

EFCA Theology Conference 2016

The Doctrine of the Church: The Embodiment of the Gospel

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EFCA Theology Conference

Introduction: The Doctrine of the Church

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Introduction

As we ponder the doctrine of the church, it is vital that we know who and whose we are. Apart from this truth, we will become nothing more than another dying organization or institution. Like in the days of Samuel (1 Sam. 4), it will result in the church being referred to as Ichabod, the glory of the Lord has departed.

In our day of tsunami-like moral and cultural changes, we need to be reminded of the doctrine of the church. And although this is a doctrinal truth, it is necessary not for the sake of doctrine alone. This doctrinal truth has practical implications. When we forget this doctrine, we, as the church of Jesus Christ, follow the cultural winds, or we follow after the spirits of the age, or we are coopted by someone else for the propagation of their own agenda. History is replete with examples.

In contrast, and positively, we need this doctrine so that we can “clarify our minds, motivate our hearts, and direct our hands... so that we can be who and whose we truly are.” As the church, we are the transformed people of God who influence and impact culture, not follow the mores of culture, we follow the Spirit of the ages, not the spirit of the age, and we are preeminently given to living under the Lordship of Christ in His kingdom and making His name great, not fitting in someone else’s agenda.

The Church

As you consider doctrines of importance, which ones do you include in the “utmost importance” list? Theology – the doctrine of God. Christology – the doctrine of Christ. Anthropology and Hamartiology – the doctrine of man and sin. Soteriology – the doctrine of salvation. Ecclesiology – the doctrine of the church.

How many of you would have included the last one in your list? My guess is that not many consider the doctrine of the church to be of utmost importance. For Free Church pastors and leaders, if this is the case not only would this be tragic, but it would belie the fact that we are a gospel-centered people in a gospel-centered movement.

Because we affirm, proclaim and live the gospel of Jesus Christ, we acknowledge the importance of the church because it is important to Christ, who died to purchase people for himself. And he is the Head over this new community, the church. Furthermore, the gospel that creates the church that joyfully lives under the Lordship and Headship of Jesus Christ, now proclaims the gospel, and through their corporate life together they manifest the gospel. That is, “the church is the gospel made visible,” an “embodiment of the gospel.”

The EFCA

In our Statement of Faith Article 1 on the doctrine of “God,” our concluding statement addresses God’s purpose for his people: “God has graciously purposed from eternity to redeem a people for Himself and to make all things new for His own glory.” The expression “redeem a people for Himself” addresses the people of God, the church of Jesus Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit.

This truth is more fully expounded in Article 7 on the doctrine of “The Church”: “We believe that the true church comprises all who have been justified by God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone. They are united by the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ, of which He is the Head. The true church is manifest in local churches, whose membership should be composed only of believers. The Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, which visibly and tangibly express the gospel. Though they are not the means of salvation, when celebrated by the church in genuine faith, these ordinances confirm and nourish the believer.”

God in his grace has purposed to restore his fallen creation and to redeem a people for himself. In Jesus Christ God has acted to rescue sinful human beings from his wrath and to reconcile them to himself. This work of Christ in his cross and resurrection is now applied to us by the Holy Spirit, who unites us with Christ so that what is true of him becomes true of us. And in uniting us with Christ, the Spirit also creates a new community we call the church. The church, as those saved by God's grace and united with Christ by God's Spirit, becomes the embodiment of the gospel in the world.

God’s gospel is now embodied in the new community called the church. This means not only that the gospel creates the church, but also that the church proclaims the gospel. And the church proclaims the gospel not simply in what the church is called to do, but in what the church is.

The church is the centerpiece of God’s purposes for humanity. For the promise of the gospel is that God will redeem a people composed of those from every nation, tribe, people and language who will find their unity solely in their common relationship with Jesus Christ as they are united to him by the Spirit (cf. Rev. 5:9; 7:9). And it is in the church that this people-to-come is now being made visible to the world, an eschatological statement being made in the present by and through the church.

Soteriology and Ecclesiology

For those of us serving in the EFCA, how necessary or essential is the community of the redeemed to the gospel? What, if any, is the connection between the gospel that is foundational to the new birth and the new birth that is expressed in a new community?

None of us would conclude the gospel is nice but not essential. All would conclude it is absolutely essential. What about the new community, the redeemed people of God who become part of the church? Is that necessary, or is it optional? Is it connected to the gospel, and if so, in what way?

We believe if one excises the redeemed community from the gospel, you then gut the gospel of its very purpose. Although the new community of God’s people is not the gospel, it is connected to the gospel.

The doctrine of salvation has been central to the free church movement, not just the EFCA, but the doctrine of the church less so. Although these two doctrines are not one and the same, they are organically connected. Because we are a gospel-centered people in the Free Church, we need to understand the gospel's implication as it relates to the church, and the church as she relates to the gospel. This is the heart of ecclesiology. We not only need a theology *of* the church; we need a theology *for* the church.

