

The Church's Essential Nature

Introduction:

1. Some of Christ's most stirring words occur in response to Peter's confession of his divinity (Matt. 16:16).
2. A promise follows: Read v. 18.
 - a. This promise, however, is not so astounding when viewed in light of what God had in mind for us from eternity (Eph. 3:8-12).
 - b. These verses show God's redemptive plan included the establishment, the mission, and the message of the church.
3. Christ's earthly ministry included actual preparation for the church's beginning on earth (Matt. 4:17; Mk. 9:1).
 - a. Acts 2 is a history of its beginning, and the rest of Acts gives historical details of the gospel's advance, while the N. T. epistles offer detailed information about worship, church government, membership responsibilities, and other pertinent information.
 - b. Unfortunately, most studies emphasize these and other externals without giving a proper place for a study of the church's essential nature. This is our focus tonight. After know the "externals" one still desperately needs to know the internal quality and basic nature of the church.
4. We want to consider five descriptions of the church that will help us understand the church's essential nature.

I. THE CHURCH IS A UNIVERSAL SOCIETY.

- A. Read Isaiah 2:2-3.
 1. Note the terms: "all nations" = these will have free access to God's house; "many peoples" = all colors and kinds will be members.
 2. Out of all kinds of political arrangements, out of all kinds of religious organizations, from every racial group on earth, obedient men and women would be received into the church.
- B. Read Matthew 6:10.
 1. Jesus viewed the kingdom as existing whenever and wherever God's will is being done on earth.
 2. The church exists when God's will is being accepted by men. It is the union of heaven and earth.
- C. Read Ephesians 1:22-23.
 1. Paul viewed the church as "the body of Christ.
 2. It is the "fulness of him that filleth all in all."
 3. As the fulness of Christ, the church pervades all society, affects all to whom it ministers, makes Christ real in all human enterprises. "The fulness of him" speaks of the church's universality.

- D. Implications in the view of the church as a universal society:
1. When a Christian (say a Negro, to illustrate the point) is not completely accepted in a local church, its universal nature is denied.
 2. When a shabby suite and worn shoes seem out of place and make the wearer uncomfortable in our fashionable assemblies, the church's universality is blurred.
 3. When society's outcasts are coldly handled "from afar" when they happen to attend our worship services, the church's essential nature is being rejected.
 4. When individual's with political persuasions unlike ours are rejected *for that reason* rather than on the basis of their relationship with god through Jesus Christ, we do not have the New Testament church to which "all nations" and "many peoples" may freely go.
 5. To believe that we must "Americanize" before we "Christianize" (and this is not an adequate word) is to miss the biblical nature of the church.

II. THE CHURCH IS A MILITANT MOVEMENT.

- A. Military figures appear frequently throughout the New Testament. This militancy arises from the Christian's allegiance to Christ.
- B. This militant spirit was expressed early by the apostles (Acts 4:18-20 with 5:28-29).
- C. Read Ephesians 6:10-12. The weapons are described in vv. 13-20.
- D. All this says we are involved in a real battle, and all-out war, a combat with eternal consequences.
 1. Rather than equipment to be polished, buckled on, and displayed in dress review once, twice, or three times each week, the countermeasures are to be used by the Christian at all times.
 2. The Christian soldier must under no conditions give less than his best (2 Tim. 2:3). The "good soldier" is then defined in the next verse (2 Tim. 2:4).
- E. The N. T. conception of the militant church demands a constant vigilance, a never-ceasing effort, a life-long involvement in God's redemptive work.

III. THE CHURCH IS A COMMISSIONED COMPANY.

- A. It was a motley crew that met Christ that day in Galilee following the resurrection—first, there was only a handful (Matt. 28:16). But even worse, some worshiped him, and some doubted (Matt. 28:17). They were also rife with hardness of heart and unbelief (Mk. 16:14). Jesus had to open their minds in order for them to understand the purpose of his life (Lk. 24:44-46).

- B. Yet, in spite of these adverse conditions, Jesus commissioned them (Matt. 28:18-20).
- C. Jesus followed the principle which Paul later used formulated for Christians to carry the gospel to the world: “And the things which thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2).
- D. What is the key to the early church’s acceptance of Christ’s commission? Simply put, it was that *they refused to consider any other obligation or responsibility before that created by their Master’s order.*
 - 1. Even when warned that they could lose their lives, and after being beaten for their preaching and teaching, Luke says that “every day, in the temple and at home, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus as the Christ” (Acts 5:42).
 - 2. They did not wait for wounds to heal and for the trouble to “blow over.” They left the council chambers “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name” (Acts 5:41).
 - 3. From a crew of half-hearted, discouraged, doubting followers came the worldwide proclamation of the gospel within thirty years, resulting in several million first-century Christians.

IV. THE CHURCH IS THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION.

- A. All reconciled persons (that is, the church) are in a new relationship with God, but through Christ they also are given “the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18). In the next verse, Paul says he has “committed unto us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19). Twice, in two consecutive verses, Paul make this point: all reconciled ones are charged with the “ministry” or “word” of reconciliation.
- B. What is the church as a “ministry of reconciliation”?
 - 1. The word “reconciliation” means more than harmony reestablished between man and God, although this is central to the biblical concept (see Rom. 5:6-10).
 - 2. One’s reconciliation to God, Paul shows, also creates one’s friendship and relationship with all kinds of men (Eph. 2:11-22).
 - 3. The 1500 years of hate, strife, and separation between Jew and Gentile was destroyed in Christ, in reconciliation to God and all men who also were reconciled to God through Christ. This problem, as explained in Ephesians 2, was a racial, social, and spiritual one.
 - 4. Only those who willingly and freely accepted all other believers in Christ could hope to know the reconciling love of God. Following the faith and baptism necessary for union with Christ, Paul conclude, “There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male or female; for ye all are one man in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

5. From this we see that wherever the church is fulfilling its mission in the world, peace rules in men's hearts. That is what the church is all about—it *is a ministry of reconciliation*. Isn't this what Paul is saying in Romans 14:17?
- C. This means that the church does not *have* a ministry of reconciliation so much as it *is* a ministry of reconciliation. It does not elect to spread abroad a little peace in the community, if it first takes care of other important matters. If the church is what the N. T. describes it to be it is that ministry of reconciliation.

V. THE CHURCH IS CHRIST ON EARTH TODAY.

- A. When describing the church as the body of Christ Paul uses an unusual word order: "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of the body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12).
- B. The next fifteen verses describe the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27). The physical body's unity and coordination is used as an analogy of the church, Christ's body.
- C. But when Paul transfers the metaphor to the spiritual body all he says is, "so also is Christ." Did the apostle make a mistake? Didn't he mean to say "the body of Christ" as he does later in the chapter? Or was he subtly saying that Christ and his body are so inseparably linked that to think of one is to think of the other?
- D. Repeatedly in the N. T. this identification between Christ and his church is made (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18, 24). The church was actually planned to extend Christ's ministry on earth until he returns.
- E. In essential nature, in kind of work, regarding purposes and goals, the church may be considered Christ on earth. See Luke 19:10; Acts 10:38; Matt. 20:26-28. So completely did Christ give himself to God's purpose that he prayed, "I glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou hast given me to do" (Jn. 1:4).

Conclusion:

1. We have attempted a look inside the church. Its essential nature, basic constitution, and reason for being have been examined.
2. The five facets of the core around which all else revolves are that the church is a universal society, a militant movement, a commissioned company, a ministry of reconciliation, and Christ on earth today.

— Outlined from a sermon by John Allen Chalk,
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