details that seem to get in the way – details like definitions. But definitions are important. Much like I’m sure you wished the pilot knew how the plan landed *before* he took off with you in the passenger seat, it’s important for us to consider the definition of the church before we take off.

So where do we start?

The word “church” shows up well over a 100 times in the NT[[3]](#footnote-3), so a good place to begin may be to rule out what a church is *not*.

* A church is *not* a building. We may walk by a building and say, “That’s a nice church” –but that’s not the idea in the NT. *This* building could burn down tomorrow and there’d still be a Capitol Hill Baptist Church. That’s why in Romans 16, Paul can greet the church that met *in* Prisca and Aquila’s house (Rom. 16:3-5) – the building (the house) was not the church, but the people who met there. The word ‘church’ in the NT is from the Greek ‘ekklesia,’ which means gathering or an assembly. The church is fundamentally an assembly of people.
* Now, if you get a random group of Christian friends together to watch a football game, does that make you a church? No. The church *is* an assembly, but the church is also not *simply* a random group of Christians[[4]](#footnote-4) - it’s far more.

There is such a thing as the *Universal Church* – which is a way of talking about all true Christians from all times and all locations. We can’t see that church now, but God can and one day the universal church *will* be gathered together[[5]](#footnote-5) in one place – every tongue, tribe and nation worshipping God together. There are times in the NT where this is how the word ‘church’ is used – in a universal sense. For example, when Paul writes in Ephesians 1 that Jesus is the head of the church (Eph. 1:22-23) he doesn’t mean *just* of the church in Ephesus, he means of the Church universal. But most of the references of the church in the NT have the local church in mind: the church in Ephesus, Corinth, Colossae, Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia.

So the church is not a building, it’s an assembly…but it’s more than *just* an assembly. So how do we clarify what a local church is then? A helpful definition that will serve as a starting point for us is this:

“*A local church is a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ’s name to officially affirm and oversee one another’s membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances[[6]](#footnote-6).”*

Now, we will unpack this definition with greater detail in the coming weeks, but let me highlight one aspect of it: “Jesus Christ and his kingdom.” What does the kingdom of God have to do with the local church? Quite a bit! The Kingdom of God is a major theme in the NT, particularly in the Gospels. Now when you read about the kingdom of God, one way to think about it is this: *God’s people, in God’s place, under God’s rule*.

God’s people, in God’s place, under God’s rule is at the heart of the definition of the church. Why? Because it’s another way of talking about worship – and friends, the church exists to worship. So how do we worship God together in a local church?

**The Church Displays the Image of God**

To answer that, I’m going to walk through the storyline of Scripture to show how we image God

That’s our key word: *image*.

1. **Creation**

First, Creation. Genesis 1. God creates plants and animals “each according to its kind.” Every apple is patterned after another apple; every zebra after another zebra. But then in verse 26 we read this: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’” We are patterned after God. We uniquely represent God.

1. **Fall**

Step two: the Fall and Genesis 3. People decide *not* to represent God’s rule. They work instead to represent their own rule. Now we’re guilty (because we’ve broken God’s law), and we’re also corrupt. The mirror is bent, you might say, so a false image of God is portrayed.

**3. Israel**

Step 3, Israel. God, in his mercy, had a plan to both *save* and *use* a group of people to accomplish his original purpose for creation: the display of his glory. In Exodus 4, he even calls this nation his “son.[[7]](#footnote-7)”

Why a son? Because sons look like their dads. They image their fathers.

And so the Ten Commandments he gives this son are bound up in the son’s imaging of his Father. You shall have no other Gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image of God. You shall act in a way that reflects my character.

And if this son, Israel, did worship other images—and fail to display God’s image, he would be cast out of the land. Which, as you know, is exactly what happens.

**4. Christ**

Step 4. Christ. In Matthew 3, Jesus is baptized. And what does the Father say from heaven? “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Now, at last, we have the perfect Son who perfectly pleases his Father. Who perfectly images his Father. “Whoever has seen me has seen the father,” (John 14:9).

Like Father, like Son.

So no wonder the authors of the New Testament call him the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15) and “the exact representation of his being” (Heb 1:3). Here is a man who now perfectly images God for all of us to see.

