

I Am Going to the Nations with my Local Church

Introduction

One of the highlights of my life was doing mission work in South Sudan, one of the poorest and most dangerous places in the world. The reason I enjoyed my time there so much is that the Christianity I encountered was so real. The churches in that decimated nation are authentic. On the one hand they have next to nothing. On the other hand they have everything because their faith in Jesus is very rich. Let me share one specific example that I could repeat again and again.

In 2009 I joined a church team from Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas that went to Kajo Keji, South Sudan. It is a small town south of the capital of Juba and just north of Uganda. We were there to lead a Bible Conference, conduct pastoral training and do church planting. More than 1000 people from Sudan (this was before its division into 2 countries), Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo came for an incredible week of worship, training, fellowship and church planting. Some of those who attended walked for a week to get there and then walked another week as they returned home. Almost all of the attendees slept at night on a blanket under the moon and stars. Seldom had I seen such happiness and joy in the Lord among brothers and sisters in Christ, many of whom had suffered greatly because of the civil war fighting in Sudan. One man in

particular exemplified what we saw. His name is Pastor Sam. He had been born in Uganda. As a small boy, Sam witnessed the brutal murder of his parents and siblings by tribal terrorists who raided his village. He only escaped because he was able to run into the bush and hide. In God's grace a Christian family took him in. Sam would put his trust in Jesus and be saved. As a teenager, he sensed God's call to be a pastor. We had the honor of helping Sam plant his first church. They quickly became a vibrant congregation that meets under several mango trees where they continue to this day! This body of believers, who love Jesus and walk by faith in the most intimate and radical trust I have ever seen, have no building, seats (except the dirt ground and a few bamboo poles that I can tell you from personal experience are extremely uncomfortable!), screens, musical instruments or any of the other trapping we in America so often think are necessary to be the church and do church. They do not look much like the 21st century church in the US, but they have a striking resemblance to the church of the first century. All of this leads me to ask: What is the Church? What does a biblically faithful community of believers look like? What does it do? How is a church to be a dynamic gospel outpost as it runs on the dual tracks of the Great Commission (the gospel to every nation) and the Great Commandments (love God and every neighbor)? Let me quickly address these questions.

What is a Church?

When it comes to defining what the church is, there is a lot of confusion. Multiple usages abound, and there is a lack of clarity at a most basic level – understanding the very essence and nature of the church. We need to do some solid biblical thinking.

The church was born on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), though we recognize from Ephesians 3:14-21 the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is made up of all believers of all ages. It truly is an eschatological community.

A survey of the New Testament reveals four clear uses of the term church. It is helpful to quickly identify each.

1) The Local Church

Most often the word *ekklesia* designates a specific gathering of believers in some definite locality. This is its primary usage in the Bible.

2) A House Church

In some cases the word denotes what may be called a domestic *ekklesia*, the church in the house of some individual (Philemon 2). The early church most often met in homes.

3) A Collection of Churches

The churches of a region, for example Judea, Galilee, and Samaria (Acts 9:31). This use is very rare.

4) The Universal Church

In some instances the word serves to denote the whole body of Christ, all believers throughout the world, those who outwardly profess Christ and organize for purposes of worship, under the guidance of qualified leadership (Acts 20:28-38; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4). This is an emphasis found in the books of Ephesians and Colossians.

Correctives in Defining the Church

Nowhere in the New Testament does the word *ekklesia* mean a building. The *ekklesia* of the New Testament is never a structure composed of bricks and mortar. A statement such as “I pass by the church every day on my way to school” would make no sense to early Christians. The church is the body of believers in Jesus wherever they gather for worship, witness and work. In the early days gatherings were small, and believers, as previously mentioned, often met in homes (Rom 16:5; Col. 4:15; Philemon 2).

The Church also is not a national organization. The Church is not a denomination either. However, needs can be met by denominations. There is no

reason why individual churches should remain isolated, without real, visible union with other churches.

Now, biblical images and metaphors are one means whereby we learn about the essence and nature of the church. John Hammett, professor of theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and former international missionary believes “this is the primary means by which we are instructed.” Let me highlight three.

