

**The Church: It's Nature,
Unity and Government
May 3, 2015**

¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

We are in a four week study on the Church. Since all authority has been given to Jesus, in heaven and on earth; and since he has commanded us to go and make disciples of all peoples; and since the church is his chosen bride and the means through which he has called us together to accomplish this commandment, then it stands to reason that we should understand the nature and character of the church. That is the purpose of this series. It is designed to help us all understand the church and how it fits in the redemptive purposes of God.

Last week we defined the church as “A community of all true believers.” We saw that every person who is a true believer in Jesus Christ, every person who has been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, is a “called out” or “summoned” person and has been called out of the world into this amazing body called the church. That is why we can sing “this world is not

my home, I'm just a passin' through." True believers are called out of the world and into the church. It isn't something we choose, it is a part of the package when we are adopted into God's family – that family is the church. As a family, we all share the same purpose – to make disciples. And when we do, there will be opposition and ultimately persecution. That is our heritage, all to the glory of God who promised us that He would build His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

This week we want to look at the very nature of the church. What is the church, how does God intend for the church to look, how is it organized and how are we to oversee it? We need to know this so we keep focused on our mission of making disciples. It is so easy to get lost in the forest and forget what we are called to do. We can get so wrapped up in the implementation details that we totally miss our real purpose.

The Nature of the Church

First, let's look at the very nature of the church. We have already said that the church is a community of all believers. The Bible has some very specific imagery that helps us understand the nature of that community. There is no better place to start looking at what scripture says about the church than Ephesians 2:19–22: *¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined*

together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Let's break this passage down. What does it say about the church?

1. We who are in the church are "fellow citizens." There are no immigration issues in the church. It has no classes, no special designations, no need for visas for those who are just visiting or don't truly belong. All who are in the church are fellow citizens with all the rights and privileges that God has given us as believers and followers of Jesus Christ. And this church is built on the foundation of the apostles teaching, with Jesus Christ being the cornerstone. Remember last week when I said that our history as a church is a shared history with those who have gone before us... particularly the apostles whose lives were given to establish the church of Jesus Christ. This is our history, built on the cornerstone of Jesus Christ, with the teaching and guidance of the apostles as the foundation on which we build.
2. We who are in the church are "members of the household of God." Stop right here. This is huge! This statement should overwhelm you. If it doesn't, you aren't thinking deeply enough. As a Christ follower, you are a fully privileged member of God's household. This is another way of expressing the fact that you have been adopted by God and made his child... with all the rights, all the privileges, all the benefits that are bestowed upon every single member of the household.

3. We who are in the church are part of a structure. It is a structure that is growing into a holy temple in Jesus. Do you think of the church this way? The church is a collective, it is alive, it is growing constantly, it is a holy temple. All who profess faith in Jesus are a part of that structure. Then, verse 22 goes on to say that as part of that structure we are all being “built together”. This is a picture of a master craftsman fitting individual pieces together and constructing a perfect masterpiece. This “building together” speaks to our inter-personal relationships in the church – one to another, and also to our relationship with Jesus, as we become more and more intertwined in the life of the church.
4. Finally, verse 22 says that we who are in the church have a purpose. Our purpose is to be a dwelling place for God. Now go slow here, be very careful in the way you read verse 22. Where is the dwelling place of God, according to Ephesians 2:21-22? In the holy temple... do you see that? What is this holy temple, is it individuals or the whole church? This is one of those questions where both answers are correct, but we need to make sure we keep our focus in the right direction. In our “individualistic” culture, we nearly always think of things as they relate to us personally. I am the temple of God. I am being built together. We even hear this statement frequently, “I am the church.” But, while we are individually being woven into the structure of the temple, the Bible speaks of this in a collective sense, in the sense of the body as a whole, not individuals. This is important for us to understand. Remember, our

purpose here is to understand the church from a Biblical perspective so we can obey the commandment to go and make disciples. The CHURCH is the temple of God. Yes, the Holy Spirit indwells each believer, but the church as a whole is God's dwelling place. It is a corporate body – woven together by the master craftsman for His purposes and to His glory. When we miss this and start to think of ourselves as independent centers of God's influence, we miss the point of the church and we will miss God's will as well. We are not called to be independent, stand-alone churches. Individuals are not the church... even though popular church culture may tell you just the opposite. The bible is clear, the church is the woven together temple of the living God. That is His place of residence. That is the meaning of the verse in Matthew 18:20 that says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." God indwells all believers, but it is in the gathering of the saints together that He establishes his purposes.

Listen to how the Apostle Peter describes the church in 1 Peter 2:9-10:

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Once again, read this as a collective statement about the church, not just a statement about individuals.

