

Biblical Churches

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[0 : 00] As I looked into this matter, I thought we needed to just pause a moment and look at the subjects of the nature of the church. It might seem very obvious and straightforward to be able to say if Christians grow then churches grow.

! But actually we know that's not the case. And we do know that in the West we are in a state of some stagnation or even decline as far as the church is concerned. Obviously not true in many other parts of the world but certainly true for us in this generation at this time. And therefore we need to work very hard to understand what God is saying about this subject. But of course what do we mean by the church? Go and ask anybody out in Brighton, what do they think about the church? Then there's all sorts, there's a plethora of ideas. There's no unity of message about the nature of the church. For ourselves as evangelical Christians, belief in the Bible and the fact that God has spoken sufficiently in the Bible puts us in a clear place.

[1 : 14] And that clear place is that God has told us what his own church is, what it should be like, how it should behave.

And he's given us understanding of that through his word. That puts us in a very strong and a clear place. But it still is a place that we need to keep on refreshing and to be clear about. So I asked the question today, what does the Bible have to say about the church? And firstly I want to say, it actually says a lot about the church. The church of Jesus Christ is written about hugely. The New Testament is full about the church of Jesus Christ. And whilst it isn't presented to us in the form of a manual, it is presented to us in the form of the apostles' teaching as given by the Holy Spirit, which is foundational for the churches.

And there is a lot in there. So it's sheer laziness on our part if we don't actually read what God says about this and be clear in our own mind.

[2 : 24] And I'd like to suggest that for every Christian person, it's an absolutely cardinal thing that should we be very clear on this particular point. So that we can discern what pleases God and what displeases him.

What is appropriate and what he wants. And so although we may be faced with a confusing, bewildering array of different places out there that call themselves churches. We have a privileged opportunity by looking at God's word to be able to understand what it is and how he discerns. Can we really be sure? I'm sure we can be sure about this. Of course there's been lots of debates over the centuries about aspects of church life and so forth. But on the basis of God speaking sufficiently to us, we can have enough assurance about the main things so that we don't have to be in a constant state of debate and uncertainty about the nature of the church and how it performs. Now some people say this is all a bit boring. You know, just, I'm not bothered about that. I just want to get together and sing a few songs and leave. But this shouldn't be boring and the reason why it shouldn't be boring is it's very important to God.

And if it's important to God, it should be important for his people. It's really important to God and we can tell that by the amount of energy and effort that was taken by the apostles to get things right.

[3 : 52] And they were constantly battling with people who had different views and opinions on these points. And I was reminded by this phrase here because there's an article I read every so often and it says, boring but important.

Boring but important. It's like the sort of small print. It's like, you know, I wish you'd get on to something better. But this isn't the case. This isn't the nature of this subject. This is actually extremely exciting.

Because the church is God's highest recreation. It's the most beautiful thing in his sight. Jesus Christ gave his life for the church.

The church is very precious to him. The church is one of those things that will never decay. It's going to go on forever, for all eternity. The church is going to be so close to the throne of God. It's a beautiful thing that we should be considering this subject. And it is a matter of some awe and respect and reverence to come to this subject matter and to think, well, we can find out what God intends.

[5 : 08] What God wants us to be. And I want to also suggest that the Bible is also helpful, not just in giving us a kind of list of things that we tick off, but also giving us a sense of proportion about really what matters.

In its proportion, some things are more important than others. And it's important for us to note that sense of proportion. So that's why we're going down this route today, just thinking about the church and, in fact, giving it another heading here, calling it biblical churches.

Or if I was going to be a bit more pedantic, I'd say churches which are biblically endorsed. Because many people might say, well, I've got a biblical church.

But we need to measure our thinking and understanding of this by the endorsement of the scripture. Now, Phil is going to be helping us over the next few Sundays in the matter of gifting in the church and also going on to the matter of elders and deacons.

And in four weeks' time, I'm looking forward to coming back on the issue of growing churches. So that's the context. So to begin with, now I'm going to just go through a few headings here with some scripture references against them.

[6 : 29] Won't have time to look at all the scripture references, but they're there on the screen. If you don't have time to write it down, happy to give you a copy of those afterwards.

