

Membership Matters: Session 4

What is a Church?

What we have covered so far:

- Session 1: Being reconciled with God requires us to be reconciled to one another.
- Session 2: We must exhort one another if we are to prevent hard-heartedness.
- Session 3: God's program to create mature, growing Christians is a church where pastors equip the saints for the work of the ministry: speaking the truth in love to one another.

What does a church provide that a gathering of individual Christians lack?

"The emphasis on parachurch ministries increased cooperation across denominations, but once unleashed, the 'para' mentality was difficult to contain, and among too many believers, it eventually threatened to supplant the idea of an institutional church entirely...This turn boded ill for Evangelicalism's long-term future, because although the 'para' groups were immensely successful at religious mobilization, they weren't as effective at sustaining commitment across a life span or across generations. They were institutions for an anti-institutional faith, you might say, which meant that they were organized around personalities and causes and rarely created the sense of comprehensive, intergenerational community...You couldn't spend your whole life in Campus Crusade for Christ, or raise your daughters as a Promise Keeper, or count on groups like the Moral Majority of the Christian Coalition to sustain your belief system beyond the next election cycle. For that kind of staying power, you needed a confessional tradition, a church, an institution capable of outlasting its charismatic founders."

- Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion*, p. 140

The Matthew Road: 16, 18, 28

Who gets to represent Jesus?

- *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."* (Matt 28:18-20)
 - o Go into the nations → Make disciples of them
 - How? 1) Baptizing them into the triune name and 2) teaching them to observe all that Jesus taught
 - o Those who bear God's name are in covenant with God—so, to be baptized into the name of God is a new covenant declaration.
 - o Notice: Representing Jesus is not an individual event—you cannot baptize yourself. This assumes a community of some kind.
- 15 *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence*

of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector (Matt 18:15-17)

- The scenario: someone's manner of life is contradicting their profession of faith.
 - The final court of authority: the church.
 - If the unrepentant brother fails to listen to the congregation, then he is to no longer be considered a brother, but a "Gentile and tax collector" (meaning: someone outside of the covenant community).
 - This is a pretty audacious thing to do to someone! Where does anyone get the authority to do something like this?
- *"18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."* (Matt 18:8-20).
- The church has been given authority to bind and loose on behalf of heaven.
 - If that sounds weird, just consider: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld," (John 20:23).
 - Note: All of the *you's* here are plural (You all), referencing back to the authority being wielded by the congregation.
 - What does it mean to bind and loose?
 - Could refer to correct interpretation (rabbinic tradition)
 - Binding someone into something, or letting them go.
 - Verse 19 helps clarify: *"Again, I say to you...earth...heaven"*
 - Binding and loosing has to do with
 - Multiple people (a minimum of two)
 - Agreeing
 - Asking
 - What are we talking about again? An unrepentant sinner who is claiming to be a representative of Jesus. Someone who has been *brought in* (bound) to the church, and is now being *let go* (loosed) from the church.
 - Verse 20 gives the theological ground for this
 - For where two or three are gathered **in my name**, there am I among them.
- *Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not*

prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matt 16:13-29)

- Jesus asks for a correct confession: who do you say that I am?
 - Simon gets it right: You are the Christ, the son of the living God
 - Jesus rightly identifies that Peter on earth has rightly reflected a heavenly reality
 - Peter becomes the rock on which the church is built (the only two instances of Jesus using the word ‘church’ is here and Matthew 18)
 - He is given the keys of the kingdom of heaven, a symbol of authority to be exercised on behalf of heaven that binds and loosens.
 - Here, Peter alone is given this, but he is given it as a representative of the apostles, and so a representative of the church (the foundation of the church is the apostles). Matthew 18 demonstrates that the keys are exercised by the whole congregation.
- What this means: the church is a gathering of at least two or three people who have been baptized into the triune name of God and agree with one another about the credibility of their life and profession of faith. It is a heavenly institution that dwells on earth like an embassy who exercises the keys of the kingdom of heaven by authenticating who is and is not a right representative of Jesus. That is the *what* of the church. The *why* of the church is Matthew 28: to make more disciples by going into the nations and baptizing them and teaching them to obey Jesus, which means planting more churches.
- Note the promise of Matthew 28: “baptizing them into the name...I am with you always” and its connection with Matthew 18:20, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”
- The importance of the sacraments:
- “The sacraments provide the primary way in which the church is ‘knit together’, that is, given institutional form and order. Without them the church could be a ‘visible’ society, without doubt, but only a rather intangible one, melting indeterminately like a delicate mist as we stretched out our arms to embrace it. In these forms we know where the church is and can attach ourselves to it. They are at once ‘signs’ of the mystery of redemption wrought in Christ, and ‘effective’ signs which give palpable presence in the participating church.” – Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*, p. 172