1) The People of God

In 1 Peter 2:9-10, the church is called “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His possession...” This recalls descriptions of Israel in Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 4:20; 7:6; Hosea 1:10; 2:23; and other places throughout the Old Testament where God calls Israel “my people.”

Hammett notes that the image “the people of God” teaches us several important truths:

- a) It gives the church a connection to the redeemed in the Old Testament and God’s great purpose of calling to himself a people from the nations.
- b) It underscores the nature of the church as called-out by God. God took the initiative in calling a people unto Himself from all tribes, peoples, and nations.

c) The church is a people, not a collection of isolated individuals.

d) The church is *God's* people, not a human institution.

- As God's people, we discover the church is called to be holy and loving.
- As God the Father's people, the church is a family.
- As God the Son's people, the church is composed of those who believe in Christ.
- As God the Spirit's people, the church is made up of those who experience His indwelling presence and fellowship.

The people of God is a powerful image of just who the church is. We are the people who belong to the Lord God Himself.

2) The Body of Christ

This image occurs in four of Paul's letters (Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians). The body image in Romans and 1 Corinthians highlights unity, the common experience of baptism "by or "in" the one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12: 13). It also emphasizes *unity in diversity* (cf. Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:14-20). Paul reminds the Romans that it is only "in Christ" that "we who are many become one body" (Romans 12:5). It requires the supernatural power of a shared life in Christ and a common reception of the Spirit to overcome the divisions of Greek and Jew, slave and free, male and female. There should be

diversity of race, sex and social status, diversity in function and gifts, but there is one body, one Lord, one Spirit, one faith (Ephesians 4:4-5).

Romans 12:5 says that in Christ we are “individually members of one another.” First Corinthians 12 shows how each part of the body needs every other part, pointing out that God desires all the members of the body to “have the same concern for each other” (v. 25). Mutuality is reflected in more than thirty “one another” passages in the New Testament (such as “love one another,” “forgive one another,” etc.).

The usage of the body image also points to the relationship of the head to the body. In Ephesians and Colossians, Christ is identified as the head of the body (Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2:19). Christ as the head of the body highlights ideas of *authority* over His body and the direction He gives.

Christ as the head of His church is preeminent in everything (Col. 1:18). However, His authority is described as loving and sacrificial in the beautiful analogy of Christ and the church to a husband and wife (Eph. 5:21-33). Christ as the head exercises his authority on behalf of the church, loving her, giving himself up for her, feeding her, and caring for her. Nobody could have a better head!

Hammett’s summary of this metaphor is again helpful:

- a) The image of the body points to the church's unity, seen especially in the ordinances of the Lord's Supper and believer's baptism
- b) The image of the body aptly illustrates how the church may be one, while its members are diverse. We are a unity with diversity.
- c) The body image reflects how the members of the church should show a common love and care to and for one another.
- d) Christ, as the head of the body, is the ultimate authority for the church. His will is to be sought in all things.
- e) As head, Christ also provides for the needs of the church. We are completely dependent on Him.
- f) Christlikeness is the goal of the church's growth and all members should contribute to its growth and unity (Eph. 4:11-16).

3) The Temple of the Holy Spirit

In 1 Corinthians 3:9 Paul compares the church to a field and a building. He states that the foundation of the building is Jesus Christ. But in verse 16, he sees the church as a very special building, God's temple. Elsewhere he speaks of the individual Christian's body as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). The church is the temple of God by means of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The word used here for temple is important. It is *naos*, which refers to the inner most sanctuary; the place of God's dwelling. The church, composed of believers, is not

a physical temple but a spiritual one. Further, those offering the sacrifices in the temple of the Spirit are called “a holy priesthood,” “a royal priesthood,” and “a kingdom and priests” (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10). All believers are priests.