And no doubt there'll be things that aren't put in quite the same sort of way as you might have imagined. And there may be some things that I miss out completely. Either because I've just missed them out or because I don't genuinely feel them to be of the significance that some people hold them to be.

Because, again, we test everything by the Bible. And that is the standard. It's always been the standard. And we have to test everything against that touchstone.

So foundations, very close to my heart. As an engineer, I know a lot about foundations and a lot about what happens when foundations go wrong. So I really hope none of you goes back home to this.

Because this is a serious problem. If you're facing one of these in your home, I encourage you to actually leave the house. Try and find a nice friend to stay with.

[7 : 38] It's going to take a long time to get this sorted. So fantastic brickwork. Window looks intact. Probably the kitchen's all right. But basically, there's not much you can do with that apart from rebuilding it.

There are some clever things you can do. But they're very, very costly. Think of a number and multiply by 10. That's the problem with foundations. Now, for the Church of Jesus Christ, foundations is an extremely important topic.

We have to get things right. And I've suggested that one of the foundation aspects of the Church is having definite belief. Definite belief.

So please have Bibles available to read. I won't have all the text up on the screen. But here's Ephesians 2, verse 20.

One of many letters in the New Testament addressed to Christians within churches.

[8 : 40] And Paul says, You are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

It's a building picture. So it's very apposite that we use the idea of a foundation. That's what we're built on. That's the foundation. The apostles and the prophets.

So the whole of the Bible is extremely useful for us in the understanding of the nature of the Church. It's not just the New Testament. The apostles were in New Testament times.

But the prophets as well give us great insight into the Church. And they are foundational. The result is a set of definite beliefs.

1 Corinthians 15. We looked at that at Easter time. When we saw how Paul was revisiting a message. And he says to them, Now brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you,

which you received and on which you have taken your stand.

[9 : 46] That is the foundation. By this gospel you are saved if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise you have believed in vain. Quite confident as Paul went around in every place he went.

He had a form of words. He had foundational things to say to people. And this church has foundational beliefs. And they're expressed both in our constitution. And we're a member of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches. And you will see in the foyer a list of foundational beliefs. I'm always very suspicious of churches which don't have any foundational beliefs.

If you go onto a website and you look on a church and you can't see what we believe on the website, I have to say I feel a bit concerned about that. Because everything has to flow out of those foundational beliefs.

And so we need to recall that, know that, and make sure we're based upon that. The church is the gathering of gathered saints.

[10 : 55] Sounds like a bit of a quaint word, saints. But I actually prefer it to the word believers. Because lots of people call themselves believers. But saints is a very particular word that the Bible uses.

To describe those who have been born again of the Holy Spirit. Who are brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. They've been set apart by God. They've been brought out of one darkness and brought into his light.

These are saints. Everyone who has experienced that work of the Holy Spirit of God is that saint. And the church is a gathering of saints. It's not just a gathering.

It's not just a gathering of people who come together on a Sunday. But it's a gathering of saints. They've actually received the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

And at the start of all the letters, almost all the letters. There is some sort of phraseology that Paul uses. So in Ephesians 1.1. To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus.

[11 : 56] The church is a place where there is a message. A holding out. A placarding.

A message of saving grace. Titus 3 verse 4. Titus 3 verse 4.

On page 1199. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.

He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior. That's just one of many Bible expressions of the rich gospel of Jesus Christ.

This gospel that saves simply by grace. Undeserved favor from God. We hold very strongly to this point. That we are not saved by the good things that we do.

[13 : 14] Because they can never be sufficient. And we must always be careful on this point. Because that's a natural inclination and thought of the proud heart that thinks that we can do something which is going to be sufficient to please God.

But the Bible record is absolutely clear on this point. That there will never be anything that will be sufficient in our lives to be pleasing to God in itself.

We're all under judgment because of our sin. We've all gone astray. And we need God's grace that that sin might be dealt with and we should be forgiven.

And if you're here today and you haven't yet experienced that, I'm just wanting to tell you that great story. That great good news. That there is a way in which your sin and shortcoming can be dealt with.

But it's only through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul and the other apostles was constantly battling in the New Testament times with groups of people gathering together as churches who were straying from that idea.

