

The Church in her House

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Date: 27 January 2016

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[0 : 00] Well, for a short time, let's turn as we wait on the Lord to Colossians chapter 4, and some words you'll find in verse 15. Give greetings to the brothers at Laodicea and to Nympha and the church in her house.

Especially the last few words, the church in her house, although we're going to focus really on one word, the word church. There's a dispute here in translation between various translations because dispute really over whether Nympha is a female word, feminine word, or is it a male word.

So you'll find some translation saying the church in his house. Those that think it was a male person and others like here in this ESV translation have taken it.

This was a lady and a church in her house. But what is clear is that it was obviously an individual who had given hospitality or made provision for the church to meet in this house that belonged to him or to her.

And our interest really in it is to look at the way in which the word church is used and how it's referred to there as the church in her house. Slight apologies to some younger folks who were at the SU in the Nicholson today because it took not exactly what's here, but the basis of this for a short address to them.

[1 : 24] And it just kind of expanded from there. And as a matter of fact, it doesn't often happen to me, but much of what is in the content of the sermon tonight came to me at 5 o'clock in the morning.

It doesn't often happen, but when it happens, you know it's from the Lord and you know it's something that the Lord intends that you give. If he has laid it in that way, in the same very structured way, just as if it was just being poured into my mind, that means that the Lord has given you something not just for yourself, but to pass it on.

It's something that is there with the intention of hopefully instructing others through it. So I'm just sharing that with you. I don't often share these kind of thoughts with you, but I just thought it was appropriate.

And especially as it is something which some of the younger folks had heard a bit of it earlier on today. But I've expanded it and hopefully we can see something of the meaning of this word church.

And in fact, the Lord's used here as the church in her house. That nevertheless, what is contained in that word church is so important for us to understand it.

[2 : 29] And especially when you come across very different ideas of what the church is in today's world. Not just by people who are outside the church, but people who actually, according to themselves and who comprise the church or are part of what the church is.

And yet there are so many different ideas as to what the church should look like and what the church should be doing and what sort of things make up the church. Well, what is the church?

Well, you can see from this very reference itself in verse 15, the church in her house, that the church is not actually a building. A lot of people out there tonight would answer if you asked, do you know what the church is?

They would say, well, there's a few churches here. There's that big building in Garibas. There's one up the road. These are the churches that we're used to. But the church, of course, in the Bible is not a building. In fact, if you look at history, it's clear that the church did not begin, the people of God, the worshipping people of God in the New Testament, from the time of the apostles onwards, they did not really have specific church buildings built for services until about the third century.

So a long time elapsed from the days of the apostles until the specific church buildings such as this one were built in order to meet together.

[3 : 54] Until then, they met in places like this person's home, which is why it refers there to the church in her house. That's where they met. That's where believing people met.

That's where the worship of God as a congregational worship was actually situated. You could find other places in the Bible in the New Testament as evidence of that.

It appears, for example, when Lydia was converted in Act 16, that as she invited people to her house, that that very likely was the very first place in Philippi where the church could meet, where they would have a specific building house as it was in order for them to meet there together.

So it's not actually a building. It's not a church building, a temple. It's not a building like this. We say, yes, we're meeting in the church rather than in the hall.

But the church is not itself a building. Neither is a church simply a denomination. Alistair prayed earlier for churches.

[5 : 01] He prayed across denominations that God would bless the work of the gospel. We cannot think of the church as a denomination exclusively. There are denominations that belong to the church, but the church is not a denomination or to be defined as a denomination.

We all belong to the Free Church of Scotland. That's a denomination. It has that particular name to distinguish it from other denominations. But it is not the church in itself.

It is a part of the church. It is a branch, if you like, of the church. But it is not the church you could never say, and we should never say whatever denomination we belong to, we should always have a hostility to saying, we are the true church.

Because the true church of God, if you use the word true, or the church of God is spread across all denominations and all kinds of backgrounds of people and all kinds of ways in which people actually engage with their own culture and their own society in the gospel and with the gospel of Christ.

