

The Church: Glorious or Confusing?

What is the Church?

The answer to that question seems particularly confused. Is there any difference between a church and a club – folk with common interests getting together to pursue their hobbies, whether quilting or doing religion? Does one need to ‘join’ a church, or is it sufficient to ‘frequent’ a church? Of the abundance of churches in a given region, which one ought you to attend? Why *that* one? And: how ought things to be done in church? Should the pulpit with its preaching be central, or a podium with its testimonials and/or talent displays? These questions, and so many more, do their rounds in current discussions on the church, and the answers are anything but uniform.

Why the confusion?

We can list at least three reasons for this confusion. I mention first the impact the Westminster Confession has had on North American thinking in relation to the church. This confession speaks of the church as “invisible,” and says that it “consists of the whole number of the elect...” (Article 25.1). That portion of the Confession is understood to say that genuine Christians of any denomination are actually members of “the” church, and so we shouldn’t be too critical of the variations that exist between the churches of town, let alone pass a judgment on which church one attends.

In second place, as children of our times we invariably do our analyses according to the dictates of modern habits. The older sector of today’s generations has learned from science to build its conclusion on measureable, observable data. As a result, we’ve learned to build our conclusions about what the church is on the things we *see* about the church. We observe a multitude of churches in our communities, we talk with their members on the job during the week, and we notice that these fellow workers are decent Christians – and so come away thinking that their church is respectable. We listen to preachers on the radio, read their literature, and make evaluations of their churches based on what we hear – and time and again come away agreeing with much of what they say. The conclusion grows in our minds that there are numerous very respectable churches in our region.

Thirdly, postmodernism has taught (especially) the younger among us to modify the conclusions-based-on-observation with a goodly dose of subjectivity. As you can’t be sure that you have a monopoly of truth (we’re told), you need to avoid being judgmental of others. This way of thinking insists that others should have space to do things their way, just as we want others to grant us space to do things our way. Similarly, we’re happy our ancestors found a comfortable way to do things that worked for them, but there is no reason their traditions are best for us. So it becomes old-school to speak of any church as ‘true’ – and insisting that ‘we are the true church’ is utterly self-righteous and therefore anathema. This postmodern way of thinking makes finding clarity on the contemporary church scene so much more difficult.

Results

Predictably, the confusion described above exhibits itself in a variety of ways. Consider the following:

- It used to be that one attended one's own church as much as possible. Except for an emergency, one would not leave till Monday morning, and would interrupt and/or shorten a holiday in order to be back home on Saturday and be in a position to join your congregation on Sunday. The only exemption deemed acceptable was if one could attend a sister church during one's absence from your home church. If for some reason one could not get home in time for your own church service, you did a private church service in your hotel or campground. This behavior has changed so that today folk do not feel the urge to come home in time for church (or stay in the campground), but instead seek out a local church (including of divergent ecclesiastical color) where one could worship.
- Withdrawal announcements in the past were formulated tersely: So-and-so "has broken with the church of Jesus Christ" – irrespective of which church he went to join. A subsequent prayer would as often as not petition the Lord for the erring member's repentance. Today the formulation is far more gentle, with the membership advised that so-and-so "has withdrawn from this church." More often than not, a wish follows that part of the announcement expressing the hope and prayer that the Lord will bless the departing member in his new church home.
- The Lord's Supper table was in time past only for members of the local congregation, plus guests of churches in the same federation – and they could join the table only if they could convince the elders that they were in fact members in good standing of that sister church (commonly through some form of attest). That habit has relaxed to the point that guests from various churches receive greater welcome at a local table, even on their own testimony about their Christian faithfulness.

To sum up the development: the churches of a particular region are effectively seen as so many dishes in a restaurant from which you may choose your dinner according to your taste. The dishes are relatively equal, with the I-love-potatoes-and-meat people worshipping here and the I-love-pasta people worshipping there, and the I-love-sushi people worshipping yonder. As I fancy a change of diet, I'm free to join you and you're free to join me. (Conservative) Christians are one happy family together, celebrating the privileges of smorgasbord.