[14 : 28] But we have a message of saving grace. And it has to be constantly fought over. Constantly reaffirmed. That this is the way in which God gathers people together and takes them to be with him forever.

But we also have a message of changed lives. So in Titus 2 verse 12, the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.

It teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.

This is the inevitable outworking, the inevitable result of a true understanding of a gospel of grace that we are made of thankful people, responsive by obedient lives.

And all that we read earlier in Ephesians 4 about the behavior of God's people is an outflow of that, thank you God for what you have done for me.

[15 : 37] I just want to live for you and I want to live for your people. So the church of Jesus Christ doesn't just have a message of saving grace, but it also has a message of changed lives.

One very poignant point in the epistle to 1 Corinthians, Paul talks about people and the way they had been and he says, well, such were some of you, but you have been washed, you have been sanctified.

You're different. We were thinking last week about something of the difference that the gospel of Jesus Christ really does make in lives. And we hold very firmly to this idea as well.

Because again, this is an idea that the apostles had to fight very hard about in the New Testament age. This idea, well, once saved, I can live as I like.

That is completely out of court. You can't think like that. If you're thinking like that, you haven't understood the gospel. This is a gospel that must change us.

[16 : 48] We will become different people as a result of receiving the news of God's grace.

Foundations, you could add a few more, no doubt to that.

I want to go on to structure. And how important it is for us to remember that the church has a head. And the chief head and authority for the church of Jesus Christ is Jesus Christ himself. So Ephesians 1 and verses 22 and 23.

God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

It's a very common picture in the New Testament that Jesus Christ is the head and we are the body. We are not the head. The head speaks of authority.

[17 : 51] It speaks of intelligence. It speaks of guidance. It speaks of direction. These are the things which belong to the head and this belongs to Jesus Christ.

He is worthy of that conscious reverence and welcoming and respect. So you see in some houses, Christ is the unseen guest at the table.

But he's not just a guest at the table. He's actually in the place of authority. He's not just one of us. But he is actually the one who is to lead us.

Careful prayers need to be made, don't they? So that in church life, we constantly recognize the lordship of Jesus Christ. How thankful we are that we have one who is the head.

I'm really grateful that we're not having to look amongst ourselves for prime guidance because Jesus is the head and that puts us in a wonderful place.

[18 : 55] So the first thing we can do is come and acknowledge him and be still before him and to say, what do you want us to do? How do you want us to be? Identified belonging.

Various passages in the book of Acts there. We won't look at those. But simply to say that throughout the New Testament, there's a very clear picture of people who know one another, who are gathered together geographically, and they belong to one another.

Particularly struck by the book of Romans, in the last chapter of Romans, where a number of people are named, who are clearly sort of well known to the apostle. They're people who not only are known to him, but also are known to one another.

They're known on first name terms. Two weeks ago, Corinne was welcomed into membership here. We have a membership system. In other words, people who say, this is the people whom I am committed to.

Because you can't commit to everybody in this city. You have to commit to a group. And this is how it works. For us, we have a membership. And it's a way for us to have identified belonging.

[20 : 10] And great it is that others have made application for it. And I would ask you, if this isn't on your agenda, and you've been coming here for a while, and you consider this to be your church, that it's very important.

You should think about identifying your belonging to this people. Because that's both your responsibility and your privilege. The church structure needs qualified leaders.

I mean, qualified leaders. So, Ephesians 4, which we read, we see that it is God's gift to the church. Gifts to us.

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.

I'd say it's a fundamental for a biblical church to have qualified leadership. And it's a very difficult state for a church to be in if there isn't that qualified leadership in place.

[21 : 22] If there isn't the evidence that God has gifted a man and men to be the qualified leaders. Later on in Timothy and in Titus, there's a clear understanding that it isn't just a question of someone having some sort of gifting, sort of given by God, but they're also evident, that gifting is evident in their ability to do the preaching and the teaching.

And we as a church are going down the route of, or made the decision as a membership of looking for an assistant minister. And this is another development for us.