**5. Church**

Think of Romans 8:29. “For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the *image* of his Son.” Or 1 Corinthians 15:49: “Just as we have borne the *image* of the man of dust, we shall also bear the *image* of the man of heaven.”

Our job as Christians is to display the character and likeness and image and glory of the Son and the Father in heaven!

* The Father’s a peacemaker, so you, church, be peacemakers.
* The Father loves his enemies, so you, church, love your enemies.
* The Father and I are one, so you, church, be one.

Like Father, like Son, and like sons.

**6. Glory**

1 John 3:2, “But we know when he appears we will be like him, because we shall see him as he is.” One day God will remake creation into the new heavens and the new earth. The city where God dwells with man will descend from heaven, and we will be perfect mirrors reflecting his image!

Here’s the summary of the story:

* God created humankind to display the excellence of who he is.
* Adam and Eve didn’t do that, though.
* Neither did the people of Israel.
* But Jesus did. Jesus came to reveal God, and Jesus came to save.
* Now the church is called to image the character and glory of God to all the universe. It is called to testify in word and action to his great wisdom and work of salvation.

How do we worship? How do we respond to the excellence of who he is? We image him! We show off his glory!

Let me briefly return to our definition:

“*A local church is a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ’s name to officially affirm and oversee one another’s membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances[[8]](#footnote-8).”*

If you read through the NT, you’ll see a number of pictures used to describe the local church. We could argue that those too are part of the definition of the church - for example, the church is described as:

* A body (1 Corinthians 12:12-27)
* A family (1 Timothy 5:1-2)
* A flock of sheep (1 Peter 5:2)
* A house (1 Peter 2:5)
* A priesthood (1 Peter 2:9)

Here’s the point: as a local church lives together with the structure and purpose laid out in the definition (meeting together to oversee one another’s membership in Jesus Christ), they are set up to live together in such a way that those images (body, family, flock) become a reality. In other words, the church increasingly reflects different aspects of the image of God.

**Two Implications**

Let me draw two lessons from this for how we should think about the church.

***Implication 1: The local church is the focal point of God’s grand plan to display his glory to the nations.***

Think, for a moment, of how Paul constructs the book of Ephesians. He begins, chapter 1, with a beautiful description of our salvation—by grace alone, to the glory of Christ alone. Chapter 2 begins with the gospel that saved us. And then mid-way through chapter 2, Paul launches into the primary application point of the gospel: that Jews and Gentiles are one in Christ. Two groups who for ethnic, theological, social, and political reasons had been at enmity are now united. In fact, Paul uses the two most committed bonds we know—the bond of family and of ethnicity—to describe the church united. We are the new family of God. We are God’s new humanity. People with nothing in common but Christ living together as if we have everything in common. What is God’s purpose in all of this? Ephesians 3:10,

“…so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.”

Don’t miss that. How will God make known to a watching world his manifold wisdom? *Through the church.* It’s God’s supernatural work in us, not merely as individuals, but collectively as a church body, that becomes this platform. Far from optional, the church is central to God’s plan.

***Implication 2: The local church is to be distinct from the world.***

God’s purposes for the church work when believers are *different* from the world. Not only does that mean different types of people from different backgrounds learning to live with and love each other. It also means different in the sense of holiness. In 1 Peter 1 we read, “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance,but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.[[9]](#footnote-9)” Churches are only for sinners. If you’re not a sinner, you’re not welcome in my church. And yet churches are only for *repentant* sinners. If the church looks no different from the world, what good is it? I don’t care what message it preaches; a church that looks like the world only defames that message.

**Discussion Questions**

1. **If the church is called to image God, what should the church be reflecting about God? What are things a church can do to strive after reflecting God these ways?**
2. **Based on what we’ve talked about this morning, why would a church decide *not* to go multi-site or multi-service?**
1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IAhDGYlpqY [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Matt. 18:20 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 113x in the ESV; ekklesisa shows up 114x. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A different example of this is in Act 19:32 where *ekklesia* is used to describe the assembly (or mob) about to persecute Christians. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. e.g. Rev. 7:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Church Membership,* by Jonathan Leeman, pg. 52 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Exodus 4:22 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Church Membership,* by Jonathan Leeman, pg. 52 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 1 Peter 1:15-16 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)