

## The Doctrine of the Church

### I. The Origin of the Church as the Transformed Israel of God

- Adam → Israel: From the beginning of human history, God has always formed his people into a community. God's covenant is a relationship that is not only with individuals but also with his people as a social/corporate whole. In the Old Testament, this movement developed from a line of households from Adam through Jacob and expanded into the nation of Israel.
- Israel → Jesus: Jesus fulfills the mission of the people of Israel in his person and work (as prophet, priest, and king), and he formed his first group of disciples into the foundation and nucleus of a renewed and transformed Israel (12 disciples = 12 tribes).
- Jesus → Church: Fifty days after his resurrection, and ten days after his ascension to heaven, Jesus manifested the presence of his Holy Spirit in a dramatic visible and audible way (Acts 2:1-41). The miraculous display of wind, fire, and multiple languages revealed that the church of Jesus Christ is the continuing people of God's covenant and God's new temple, the people where he reveals himself most clearly and draws people into saving relationship with him. And he expands his covenant with Israel by forming his followers (the church) into a multiethnic, global community uniting Jews and Gentiles as the one body of Christ defined and united by faith in Christ (John 10:14-16; Gal. 3:23-29; Eph. 2:11-22; Rom. 9-11; Rev. 5:9-10; 7:9-12).
- Church → World: Following Jesus command and guidance by his Spirit, the church rapidly spread beyond Judea into the surrounding nations and to the ends of the earth (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). Jesus set apart apostles as authoritative leaders to establish the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20; Rev. 21:14) and to guide the life of the church by providing eyewitness accounts (Acts 1:22-23; 1 John 1:3) of the acts and significance of the work of God through Jesus and his Spirit in the documents of the New Testament (2 Pet. 1:16-21; 2 Tim. 3:14-17).

### II. The Universal and Local Church

- The church is universal (Greek: "catholic") in two senses:
  - (1) The visible catholic church is a global movement of different organized assemblies/congregations of believers in many different larger denominations, networks, and institutions within many different nations, cultures, and ethnic groups.
  - (2) The invisible catholic church is the total number of people in all of history and all over the world and in heaven who are united to God in Christ and have a genuine, living faith in the one true God, who is ultimately revealed in Jesus Christ (Rev, 21:2; 1 Cor. 12:12-13; Eph. 4:4-5).
    - Being a part of the universal (catholic) church means that we are part of a vast body of God's people that is cosmic and global in scope with ancient historical roots that extend back to the beginning of humanity. We should appreciate and nurture our connection to the universal church in history and throughout the world.
- The church is local.
  - The universal church is embodied in local assemblies and congregations of Christians in particular locations where people can live in communities together. As the church expanded beyond Jerusalem, Christians have planted local churches in all the places

where they moved and lived (Acts 11-28; Rev. 2-3), and the New Testament epistles/letters are addressed to local congregations in particular cities and areas.

- The local church is visible: It is a tangible community of real flesh-and-blood people organized into a specific organization together.
- The local church is very important for Christian faith, life, and growth. God created humans to live in communal relationships, and thus God's covenant is both individual and communal. The church is the body of Christ and temple where God dwells and works (1 Cor. 3:16), and thus the church is a means of embodying and receiving God's grace, life, and love. God also gives gifts to Christians to use in serving and blessing other believers and to make unique, complementary contributions to the life of the church (Rom. 12:3-21; 1 Cor. 12:12-27). Thus, it is hard to overstate how important it is for every Christian to be an active member and participant in the community life of a local church, which is why God commands Christians not to forsake meeting together (Heb. 10:25).
- Visible ≠ invisible: In every local (visible) church, there are always some people who do not have a genuine, living faith in God in Christ, even though some may even profess to believe in Christ (Matt. 13:1-43; 1 John 2:18-19). In other words, not every member of the visible church is a member of the invisible church.

### III. The Church's Sacraments

God embodies and strengthens his covenant relationship with his people through the practices of worship, and two important practices are the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

#### A. Baptism

- Baptism is a sacrament: A concrete, physical, symbolic action established by God through which God embodies and strengthens his grace and our covenant union with him.
- Washing and cleansing: Baptism is a pouring out of water, which symbolizes cleansing from sin (1 Cor. 6:11; Acts 22:16; Tit. 3:5) and deliverance from God's waters of judgment (1 Pet. 3:20-22; 1 Cor. 10:1-2).
- Covenant initiation: Through baptism, God formally and tangibly initiates believers into his covenant with his family through union with Christ and the church by the Spirit (Rom. 6:3-5; Gal. 3:27-29; 1 Cor. 12:13; Acts 2:38). In and through baptism, God adopts us as his children and heirs (Gal. 3:27-4:7), bestows his name upon us (1 Cor. 6:11; Acts 2:38; 10:48), and calls us to follow Jesus in repentance and obedient faith. Because it is an initiation, it can only be done once; there is no such thing as "re-baptism" even if the ceremony is performed again.
- Objective & subjective means of grace: Baptism is an objective means or instrument of grace through which God bestows the grace of union with Christ (Rom. 6:3). God is the primary actor in baptism, not the person being baptized. As an act of covenant relationship, the grace objectively offered in baptism must be received subjectively with faith (Acts 2:38; Col. 2:11-12; 1 Pet. 3:21). It is not a mechanical act that bestows all of its blessings apart from personal faith of the recipient.