Once more note the helpful summary of Hammett:

- a) Because it is God’s holy temple, the church must be a worshipping community.
- b) In God’s temple, all believers constitute the priesthood; all are involved in the church’s ministry.
- c) The temple is also a place of relationship.
 - The Spirit mediates our relationship with God, communicating his presence and power and sanctifying us as we grow in Christlikeness.
 - The Spirit joins together believers as the living stones in God’s temple through his creation of fellowship.

In addition to these three images, Mark Dever adds, “The church is the herald of the gospel (as in Acts). The church is the obedient servant (drawing from Isaiah). The church is the bride of Christ (as in Rev. 19 - 20). The church is a building (Eph. 2:21, 1 Pet. 2)...The church is the community of people who live in the last

Defining the Church

Article VI of *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000* provides an excellent statement on “The Church.” It sets reasonable parameters for like-minded brothers and sisters committed to the Lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture, but it does not pin down issues of methodology and practice that the Bible does not address. I believe this statement provides a foundation for a healthy methodological diversity grounded in biblical and theological unity. I am fully aware that some of my non-congregational, paedo-baptism brothers and sisters will not affirm and embrace every component of this definition. Know that I will pray for your theological conversion! The statement is as follows:

VI. The Church

New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture. The New Testament speaks also of the church

as the body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation.

From this definition, let's make some observations about important aspects of church life and practice.

Marks of a Church

What are “the marks” of a New Testament Church? What are the marks of a healthy church? These two questions are clearly interrelated. What are the essential and non-negotiable evidences of a New Testament Church?

The Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381 stated that as Christians “we believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.” Four adjectives contained in this statement deserve a brief explanation since at least one term (“catholic”) is subject to misunderstanding.

One: The Church is *one* just as God is one. The church as the body of the one Lord Jesus Christ is to be known for its oneness or unity. Christians should be characterized by their unity (Acts 4:32). The unity of believers is to be evident in the church, and as a witness to the world. Divisions and disputes bring shame and harm our testimony.

Holy: The church is to be holy because God is holy (Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7; 1 Pet. 1:14-16). As the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, the church is

made up of saints set apart for God (1 Cor. 1:2). Our holiness is at the most basic level Christ's holiness. His holiness should be reflected in the church's holiness (Rom. 6:14; Phil. 3:8-9). Paul teaches, that "Christ loved the church and gave himself for her, to make her holy, cleansing her in the washing of water by the word. He did this to present the church to Himself in splendor without spot or wrinkle or any such thing but holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:25-27).

In this present age, the church will never attain a perfect experiential holiness. John Calvin put it well: "The Lord is daily at work in smoothing out wrinkles and cleansing spots. From this it follows that the church's holiness is not yet complete. The church is holy, then, in the sense that it is daily advancing and is not yet perfect."

Catholic or Universal: The church is catholic or universal because it spans across space and time. It constitutes all believers of all the ages and reflects the nature of the true church. While every true local church is part of this universal church and is a church in and of itself, no local church can be said to constitute the universal church. However, the church in both its local and universal manifestations is the body of Christ and is to reflect Christ and honor Christ.

Apostolic: The church is *apostolic* because it is founded on the Scriptures given through the apostles. The gospel and “the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all” (Jude 3) has been passed down from the apostles who were called to be with Jesus. Paul told the church at Ephesus that they had been “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20).

Contributions From The Reformation

The magisterial reformers (Luther, Calvin and Zwingli) were on the same page for the most part in answering the question, “what constitutes a true church?” It was: 1) the Word rightly preached and 2) the sacraments (we usually call them “ordinances”) properly administered. Luther gave emphasis to the Word of God. He argued that, “even if there were no other sign than this alone, it would still suffice to prove that a Christian, holy people must exist there, for God’s Word cannot be without God’s people, and conversely, God’s people cannot be without God’s Word.”

Calvin is well known for his famous affirmation, “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.”

Anabaptist and Baptist went further than the magisterial reformers insisting upon “a believer’s church.” They followed out to its logical end a return to *sola Scriptura* and the New Testament pattern for the church. The conclusion they reached was inescapable: the church is to be composed of regenerate members.

