

What Did God Say About The Church?

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Introduction

The biblical conception of the local church is under assault here in the West. Powerful cultural currents relentlessly push against it, redefining its nature and purpose, and reshaping its forms to support that redefinition. This is no small matter because the church is God's idea. This workshop addresses the most crucial element in the quest to restore and maintain the church as God intends. This key element is the shepherd's (pastor) own satisfaction with God's design for the church. Over time, the church will reflect the values of its pastor. We will proceed by first unpacking two simple foundational ideas: God loves the church and, therefore, those who love God will love the church. These constitute what God has said about the church—at least in part. We will then survey theological and philosophical anomalies that are eroding the biblical conception of the church. Finally, we will offer some specific suggestions that will help the shepherd cultivate his own satisfaction with the church as God designed it.

Certain preliminary considerations will help shape our conversation.

First, our discussion assumes biblical validity of the primacy of the local church. This doctrine states that the local church is God's ordained instrument through which he works to accomplish his mission in this age. Conservative Christians, particularly Baptists, have historically embraced this principle, hence including in common church covenants the commitment to "*give it a sacred preeminence* over all institutions of human origin." While the workshop material will give expression to biblical themes that uphold this view of the church, our purpose does not lie in the direction of a systematic argument to prove it.

Second, this material assumes that the New Testament places priority of emphasis on the visible, local assembly rather than the invisible, universal church. It is inarguable that the New Testament envisions the church as a heavenly assembly of all believers in this age and, thus there is a connection between all genuine believers and all genuine churches; and that God's ultimate goal for the church is that heavenly assembly. However, in the current age, all we see of this heavenly assembly appears in its local manifestation. The current emphasis on the church universal is out of step with biblical ecclesiology. Therefore in these notes, discussion of the church either refers to or has specific implications for the local assembly.

Proposition: We express our love for God by seeking contentment in His church.

I. God loves the church.

The New Testament demonstrates this fact in many ways, in many texts. Through the church God displays his wisdom (Ephesians 3:10); for the church Christ “gave himself up” (Ephesians 5:25). We will briefly survey three ways that God demonstrates his special affection for the church.

A. God has made the church central to his eternal plan.

In the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul expounds on God’s eternal plan to bring glory to himself. As we might expect, the redemptive work of Christ is a dominant theme. However, the main focus is on the church as the object of redemption. The section moves in crescendo to this famous paean of praise.

Ephesians 3:20–21 (ESV)

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Note: The final chapters of Ephesians show direct connection between the church universal and the local assembly.

B. God has given the sovereign Christ to the church.

When we think of the church in relation to Christ, we normally think of the fact that the Father has bequeathed the church to Christ (John 6:37; Ephesians 5:27). However, Paul makes a stunning statement that we are prone to overlook.

Ephesians 1:22–23 (ESV)

²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

C. God has entrusted his truth to the church.

The wonder that God has spoken, revealing himself within creation and calling to himself a people as his special possession, leaves its impression throughout the pages of Scripture. He has spoken and his word is truth (John 17:17). To compound our amazement, we learn that he has entrusted the truth to churches for proclamation and safekeeping.

1 Timothy 3:14–15 (ESV)

¹⁴ I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵ if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

The point of the foregoing survey is this: If we modify, minimize, or marginalize the church, we touch something at the core of what God is doing in his universe; we exhibit disregard for the object of God's special regard.

II. Those who love God love the church.

We should consider it axiomatic: If we love God we will love what God loves. This is why conservative Christians pledge to give the local church a "sacred preeminence over all institutions of human origin." The following facts illustrate the inseparable and formative connection God expects believers to have with his church.

A. The New Testament assumes our corporate identity.

Current fads promote the idea that the Bible does not require church membership. The Bible, we are told, contains no teaching on the subject.

Alva J. McClain said in this regard:

The necessity of membership in the local church is never questioned in the New Testament. It is taken for granted. Had we asked the believers of the Apostolic period whether it was essential to join a church, they would not have known what we were talking about. Every believer became a member of a church. It was involved in the very profession he made in Christ.¹

In actuality, the New Testament provides such clear instruction on matters of inclusion and exclusion vis-à-vis the church that we must conclude:

1. The profession of any believer who refuses involvement in a church is suspect.
2. The gathering that calls itself a "church" but does not establish membership is not a true church.

B. "Love one another" functions in the context of our corporate identity.

We often (rightly) link John's words in 1 John 2:19 to doctrinal apostasy. But John's concerns involved more than doctrine. He also wrote against the lack of love for the assembly revealed through the secession of the apostates.

1 John 2:19 (ESV)

¹ Cited by Rolland D. McCune, *Systematic Theology* (Allen Park, MI: DBTS, 2010) 3:96-97.

¹⁹ They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.