Denomination

The human mind wants to rationalize and justify this smorgasbord look of the ecclesiastical scene. That's done today by the common usage of the word 'denomination'. Historically speaking, it's a very new word – as its origin the world of banking demonstrates – and its usage in the realm of churches is even more recent (try to find a date). In the world of banking, the term 'denomination' describes the various notes one can get at a bank, be it a \$5 note, a \$10 note, a \$20, \$50, etc. We well realize that each of these notes is equally and truly money – be it that the one note is more desirable than the other. That same term is now applied to churches so that one speaks of the Lutheran denomination, the Baptist denomination, the Canadian Reformed denomination, the

Christian Reformed denomination, etc. The implication is that each church is equally and truly a church – be it that the different churches have different value. And of course, ‘my’ church is the \$50 note, ‘yours’ the \$20 and down the road the \$5. But that’s subjective; in acceptable postmodern fashion, you disagree – and that’s OK....

Unraveling the Confusion

We need now to turn to Scripture to discover the Lord’s revelation concerning the church. To do so successfully, we’ll need to discard those notions concerning the church that are built on our observations or on our preferences, and let a new understanding on the subject grow in our minds that conforms to God’s revelation. That, of course, is not a new concept. Observation and experience will never get our heads around what Jesus’ substitutionary work on the cross was all about; we need to discard notions and analogies drawn from daily life in favor of simply listening to God’s instruction on the topic – and develop notions and add analogies only after we’ve understood (and believed!) what God has revealed. The same is true in relation to the doctrine concerning the church. Let’s dust off our Bibles, then, and seek to listen....

The Work of God

The clear message of Scripture is the church is not the work of people, but the work of God. Pause for a second to reflect on that statement. We live on Planet Earth, where people do so many things day by day – including things related to church. My contention is that God on high is so involved in the day-to-day affairs of this planet that the church is directly and distinctly the work of God. Let me flesh that out. I want to do so with reference to the three Persons of the Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

God the Father

God the Father created the world in the beginning. Yet He did not simply create it, but ever since has continued to be so involved in the affairs of Planet Earth that nothing happens without His directing it to happen. The LORD God describes Assyria, the superpower of the day, as *“the rod of My anger, in whose hand is the club of My wrath”* (Isaiah 10:5). Jesus says that God *“causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous”* (Matthew 5:45), and adds concerning the sparrows that *“not one of them falls to the ground apart from the will of your heavenly Father”* (Matthew 10:29). David can even say that *“all the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be”* (Psalm 139:16). Who his parents would be, how his brothers would treat him, that he’d be a shepherd, that he’d triumph over Goliath, that he’d be king in Jerusalem, that he’d commit adultery with Bathsheba, and so much more of the details of his life, were all determined by God the Creator long before David came to be. It’s mind-boggling, but such is the revelation of Holy Scripture.

The implication is that nothing occurs in today’s world without the will and involvement of the world’s Creator. Since the Church appears in the midst of life-as-it-is, it follows that it too is the work of God Most High.

Election

A subset of the doctrine of providence outlined above is the subject of election. If nothing happens without Him, no one is saved either without His determining it. The apostle Paul assured the Ephesians that God *“chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight”* (1:4). We are to understand, then, that before God fashioned the world as described in Genesis 1 He determined who was going to be

saved – and hence too who was going to be passed by in His gracious decision to save sinners.¹

The persons God chose to save, now, He “gave” to His only Son. That’s what Jesus says, “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never drive away,” and, “This is the will of him who sent Me, that I shall lose none of all that He has given Me, but raise them up at the last day” (John 6:37,39). In fact, the Son left the glory of the Father and came into this world for the specific purpose of saving those whom the Father had given to the Son. So the angel can instruct Joseph to “give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). The term “His people” obviously describes those whom the Father has given Him.

