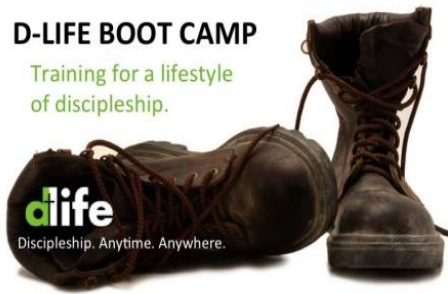


D-LIFE BOOT CAMP

Training for a lifestyle
of discipleship.



Keeping it Real
CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

Pastor Dale L. Crawley Sr.

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Matthew 28:19-20

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THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

A. The Nature of the Church

1. Definition: The church is the community of all true believers for all time.

This definition understands the church to be made of all those who are truly saved. Paul says, ***"Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her"*** (Eph. 5:25). Here ***"the church"*** is used to apply to all those whom Christ died to redeem, all those who are saved by the death of Christ. But that must include all true believers for all time, both in the New Testament age and in the Old Testament age as well. So great is God's plan for the church that he has exalted Christ to a position of highest authority for the sake of the church: ***"He has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all"*** (Eph. 1:22–23).

Jesus Christ himself builds the church by calling his people to himself. He promised, ***"I will build my church"*** (Matt. 16:18). But this process by which Christ builds the church is just a continuation of the pattern established by God in the Old Testament whereby he called people to himself to be a worshiping assembly before him. There are several indications in the Old Testament that God thought of his people as a ***"church,"*** a people assembled for the purpose of worshiping God. When Moses tells the people that the Lord said to him, ***"Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live upon the earth . . ."*** (Deut. 4:10), the Septuagint translates the word for ***"gather"*** (Heb. Qāhal) with the Greek term *ekklēsia*zō, "to summon an assembly," the verb that is cognate to the New Testament noun *ekklēsia*, "church."

2. The church is invisible yet visible.

In its true spiritual reality as the fellowship of all genuine believers, the church is invisible. This is because we cannot see the spiritual condition of people's hearts. We can see those who outwardly attend the church, and we can see outward evidences of inward spiritual change, but we cannot actually see into people's hearts and view their spiritual state—only God can do that. This is why Paul says, ***"The Lord knows those who are his"*** (2 Tim. 2:19). Even in our own churches and our own neighborhoods, only God knows who are true believers with certainty and without error. In

speaking of the church as invisible, the author of Hebrews speaks of the “**assembly** [lit. ‘**church**’] of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven” (Heb. 12:23) and says that present-day Christians join with that assembly in worship. We can give the following definition: **The invisible church is the church as God sees it.**

3. The church is local and universal. In the New Testament the word church may be applied to a group of believers at any level, ranging from a very small group meeting in a private home all the way to the group of all true believers in the universal church. A “**house church**” is called a “**church**” in Romans 16:5 (“***greet also the church in their house***”) and 1 Corinthians 16:19 (“***Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord***”). The church in an entire city is also called “**a church**” (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1). The church in a region is referred to as a “**church**” in Acts 9:31: “***So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up.***” Finally, the church throughout the entire world can be referred to as “**the church.**” Paul says, “***Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her***” (Eph. 5:25), and “***God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers . . .***” (1 Cor. 12:28). In this latter verse, the mention of “apostles,” who were not given to any individual church, guarantees that the reference is to the church universal.

4. Metaphors for the church. To help us understand the nature of the church, Scripture uses a wide range of metaphors and images to describe to us what the church is like. There are several family images—for example, Paul views the church as a family when he tells Timothy to act as if all the church members were members of a larger family: “***Do not rebuke an older man but exhort him as you would a father; treat younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, younger women like sisters, in all purity***” (1 Tim. 5:1–2). God is our heavenly Father (Eph. 3:14), and we are his sons and daughters, for God says to us, “***I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty***” (2 Cor. 6:18). We are therefore brothers and sisters with one another in God’s family (Matt. 12:49–50; 1 John 3:14–18). A somewhat different family metaphor is seen when Paul refers to the church as the bride of Christ. He says that the relationship between a husband and wife “***refers to Christ and the church***” (Eph. 5:32), and he says that he brought about the engagement between Christ and the church at Corinth and that it resembles an engagement between a bride and her husband-to-be: “***I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin***” (2 Cor. 11:2 NASB)—here Paul is looking forward to the time of Christ’s return as the time when the church will be presented to him as his bride.

In other metaphors, Scripture compares the church to branches on a vine (John 15:5), an olive tree (Rom. 11:17–24), a field of crops (1 Cor. 3:6–9), a building (1 Cor. 3:9), and a harvest (Matt. 13:1–30; John 4:35). The church is also viewed as a new temple not built with literal stones but built with Christian people who are “living stones” (1 Peter 2:5) built up on the “cornerstone” who is Christ Jesus (1 Peter 2:4–8). Yet the church is not only a new temple for worship of God; it is also a new group of priests, a “holy priesthood” that can offer “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God” (1 Peter 2:5). We are also viewed as God’s house: “***We are his house***” (Heb. 3:6), with Jesus Christ himself viewed as the “***builder***” of the house (Heb. 3:3). The church is also viewed as “***the pillar and bulwark of the truth***” (1 Tim. 3:15). Finally, another familiar metaphor views the church as the **body of Christ** (1 Cor. 12:12–27). We

should recognize that Paul in fact uses two different metaphors of the human body when he speaks of the church. Here in 1 Corinthians 12 the whole body is taken as a metaphor for the church, because Paul speaks of the “ear” and the “eye” and the “sense of smell” (1 Cor. 12:16–17). In this metaphor, Christ is not viewed as the head joined to the body, because the individual members are themselves the individual parts of the head. Christ is in this metaphor the Lord who is “outside” of that body that represents the church and is the one whom the church serves and worships.

