

# Taking It Seriously - Elements of Church

REVIEW: We are in week three of a series that is kind of an extension of our previous series from the book of Ephesians. Ephesians really concentrated on how God brought Jews and Gentiles together in one church. The common faith we have, the same Lord, the same Spirit, the same Father of all. Then Ephesians turned its attention on how we are to be treating one another as fellow believers. In short, Ephesians turns into a roadmap of sorts of what the church is to be like.

So our current series is extending that theme a bit on some practical matters of what the church should be like. The first week we looked at why we come to church at all? What is the point? Why do we dedicate ourselves to taking our Sunday mornings to be here at all? Last week we looked at baptism and membership in church.

INTRO: This morning, having covered the fact that we should belong to a church, it leaves open the question, "What kind of church should I belong to?" What are the important elements in a church that I should be looking for? So for example: if you were to move from this community to another state, there is no chance that you will be making it back here for Sunday morning worship, what kind of church should you be seeking out to join in your new community.

- I. Reasons to go over this kind of information
  - A. Obviously we hope that you will not have to be leaving the community any time soon
    1. But we do understand that life happens
    2. Your job may change and carry you away to another place, so you really should know what are some of the essential elements to be looking for in a church
  - B. Let me give you another reason why understanding this is so important
    1. Regardless who the pastor of this church is (that includes me) these elements should be present in this church as well
    2. That means, if I should ever stray and take this church away from this basic standards that we are about to go over
      - a) First, confront me and find out what or why I am doing what I am doing
      - b) Second, if I don't repent, fire my sorry self
      - c) The church is far bigger than the pastor, and the pastor has certain checks and balances that he should be meeting before God
        - (1) If I fail in those, the first step is confrontation, with a view toward restoration
        - (2) If that fails, the church must protect itself biblically and theologically - so that may mean the pastor has to leave

# Taking It Seriously - Elements of Church

3. Along these same lines, if I were ever to leave this church, the next man you would be seeking to fill the pastoral role had better meet these basic standards
    - a) If he doesn't, don't hire him
    - b) I'll give you an example
      - (1) Years ago after Pastor Larry left, I was sitting on the committee to search for a pastor
      - (2) One candidate, and I couldn't give you a name if I wanted to, but when asked about his doctrine and what he believed, he told us that he subscribes to the Apostle's Creed
        - (a) That is not a bad thing at all
        - (b) But it leaves a lot of latitude in some pretty important areas
      - (3) And that he boils it all down to St. Augustine's statement, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."
        - (a) Needless to say, that guy scared me
        - (b) And I think he scared several other committee members too
    - c) If we every bring new people on staff, to take my place, or as a new and expanding staff, these things we cover today should be basic
  - C. So this brings us to the big question of the day: What are essential elements to look for in a church?
- II. The essential elements for any church
- A. Sadly, when most people think about the elements or the things that want to find in a church, these are some of the responses you typically hear
    1. We are looking for a church with a strong program for children
    2. We are looking for a church that is friendly
    3. We are looking for a church with a good youth ministry
    4. We want a big church
    5. We want a small church
  - B. Rarely do you hear the response, "I am looking for a church that will feed myself and my family well from God's Word."
    1. And that would be the first essential thing to look for is good doctrine and teaching from a church
    2. Obviously that will start with the preacher
      - a) Now, sadly, there are a lot of people today that prefer alternate means of communication on a Sunday morning
        - (1) Lots of movie clips
        - (2) Dramas
        - (3) Dancing
        - (4) Artsy type of things

# Taking It Seriously - Elements of Church

- b) What happens when these become the focal point is the Word of God gets slowly squeezed out of what is communicated
- c) Don't get me wrong, I am not against any of those forms of things for communication, or for illustration
  - (1) It is when the illustrations get to be the focal point that I become concerned
  - (2) God's Word is always the focal point
- 3. In fact, let's make sure we do understand some of the finer doctrine on this
  - a) There are some branches of Christendom that hold that what is authoritative is the Bible AND the church
    - (1) This plays out in two ways and has some problems associated with it
      - (a) First, it sets the pastors, priests, bishops, etc. up as equal with God's Word
        - i) One problem with that immediately is the fact that Paul differentiated between when he was speaking on behalf of God and when he was stating his own opinion
        - ii) Practically speaking, when you put someone into a position of absolute power - where their word is God's word - absolute power corrupts absolutely
        - iii) Further, we believe the canon of revelation from God closed with the writing of the book of Revelation (circa 95 AD)
          - (1) So no more revelation in the sense of "this is God's Word to us" is coming
      - (b) The other way this plays out is that these branches of Christendom believe that their teaching is necessary for you to understand and live the Christian life
        - i) That led to some disastrous consequences in the past
        - ii) People not encouraged or allowed to read the Bible for fear that they might mess up the understanding
        - iii) So in some circles it led to an authoritarianism in the church
    - (2) A practical problem with this idea is how the church got its authority
      - (a) The church does have authority - no doubt
      - (b) The authority they have was granted by God's Word
      - (c) Seems to me that if God's Word granted that authority, God's Word continues to hold greater authority than the church