Together we are a chosen race, the Christian race. Together we are a royal

priesthood, the priests of Jesus Christ. Together we are a holy nation, the nation of the Lord almighty. Together we are a people for his own possession. And finally we are a people together who proclaim to the world the excellencies of Christ Jesus, the one who summoned us out of the world, saved us from darkness and has built us together into His temple.

Do you see the beauty and glory of what God has done and is continuing to do. He is constructing His dwelling place – the church. It is His glory, His nation, His dwelling place, His light on a hill. Once we were not a people, but now we are God’s people. Once we were without hope, receiving no mercy. Now we are people of infinite hope, having received the mercy of Christ’s sacrifice and eternal life in him. This is the church. This is its nature. This is one Treasure... built up and constructed by God to proclaim God’s excellencies. That is the nature of the church.

Unity in the Church

Because the church is God’s temple, his dwelling place... it is also a place that must reflect His character and glory. One of the primary requirements of scripture is that the church be unified, that there be no disruption, no strife, no backbiting, no gossip and no slander. After all, this is the body of Christ, this is the bride of Christ, this is the very domain of God. If the church is to reflect His glory, there must not be disarray. In the fourth chapter of the book of Ephesians, Paul makes this crystal clear. This is the

first and foremost thing on His mind as he instructs the Ephesians in how to live out their faith as the church, the dwelling place of God. Look at what he says in Ephesians 4:1-6: *I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

Paul urges them, he implores them, to live in a way that is worthy of their calling. Now remember, I will remind you once again, this is not primarily a statement to individuals... this is primarily a statement to the church in Ephesus – the whole church which of course is made up of individuals. Paul is saying, “Church body, live in a way that honors Christ, that is worthy of your calling to be the dwelling place of God!” As a whole, collectively, together... be humble and gentle, be patient with one another, bear with one another... don’t be critical, don’t be short, don’t get frustrated. Be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit. We all have the same hope, the same purpose, the same Lord. Therefore, what Paul is saying here is don’t let the pressures of life together destroy your focus. Church of Jesus Christ, you have one mission and one mission only – be making disciples. We are all in this together. With humility and gentleness and love and patience and forbearance ... go and make disciples of all nations. Implied

here is this truth: we have enough trouble in this world as it is, why would we want trouble in the church? God is unified. The three persons of God, the Father, Son and Spirit, never disagree. They are perfectly unified. When we allow the God who dwells in us to lead and direct us in unity, we will see Him bring about amazing results.

Once more, Paul recites this same concern to the church at Rome. In Romans 12:3-5 he says this, ³ *For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.* ⁴ *For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function,* ⁵ *so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.* We are individually members of one another. Think about that. We think of ourselves as “members” of a church... and that is appropriate. But within that church we are also members of one another.

Unity is one of the major themes in the New Testament and causes of division are frequently addressed.. Scripture lists the following as major sources of division and sin in the church.¹

- Personal ambition. In Mark 9:34 Jesus asks the disciples what they were talking about on the way back to Capernaum. ³⁴ *But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.* They wouldn't answer. They were feuding with one another

over who was the greatest among the twelve. These were ambitious young men. It causes so much trouble in the church.

- Ethnic tension. Acts 6:1 *Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.* There is no place in the church for ethnic or social differences, even subtle ones that show up in our failing to serve those we are uncomfortable with or don't know because our lives are lived in different economic and social strata. In all likelihood, the oversight of the Greek widows was unintentional. There were thousands of new converts, many needy widows. Likely this was an oversight caused by the stress of ministry, but it was still ethnic in nature. Scripture is clear, there is now no distinction, Jew or Greek, rich or poor, black or white... the potential for division is great, but God has built one temple and we are all equal parts of the church.
- Unresolved differences of opinion. Ac 15:37-40 ³⁷ *Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark.* ³⁸ *But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.* ³⁹ *And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other.* Even Paul and Barnabas fell into this trap. We will rub up against one another in the course of life, but the way Paul and Barnabas handled this was sin. They went at it and couldn't find a resolution – so they split up and went their

separate ways. Unity in the church demands conflict resolution that glorifies God.

- Greed. James 4:1-3 *What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.* There is really no need to even comment on this passage. It speaks for itself. Stop wanting what you don't have, be satisfied with the grace that God has shown you, love your brothers and sisters in Christ who have less than you and who have more than you. Don't covet their lives, you have no idea what their life is like. No fighting or coveting over stuff... we are all in this church together as equals.

There are many more examples of issues that cause division in the church, but I think you are getting the picture. The bottom line here is this, be unified – humble, gentle, patient, forbearing, forgiving... eager to maintain the unity of Spirit in the church. Why? Because we are commanded to do so, but also because this is the attitude that builds character and creates disciples of Jesus. Remember our mission... make disciples.