God the Son

On earth the Son of God set Himself to the task the Father gave Him. Just before He went to the cross He prayed a prayer that demonstrates how much the Father’s mandate formed His program. “Father,” He prayed, “the time has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son may glorify You. For You granted Him authority over all people that He might give eternal life to all those You have given Him.... I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those You have given Me, for they are Yours” (John 17:1,2,9). We realize well that if Jesus refused to pray for the world, and insisted on praying only for those the Father had given Him, He would shortly die not for “the world” but only for those whom the Father had given Him out of the world. His sacrifice on the cross, then, would be for that very same group whom the Father had long ago chosen to eternal life; *their* sins He would wash away. **Note: replace texts with ESV.**

Exaltation

After Jesus had accomplished the work the Father gave Him to do (John 19:30), He arose from the dead and ascended into heaven. He received from the Father a throne over all creation, “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” (Ephesians 1:21). We realize well that the exalted Christ will surely not forget those whom the Father had given Him and for whom He died, but would in heaven continue on the path He’d followed on earth – and that is that He would do all in His (almighty) power to bring to glory those whom the Father had given Him. Indeed, it was precisely because Jesus was to bring the elect fully to glory that God gave Him such exalted power. For Paul continues, “And He put all things under His feet and gave Him as head over all things to the church” (Ephesians 1:22). Though the precise loading of the preposition “to” may be debated² (other translations render it as “for”), the significance of the sentence is clear; God has given His Son all authority in heaven and on earth for the benefit of the church. And that church ultimately consists of the very same elect people Paul had mentioned at the beginning of that same chapter (Ephesians 1:4).

We meet here an astounding and far-reaching thought. Those chosen to life, those whom the Father has given to the Son, those for whom the Son has died, live on this earth. They breathe the air of daily existence, they experience the cut and thrust of politics and economics and social change, and they bear the scars that come with living in a broken world where sin and Satan have so much influence and power. In *this* world the Son of God brings to glory those the Father has given Him, and that in turn is why the Father gave Him

¹ I cannot go into more detail on this point here. Interested readers are referred to Chapter 1 of the *Canons of Dort* for more Biblical detail on this subject.

² See the commentaries here....

such authority that demons and princes, media and educators are all under His feet. The politics and wars of history, the booms and busts of the economy, the changes in climate and the storms of life are so many tools in the hand of the King of kings through which He brings the elect to glory. The church is not a hobby of a few religious-minded fanatics, but is in fact the *driving motif* of whatever happens on Planet Earth.

Paul

So there was one day, around the year 35 AD, a party of men traveling the well-known road from Jerusalem to Damascus. So many parties traveled this thoroughfare on a daily basis for an endless variety of economic or political or personal reasons – and none traveled this road without the express involvement and permission of the One who had all things under His feet for the benefit of the church. One of those traveling that road that day was one who hated Jesus of Nazareth so much that he breathed “*threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord*” (Acts 9:1). But through a bright light from heaven sovereign Jesus arrested this persecutor and claimed him as “*a chosen instrument of Mine to carry My name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel*” (Acts 9:15). For the ordinance of God was that the elect would not be saved without faith, and faith should arise in sinful hearts as response to the preaching (Romans 10:14,17); hence the need for preachers – and Christ’s move to compel this persecutor to become a preacher. Real life people with real life worries puzzled over and marveled at the change that had occurred in the persecutor’s life (Acts 9:21). The point is this: the exalted Christ is busy on the highways of daily life to bring to glory the elect the Father has given Him.

Spreading the Word

The picture is more exciting and impressive still. The people mentioned on the list of names the Father had given to the Son did not all live in the same village or nation or culture, nor do they all live in the same generation. On that list was not only the educated Jew Saul (Paul) living in Jerusalem around the year 35, but on that list was also the businesswoman Lydia from Thyatira in Asia Minor (present day Turkey) but living at the time in Philippi in far-off Macedonia. And on that list was also a jailor living in the same city of Philippi. Here, then, was a task for the exalted Christ; from heaven above He now needed to ensure that the gospel was somehow brought to Philippi, and brought in a language and manner that the locals could understand.

With that purpose in mind, sovereign Christ saw to it that the world of the time was dominated by one language (Greek) so that a Paul from Israel could communicate freely with folk in Greece. More, He saw to it that there was such political stability in the world that the preacher Paul could travel without hindrance from Antioch to Philippi. Transportation, economy, politics, language and so much more were so many players the ascended Christ used to complete the mandate the Father assigned Him – and that is to bring to salvation all those chosen to life eternal.