This is totally in line with what we're thinking about here as the structure of the church. It's very important for us that we don't ever be in a situation where there is not qualified leadership in place. It has all kinds of implications, not only from the point of view of teaching, but also of pastoral oversight. We have model serving. What a blessed thing it is that everybody serves in the church, but there is a specific role, the role of deacon, which is to be a model of such service.

So that people should be able to look at the deacons in the church and to see by the way they do things, their servant-heartedness and what an encouragement it is for us to see others and how we can be inspired by their example.

[22 : 54] The greatest example of all being Jesus Christ. He said to his disciples on the last night before he died, I've left you an example.

I've left you an example. Not just a lead, but an example as he washes their feet. And so in deaconing inside the church has work to be done, but it's also a modelling in the side of all of servant-heartedness.

And they recognise roles and on our church weekend away, Ben very helpfully led us in thoughts from Titus chapter 2, which talk about the different responsibilities that different seasons of life and life circumstance bring to us within the church.

So he speaks about, in Titus chapter 2, of older women and their relationship to younger women, younger women in relation to their husbands and children, young men and the relationship to older men, slaves to their masters, relational things, things that have to happen within the church.

And something for us to work on here, I'm quite sure. This is really beautiful in God's sight when the older women teach the younger women how to be good mothers and bringers up of children. It's very important for younger women to sort of seize the opportunity of talking to older women and learning from the wisdom of that.

[24 : 26] We live in days of completely flat culture where everybody has almost a sort of equal right to think anything they like because no one's more wise than anybody else. But that's completely counter to the Bible picture where it should be the way that those who have walked as Christians for a number of years are able to pass on the wisdom of those years to others.

It's very important that younger men are able to listen carefully to the older men and for the older men to take that responsibility. But they need to be given space to do that, don't they? They need to be given encouragement to do that.

So again, it's very counter-cultural this. The Bible is very counter-cultural. But it's beautiful. And this is really precious when this works in that way.

In practice, we meet for public worship. God's people have always met together in groups to worship God. The Old Testament times, New Testament times, that is absolutely the pattern that is made.

That's exactly what we're doing. We're completely in line with what God's people have always done to meet like this. So I've said it frequently from this place, but I say it again.

[25 : 41] The Bible knows nothing about you staying at home on a Sunday. There just isn't a place in the Bible understanding of that unless there's very good cause to be at home.

You need to be here. You need to be with God's people. This is exactly what God wants to do. He wants the gathering of his people so that he can address them as a people. You'll feel addressed as individuals, but actually, this message is also for a people.

sound teaching. I mentioned earlier about the importance of getting an understanding of the proportion of the way the Bible speaks about the church.

And I want to especially stress this point because it is so stressed in the Bible. Titus chapter 2, verse 2.

Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith. That implies to me that there is such a thing as being unsound in faith, being unclear.

[26 : 54] If you're an older person and you're not sound in your faith, then you won't have much to pass on to someone else. But we meet here regularly and we hear, and many of us have heard thousands of sermons.

So a greater responsibility lies upon us because we've received a lot of light over the years and we should be sound in our faith. 2 Timothy 2, 15.

Do your best, says Paul to the young elder. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

Well, what a great responsibility. And yet, Paul says, it is a responsibility. You have to do this. Elders have to do this and have to do it right as to the best of their ability.

I like that phrase when he says, do your best. We're not perfect, but we've got to do our best. And we have to do our best to correctly handle the word of truth because this is not simple and straightforward.

[28 : 11] There are things to be sorted in their proportion and to decide what is to be said and what is not to be said and the applications that need to be made from that.

This is all about sound teaching. This is what the early church gave themselves to in the book of Acts and chapter 2, verse 42.

There's a lovely picture of the balanced life of the early church. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship and to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

They devoted themselves. They really gave themselves over to it. That was a sort of big priority in their lives. They needed to be taught. They knew that and as they did that, they grew.

Sound teaching. Timothy, the letters to Timothy have strong warnings about the fact that there will constantly be attacks on sound teaching.

[29 : 12] Every generation has had it. We are no different. We will always be under threat in this area and God forbid but in church situations people will come in and will bring other sorts of teachings which are not in accordance with sound teaching.