So, we have looked at the nature of the church and the absolute requirement for unity in the temple of God. Now we will see that God has given the church gifts and leadership to enable us to function together as a

single body of believers. He has crafted us together into a beautiful mosaic called the church.

Gifting and Government in the Church

God has summoned us out of the world and into the church. He has given us a mission that is to be pursued in unity by all who have been called out. But he has not left us without guidance on how to organize the function of the church. I see two things that God shows us in scripture that gives the church direction and guidance and each are provided under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

First, he has given the church gifts, in the form of people – called out ones that have specific gifting that is to be used for the benefit of the whole body. First and foremost is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Every believer is given this gift upon their salvation and it is the Spirit that acts as our seal, the promise of our redemption and ultimate salvation. This cannot be minimized. Without the Spirit we have no hope, no guidance, no direction. But scripture is also clear that the church is given specific gifts which are to be used for specific purposes. 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 says, *⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according*

to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apports to each one individually as he wills. These gifts are given to individual members of the church “for the common good.” In other words, to enable the church to fulfill its mission – to make disciples. These are not “personal” gifts and they are never used for an individual’s purposes, always for the common good. Further on in that same passage, in verse 18, Paul says, ¹⁸ *But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.* God chooses to gift the church as he sees fit, for his purposes. Then, Paul closes the chapter with these statements, look at verse 27, ²⁷ *Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.* This called out church has amazing gifts. Those gifts are found embedded in people, through the choosing of God and for His purposes. Every member of the body has a unique role to play, a role chosen by God and vital to the well-being of the church. There are no “extra” members. There are no marginal members. There are no unnecessary members.

And finally, God has set a structure in place in the church. He has given us leaders to help the body as a whole stay on track and keep headed in the right direction. We are all sheep, we lose our way. Church leaders are also sheep, but God has called them to keep watch over the flock. First and foremost, Jesus Christ is the absolute head of the church. He appoints leaders in the church to enable the whole church to flourish and grow into maturity. Christ has ultimate authority and His authority over the church is acknowledged more by the church's obedience to God than through any particular form of government.² But, he has given us a form of government – he has ordained positions of leadership in the church. These leaders are called elders and deacons and they serve as shepherds, under the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ (1Peter 5:4). This term elder needs some definition, due to an unfortunate slide in the modern church that has come to use the term as the equivalent to a “board member” of a non-profit organization or a corporation. This is not Biblical. The term elder is derived from two Greek words that are used interchangeably in the New Testament. One literally means “older man”, thereby the name “elder” and the other means “overseer”. These two words are both used to describe the single office of elder. Note that the New Testament does not use the word “pastor” in the sense of an official office. Our term pastor comes from the Greek word that means to shepherd. Pastoring is an action, not an office. Shepherding the sheep is a critical activity and all elders are required to be shepherds. We are all sheep, we lose our way.

Elders are also sheep, but God has called them to keep watch over the flock and has given them authority as servants of the church.

So here is the bottom line. Elders are the official leaders of the church. The way we use the term “pastor” is really the same as the Biblical term “elder”. At oneTreasure, elders are pastors... and even though I go by the title “Pastor”, that is also a term that is descriptive of each of our elders. We share equal authority and equal responsibility for this church. The four of us have been called by God to a place of service that carries a very serious set of responsibilities. This is not the time or place to detail those, but bear in mind that the burden of eldership is very real. It is difficult. In fact the writer of Hebrews says this in Hebrews 13:17, *¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.* Elders are not the business managers of the church. They are the spiritual leaders and they are those who will stand before God and give an account for their oversight. Elders keep watch over your souls, even when you do not know what is best for yourself, or the church... your elders are responsible for knowing and acting accordingly. Pray for them, they carry a very heavy burden.

Here is the bottom line. The church is God’s temple, His dwelling place. Together, corporately, we are called into God’s mission – the redemption

of the world. Our role is to make disciples of those He calls out – and calls into the church. Because it is God’s dwelling, there will be unity and common purpose. The members of the church, who are woven together, will experience unity and common purpose... loving one another as Christ loves us, His bride. We are the church – together, not singularly. We will obey our Leader and follow those who he has set in authority over us, as we make disciples of all nations. That is our purpose and that is the reason the church exists. When we follow God’s plan it brings Him great glory and it brings us great satisfaction and joy. So church, live together in peace and harmony, make disciples and glorify your God.

AMEN.

Endnotes:

¹ Manser, Martin H., *Dictionary of Bible Themes: The Accessible and Comprehensive Tool for Topical Studies* (London: Martin Manser, 2009)

² *Ibid.*