This biblical basis for a regenerate church is so clear that it is difficult to understand how we ever lost it. It is also hard to understand why we minimize it today within many of our churches. The descriptions of local churches in the New Testament assume that these local, visible congregations are composed of believers only. “The church of God in Corinth is called “those sanctified in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor. 1:2). The letter to the Ephesians is addressed to “the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1). The letter to the church in Philippi is sent “to all the saints in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:1). Paul wrote “to the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse” (Col. 1:2). The church of the Thessalonians is described in both letters as a church “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:2).

Putting Marks and Membership Together: 7 Essentials

A New Testament Church will be identified or marked by particular distinctives, specific non-negotiables. What must our churches “look like” if they are to resemble those of our 1st century forefathers? We highlight seven.

1) Regenerate Church Membership

A regenerate church has always characterized a true church. The membership of the local church is made up of those who confess Christ as Savior and Lord, and whose life gives evidence of conversion. It is a community of confessing sinners who covenant together under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It will call sin what God calls sin and it will fight against what God calls sin.

A New Testament church will make it clear that church membership is a privilege not a right. There are requirements and expectations that are clearly defined and articulated when it comes to church membership. It requires an understanding of the gospel, public confession of one's faith evidenced by a clear verbal testimony and baptism, and a pledge to walk in the newness of life in Christ.

Further, a New Testament church will guard against easy believism and a compromised gospel. The gracious invitation to believe on Christ must be complemented with the call to repent of sin. To leave out repentance is to preach only half a gospel. It is to ignore the first public preaching of John the Baptist (Matt. 3:1-2), Jesus (Matt. 4:17), and Peter (Acts 2:38). It is to neglect the missionary proclamation replete in the book of Acts where persons are

called to “turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus” (Acts 20:21).

2) The essential nature of believer’s Baptism by immersion and the faithful practice of the Lord’s Supper.

In the New Testament public confession of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord was by baptism. An “unbaptized believer” is an oxymoron in light of the New Testament. Closely connected to but distinct from regeneration/conversion, baptism is the means whereby one declares publicly his or her faith in Jesus Christ.

New Testament baptism involved a particular member (a believer), mode (immersion) and meaning (public identification with Christ and the believing community). It is a prerequisite to coming to the Lord’s Table where we proclaim His death until He comes again (1 Cor. 11:17-34).

3) Church Discipline

Church discipline is clearly and repeatedly taught in the New Testament. Jesus addresses it in Matt. 18:15-20 and Paul does so in 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; Gal. 6:1-4; and Titus 3:9-11.

Historically, Baptists have viewed church discipline as an essential mark of the church along with the word rightly preached, the ordinances properly administered and regenerate church membership.

4) The emphasis and practice of a genuinely Word-based ministry

We live in a day when the words of the prophet Amos have never been more true in many of our Baptist churches, there is “a famine through the land – not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11).

We have neglected preaching the whole counsel of God’s Word. For those who believe both in the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture, there must be “faithful exposition.” There must be preaching that is biblical in content and dynamic in delivery, preaching that is expositional and theological on the one hand, and practical and applicable on the other. We must advocate an expositional method with a theological mindset under an evangelical mandate. It is preaching that models for our people how they should read and teach the Bible.

5) A faithful and authentic biblical ecclesiology of leadership and governance

Today our churches are exploring again the biblical nature of church

government and church offices in terms of function and number, particularly that of the elder. This is a healthy development.

Scripture never specifies the number of elders (or “pastors”), though they are almost always in the plural. The focus is on their qualifications (1 Tim. 3:1-7). The Bible is clear that a properly constituted church will have both elders and deacons. Scripture also sets forth congregationalism, but not its specifics. Flexibility within biblical parameters is a wise course to chart.

6) Missions and evangelism wedded to biblical discipleship

A faithful church must be known for its missions and evangelism. In our years of ministry we have become absolutely convinced of this truth: No church will be missional and evangelistic by accident. It must be intentional. Evangelism and missions must be a priority, and it must start with the leadership.

We should train our people to be on mission with God. We should challenge them to evangelize without bias or prejudice, loving and going after the exploding ethnic and minority groups across America. The authenticity and integrity of the gospel is at stake.

