

The Foundation and Unity of the Church

Ephesians 2:19-22

Justin Deeter – January 14, 2018



What is the church? What does it mean to be a part of a church? What's the mission of the church? Who leads the church? These are important questions, because we continue to grow more confused about the nature of the church and what a healthy church looks like. There are books after books proposing different visions for the church. I received one such book recently called "Twelve Keys to an Effective Church." Wow, sounds like a pretty important book! Well, its not. The twelve keys include, "Adequate parking, land, and landscaping," and "several competent programs and activities" and "High Visibility." Is a church really defined by its property of brick and mortar, cement and asphalt? Is a church really defined by the list of its programs, which tend to be carefully designed to meet the perceived need of a target demographic, just like business trying to attract customers? After all, a healthy church has to be more than just having great parking and landscaping.

When it comes to churches in American, I don't think we are aware of how much consumerism has poisoned the health of Christ's church. We've turned our churches into spiritual theme parks designed to keep people happy and entertained. After all, people love theme parks! When my family and I were down in Orlando visiting Kaitlyn's family over the new year, we took a day and went to Disney World. There is no theme park quite like it.

However the church isn't a theme park, rather its an embassy. What's an embassy? Its a residence for an ambassador in a foreign land. As ambassadors of Christ who are foreigners in this land, we must understand the church as an embassy, a microcosm of the coming kingdom of God. We represent Christ and model the kingdom in our life together, as we try to reach our world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.



Now a theme park and an embassy are two very different visions for the church.

- At a theme park, you are there to be entertained by the vivid decor and exciting attractions. At an embassy, you are there to work and represent the interest of the king.
- At a theme park, people are your obstacles as you dodge and dart to get around them.
- At an embassy, people are your mission.
- At a theme park, your personal happiness is your goal, and the whole park is designed for that purpose. At an embassy, the goal is the glory of your king.
- A theme park exists for your leisure. An embassy exists for the mission.
- At a theme park, you go for vacation. You are at an embassy to serve.
- At a theme park, you are a customer. At an embassy, you are an ambassador.

I'm convinced that the "theme park" mentality dominates much of our churches, so much so that we've turned church into a destination designed for the comfort and pleasure of its members. Church, we must reject this consumeristic impulse to turn church into a spiritual theme park. Instead, we must recover a biblical vision of the church—the church as an embassy of the kingdom of God. Hence the origin of this series, to try to clarify what the Bible says the church ought to be. The aim of this series is to search the Scripture and discern a vision for a healthy church?

When we come to the biblical text, we bring with us a lot of assumptions or presuppositions. Presuppositions clog our ears making it difficult to read the Scriptures rightly. Based on our assumptions we bring to the Bible, the Scriptures can sound muffled in some places or at worst, we fail to hear them at all! Since we all have presuppositions, how do we handle them? Well, knowing is half the battle. Trying to identify our own biases and preferences when we come to the Bible helps us become more aware of what the Bible is trying to tell us. In

addition, we must constantly pray that the Spirit gives us understanding of his word, and that he would unclog our ears to listen to truth that may challenge or change our previous understanding.

As we begin this series, *The Church: Embassy of the Kingdom*, I pray you will do just that. As we try to understand what is the church, most of us develop our beliefs from our experiences and our personal history, not so much the Scriptures. In other words, for most of us, it's what we grew up with that defines the church for us. Over time, tradition begins to be elevated above the authority of Scripture. Our personal background dictates how the church ought to be, not the Bible. So we begin reading our personal experiences into the Scriptures themselves. How dangerous and foolish! As we begin this series, let's try to cast aside everything we think we know about the church, including our own upbringings, so that we can hear the word of God with fresh ears and a fresh perspective. I pray that by doing that, we would be awakened to the astonishing work of God in the founding of his church and how wonderful it is to be among its number!

As we begin searching God's word for answers on the church, we will begin today by considering the foundation and the unity of the church. By doing so, we will go to Ephesians 2:19-22. If I had to sum up today's sermon in one sentence, here's what it would be: the foundation of the church is the word of God and the unity of the church is guarded by the church's confession of faith. So let's first begin by considering the foundation of the church, then secondly by considering the unity of the church.

1. The Foundation of the Church: Christ, The Apostles, and the Prophets

When you are building a house, the most important component to get right is the foundation. If the foundation is bad, the whole structure is unstable. The same is true for the church. If we put the wrong foundation in place, it will be disastrous. The spiritual theme park mentality that dominates churches is a disastrous foundation. The church is founded upon the Word of God which produce deeply

help and non-negotiable beliefs. In other words, doctrine and theology are essential in establishing the foundation of any healthy church.