1 John 4:11–12 (ESV)

¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

For John, love expressed within the assembly serves as an indispensable mark of genuine love for God.

All of the “one another” commands in the epistles assume the believer’s involvement in the local assembly.

C. The biblical mission revolves around our corporate identity.

Through his life and ministry, the apostle Paul left to the church a paradigm of ministry that transcends cultures and generations. We know that God intends the church to follow the core principles that shaped Paul’s ministry for several reasons. The record of the outworking of our Lord’s commission for this age centered on the ministry of Paul (Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 1:8; cf., the structure of Acts). Paul’s thirteen epistles provide the primary inspired collection of church truth, containing both the content of the church’s message and the principles that guide the church’s practice. Finally, Paul specifically stated that subsequent generations of ministers should follow the pattern of his ministry (see the Pastoral Epistles specifically 2 Timothy 1:6-2:7; 3:1-4:8)

When we examine the record of Paul’s ministry, we learn three simple principles:

1. The local church is the *source* of the biblical mission.

From the beginning of the mission, we find the local church at the heart of God’s plan for the work of expanding mission.

Acts 13:1–3 (ESV)

¹³ Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² 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.” ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

God prepared men for the biblical mission within the incubator of the local church. It was from this context that God called the men he providentially chose (13:2b).

2. The local church is the *means* of the biblical mission.

The church at Antioch *sent* the first missionaries. That certainly implies more than granting them well-wishes. The implication is that the church supplied their needs. The New Testament records numerous examples of local churches supporting, not just their own pastors, but the missionary endeavors of those who spread the gospel to new regions.

See Philippians 4:10-19; Romans 15:23-24

3. The local church is the *end* of biblical mission.

The establishment of new local churches is the *goal*, or *end* of the mission.

Paul did not labor merely to evangelize, but to plant and establish new churches. He established local church organizational structure in each church that he planted. For example, Acts 14:23 says that Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church.

But those first missionaries were not finished until they launched *indigenous* churches—self-supporting, self-governing, self-extending.

Acts 14:23 says:

²³ And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

- D. Family commitments are shaped by our corporate identity.

Both the church and the family are institutions ordained of God and, therefore, neither came into being by human origin. In the mind of the average churchgoer, the interests of the church are subservient to the interests of the family. However, without denying the extreme importance of the family, we must understand that in a sense exactly the opposite is true.

Author Rodney Clapp boldly, even shockingly, declares:

Recovering the purpose of Christian family, on the distinctive terms of the Christian story, requires two declarations--one negative and one positive.

The negative declaration: The family is not God's most important institution on earth. The family is not the social agent that most significantly shapes and forms the character of Christians. The family is not the primary vehicle of God's grace and salvation for a waiting, desperate world.

And the positive declaration: The church is God's most important institution on earth.²

What is the evidence for this view which seems so radical to many? Consider the fact that New Testament instructions for family life are channeled through the assembly. Or, the fact that in certain situations singleness is preferable for the sake of ministry (1 Corinthians 7). Or, the fact that the church abides forever and the family unit does not. Could it be that in our zeal to promote godly families we sometimes inadvertently establish a new expression of idolatry?

We need to challenge God's people to view their families as a mission field and training ground for the biblical mission. In this way, the God-ordained purpose for our families serves the God-ordained purpose of the church.

III. Misdirected love marginalizes the church.

Many destructive streams of doctrine and philosophy have converged to flow through and eddy within evangelicalism and fundamentalism. The following examples illustrate the relentless undermining of the primacy of the local church resulting in systemic marginalization of God's appointed agency for the mission in this age.

A. Classic Keswick Theology

Keswick theology primarily concerned itself with the individual believer's walk with God. Its defective view of sanctification fostered a preoccupation with individual dedication, individual growth, and individual service. Martin Lloyd-Jones observed:

How often does the minister have to deal with such people! They feel that they have lost something, or they are trying to recapture some former experience, or else they are waiting or longing for some experience which has never yet come to them, but which they have heard of in the case of others. Their interest is entirely in themselves. Their talk is solely of receiving and never of giving.... Poor souls! If only they could lose themselves in the objectivity of the New Testament, their subjective states would soon take care of themselves.³

Keswick theology took root in certain influential quarters of dispensationalism with the result that "the church . . . has tended to be of negligible importance in

² Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 67-68.