So, we read of a particular event in Antioch dated a few years later, “*While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off*” (Acts 13:2,3). The resulting travels of the apostle Paul took him through Asia Minor (present day Turkey). Paul’s plan had been to travel due west to “Asia”, but the Holy Spirit forbade him to speak the Word there – with as result that his route took him further north through Phrygia and Galatia, ending up in Mysia. The apostle thought to go still further north into Bithynia, but again “*the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them*” (Acts 16:6,7). I have no idea how the Spirit of Jesus made it plain to Paul that He wasn’t to speak the Word in Asia or travel to Mysia; perhaps a virus laid Paul low or snowstorm closed a

pass or a political disturbance made the road unsafe. The fact is, though, that the exalted Christ, through means of His own, nudged His ambassador west-by-north to the harbor city of Troas – and there confronted him with a vision that Paul was to cross the sea to Philippi. And the reason, of course, why Paul was to go to Philippi to preach the gospel was that on the list of the elect the Father had given to the Son were Lydia of Philippi and the local jailor!

In Philippi the Lord caused the paths of Paul-the-preacher and Lydia-the-elect to cross down by the river (Acts 16:13). Through her hearing the gospel the Lord caused Lydia to come to faith. Again, by means of the slave girl's owners' unhappiness Paul ended up in the jailer's vicinity, and then through an earthquake Christ brought Paul face to face with another on the list the Father had given him – and so the jailer too heard the good news of Christ crucified for sinners and also came to faith. The picture that arises should be clear: the bits and pieces of daily life happen because the exalted Christ would organize circumstances in such a way that the elect the Father has given Him would hear the gospel and come to faith. What glorious perspective this gives for how we read the news! Yet who of the locals of the day knew that Paul's sniffles or that snowstorm or that political unrest served a purpose in the church-gathering agenda of the King of kings? Or which newspaper reported that the earthquake of Philippi was but a tool of the Lord to connect the elect jailer with the preacher of the gospel?!

God the Holy Spirit

The ascended Christ did more than cause the Word of life to come to the Lydias and jailors chosen to life; He also sent His Spirit to earth in order to regenerate sinners. Jesus told Nicodemus that *"unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God"* (John 3:3). Yet in whom will the Holy Spirit cause rebirth? Will Jesus Christ send His Spirit to cause rebirth in those for whom He did not die, or those whom the Father has not given to Him? We realize well: the Spirit of Jesus Christ will work faith and regeneration only in those the Father has given Him.

One cannot follow where the Spirit will work (John 3:8), for we on earth do not know the names of those the Father has given the Son. But we can trace where the Spirit *has* worked, for His footprint is registered by the faith He has caused. These are the elect of God, those whom the Father has given to the Son and for whom the Son has died.

So it was that the Holy Spirit, in agreement with the will of the Son, worked in the heart of Lydia in Philippi – one of those the Father had ordained to life. *"The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul"* so that *"she was baptized"* (Acts 16:14,15). Similarly, the Spirit worked in the heart of the Philippian jailer so that *"he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God"* (Acts 16:34). His coming to faith demonstrated that he too was one of those the Father had given to the Son and that the Son had died for him.

For our part we are not surprised to see this harmony between the work of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; the Persons of the Trinity, after all, do not work in opposition to one another but in perfect harmony. Those whom the Father had chosen to life before time began were redeemed by the Son in His work on the cross around the year 33 AD, and it is these same people to whom He in the course of history sends His Spirit for their regeneration.

This work of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we well realize, is foundational to the church. Does, though, the fact that Lydia has come to faith in Philippi mean that now there is a church there? Or does the fact the jailer has come to faith in Philippi too mean that *now* there is a church in that town? What does it take for those upon whom the Father, Son and

Spirit has worked to become a church?? Is more required than the simple fact that the Father has chosen, the Son has redeemed and the Spirit has renewed a person? Or persons?

That question brings us to a second critical aspect of what we need to know to grasp what the church is.