Let's reread our focal text again to see the nuance of what Paul says here,

"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit." (Ephesians 2:19-22, ESV)

So, in the church God has redeemed sinners by the blood of his Son, and he has brought them together. Now, no matter our background or skin color, we are no longer strangers and aliens, but saints and members of God's household. However, notice the importance upon which this household of God is founded. It is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone." This is an incredibly important sentence. Paul tells us that the foundation is the apostles and prophets; what does this refer too? This refers to the Scriptural witness, the combined revelation of God in the Old Testament and the New. These prophetic and apostolic writings have authority to establish doctrine. In other words, Paul says that the foundation of the Church is built upon the Bible—sola scriptura, scripture alone.

So the church of Christ is founded upon the word of Christ. God has spoken through the apostles and the prophets to reveal the truth of Christ and his Gospel. Of course, Christ Jesus himself is the cornerstone. The church is founded with the blood of Christ. He birthed the church through the labor of his sufferings. The Scriptures then, bear witness and testify to who Jesus is. The Bible is the God-breathed authoritative word about Christ!

So why is this so important? Because it indicates the foundation of what brings the church together. It's not our age. It's not our music style preferences. It's not our ethnicity. It's not our income levels. It's not hobbies. It's not where we are from. It's not our education levels. Rather, the foundation of the church is based on a set of shared beliefs, beliefs in Christ and the authority of God's word.

As I hope your beginning to put together, the foundation of the church is very much connected to the unity of the church. If there is not identifiable foundation



that we all hold in common, then there can be no unity. Also, if we put the wrong foundation in place, unity will be impossible. If we base our fellowship around anything other than the Gospel of Jesus than we simply aren't a church. A true church is a gospel church, a church founded upon the cornerstone of Christ as defined by the apostle and the prophets in the Bible.

Notice too that Paul doesn't suggest that only a portion of the church has to have this foundation. Rather, the "whole structure." This temple of flesh and blood that God constructs is joined together by his Spirit and is founded upon Christ. Exclusive devotion to Christ and the authority of the Bible is necessary for a true church to exist.

When we understand rightly the biblical foundation of the church, we begin to rightly discern the essentials from the preferences, the absolute and the negotiable. When we mistakenly elevate our preferences (things we like) to an idolatrous place of conviction, the church becomes a divisive place. When we understand that Scripture is the authority and foundation of our fellowship, than we will have no problem allowing the microscope of Scripture to probe and question any and all of our practices as a church. And we will not fear it! Rather, we will welcome it. We must let Scripture drive and evaluate all that we do. When we are out of sync with the commands of God than we adjust our practices. That means that we change, so that we can submit to God's word. It doesn't matter what's always been done. It matters what the Scriptures say.

How we need revival in so many of our churches! How many churches have forgotten this? How many churches have wavered or neglected sound biblical teaching? How many churches are filled with people who are functionally biblically illiterate? We have no excuse. Revival begins when congregations repent of idolatry and give themselves completely to God's word, and allow the Scripture to probe the depths of their heart. Only when we restore the proper foundation, can churches grow and flourish as embassies of the kingdom.

2. The Unity of the Church: The Church's Confession

This leads us to consider the unity of the church. Paul tells us that upon this foundation of the Scriptures, the church is built up, joined together, and grows.

That we, as individuals, join together as one. Many people consider doctrine and theology divisive. Such truths seem to heady and to lead to argument and debate. Thus, we've witnessed this last century many churches simply avoid doctrine and settle for silence on any issue of controversy. The aim was to achieve unity, but its a false unity. A doctrinally shallow church is at risk of drifting into error and beneath the surface divided. Beneath the surface of the pretend peace are people very much divided on the purpose and direction of the church. Factions develop within the church lobbying for power to get the church to go their direction. A church divided on what they believe will be a church unable to be built up and grow. Doctrine and theology aren't road blocks to unity but rather, they are the fence which protects unity.

So what's the cause of the doctrinally shallow churches that dominate our country? Well it didn't always be this way. Historically, I think you can trace this shallowness to the decline of creeds and confessions. Baptist have always been a confessional people, meaning that we've created and emphasized confessions of faith that clearly outline what a specific local church believes. Confessions of faith are short statements that clearly and simply spell out what the church believes. Though confessions of faith have no authority in and of themselves, they are helpful in clearly summarizing what a church believes from the Bible.

We baptist tend to give little time to the historic creeds of the church, such as the apostles creed or Nicene creed. I think that's a shame and we ought to give more attention to them in our gatherings. However, Baptists have always been a confessional people, meaning we love confessions of faith and see them as vitally important. Baptists have written several confessions in their history, including, the first and second London confession, the Philadelphia confession, and the New Hampshire Confession.