³ Cited by Andrew David Naselli, *Let Go and Let God? A Survey and Analysis of Keswick Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2010), 289.

dispensational theology. That is to say, that which is commonly called ‘the visible church’ is at best considered a mere convenience for the individual believer during his earthly sojourn, and at worst is looked upon as a theologically impotent human construction.⁴

This is no overstatement. Scofield claimed:

The visible church, *as such* is charged with no mission. The Commission to evangelize the world is personal, and not corporate... So far as the Scripture goes, the work of evangelization was done by individuals called directly by the Spirit to that work.⁵

Chafer writes in the same vein:

No responsibility or service is imposed on the church *per se*. Service, like the gifts of the Spirit by whom service is wrought, is individual. It could not be otherwise. The common phrase, ‘the church’s task’, is, therefore, without Biblical foundation. It is only when the individuals sense their personal responsibility and claim personal divine enablement that Christian work is done.⁶

B. Revivalism

The heritage of many evangelicals and fundamentalists leads down a “sawdust trail.” That is, they have been deeply influenced by revivalism. Psychological and pragmatic methodologies displace biblical means of grace in order to induce results.

Seasons of revival became ‘revival meetings.’ Instead of being ‘surprising’ they might now be even announced in advance, and whereas no one in the previous century had known ways to secure a revival, a system was now popularized by ‘revivalists’ which came near to guaranteeing results.⁷

In revivalism, expectations of the word of God diminish. Preaching the word, praying the word, and singing the word cannot compete with the visible results gained through the emotional manipulation of the professional evangelist. Sober worship is replaced with results-oriented, high pressure evangelistic services.

The end goal is individual professions—not community. The church is simply a gathering place where the specially gifted do the real work of ministry.

⁴ Michael D. Williams, “Where’s the Church? The Church as Unfinished Business of Dispensational Theology,” *GTJ*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Fall 89), 167.

⁵ Scofield, *Comprehensive Bible Correspondence Course*, cited by Williams, “Where’s the Church,” 175.

⁶ Lewis Sperry Chafer, vol. 4, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1993), 149.

⁷ Iain H. Murry, *Revival & Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1994), xviii.

C. The Church Growth Movement

The Church Growth Movement with its seeker-sensitive services is, in many ways, a natural progression from revivalism. Many of the foundational assumptions about church and ministry remain the same. The CGM just applies them with greater sophistication, employing sociology and technology. Individualism remains the driving concern that shapes the movement.

Technique is being substituted for truth, marketing action for thought, the satisfaction of the individual for the health of the church, a therapeutic vision of the world for a doctrinal vision, the unmanageable by the manageable, organism by organization, those who can preach the Word of God by those who can manage an organization, the spiritual by the material. At the center of these substitutions is an individualism fired by a shallow, self-centered consumerism. And along with this, and because of it, has come a debilitating loss of truth — the very thing that brought the mainline denominations low — and behind that there lies the loss of awareness of God as objective and transcendent. This, too, is an inescapable part of the move into the market, of adaptation to the ways of the world that modernization has brought about.⁸

D. The Missional church

The missional church is the latest fad in American evangelicalism, enjoying an explosion of interest in the past decade. Unfortunately, while the label is popular, its characteristics have not been well defined. Fundamentally, it is an attempt to collapse the ideals of the Kingdom social structure into the mission of the church. Therefore, “missional” is equated with the pursuit of social justice and incarnational ministry through deeds of mercy.

Dr. Mark Snoeberger identifies three levels of commitment to the missional idea and warns of a historical progression from low to high.⁹

1. Low Missional: (social justice and mercy ministry as vehicles for the church’s chief end of gospel proclamation)
2. Mid Missional: (social justice and mercy ministry and gospel proclamation as the church’s two parallel ends)
3. High Missional: (social justice and mercy ministry as the church’s primary end)

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David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 86-87.

⁹ Mark A. Snoeberger, “History, Ecclesiology, and Mission, Or, Are We Missing Some Options Here?,” <http://dbts.edu/pdf/macp/2010/Snoeberger>. See page 10.

The missional movement in some ways counteracts the systemic individualism rampant in the church. However, its solution places the church on another path destructive to the church by diminishing its role in God’s plan of history and by making significant alterations to its mission.

E. *Revolution*

George Barna helped fuel the Church Growth Movement with the publication of his 1988 book, *Marketing the Church*.¹⁰ Seventeen years later, he published a work entitled, *Revolution*, which offers a critique of the church that he helped create. Here is a telling quote:

There is nothing inherently wrong with being involved in a local church.¹¹

Can you guess where this is going?

. . . you should realize that *the Bible neither describes nor promotes the local church as we know it today*.¹²

If we survey the churches that dominate the ecclesiastical landscape in America, we would have to agree—but for different reasons. We would say that the shape of the local assembly has departed from the biblical pattern; Barna says that there is no biblical mandate for a local assembly. So where did this widely accepted idea about the local assembly come from?

We should keep in mind that what we call ‘church’ is just one interpretation of how to develop and live a faith-centered life. *We made it up*.¹³

Once again, with this we can agree. How ironic that a pollster has helped shape the church according to the opinions and interests of the unregenerate community and then is surprised to find that the church he “made up” is unspiritual and ineffective.