Togetherhness

After the ascension of our Lord into heaven, we come across various terms in Scripture that describe the believers – and all convey something of the notion of *togetherhness*. We meet the term “brothers” in Acts 1:15: “*In those days Peter stood up among the brothers...*” (see also 14:2, 15:1,22,36). The term describes a family bond, and communicates the thought that these believers had a common spiritual ancestry, a single faith in a common Savior. That bond makes them comfortable together so that one speaker can address them in one room. A second term used to describe the believers is the word “disciples”; “*the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem*” (Acts 6:7; see also 9:26; 15:10; 20:30). The use of this term underlines that these believers have a link to a common teacher; they all receive their instruction, and hence their belief, from one instructor – and therein lies their togetherhness. A third word we read is the word “saints” (see Acts 9:13,32), a term that indicates the link that the many believers have to the renewing work of one Holy Spirit. Each of these terms in turn accent the unity of the believers, the bond, the togetherhness they share through the work of Triune God.

Assembly

The term, though, that drives home the nature of their unity is the Greek word “*ekklesia*”. After the death of Ananias and Sapphira, “*great fear came upon the whole church*” (Acts 5:11; see also 8:1,3; 9:31, etc). It turns out that the term was well known in the secular society of the New Testament era to describe a meeting of the citizens of a town. Its usage is attested not only by numerous surviving documents of the time, but also from how the apostle Paul uses the term in Acts 19. The riot in Ephesus had drawn out a crowd, so that “*some cried one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion*” (vs 32). The town clerk came to quiet the crowd, then added the reminder, “*If you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly*” (vs 39). The passage concludes, “*And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly*” (vs 41). In each of these three verses, the term ‘assembly’ translates the Greek word *ekklesia*.

This is the term the Holy Spirit used repeatedly in the book of Acts to describe those whom the Father had given to the Son, those for whom the Son had died, and those in whom His Spirit had worked faith. The term has at its heart the notion of *togetherhness*. Not scattered individuals make up an *ekklesia*, but persons *assembled together*.

The use of the word *ekklesia* also has roots in the Old Testament. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, but translated some 300 years before the days of the Lord Jesus Christ into Greek – in a translation commonly known as the Septuagint. This Greek translation rendered the Hebrew term *qahal* with the Greek work *ekklesia*. The Hebrew word *qahal* appears, for example, in Deuteronomy 5:22, after Moses repeated the Ten Commandments God gave Israel at Mt Sinai. We read, “*These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness...*” (see also 4:10; 9:10). When God renewed His covenant with Israel and gave them His Ten Commandments, we’re not to picture the people as scattered throughout their tents or walking the camp doing their individual thing; we’re instead to see them away from their tents and gathered together at the foot of the mountain. The term *qahal* or *ekklesia*

catches the notion of the people *gathered together*, assembled-in-one-crowd at the foot of the mountain. That's not to say that every man, woman and child in Israel was away from his tents and assembled together. There were undoubtedly those who were detained because of a newborn child, or an illness, or senior age, or perhaps a less lawful reason. The point is this: the term *qahal* does not describe the totality of the people of God, but describes instead the *assembly of the people of God*. Similarly, the term *ekklesia* in Acts 19 did not describe the totality of the residents of Ephesus, but described the *assembly* of the people of the city – excluding those who chose not to participate in the riot.

This, now, is the term the Holy Spirit moved the New Testament writers to use to describe the church. By its very meaning, the term cannot describe the *totality* of the people of God (in a given town), but must describe the *gathering* of the people of God (in a given town). There may very well be people in a particular town who are elect of God, for whom the Son has died and are even renewed by the Holy Spirit – yet they (for whatever reason) decline to assemble with other people of God in that town, and so are not part of the *ekklesia* of God, the church of God in that town.

Address

A gathering, now, is by its very definition visible and has an address, a location where the gathering commonly takes place. The apostle Paul wrote his letter known as First Thessalonians “*to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Thessalonians 1:1). The mailman who had to deliver this letter did not have to deliver this letter to some mystical, invisible, hard-to-define *thing* in Thessalonica; the address on the letter (*'ekklesia'*) told the mailman that he had to deliver this letter to some concrete *gathering* of Thessalonians. Yet the specific gathering-of-Thessalonians to which he had to deliver the letter was not the group of townsfolk gathered on the sports field to witness their sons playing in the finals; the specific gathering-of-Thessalonians that needed the letter was those gathered “*in God the Father*”. That phrase could lead the careful mailman to the synagogue of the Thessalonian Jews – but that possibility was excluded by the addition of the phrase “*and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” The assembly-of-the-Thessalonians to which this letter was to be addressed could only be the Christian believers – yet not as individuals scattered around town but as believers deliberately gathered together in the name of Triune God. That physical, concrete group was not hard for the mailman to find, for it was visible and had a specific address where it customarily gathered.