That has to be dealt with. It has to be addressed. It can't be just sort of brushed under the carpet. It has to be attacked and dealt with and we have to say what is sound and what is not sound and to recognize the particular attacks of the day and deal with them.

That is primarily a task for the elders to address and it's a task for all the church members to ensure that that is being addressed. So I rather like that phrase in the membership promises which I can't remember exactly how it goes but it's something along the lines of will you commit yourself to make sure the elders do what they should be doing?

Something along those lines. Yeah, hold us to account because we need to have that and everybody needs to see it as their responsibility that there is sound teaching within the church.

Dependent prayer. Lovely it is to see the way quite naturally the early church recognized that when times of crisis and difficulty arose they got together and they prayed.

[30 : 39] Acts chapter 4 was a great example of that when Peter and John were hauled up before the Sanhedrin and all dark threatenings you know don't preach again can't do that and the church got together and filled with the Holy Spirit they make a prayer to God and they ask that they would be given boldness to speak the word and God blessed and heard that prayer.

Often it's been said you know the prayer meeting can be the poorly attended meeting of a church and that is a very sad thing if that occurs because that is completely against the biblical pattern of a church life and we need to ensure that this is a big issue for us that we pray and baptism and communion which we had earlier today and these things keep us straight they remind us of the gospel they give us clarity on this point we do have a baptism pool you may have never seen a baptism here and that's a sadness because we would love to see more people being baptised here but it's right underneath Anne's feet but you're quite safe there Anne so wouldn't it be great to see that pool open again fairly soon so that people can be baptised and then we have a culture we have our DNA what is culture culture is this is the way we do things round here and the church has a this is the way we do things round here culture to it loving always how many times should I forgive my

brother says Peter to Jesus seven times

Jesus says seventy times seven and sort of indicating by that there's absolutely no limit to the amount of forgiveness that should be floating around within church life and the love that we're it was the bedrock of our relationship together so Colossians three verse fourteen forgive us the Lord forgave you and over all these virtues put on love which binds them all together in perfect unity and a humble service Romans 12 talks about the importance of people not thinking themselves more highly than they ought to think but recognizing the gifts God has given them and just carrying on and doing the things which God has told them to do willing hospitality I think it's a really lovely point about this fellowship that there's been a tradition of hospitality over the years so that when people come in here and start to join the church they kind of naturally pick that up that's the way things are done if you start going to a church where there isn't any hospitality it can feel like you're kind of breaking a mould in some way to do something but this is absolutely fundamental it's actually in this sort of warp and woof of the New Testament churches they were just hospitable if you went into the church at

Colossae in Ephesus I'm pretty sure you'd be invited back to lunch they probably had the lunch on the premises but that was the way it was that's the way it should be and it's a beautiful thing hospitality it's at the heart of how God welcomes us he is hospitable to us and we should be towards one another 1 Peter 4 verse 9 offer hospitality to one another without grumbling that's a good point isn't it and I want you to notice this that the churches uniformly were people were groups of people who looked forward they did look forward what were they looking forward to well here's the challenging point they were looking forward to the return of Jesus Christ 2 Peter 3 verse 11 since everything will be destroyed in this way what kind of people ought you to be you ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming it's quite remarkable what a strong emphasis there is upon the expectancy that we should have about the return of Jesus

Christ and I wonder if we're a bit weak on that point maybe we should sing songs of greater expectation and pray prayers of greater anticipation looking forward and longing for the coming of Jesus Christ because we know that this world and us ourselves we will not be sorted in this world in this life it's only the return of Jesus Christ that will provide the complete resolution where righteousness will be exalted and sin will be thoroughly judged that's what I wanted to bring today those are some thoughts as I said earlier that's not everything you'll have your own list other things but what I would say is this if you've got particular things which you feel it's very important in the church to have that I just want you to test that carefully against what the word has to say and remember that thought that the word of God is given to us sufficiently there is sufficient from what we read in the

[36 : 14] Bible to be able to set things right to be obedient to follow him there's sufficient there and once those foundations are in place we can in dependence on the Holy Spirit look with confidence that he will be amongst us that he will guide us that he will hold us back he will do all the things that by his Holy Spirit he does because we are a spirit people we're spirit people based upon the spirit of