

THE IMPORTANCE OF A SOUND ECCLESIOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

- The greatest need of the church today to understand its role in God's economy and to function as a healthy body in order to fulfill that role
- An unhealthy church is unable to fulfill its God-given design....such a church will not contribute to what matters for eternity
- For example, an unhealthy church is a poor witness which undermines its own evangelistic efforts
- Unfortunately, the church in America is largely unhealthy...something that is clearly seen in the fact that, in many cases, it simply reflects the world....Many causes have been suggested for this

Various cultural conditions that infest the church have been noted. Carl Braaten has expressed his alarm over the entry into the churches of a subjective, ahistorical neopaganism. Os Guinness, in his provocative little book *Dining with the Devil*, has suggested the problem is secularization. Guinness writes that even theologically conservative churches that self-consciously oppose secularism are nevertheless themselves often unwitting bastions of a secularized version of Christianity, and that, "The two most easily recognizable hallmarks of secularization in America are the exultation of numbers and of technique...The purpose of too many evangelical churches has fallen from one of glorifying God simply to growing large, assuming that that goal, however achieved, must glorify God.

Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 24-25.

- What are some examples of the fact that the church today has lost its way?
 - Pragmatism – the desire to draw a crowd through all means necessary and an emphasis on church growth; a market-driven church philosophy
 - Abandonment of objective truth in favor of subjectivism and mysticism – this involves a disdain for rational understanding and a desire for truth that comes through the feelings, the imagination, personal visions, inner voices, private illumination, etc.
 - Neo-liberalism – the emergent church
- We must remember that the truth about God is most correctly known through the church...a healthy church

REASONS A SOUND ECCLESIOLOGY IS IMPORTANT

The Church is Designed by God

Colossians 1:25-27 ~ Of *this church* I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the *preaching of* the word of God, *that is*, the mystery which has been hidden from the *past* ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

- If we are going to understand how the church is to function best, we must consider God's plans and purposes for it
- Since God is the author and creator of the church, He determines the purposes and priorities of the church

The Church is Central to God's Purposes in this Age

Matthew 16:18 ~ I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

Matthew 28:19-20 ~ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

- These promises and commands of Christ were fulfilled in the book of Acts as the apostles not simply won people to Christ, but assembled them together into church

Acts 14:21-23 ~ After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and *saying*, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

- The church is the primary means by which God intends to work in this age
- It is through the church that the Word of God is taught
- It is through the church that believers are shepherded
- It is through the church that saints families are ministered to
- The church is the primary vehicle God uses to accomplish His purposes on earth
- What about parachurch organization? → although they may do some good work for the kingdom, they don't have the same commitments the church does
- They don't have the same commitment to be proclaiming the whole counsel of God
- They don't have the mechanisms of baptism, the Lord's supper, and church discipline for drawing a sharp distinction regarding who the people of God are
- A huge distinction exists between the church and the parachurch – the parachurch meets specific needs...the church is for all believers!

Christ Died for the Church

Acts 20:28 ~ Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

Ephesians 5:24-27 ~ But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives *ought to be* to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.

Titus 2:14 ~ Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds

- The church is so precious to Christ that He gave His life for it
- He is even more concerned and interested in the church than we are because He sacrificed Himself to purchase it
- Thus, a sound ecclesiology is essential for having a right view and proper affection for Christ Himself

Christ is Head of the Church

Colossians 1:18 ~ He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

Ephesians 1:22-23 ~ And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

- Understanding that Christ is head of the church ensures that we look to Him for cues on how to shepherd His body
- Failing to understand this leads to attempts to “do” church apart from Christ’s headship

Much More is at Stake in the Church Than We Realize

Ephesians 3:8-10 ~ To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.

- The “manifold wisdom of God” is what is declared through the church to the angelic realm
- The entire realm of spiritual beings see the glory of God in the salvation of individuals and the preservation of the church

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF HAVING A SOUND ECCLESIOLOGY

Implications for Church Leadership

- Pastors must help their people to grow and this takes place only when they are fed the Word of God well
- Pastors must guard the flock and must ensure that true believers are being baptized, becoming members, partaking of the Lord’s support
- Pastors will give account for how they lead the church

Hebrews 13:17 ~ Obey your leaders and submit *to them*, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

Implications for Church Membership

- The demands of the Gospel must be made known and be made concrete in the local church to guard against false conversion and nominal Christianity
- Being a member of a local church should be the normal expectation such that believers are not only committing themselves to that church and its leaders but also to each other
- When a clearly identifiable church membership exists, leaders know who they are accountable for leading, believers know who they are to serve with their spiritual gifts, and the one another can be properly practiced
- A right ecclesiology raises the priority of church participation, healthy relationships, corporate worship, etc.

Implications for Church Structure

- A right doctrine of the church should affect its structure, carefully reflected in a plurality of elders who lovingly lead, serve, and shepherd the body of Christ
- God has placed leaders within the body to teach the Word, direct the church, and model godly conduct

1 Peter 5:1-3 ~ Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock

- A failure to have a sound ecclesiology results in a failure to understand God's design for how His body is to be shepherded and cared for
- Leadership is a gift from God!...Rejecting leadership as God designed it (plurality of male elders) deprives the church of Christ's gift and hinders the church from fulfilling its purpose

Implications for Church Culture

- A right ecclesiology impacts the culture of a church in that it creates an atmosphere of discipleship, mentoring
- A right understanding of the church should promote intentionality in helping fellow believers grow in Christ-likeness and maturity

Ephesians 4:11-16 ~ And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Implications for the Glory of God

- A right ecclesiology is essential to God receiving the glory in the church!

Ephesians 3:20-21 ~ Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him *be* the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.