So the church is not buildings, nor is it in fact a denomination. It's spread across all denominations that worship God in truth.

[6 : 26] So the church in fact is, as you very well know, in a way a body of people. You are the church tonight here in this locality, which is why you find the apostles so often, as for example there in Thessalonians, the next letter, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And you find elsewhere that he'll say, to the church in such and such a place. In other words, he's saying, the church is a body of people. They are a body of people who are engaged in specific activities, who believe certain things, and particularly in relation to God and to Christ and to salvation.

And they meet in certain localities, and they are found in a certain place. So you could say that this is the church. You are the church tonight, although you all belong to different parts of Point.

But you could say this is the church in Point, just as other denominations, congregations of other denominations in Point also could be said they are the church in Point.

But we are all, in that sense, the church of Christ. Now I know that that means a lot of definitions usually then follow us to, well, you say it's a body of people, but how do you distinguish who are the church and who are not?

[7 : 46] Or is there such a thing as the true church in the wider context of the church or not? Well, it's helpful if you go to the way that the acts of Westminster Confession of Faith and these men who drew up these great definitions of doctrine, including the doctrine of the church.

And what they did was make a very important and useful distinction, though you don't take it too far. And first of all, they're defining the church as the elect of God.

The elect of God, invisible in that sense and invisible in the sense of known only to God alone as to who they are. We know that God has his elect people that he has elected from all eternity.

And in fact, in that sense of it, in terms of God knowing who his people are, who the saved people of God are, that is something that you might call the invisible church, which is not exactly maybe the best term, but that's how it's traditionally been referred to, so that they are the elect of God.

And this is how the Confession of Faith puts it, chapter 25 and paragraph 1, the Catholic or universal church. Now there, the word Catholic has a small c, so when you come across it like that in the East Old Text, it does not mean the Roman Catholic Church.

[9 : 10] That's a capital C, that particular denomination. Catholic means universal or spread abroad throughout the world. Catholic in that broad sense.

The Catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ the head thereof.

And is his, and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all. That's the first part of it. Now, the second part of the definition is wider than that.

You can say that the church, and indeed that's how the Bible generally speaks about the church, and how Paul, in writing to the church at Corinth or whatever it was, had in mind that visible body of people, leaving aside the issue of the elect and God's knowledge of them, they are that visible body of people that worship God, that confess to be Christ's.

And the confession puts it this way, the visible church, which is also Catholic or universal under the gospel, not confined to one nation as before under the law, consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion together with their children.

[10 : 31] And is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation. In other words, it's saying, that visible church, that body that you see of those who profess to be believers, they are the church in that visible sense.

That's what we are here tonight. We are the church. We profess to be God's people. We profess to be Christ's. We profess the true religion, as the confession puts it, in distinction from other religions.

You could not say that other religions actually are the church. In other words, whatever name other bodies give to their own history or to their composition.

For example, the Mormons actually go by the name officially as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It's a bit of a mouthful, but you notice how they actually use the word church.

And actually, a lot of people that I've come across think that they really are part of the church, that they're a different branch of the church. And just because they've got some stuff from the Bible mixed in with their own ideas, their own teachings, that have come through the Book of Mormon, which they use, does not make them Christian.

[11 : 58] It does not mean that just because they use the word church in their title, that they have a right to be regarded as people who worship the true religion, who worship God and profess, rather, the true religion.

And whatever groups you have like that, one of the things that is obviously important is when they do profess the true religion, what is it they believe?

And you cannot take the likes of the Mormon, whatever bits of truth there are mixed in with what they believe, you cannot possibly say, as you look at their teachings and look at what they believe, that these are actually a Christian body.

So you all have to be very careful as to whether we accept at face value what people say that we are the church, we're part of the church, though we believe very different things to you people in the free church.

They profess the true religion. That's the visible church. Now, Paul uses two words very frequently of people who make up that visible church, saints, and also believers.

[13 : 13] And our confession uses the word believers as well. Now, we've not got time obviously tonight to go into a definition of what a believer is. But remember, confession carefully states that they profess the true religion.