# Taking It Seriously - Elements of Church

- i) For the church to think that they have as great or greater authority brings to mind a different story in the Bible
    - ii) What did the “son of the morning” say in Isaiah 14 - I will make myself like the Most High”
    - iii) Dangerous when we think we can have equal authority or greater authority than God - or His Word
  - (3) There is more to this argument that we do not have time for - but for now this should suffice
- 4. So, back to this idea that it begins with the preacher
  - a) God’s Word should always be the focal authority of a sermon
    - (1) The preacher’s authority comes from the Word of God
    - (2) This is why you will hear me say many times that these things are from the Bible - you can argue with me, but do so on biblical grounds, it is the place where the buck stops
    - (3) This is why you will hear me say that when I am just throwing in my opinion, or that a particular passage is debated and there are different interpretations, I make it clear that I will teach the passage as I believe it (cause I can’t do anything else)
    - (4) This is also why I believe in expository preaching
      - (a) Expository simply means to explain
      - (b) But it also limits the scope
      - (c) If you have ever noticed, I do not do lots of topical preaching
        - i) And even when I do, I usually have you go to a primary text to explain the topic
    - (5) The other part to the type of preaching is exegetical
      - (a) It is a fancy word that simply means to take out of
        - i) In other words, I take the meaning out of the passage of the Bible
      - (b) The opposite is isogetical
        - i) Reading into the Bible something that is not present in the text
  - b) So one of the absolute essentials for any church, whether you have moved and are looking for a new church, you are a visitor here and you are trying to understand what church is about, or figure out where this church stands, the sermon begins and ends with God’s Word
    - (1) With taking the meaning out of God’s Word as God stated it for us
    - (2) With explaining what it means as you walk through a passage or topic

# Taking It Seriously - Elements of Church

5. If these things are being observed by the preacher, the chances of the church having the correct doctrine on the essential things is very high
    - a) If they fill the sermon with illustrative material
    - b) If they stick in the Bible as an after thought in many sermons, you need to be wary
  6. If the preacher is careful about how he handles the Word of God, you can rest assured that the teaching in the rest of the ministries will also be quality as well
  7. Before we leave this topic, let me say that my hope is that you do crave straight talk from God's Word
    - a) Turn to Hebrews 5:12-13
    - b) This is what we need to be - craving the meat of God's Word
    - c) We should be growing beyond just the basics and the milk of the Word, and sustain ourselves on the meat
- C. Which brings up a second thing to make sure is in place in any church - the church doctrine
1. Now, we cannot spend a lot of time on this area in one sermon - just not possible
  2. There are what we would call primary doctrines, or essential, and then there are secondary - or non-essential
    - a) Primary doctrines are the ones that we better get right, or we do damage to the character of God, and/or lead people toward hell and not heaven
      - (1) God's Word - it is His Word - it does not contain His Word
      - (2) Things like the person and work of Christ
      - (3) The character of who God is
      - (4) The nature of man - man was created to be like God, but we sinned and we are now incapable of pleasing God, or seeking God
      - (5) Salvation - that it is by grace, through faith in Christ alone
        - (a) No adding works to it
        - (b) Works prove that you really have salvation
      - (6) These and others are the type of things that really have far reaching effects, and so a church better have these right
    - b) Secondary doctrines or non-essential ones are things like
      - (1) How do you perform baptism
      - (2) Is speaking in tongues for today
      - (3) Christian liberty issues
        - (a) What God forbids, He never allows
        - (b) And what God allows, He never forbids

# Taking It Seriously - Elements of Church

- (c) So don't say drinking is sinful because God never said drinking was sinful - getting drunk, yes
- (4) Views on the end times - important, sure - essential, rarely
- 3. It is so important that we understand what we believe about various things, and which are essential and which we should be flexible on
- 4. Were we to go into another church, even if we are just visiting, we need to know if we are on the same page in the essentials
- 5. Turn to 2 Timothy 4:3-4
  - a) The time is coming quickly that people just want to hear what they want to hear
  - b) We have sadly even had some people over the years from this church leave because they wanted to hear what they wanted to hear
- D. A third essential element to church
  - 1. There is the preaching and teaching is biblically based, doctrine is solid, and then there is worship
  - 2. "YES! Finally, Pastor is going to set people straight on how worship should be!"
    - a) You ever notice that for most people, how worship should be is usually how they think it should be
    - b) It is based on their preferences and tastes
      - (1) I have had people tell me that these younger generations just need to learn to appreciate church music
      - (2) No need for all that other new stuff -
    - c) Ever notice how, when it comes to worship we ditch our own theology and become hypocritical?
      - (1) Psalm 149:1 "Praise the Lord. Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of his faithful people."
      - (2) People are all excited about praising the Lord until someone takes that phrase literally - "sing to the Lord a new song"
      - (3) And it doesn't matter if that song was just written or is 200 years old, if we don't know it, somehow it disrupts our ability to worship
  - 3. Well, sorry to disappoint anyone, but this is not where the Pastor is going to set those people straight about what is the best form of worship
  - 4. In bringing up the concept of worship there are a couple of things I want to make sure we address
    - a) First being the fact that worship should be centered on God
      - (1) That seems like a no-brainer but it is shocking how quickly it can become something else