Yet that's not to say that every believer in Thessalonica was guaranteed to be present at this assembly-of-the-believers; invariably there would be those who were detained at home, for legitimate or less-than-legitimate reasons. To be sure, they belonged with the assembled saints, and inasmuch as they were part of the *ekklesia* in Thessalonica it was certainly their custom to gather with the saints. But on the day Paul's letter to the church of the Thessalonians was to be read to the assembled congregation, they were not present. So the apostle concluded his letter to the Thessalonians with the instruction to “*have this letter read to all the brothers*” (1 Thessalonians 5:27).

Concrete

Does the fact, then, that there were two (families of) believers in Philippi (Lydia and the jailer) mean that there was a church in the town?? The answer is No. Two (or even five or fifty) scattered elect of God, believers in Jesus Christ who were washed by His blood and renewed by His Spirit, does not make a church – until they are *gathered* from their various corners of town and *assembled together* in the name of the God who chose, redeemed and renewed them.

There is by definition something very visible and local—and therefore find-able—about the church of Jesus Christ. The notion ‘church’, then, is not to place in our thoughts a perception of something vague, something mystical and known-only-to-God, something out-of-this-life. Instead, we need to recognize that sovereign, Triune God is concretely busy on Planet Earth, gathering people of particular name together in a concrete, local, visible assembly in the name of this Triune God. This is exciting and encouraging; God almighty is busy in *this* life gathering His people – in ways we can see and follow and even join! His work is not done in secret.

Dynamic

The Scriptural instruction that the church is characterized by assembling, and so is local and visible, leads us to a discussion of its vibrancy. The church of the Lord is never static or dormant, but always dynamic and alive and changing.

The list of elect the Father gave to the Son includes people of every race and language and generation (more on this below). This meant that in Paul’s day there were people on that list from Judea as well as from Rome and Thessalonica and Spain – locations separated by hundreds of miles and further in culture. Within Rome it meant there were people from this quarter of town as well as from that quarter, from the rich of town as well as from the slaves, from the military people as well as from the business sector. There were people on that list born in the year 37 who would by God’s providence come to faith at age 22, and others born in the year 49 who would come to faith at age 34, and again others born into a believing home and so included in His covenant and congregation from infancy. Some within the church would grow to relative maturity quickly and so become members with much to offer, while others would grow ever so slowly and seem to be in need of so much nurturing spanning many years. The church in a particular community, then, is not predictable or static, but is dynamic and growing and changing as people join, grow, bear fruit and are promoted to glory.

Flock

The Scriptures use a number of images to drive this point home. In John 10 the Lord uses the imagery of a flock to speak about His people. We realize well that a ‘flock’ is not a number of individual sheep scattered across various fields; rather, inherent to a flock is the same togetherness we’d mentioned earlier as normative for the church. Well now, Jesus says, *“I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd”* (vs 16). We understand His point; in God’s big, wide world there are persons the Father has given to the Son, persons for whom Jesus has died, but who have not yet come to faith – perhaps because they are not yet born, or perhaps because they have not yet heard the gospel of redemption, or perhaps because their stubborn heart has not yet been broken. Whatever the case, Jesus needs to keep working in step with the Father’s plan, and one sees the effect of Jesus’ continued work in the changing dynamics of the local church scene as another sheep or three are one day added to the flock of the good shepherd.

Body

Another image the Scripture uses to convey the concept of change is the imagery of a body. Consider the underlined words in the following quote: the ascended Christ *“gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children.... Rather, speaking the*

truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Ephesians 4:11-16). The picture the apostle paints is clear: the church to which the Lord gave office bearers is an ever changing, dynamic, exciting and life-filled entity.