The Doctrine of the Church: The Embodiment of the Gospel

We will address this important topic through six sessions. Our goal is to focus on the foundational truths of ecclesiology. There are many contemporary issues that can and must be addressed as we consider the doctrine of the church. But it is important we not assume these foundational truths and then focus on implications, applications or contemporary expressions. They are vital issues to address, but they must be done from the foundational truths of ecclesiology. Each of the six sessions are stand-alone topics, but they are all part of building a whole so that we have a deeper and broader understanding of the biblical teaching of the nature, purpose and function of the church.

Plenary Lectures

Session 1: What Is a Church? The Church as the Embodiment of the Gospel (A Biblical and Historical Overview)

In this lecture, which frames the whole conference, the focus will be on the biblical nature of the church and how that has been lived out, embodied, throughout history. We think of the Nicene understanding of the church as being “one, holy, catholic and apostolic.” We will be reminded of the necessity of the Reformers setting forth the marks of a true church (faithful proclamation of the Word of God, regular celebration of the ordinances, including church discipline) in light of what was happening with the Roman Catholic Church. As the church is grounded in the gospel, history reveals that the embodiment has taken various expressions through the years, some more faithful than others.

Session 2: The Church: A Visible Community - Boundary Markers of the Community

In this lecture, we will focus on the church as a visible community. Since the church is an embodiment of the gospel, it will be expressed. Here we will address some of the boundary markers of the church, the ordinances and membership, and how the gospel embodied in the church creates and manifests the gospel. This is God's ordained means of revealing a compelling community. And it is these boundary markers that set apart the people of God from others as a new and visible community.

Session 3: The Church: A New Kinship Community

The gospel creates a new family that has profound implications for how we view our life together as the people of God in/as the church. This new faith-family creates new relationships and new structures, and transforms the old, such that this family supersedes all other relationships. In this lecture we will learn that these truths have profound implications for how we understand the church: it is a family, not a business; it is relational, not institutional; it grows spiritually, not biologically.

Session 4: The Church: A Community that Transforms

As a community that has been created by the gospel and is being progressively transformed by that gospel, the church embodies a transformative community, which means one of the key ministries of the church is that of transformation. As we live by and keep in step with the Holy Spirit, we are conformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ. This is the heart of discipleship. Although this happens individually, it also happens corporately. Since discipleship is communal, as we will learn in this lecture, it takes the church to carry out the mandate of Christ to make disciples.

Session 5: The Church: A Missional Community

Not only is the church a new family that is being transformed and proclaims and lives the truth of gospel transformation, the church is also a missional community. Since the church is an embodiment of the gospel, there are important reasons and purposes why God has each church in a specific place at this period of time. This new community is a witness to the world that consists of all people, yet it begins in one's own neighborhood. Having been reconciled to God and to one another, we truly are ambassadors of reconciliation to others in our communities. In this way, the local and localized church is an eschatological people of God, reflecting here and now, albeit imperfectly, the kingdom of God.

Session 6: Shepherding God's Church: The Privilege of Being a Pastor

After hearing these wonderful, amazing truths of the doctrine of the church, we are overcome with awe and wonder that we have the incredible privilege of being a part of this new community. The church is, indeed, the center of God's work in the world. However, for many of us, there is also an added blessing – serving as shepherds in the church. In this final, culminating lecture, we will reflect on the great honor it is to serve God through pastoral ministry. We will be encouraged to cherish our calling and to press on in enduring faith to bring God glory through the shepherding of the flock God has entrusted to our care.

Breakout Session

As part of our learning we will also have a breakout session with three possible topics. Their purpose is to focus on some of the key ways the church is being challenged or ought to be challenged today:

- **Guarding the Boundaries**—discussing the why, what and how of congregational polity, particularly the value of church membership and church discipline as ways of guarding the gospel – Michael Lawrence and Bill Kynes, moderated by Matt Mitchell
- **Marriage, the State and the Church**--discussing the way in which the new law affects us, legally, practically, and pastorally – Timothy George and Greg Waybright, moderated by Tom Macy
- **Overcoming Cultural Barriers**--a discussion of ways to bridge generational, ethnic and marital (church family is spiritual not biological) differences to create a new community in Christ – Peter Cha and Joe Hellerman, moderated by Greg Strand

This is not another lecture, but a time to dialogue. Each of the sessions will begin with the plenary lecturers responding to a question pertinent to the topic. This will be followed by a time for interaction and discussion with the speakers and with one another. This is an important time for you to engage in the discussion so that the rich content provided throughout the conference in our plenary sessions can be intentionally, personally and purposefully processed.

Conclusion

In conclusion I reiterate what was stated above: God's gospel is now embodied in the new community called the church. This means not only that the gospel creates the church, but also that the church proclaims the gospel. And the church, first and foremost, proclaims the gospel in word, and also in who/what the church is – a manifestation, an embodiment of the gospel.

We pray you will learn, live and love these truths regarding the church. Not only is the church the “foundation and pillar of truth” (1 Tim. 3:15), but, more importantly, this is Christ's church comprised of people he has purchased with his own blood (Acts 20:28), who confess him to be Lord (Phil. 2:11) and Head (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:15; Col. 1:18; 2:19), and which he has promised to build (Matt. 16:18). May we be faithful undershepherds under the Chief Shepherd Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 5:1-4).

