

## **STUDY 10                    The Church**

Four main points

1.     Characteristics
2.     Nature
3.     Purpose
4.     Ministry

### **1.     Characteristics**

Reading:

Matt. 18:20; Acts 2:42; Eph. 4:4-6; Heb. 12:22, 23  
KTT 259–260, 265–273, 297-308  
H & W 153-159

### **2.     Nature**

Reading:

1 Peter 2:4, 5; Eph. 5:25-27; 1 Cor. 12:12-31  
Eph. 2:19; 3:14, 15; Eph. 6:12; Heb. 13:14  
KTT 260–265

### **3.     Purpose**

Reading:

1 Pet. 4:12-14; Matt. 28: 18-20; 1 Tim. 3:15  
1 John 3: 17, 18; Phil. 2:5-7  
KTT 273 – 275, 280 - 282

### **4.     Ministry**

Reading:

Rom. 12:4-8; Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tim. 3:1-13; Tit. 1:6-9  
KTT 275-280  
H & W 160–166

## 1. Characteristics

The Church is basically a gathering of Christian people for Jesus promised that where two or three gathered in his name he would be there with them. This may be called the 'Local Church'. On another level there are many such gatherings in a sense united by the presence of Jesus, the 'Universal Church'. Questions about the relationship between the Universal Church and the Local Churches have often caused Christians to be deeply divided.

Two common distinctions are made in looking at the Church. Those who have died in the faith of Christ are said to be part of the 'Church Triumphant', those who continue to worship and serve in this life are the 'Church Militant'. Organisationally the Church is the company of people that gather together, what may be called the 'visible Church', but because God alone knows the people who are his there is also the notion of the 'invisible Church'. To be a member of the institutional or visible Church is not necessarily the same as being right with God but a Christian, in obedience to God, will want to be in fellowship with other Christians in a Local Church.

The Congregational idea is that the Local Church is the most important and that two or three gathering in the Lord's name is the hallmark of the Church. The Episcopal idea is that Historical continuity is the hallmark of the Church, which is mainly passed through the ordinances of the Church and its ministry. Methodists (and Presbyterians) fall somewhere in the middle, regarding both ideas as important.

The expression in the Creed provides four useful adjectives when it says about 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church'. The essential unity of the Church is in Christ its head. It is to be holy because it is to be presented before God. It is catholic in the sense of universal as it welcomes people from all nations. It is apostolic because it retains the apostles' teaching.

## 2. Nature

The New Testament uses many illustrations to describe the Church. In relation to Christ it is the company of people who are being built up by him, protected by him, purified by him, interceded for by him because they are the people who have known his saving love and are being prepared for his eternal kingdom.

The Church is said to be a firm building. Though physical buildings have some value (as well as being a monumental drain on our resources) the New Testament is more concerned to speak about a spiritual building composed of living stones, dependent on one another but founded on Christ.

A relationship of deep intimacy is suggested by the notion of the Church as the virgin bride. Christ loves the Church and has made it pure and faultless by his death.

The picture of the Church as a body, with Christ as its head, emphasises that the Church is a living organism and not primarily an organisation. No member of the body is disposable and no member of the body is of over-riding importance.

The Church is also the family of God. This points very clearly to the relationship between Christians and God, the heavenly Father. In the early Church it was particularly noticeable that the barriers that set people apart in the world were irrelevant in the Church.

The New Testament also makes brief mention of the Church as an army for God. The weapons of victory are God's but the Church is called to serve him faithfully in a hostile world.

The security of the eternal city of God is also shown by the life of the Church. The Christian's fellowship in the Church is, at its best, an anticipation of the Kingdom of God.

### 3. Purpose

The main purpose of the Church is to bring glory to God. In all that it does, it should direct attention and praise to God as it bears fruit in worship, in faithful service and as it reflects the love of God in the world.

Reaching out to others in the name of Christ is usually termed mission. Mission is sometimes divided into evangelism and service and though this distinction may be helpful we must take care not to miss the point. The Church that seeks only to serve the world without naming the name of Christ is missing as vital a point as the Church that seeks only to add converts to the roll without thinking about the need to serve the whole person and community. Jesus himself was the proclaimer of words and the performer of deeds and both activities are necessary if the mission of the Church is to be authentic.

The Church is also called upon to guard the truth of the Gospel. At the heart of this is the position of the Bible within the Church. God in Christ, through the message of the Bible, which is applied through the work of the Church, reaches out and calls men and women to repentance, faith and discipleship. It is the task of the Church to announce that Jesus Christ, once crucified for the sins of the world, is now risen Lord and that forgiveness and peace with God to all eternity are available to all.

From the early centuries of the Christian Church statements as to the fundamentals of Christian belief (Creeds) have been prepared. These ensure a continuity of basic beliefs and a unity can be found between the Churches on the basis of these and the Bible. The Creeds teach the Doctrines of the Trinity and the full deity and full humanity of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. The Bible, at the centre of the Church's life and practice, corrects the unruly and those who are in error within the Church and challenges evil in the world.

#### 4. Ministry

The teaching about Ministry is one of the most notoriously controversial areas of Christian Doctrine. The range of views is from those who recognise no separate form of Ministry at all to those for whom proper Ordination (Order) is a fundamental mark of the Church.

It seems clear from the Bible that different people are called to exercise different offices within the Church. The implication is that some are called to particular kinds of ministry. The Pastoral Epistles use three words to describe Ministers who were set apart by the laying on of hands and prayer - deacons, elders (presbyters) and overseers (bishops). Most scholars accept that 'elder' and 'overseer' are used interchangeably and that a three-fold order of hierarchical Ministry is not taught in Scripture. (That need not of course necessarily rule out its usefulness for the Church.)

A considerable number of errors are caused by the translation of 'presbyter' as 'priest'. There is no notion in the New Testament of the Christian Minister being a sacrificing priest. Methodists believe that though it is useful to have Ordained Ministers that 'they hold no priesthood differing in kind' from other Christians.

British Methodist Ministers are not ordained by bishops and because of this their Ministry is not technically recognised by episcopal Churches (e.g. Anglican, R.C.) In turn the Roman Catholic Church does not, at least in theory, recognise the Ministry of other Christian Churches. However, in practice there is considerable variation in these matters from one area to another.

The 'priesthood of all believers' is an important doctrine asserted by the Reformers. It means that all Christians share equally in the Ministry of Christ. It need not mean, however, that therefore all Christians are equally called to every service.