7) The cultivation of a vibrant, sound and healthy biblical theology

Healthy theology is a mark of a healthy church. Theology allows us to glorify God with our mind and obey the commandments of Jesus (Matt. 22:37-38).

Healthy churches will produce and foster a positive theological agenda, not merely one that is defensive and reactionary. We must teach doctrine, love doctrine and proclaim doctrine.

What is the Mission of the Church?

I am part of a seminary (SEBTS) that sees itself as a servant to the churches. As a result of that commitment and conviction, we have a mission statement that closely mirrors what we think the mission of the Church is. Adopting our mission statement to fit the Church, this is what we believe:

“The mission for the church is to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ by equipping its members to serve the body of Christ and fulfill the Great Commission.”

There is a lot that could be unpacked from this sentence. Let’s break it down in some basic propositions:

- 1) The Church exists to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ (1Cor. 10:31).
- 2) The Church exists to equip its members to serve the body of Christ as each member does their part (Eph. 4:11-16).

3) The Church exists to fulfill the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20).

The mission of the Church stands on a three legged stool. We glorify God, do discipleship within the body and make disciples outside the body among all nations. We also believe that there are two biblical rails upon which the Church lives out its mission as we move forward in extending the Kingdom of God among all people for His glory and their good. One is the Great Commission. The other is called the Great Commandments.

The Great Commission (the gospel to every nation)

The Great Commission's best known statement is located in Matthew 28:18-20. We find the Lukan version in both Luke 24:46-48 and Acts 1:8. The longer ending to Mark also contains it (16:15). There is a brief Johannine statement in John 20:21. In Matthew we are commanded by our Lord to make disciples of all the nations, every *ethne*, teaching them "to obey everything I have commanded." In the process he promises us His presence, "always, to the very end of the age."

Those who are committed to the Great Commission rightly focus on the "outer edges" of lostness where the gospel witness is faint or non-existent. And, we understand that our divine assignment is not to make converts but to make disciples. A vital and essential component of disciple-making is plainly stated in Matthew 28:20, "teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. Now, if ever there was a daunting task there it is. After all, teaching a person

everything Jesus has commanded includes 66 books, 1,189 chapters and 31,103 verses. My brain is already exploding and my heart is already sinking. However, Jesus teaches us that all that the Bible teaches us to do can be boiled down into two basic commandments. Wow! What a relief!!

The Great Commandments (love God and your neighbor)

The Great Commandments are found in Matthew 22:37-39. The command to love God with your whole being comes from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and is known as the Shema. It was recited several times a day by devout and faithful Hebrews. It is at the very heart of the Jewish faith. Preeminently above all things, we are to love our God. Jesus says the second great commandment is like the first. The command to love our neighbor is found in Leviticus 19:18. Jesus provides a really good illustration of neighbor love in Luke 10:25-37. Bottom line: our neighbor is anyone in need. Racial, national, social, cultural and economic barriers disappear because my love for my God causes me to love those made in his image just like He love them. No exceptions. No excuses.

Conclusion

Today on planet earth King Jesus has a body that the Bible calls the Church. It is truly an incredible organism animated and empowered by His Spirit. It has a mind that can think His thoughts and have His perspective. It has eyes that can see the needs of neighbors. It has ears that can hear the cries of the nations. It has a

mouth that can proclaim the good news of the gospel. It has legs that can walk to the hurting. It has arms that can embrace those in pain. It has hands that can serve those in need. It has feet that can be blistered and backs that can be whipped all for the sake of a King who did all of this for us and so much more. This body called the Church makes Jesus Christ real to this world. So, our goal is not to build buildings, grow budgets, merely acquire knowledge or be captivated by current political and social agendas. No, our goal is to grow up men and women, boys and girls to maturity in Christ so that they think like Jesus and live like Jesus. Our passion is to fill the earth with Christ, His gospel and His kingdom. These aims are what sets the agenda for this body called the Church. Any other agenda will fall short. Any other agenda is not worth having.