The influences distorting the churches are pervasive and powerful. How shall Bible believers establish and maintain the church as *God* envisions it?

IV. The contented shepherd strengthens the church.

To put it simply, a congregation’s ability to establish, maintain, and propagate a biblically shaped ministry depends on the shepherd’s satisfaction with the church as God envisions it. When the pastor loves the church that God loves, the congregation will

¹⁰ George Barna, *Marketing the Church* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988).

¹¹ George Barna, *Revolution: Finding Vibrant Faith Beyond the Walls of the Sanctuary* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2005), 36.

¹² Ibid., 37, emphasis his.

¹³ Ibid., 37-38, emphasis mine.

learn to love it, too. Unfortunately, too many shepherds reveal through their actions that deep down they long for a different kind of church. We have to labor to keep selfish longings in check; otherwise our hearts will drive us to seek satisfaction in the acknowledgement of our peers, advancement in ecclesiastical structures, and the approval of men.

If we will find contentment in the church that God loves, we must at least make these commitments:

A. Commitment to the regulative principle¹⁴

The regulative principle upholds God-directed worship. This is no esoteric discussion that bears no practical weight. It reveals what we really think about the church and the God of the church. It strikes to the heart of God's love for the church. Is the church important enough for God to guide and govern its corporate commitment to the world's most vital activity: worship? It puts on display our true opinions about God and his word. When we banish the regulative principle from the church, we declare our true beliefs by our actions: sociology supersedes the revealed wisdom of God, our creativity is more effective than God's ordained means of grace, and our creativity must counteract the insufficiencies of Scripture.

Commitment to the regulative principle checks our inclination to seek satisfaction apart from God; it secures our contentment in his word and his church.

B. Commitment to trust the Sovereign God with the scope of our influence

We must be content to labor in obscurity; if notoriety comes, we must be sure that God himself thrusts it upon us.¹⁵ Unfortunately, we are too often discontent with small circles of influence. As we attempt to hone the "gift of special speaker," push to create parachurch organizations, and play politics to climb associational ladders, we don't even realize that our actions broadcast our dissatisfaction with the local church.

Even within the confines of local church ministry, the vestiges of revivalism betray the primacy of the local church. We schedule speakers who have little to commend them except notoriety, sometimes even promoting those whose connection to any local church is tenuous, at best. Dissatisfied with the scope of our own influence, we depend on these famous and charismatic men to extend it for us.

¹⁴ It is beyond the scope of this workshop to argue the case for the validity of the regulative principle. For a helpful discussion, see *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), edited by Philip Ryken, Derek Thomas, and Ligon Duncan III. Particularly helpful are Lig Duncan's contributions in chapters 1 and 2.

¹⁵ Douglas McLachlan offered these words of advice to me nearly 25 years ago. They proved of immeasurable importance as I formulated a clearer understanding of my pastoral role.

When we leave the sphere of our influence in the hands of God, we will anchor contentment in the local church.

C. Commitment to longevity in ministry

Whether you are in the pulpit or the pew, there are times when it becomes advisable to leave a church. *But they are few.* A unilateral decision often marks an inappropriate choice to leave a ministry. We are called to love one another, to prefer others above ourselves, to provoke one another to love and good works. When we quickly and easily leave in times of trouble or when an opportunity for “advancement” comes along, surely we reveal a vacuum of biblical love for the church.

Commit yourself to the church; that involves a dedication to people, not merely an idea. We dare not reduce God’s people to stepping-stones. When we love them, we are with them for the long haul.

D. Commitment to use the resources God has given

The spirit of professionalism infects many a ministry and grips many a minister. Professionalism evaluates the church using the standards of business culture. It is preoccupied with market share (numerical growth), image, recognition, and advancement. It fosters envy and envy inevitably gives birth to discontentment.

Professionalism produces a culture—a way of looking at life that is at odds with the view ministers need to have if they serve Christ and His people. Christ and culture collide here—they are both competing for the church’s soul. *It is no small irony that this worldly culture has loosed its values upon the church through the ministry.*¹⁶

We are not professionals and our success in the church is not measured by quantifiable standards. Success has to do with faithfulness and process rather than performance and product.

The world sets the agenda for the professional man; God sets the agenda of the spiritual man. . . . There is an infinite difference between the man whose heart is set on being a professional and the pastor whose heart is set on being the aroma of Christ, the fragrance of death to some and eternal life to others (2 Corinthians 2:15-16).¹⁷

May God grant us true contentment in our places of ministry so that we might demonstrate a genuine love for that which God loves: the church for which Christ died.

¹⁶ David Wells, “The D-Min-Ization of the Ministry,” *No God But God* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 176.

¹⁷ John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2002), 3.