In other words, they have a belief in and they confess a belief in God, the God of the Bible, in Jesus Christ as the Savior. And that's really the confession of the true religion.

It's a different thing or an additional thing to then come and take communion, for example, where you associate a particular kind of confession with that.

To actually belong to the Christian church means you confess or profess the true religion. And it says that, as the confession put it, the confession of faith, is that it constitutes these people and their children.

So that, in terms of the visible church, believers or saints. They're saints because it's a word that really means to be called. It's something from being called by God through the gospel.

[14 : 26] And the word believers, of course, is something that, again, comes to what people confess to be. Now, it's only God at the end of the day that knows whether that confession is, in fact, genuine, true, or not.

It's impossible, even, for the best kirk session in the world, who are examining people as to what they confess and whether that confession will stand in the light of their life's behavior or whatever.

It's impossible for any fallible group of men or women, indeed, to actually say that is 100% sure that that person is converted, regenerate, or a Christian.

Only God knows that. And yet, we are responsible, as we'll see in a minute, in terms of discipline to make sure that order and structure and truth is maintained in the church and in the profession that people make.

So there you are. What is the church? It's not a building. It's not seen in terms of a denomination. It is very much a body of people, a body of people who are visible as worshipers of God, as confessing the true religion, a body of people that meet regularly together to worship God and have that confession.

[15 : 48] And that really constitutes the church visible. That's been very brief, but the church in her house. That's who they were. This body of people, they confessed to belong to God, to have their faith in Christ, to accept Christ and all that is in Christ, and therefore they met to worship this God and to confess that they were his people.

They met in her house. But secondly, what does belonging to the church really involve? And this will involve, this means, in part it means what are our responsibilities, what are our privileges?

Why is it important to belong to the church? Four things. First of all, public worship.

Public worship is such an important element throughout Scripture. All the way through the Old Testament and into the New Testament and right through to the end of the New Testament.

The primary emphasis is not on individual worship. The primary emphasis is on the gathered people of God worshipping together. Of course there's individual worship, as we know very well, and we engage in that individual worship.

[17 : 10] We read our Bible, we pray to God individually, secretly, by ourselves. But the emphasis in the Bible is overwhelming, not on individual worship, but on corporate worship.

Worship together. Worship of a people together. Which is why it is so important, as indeed not so long ago we came across a verse there in Hebrews where it talks about not neglecting the assembling of ourselves together as the custom of some is.

It's something that actually detracts from the importance of public worship, of the gathered people of God. You look at the Old Testament and just go to Israel as one example.

Where do you find anywhere in that history of Israel God speaking to Israel telling them, you know, it's okay if you just don't come very often to worship in my festivals or in these famous occasions or generally daily that you engage in worship through the priesthood by offering your offerings to me.

God doesn't say that. God never suggests anywhere that we can actually just simply think of absenting ourselves from worship and that doesn't really matter all that much.

[18 : 28] We can catch up or whatever argument the devil or temptation as we heard in prayer can place in our ear. Here is God's emphasis that people that he has saved are actually a people with a desire to worship him and not just to worship him together but to worship him not just to worship him individually but worship him together.

And we mentioned also more than once I'm sure in the past that there's an important witnessing element to that. People will know tonight that there are a group of believers in this hall meeting together as part of the church of God.

It's unavoidable. Of course some people don't give it much thought but it's virtually impossible to pass by this hall or to bypass this building on the Lord's day and see the car park with cars in it and then other times as well whether it's 6 in the morning for the early morning prayer meeting or not people will notice that and it's part of our responsibility to witness to God to witness by public worship.

We don't just come simply to consume spiritual food and to share together as we'll see in a minute. We come because there is a public dimension to what we're doing and that dimension is giving witness and testimony to our God that our God is that he lives that he is worthy of our worship that he's worthy to be served and incidentally that word serve is so intimately connected with worship isn't it?