Confessions of faith are important because they set the parameters for the church's unity. They define the borders of the church. Creeds and confessions ground the church in the history of Christian orthodoxy. I recently read a christian leader who said this when evaluating evangelical Christians at the beginning of 2018, "Largely cut off from history, biblically illiterate, and catechized more by cable news than by the creeds, today's evangelical Christians are naturally being shaped more by the ideological zeitgeist (current cultural mood) than by theological orthodoxy."¹ I think he's right. The problem with so many Christian's today is that they are being shaped by culture rather than being shaped by the grand history of the Christian tradition outlined in

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/tgcs-leaders-share-5-challenges-and-5-opportunities-facing-the-church/>

creeds and confessions. Many Christians have little historic awareness of church history, biblically illiterate, and ignorant of sound doctrine. I say that not with an ounce of condemnation, but as a fellow believer concerned about the health of our churches. I recently heard another pastor say this, "Many churches do not affirm or confess the historic creeds of the church, and we wonder why we are raising a generation of heretics."² Have you ever wondered why so many young people today aren't Christian or have rejected the church? Well its because when they came to church we gave them pizza and games not bible and sound doctrine. The reason there are so many men and women abandoning the Christian faith of their upbringing results from a failure to faithfully bring children up in the robust confines of historic and doctrinal Christianity. We've exchange robustness for shallowness, all to our detriment.

So, how can the church be built up and united? I believe the first step is a recovery of confessions of faith and making them central to the nature of our fellowship together as a congregation. In other words, theology and doctrine are important for lots of reasons, but one of those reasons is the unity of the church. Ambiguity in theology leads to conflict. Uncertainty of beliefs stirs up division. Ignorance of the truth confines us to immaturity.

When a church adopts a statement of faith (and every church has one, the problem is they lie forgotten), they define what its members must believe in order to be members. When a member joins a church, they are affirming what that church believes as outlined in their statement of faith. Every person who considers membership in a local church should be able to whole heartedly affirm the church's statement of faith.

So do we have a statement of faith? The fact that I have to raise that question illustrates the problem I've outlined. Yes! We have a statement of faith. Forest Hills has adopted the Baptist Faith and Message (2000). This is a confession of faith written and affirmed by the Southern Baptist Convention. This confession originated in 1925 and was updated in 1963, and again in the year 2000. During our membership class at Forest Hills, we make sure new members are exposed to this statement and that they whole heartedly affirm it before they are presented for the church as a candidate for membership. If you have never read the Baptist Faith and Message (2000) go to our website this week and read it. Our statement of faith outlines our church's belief on Scripture, the Trinity, Salvation, election, eternal security, the church, religious liberty, evangelism and mission, marriage and family, and much more!

² Burk Parsons, Twitter, Jan 9, 2018.



This statement of faith summarizes what we as a church body believe, and in that sense this doctrinal statement intends to set the doctrinal boundaries of our church's identity. Though it doesn't specify every foreseeable doctrinal issue, it does clearly define the bounds of our fellowship on the nonnegotiable doctrines we hold. Any teacher in the church, particularly pastors are to teach in accordance with and not contrary to our statement of faith.

Remember, a church is united by what she most deeply believes. In that sense, confessions of faith are wonderful gifts to the church to build unity. They are the guardrails on the highway that keep us from steering into a theological ditch. Yet, at the same time they keep us making a mountain out of a mole hill on issues open for discussion in the church. Between those guardrails are some room for variation. Thus, confessions of faith establish the church upon its foundation, Christ the Cornerstone as taught by the Scriptural witness—the apostles and the prophets.

Final Thoughts

If we, as Forest Hills Baptist Church, wish to be faithful to the Lord and grow in biblical health, then we must emphasize our doctrinal convictions expressed in our confession of faith. Drawing this line in the sand does not hinder unity, but actually creates it. When the whole structure of the church is built upon this foundation, unity is the result. The church of Christ is too beautiful to be wrecked by squabbles and division. We must be on guard for wolves who seek to divide the flock of Christ. Our church is founded upon Christ and the authority of the word of Christ. Doctrine and theology isn't an obstacle the church's unity, rather it is essential to the church's unity.

We are founded upon the Gospel! That we are wretched sinners who need a God of grace to have mercy on us, to redeem us and wash us clean. In Christ, we have been forgiven our sins and have been brought together as the people of God, united in him! If you do not know Christ, that invitation always stands. Come and know this Jesus who saves sinners by turning from your sins and place your faith in Jesus. God will save you and you will be joined together with a group of other redeemed sinners called the church. Together, we will treasure the Lord Jesus Christ, equip one another with the word of God, and send each other out to go and make disciples for the glory of God!



When we begin to understand that what joins us together is our convictions, everything else begins to fall into perspective. When we get the foundation right, the structure of the church is stable and secure. As Paul said, the church will be joined together forming a beautiful temple for the Lord. Let us desire to be that beautiful temple for our savior. Let us seek unity as a congregation as we press into our foundation of Christ and biblical authority. Christ has made us one, tearing down the dividing wall of hostility. However, we must get the foundation right if unity will come. And, if we get the foundation right the church will not be a spiritual theme park to cater to your every whim, we will be an embassy of the kingdom of God, a covenant people united together to represent the cause of King Jesus in a foreign land.