B. The “Marks” of the Church (Distinguishing Characteristics)

1. There are true churches and false churches.

What makes a church a church? What is necessary to have a church? Might a group of people who claim to be Christians become so unlike what a church should be that they should no longer be called a church? While in the early centuries of the Christian church there was little controversy about what was a true church, with the Reformation a crucial question emerged: **How can we recognize a true church?** Is the Roman Catholic Church a true church or not? To answer that question, people had to decide what were the “marks” of a true church, the distinguishing characteristics that lead us to recognize it as a true church.

In large measure, there was agreement between Luther and Calvin on the question of what constituted a true church. The Lutheran statement of faith, which is called the Augsburg Confession (1530), defined the church as **“the congregation of saints in which the gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments rightly administered”** (Article 7). Similarly, John Calvin said, *“Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.”* While slight differences appear in these confessions, their understanding of the distinguishing marks of a true church is quite similar. In contrast to the view of Luther and Calvin regarding the marks of a church, the Roman Catholic position has been that the visible church that descended from Peter and the apostles is the true church. It seems appropriate that we take Luther and Calvin’s view on the marks of a true church as correct still today. Their first mark was right preaching of the Word. Certainly if the Word of God is not being preached, but simply false doctrines or doctrines of men, then there is no true church. In some cases, we might have difficulty determining just how much wrong doctrine can be tolerated before a church can no longer be considered a true church, but there are many clear cases where we can say that a true church does not exist. For example, the **Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints** (the *Mormon Church*) does not hold to any major Christian doctrines concerning salvation or the person of God or the person and work of Christ. It is clearly a false church. Similarly, the **Jehovah’s Witnesses** teach salvation by works, not by trusting in Jesus Christ **alone**. This is a fundamental doctrinal deviation, because if people believe the teachings of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, they simply will not be saved. So the Jehovah’s Witnesses also must be considered a false church. **When the preaching of a church conceals the gospel message of salvation by faith alone from its members so that the gospel message is not clearly proclaimed and has not been proclaimed for some time, the group meeting there is not really a church.**

The second mark of the church, the right administration of the sacraments (**baptism and the Lord’s Supper**) was probably stated in opposition to the Roman Catholic view that saving

grace came through the sacraments and thereby the sacraments were made “works” by which we earned merit for salvation. In this way, the Roman Catholic Church was insisting on payment rather than teaching faith alone as the means of obtaining salvation, thus obscuring the true gospel. The need to protect the purity of the gospel is one reason for viewing right use of the sacraments (or “ordinances,” as they are called by Baptists) as a mark of a true church.

But a second reason exists for including the sacraments (or ordinances) as a mark of the church. Once an organization begins to practice baptism and the Lord’s Supper, it is a continuing organization and is attempting to function as a church. (In modern American society, an organization that begins to meet for worship and prayer and Bible teachings on Sunday mornings also would clearly be attempting to function as a church.)

A third reason for including right use of the sacraments (or ordinances) is that baptism and the Lord’s Supper also serve as “membership controls” for the church. **Baptism** is the means for admitting people into the church, and the Lord’s Supper is the means for allowing people to give a sign of continuing in the membership of the church—the church signifies that it considers those who receive baptism and the Lord’s Supper to be saved. Therefore, these activities indicate what a church thinks about salvation, and they are appropriately listed as a mark of the church today as well. By contrast, groups who do not administer baptism and the Lord’s Supper signify that they are not intending to function as a church. **Someone may stand on a street corner with a small crowd and have true preaching and hearing of the Word, but the people there would not be a church. Even a neighborhood Bible study meeting in a home can have the true teaching and hearing of the Word without becoming a church.** But if a local Bible study began baptizing its own new converts and regularly participating in the Lord’s Supper, these things would signify **an intention to function as a church**, and it would be difficult to say why it should not be considered a church in itself.

D. The Purposes of the Church

We can understand the purposes of the church in terms of ministry to God, ministry to believers, and ministry to the world.

1. Ministry to God: Worship. In relationship to God, the church’s purpose is to worship him.

2. Ministry to believers: Nurture. According to Scripture, the church has an obligation to nurture those who are already believers and build them up to maturity in the faith.

3. Ministry to the world: Evangelism and mercy. Jesus told his disciples that they should “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). This evangelistic work of declaring the gospel is the primary ministry that the church has toward the world.

4. Keeping these purposes in balance. Once we have listed these three purposes for the church, someone might ask, “**Which is most important?**” Or someone else might ask, “**Might we neglect one of these three as less important than the others?**” To that we

must respond that all three purposes of the church are commanded by the Lord in none can be neglected. In fact, a strong church will have effective ministries in all three of these areas. We should beware of any attempts to reduce the purpose of the church to only one of these three and say that it should be our primary focus. In fact, such attempts to make one of these purposes primary will always result in some neglect of the other two.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. When you think of the church as the invisible fellowship of all true believers throughout all time, how does it affect the way you think of yourself as an individual Christian? In the community in which you live, is there much visible unity among genuine believers (that is, is there much visible evidence of the true nature of the invisible church)? Does the New Testament say anything about the ideal size for an individual church?
2. Would you consider the church that you are now in to be a true church? Have you ever been a member of a church that you would think to be a false church? Viewed from the perspective of the final judgment, what good and what harm might come from our failure to state that we think unbelieving churches are false churches?
3. Did any of the metaphors for the church give you a new appreciation for the church that you currently attend?
4. To which purpose of the church do you think you can most effectively contribute? Which purpose has God placed in your heart a strong desire to fulfill?