# Taking It Seriously - Elements of Church

- (a) Worship of the person singing - we would never say that of course
  - (b) Worship of our style of worship - "Oh, they picked all the "right" songs today. I finally felt like I was worshipping."
  - (2) Even beyond the distractions of worship, are the songs themselves
    - (a) I love many of the modern worship songs that have been coming out for the last ten years or so
      - i) But I will be the first to tell you that there are many of them that are horrible
      - ii) Some because the music is difficult to follow or sing
      - iii) But some because the lyrics are horrific
        - (1) Some are too trite
        - (2) Some aren't even biblical
        - (3) Some don't really worship God, they are songs about what we will do for God
        - (4) Worship is not about us, it is about Him, and this is one of many ways we have made it about us
    - (b) I also love many old hymns
      - i) There are some of those that are hard to sing
      - ii) There are some of those that are not biblical
  - b) If worship is about God, than the songs should be a genuine reflection of the heart of Scripture
  - c) But beyond the singing, the whole service should be worship to God
5. Most people do not think of some parts of the service as worship
- a) In fact, some people think that they can worship better on their own than in church - largely because they don't see everything as worship
  - b) Many can see the singing as worship - the concept being that your heart is overflowing with emotion toward your Savior, and it comes out in song
  - c) Many can see the offering as worship - we are giving a part of our finances to further God's kingdom work on earth
  - d) Prayer - understandable
  - e) The part many struggle with is the sermon
    - (1) Normally we think of worship as something WE do, and the sermon is something the preacher does
    - (2) However, listening to the preaching IS something you do - so it is an act of worship when you listen with an engaged and attentive mind and responsive heart
  - f) And that is what it largely boils down to

# Taking It Seriously - Elements of Church

- (1) When people feel like they can worship in private better than at church, it is usually because private worship requires you to take the initiative
  - (a) When you are reading your Bible, you have to engage with the words
  - (b) When you are jamming in your car to the worship tunes, you are actively participating
  - (c) When you pray, your emotions are involved, your mind is engaged
- (2) Here is a tip for you in worship - you need to take the same initiative in public worship as you do in private worship if you expect to recognize the presence of God
6. This third essential element of worship is vital for your spiritual life
  - a) If the church you are considering is worshipping someone other than God, it is not the church for you
  - b) If the people of the church do not engage in each part of the service as worship, you may have some choices to make
  - c) Because you want to be in a faith community that is actively seeking God to the point where you can see that through every bit of the worship service

## III. What about some of the other things about churches?

- A. Other elements of a church that are important
  1. Is it focused on keeping people in the church - inreach
  2. Or is it focused on drawing new people in - outreach
  3. Is it evangelistic in nature?
  4. The point is that there are other things that are important in what makes a church a church
- B. What is secondary - what should not lead off your list for essentials for a church
  1. Do they have this ministry or that?
  2. What style of music do they use for worship
  3. Do they have a softball team
  4. Do they have comfortable seats in the sanctuary
  5. Do they have a strong budget
  6. All of these may be questions to ask, but they should never take the front seat ahead of the biblical preaching, sound doctrine, and genuine worship of God
- C. I'll tell you my story to close
  1. I have been at this church for 12 years now
  2. This church was not high on my list to start

# Taking It Seriously - Elements of Church

- a) I remember thinking when I read the name of the church from the list I was sent by the alumni association at Moody Bible Institute, "I'm not real hopeful here. Congregational churches tend to be liberal, but I can always say "no" if I find out I don't like their doctrine."
  - b) When I got called for an interview, I let the process unfold for the first interview
  - c) When I got called to come visit, I questioned Pastor Larry hard on what the beliefs of the church were - what is the doctrinal statement, how closely do they stick to it, what about social issues, etc.
  - d) It wasn't until I was satisfied with the answers about what the church believed that I began to invest myself in the other questions and intangibles of taking a ministry position here
3. I tell you this to point out that the most important thing to look at, the thing you look at first about a church is what it believes
- a) Then, and only then do you consider all the other questions you might have
  - b) And by the way, that doesn't mean you have to grill a church before you sit through a sermon on a Sunday
  - c) It means that if you hear or see something off base, perhaps you don't visit again
  - d) When it comes time to join a church - visit, listen, take in
    - (1) We just had a couple join here at this church that did just that
    - (2) They came for a number of months, listening, observing
    - (3) When they were ready to join, they came with more and deeper questions
    - (4) That is how you select a church
4. The essentials first, then the secondary questions later on