It's something that Jesus mentioned when he rebuffed the devil who had come with this horrendous suggestion that he would give him all the kingdoms of the world which of course were then to an extent under the darkness controlled by the devil before the gospel went out as a light into that dark world all this I will give you and the glory if you will fall down and worship me and he said get behind me Satan it is written you shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve there's something else these two great strands in the Bible of teaching but also of our practice you cannot actually separate them and pull them apart worship and service serving the Lord is not possible without tying it with worship worshipping the Lord is not possible really without taking along with it the serving that Christ mentioned and included we are not just worshippers of God we are serving God even in the act of worship you are serving him and when you go out to serve him in a more practical fashion you are doing it worshipfully you are doing it to give him honour you are doing it conscious that the praise belongs to him the two things go together public worship then is the first thing why belonging to the church is important why we should see it as a huge huge privilege that God has brought us to belong to his church in the world secondly fellowship fellowship is a word perhaps we nowadays really confine it pretty much to informal gatherings and we'll say there's going to be a fellowship after the services in the hall there will be an informal fellowship and maybe we've come to really regard the word fellowship as particularly something which means that sort of thing but actually in the New Testament fellowship is that sense of fellowship really is only secondary because fellowship the word fellowship itself the word from which it's translated fellowship really is a word that means sharing or sharing together in something it actually has a profound central core to it or basis to it because it means you have fellowship with Christ

[22 : 39] God has called you as Paul said to the Romans into the fellowship of his son Jesus Christ in other words your fellowship really begins and is rooted in and grows from your union with Christ and fellowship begins there as a definition what is fellowship it's sharing in the life that's in Christ it's sharing in all that you have in salvation as it's deposited in Christ the saviour you have fellowship with him you're joined to him you partake as in other words as often used you partake of that life and that's fellowship but of course it extends because fellowship as a sharing essentially is two dimensional you share with with other believers in this Christ and this God in communion with him and in union with Christ but there's the horizontal dimension to fellowship as well because sharing isn't just an upwards sharing where we share things together with in God sharing is sharing together in that direction too sharing together as a body of people fellowship means that we actually share in the gospel that we share in this life that we have in Christ that we share in loving one another that we share in experiences that we have gained and want to pass on to others that we share in social concern and in practical works fellowship has all of that to it as well as informal meeting together sometimes just to have what you might call an informal conversation or a time over a cup of tea and with something else added that's fellowship but it's not by any means the main part of fellowship or where it begins but fellowship in that profound sense of it as well as in all that practical dimension of it that's why it's important to belong to the church because that's where fellowship is properly located thirdly there's discipline it's a benefit but it's important as part of what belonging to the church means and the reformers for example made discipline one of the main marks of the church as they called it but what is discipline of course that's itself something that would need a lot more time to define all the detail of it but perhaps again just like fellowship we confine it to a certain thing maybe with discipline the first thing we think of is where somebody has stepped out of line and they need to be dealt with and that's discipline and you apply discipline and of course that is discipline that's an element of discipline but again it's not really the main idea in the word discipline or the main meaning of it what it means really because it's related to the word disciple it really means spiritual care a spiritual care that will at times take in such things as discipline in the sense of having to apply certain restrictions or penalties or whatever as God has given to his church through the leaders of the church to impose that's the kind of thing that occasionally needs to happen and that's again decided to recover people back to the fellowship and to the gospel and to a proper relation with God and with his people but discipline really means the spiritual care that every believer is part of as they belong to this fellowship this is where it goes together with the idea of fellowship the spiritual caring that belongs to this body of people that are the church of

God now of course God has given to his church a certain order he's given certain principles of conduct and of behavior as to how we do things how we go about things how we conduct ourselves together and in public and all that sort of stuff and that order as well as the order that you have to services of worship for example where decency and order and peace and so on these are all things for which we're instructed in the Bible and discipline means that you actually have a care to maintain the truth of God and the order that God has given to us in his church as well as personal conduct and carrying out certain things to do with examination and so on when you find a body of people saying that they are the church or they belong to the church but don't really care for discipline for example if somebody really in any church in any denomination were to start oh God forbid supposing I turned up tonight and said I no longer believe in the resurrection of