House

Peter compares the church to a building-under-construction. He pictures the “*elect exiles of the dispersion*” (1 Peter 1:1) as “*coming*” to Christ-the-living-stone, and as they come to him they “*like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house*” (1 Peter 2:4,5). Note the present progressive flavor of the verb “*are being built*”. That phrase does not describe action completed in an instant or even a day, but describes ongoing work stretching out over an extended period. And that’s precisely what we see regularly in relation to construction sites. After the earthwork is done, the concrete foundations come out of the ground, then the framing goes up and eventually the singles appear on the roof. We see the siding go on the house, notice the electrician laboring inside and the plumber too, and eventually see the carpet layer carry in the flooring. Throughout the process, raw material gets delivered to the place and cut-offs end up strewn around the site. House building takes time, and by definition includes incompleteness and even a mess. The owner and his family find it intriguing to watch the project unfold, for there is constant change and growth – and one looks forward eagerly to the day of completion when you can enjoy the finished product.

That’s the imagery Peter uses in relation to the church. It’s still in the process of being built, and so there’s so much incomplete and imperfect in its various members. But the imperfections and incompleteness give no reason to lament, for the heavenly Builder knows what He’s doing and will bring His project to completion at the appointed time. Our focus may instead be on the delightful fact that Christ’s church-building work in fact is happening, is happening even in our town under our gaze. As we watch, another brick is added through the birth and baptism of a covenant child, new insulation is added through the addition of a family that has joined from afar, and a room takes on brighter color as a teenager begins to glow in living faith. And the most exciting part of it all is that *we’re even allowed to be a living brick in that spiritual house!* How thrilling the work of Triune God in our town!

Completion

This growth and change of which the Scriptures speak concerning the church will come to completion on the day of the Lord’s return in glory. John saw the vision of the church complete: “*Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads*” (Revelation 14:1). The number 144,000 is a full number, denoting the totality of the people of God from both the Old Testament and the New Testament dispensations – and hence all the elect of God. John sees this crowd assembled together in one place, on Mount Zion where the Old Testament sacrifices foreshadowing the work of Jesus Christ were made in Jerusalem. Now Christ Himself is there, the One to whom the Father had given all His elect. His work is completed, so much so that all those the Father gave Him are gathered together – the church complete. No longer are there any imperfections among these chosen of God, for they have now been perfectly renewed by the Spirit of Jesus Christ so that “*in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless*” (Revelation 14:5). If you will, the house is complete, the construction site has been cleaned up, and God Himself has come to live with His own in a Paradise Restored. That is the church in its completeness.

We today do not yet see that church as a finished product. But the eye of faith sees the church growing, and believes that the Lord is moving history forward to its completion. Already we dare to use the term-describing-the-completed-thing –“church”– to denote the incomplete and even messy thing we see today. As we proudly refer to a partially framed structure as our new “house”, so we may proudly refer to the incomplete and often dysfunctional assembly of the saints as God’s “church” – for we’re confident that the Lord Jesus Christ will bring to completion what He has begun.

Definition

Can we come, now, to some understanding of what the church is? The following factors emerge from the above material:

- The church is not the work of people, but is a work of Triune God on Planet Earth. The church is headquartered and directed from heaven, and is predicated on a direct link between heaven and earth as two rooms of one reality.
- The church is not limited to one generation or to one ethnic group. The Father has given to the Son whomever He chose, and these privileged people (can) span any generation and ethnic group over the face of all God’s earth.
- The church is not complete until the day of Christ’s return. Though God’s people are instructed to “*be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (Matthew 5:48), no individual can achieve that goal in this life, and no group of people can achieve it either. The church invariably looks messy and broken. That ought not to discourage anyone, but instead encourage all to look forward to the day of completion.
- Already today one sees the outline of the perfect assembly that shall be on the last day. In great incompleteness, the people of God today assemble Sunday by Sunday around the Word of God. Though done in different languages and perhaps with great variation in liturgy, there is a distinct unity in faith, for every believer confesses the same Savior, Jesus Christ.

The Great Reformation of five centuries ago gave expression to this understanding of what the church is. Consider this confession in Lord’s Day 21 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*:

“I believe that the Son of God,
out of the whole human race,
from the beginning of the world to its end,
gathers, defends, and preserves for himself,
by his Spirit and Word,
in the unity of the true faith,
a church chosen to everlasting life.

And I believe that I am
and forever shall remain
a living member of it.”