Christ on the dead I no longer believe in that there are three persons in the trinity I no longer believe that somebody has to be regenerate and come to place faith in Christ in order to be saved I've come to the conclusion that that's what I have to believe in and that's what I'm going to preach to you and I'm going to keep preaching that if the church doesn't deal with that person in a way that disciplines in a way that says look you can't believe that and belong to the Christian church that is founded on the scriptures on the truth of God then I've got a choice I've got to stick with what I believe but I can't belong to that church anymore and if I don't have a church that has that discipline it's lost one of its primary marks because God's concern is a concern for his truth and for his honor and for his glory and his glory is not served by a looseness in regard to things like discipline discipline but discipline just let me say it again discipline is really something that has to do with spiritual care and that is for example in

Romans you have one verse there which near the end of the epistle to Romans chapter 15 and verse 14 where Paul says there just as he's beginning to reach the end of his address to the Romans I myself am satisfied about you my brothers that you yourselves are full of goodness filled with all knowledge and able to admonish one another the word here is instruct in the ESV but I think a better word would be as in the older verses admonish it means both teaching but also where necessary giving rebuke or warning or just dealing more strictly with people if they've gone offline if they need to be recovered again now he's saying that I am persuaded of you all my brothers he means women as well of course in other words he's not saying that the whole issue of discipline or spiritual care for the body of people that form the church lies with ministers and elders that's it he's saying

I'm persuaded that you my brothers you people you Christians in Rome that you are filled with this goodness and with this knowledge that God has given you that make you able to admonish one another to look after one another's needs spiritually discipline public worship fellowship discipline and one thing finally and it shouldn't be something we really rush through but it is the issue of mission mission is such an important element in the church's life mission of course the word mission itself is rooted in the idea of sending or being sent that goes back to Jesus sending out the disciples in other words we are sent by God we're not just individuals and people together who come to worship him who have a fellowship together and with God who have a discipline and spiritual care we are here to actually also go for the Lord as he sends us into the world with the gospel and with witness and testimony to him as our savior and you could say that mission has has two strands to it there's the evangelistic strand which really is the emphasis on making disciples as Jesus put it to in the end of

[31 : 34] Matthew's gospels go and make disciples God alone can convert people but our requirement is to go and make disciples do things in a way that will see God at work do our part and leave the converting part to God but that's how Jesus put it go and make disciples proclaim Christ as Lord proclaim him as risen proclaim him as exalted proclaim him as the one who's calling people to repentance and to place their trust in him that's witness that's evangelism that's at the essence of mission at the at the very heart of mission the other strand of it is the diaconal the more practical one and of course diaconal comes from the same root as deacon but diaconal diaconal mission is not something again confined to the deacons or to office bearers and what the bible means by by that is that the practical compassionate works of mercy that God's people engage in as a means by which they serve him as part of their serving so they're giving out as much as they're taking in of spiritual food advice teaching practical care the church in her house it's amazing what's packed into that little phrase into that word church this body of people this body of people that have to do with public worship of God that are themselves a fellowship and have fellowship together that have a discipline by which they seek to maintain the structure the order the harmony that God has given to them and by which they go out from that little house and engage in mission in terms of evangelism and diaconal ministry that's very briefly an account of church and what it means to belong to the church and we should not have many things above belonging to the church on our list of things for which we are thankful to God let's pray gracious

Lord we thank you that your word describes the church as a mother to your people and we thank you Lord for all that that includes in terms of care of compassion in terms of being concerned to be nurtured in the things of your truth and we pray Lord as we belong to your church in the world that it may constantly and continuously be for us a great privilege in our own estimation that you have brought us into your church that you have brought us up within your church that you are bringing us on to maturity through belonging to your church and through all the benefits that you have given to your church to that end that they might serve the maturing and growth of your people Lord make us increasingly thankful then that we are amongst that people who are named by your name and to whom you have given so many promises and with whom you deal each day in your grace accept our praise we pray and hear our prayers for Jesus sake

Amen