- How we practice baptism at Central
  - We sprinkle water on people's heads rather than immersing people's whole bodies in water because baptism is a symbol of being washed by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit from heaven. For example, see how the Bible uses words like "sprinkle" or "pour" to describe the cleansing work of the blood of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit that are symbolized in baptism (Ezek. 36:25; Acts 2:33; 10:45; Matt. 26:28; Heb. 10:22; Heb. 9:13, 19, 21; 10:22; 12:24; 1 Pet. 1:2). The earliest paintings showing Christian baptisms depict this method of pouring water on a person's head.
  - We declare that people are baptized "in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" because this is what Jesus teaches us to say (Matt. 28:19), and because it expresses the Bible relates baptism to the work of all three persons of the Trinity. See Matt. 3:16-17; Rom. 6:3-5; Gal. 3:27-29; 1 Cor 12:13; Acts 2:38.
  - We ordinarily perform baptisms in the presence of the whole congregation not because it is absolutely required but because it communicates most clearly that the person being baptized is being made a member of the community of the people of God (1 Cor. 12:13).
  - We baptize the infant children of believing parents because God told Abraham to circumcise the infant sons in his household as a pattern for his people (Gen. 17), and baptism now has the spiritual meaning of circumcision (Col. 2:11-12). God ordinarily begins his saving work in the children of believing parents from their earliest days (e.g., Ps. 22:9-10; 71:5-6). He declares the children of believing parents to be "holy" (1 Cor. 7:14), and Jesus declares that children brought to him for his blessing by believing parents are members of his kingdom and his disciples (Matt. 18:1-14/Mark 9:33–37/Luke 9:46-48; Matt. 19:13-15/Mark 10:13-16/Luke 18:15-17). Thus, the sign of initiation into the covenant through baptism is administered both to adult believers and to their infant children (Acts 2:38; cf. the household baptisms in; 11:14; 16:15, 31–34; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16; 16:15).

## **B. The Lord's Supper**

- Sacrament: The Lord's Supper is a sacrament (see the definition above). Other names for this sacrament are "communion" and "eucharist (thanksgiving)." It is both an objective and subjective means of grace (see above).
- Nourishment: The Lord's Supper is a symbolic meal through which Jesus is present with the church to nourish and strengthen the faith of his people. For those who receive it with faith, it provides a tangible experience of union with Christ and a participation in the benefits of his death and resurrection (1 Cor. 10:16).
- Rooted in Jesus' fulfillment of biblical meals:
  - The new covenant Passover (Matt. 26:17-29), a celebration of our exodus and liberation from sin, condemnation, and death by Jesus' blood/death and a partaking his life in this meal given to us as food
  - The new covenant peace offering (1 Cor. 10:18ff.), a sacrifice eaten as a meal to joyfully celebrate renewed peace and friendship with God
  - The greater manna (Exod. 16; cf. John 6:22-59; 1 Cor. 10:1-4)

- Another post-resurrection meal with Jesus on the first day of the week (Luke 24; John 20:19-25; 20:26-29) in which we eat with the resurrected Christ to celebrate his victory over death
- A foretaste of the great wedding feast when Jesus returns (Rev. 19:6-8; cf. 1 Cor. 11:25-26)
- Past, present, future: The Lord's Supper celebrates the victory of Jesus over sin and death in the past (through his death), celebrates communion with God in the present (through union with the resurrected and ascended Christ), and joyfully anticipates the future with confident hope (Jesus' second coming and renewal of all things).
- How we practice the Lord's Supper at Central:
  - To follow Jesus' example and command to "do this", we begin the Supper with a prayer of thanksgiving, and we eat bread and drink juice/wine (Matt. 26:17-29/Mk. 14:12-25/Luke 22:7-23; cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-22; 11:17-34).
  - We sit and serve one another because communion is a meal, and thus the form of celebrating the Supper matches its meaning as closely as practically possible. Second, the Lord's Supper celebrates peace and friendship with God, and sitting at a meal is a posture well suited for relaxation and peace. This posture also signifies that we are highly honored servants, children, and friends of God (see the meaning of sitting in Luke 12:37; 17:7). Third, celebrating communion while seated enables us to serve one another. This communicates one of the major theological meanings of the Supper, namely, its social purpose of expressing the unity of the whole church (1 Cor. 10:16).
  - We sing when we receive communion because singing together helps us express more fully the biblical meaning and emotional tone of the Lord's Supper. In the Bible, eating and drinking with God is never observed by somber, individual meditation and private prayer. Rather, meals with God are joyful, social celebrations of peace and friendship with God (Deut. 12:6-7, 11-12; 14:22-29; 2 Sam. 6:16-19; 1 Kgs. 8:62-66), and this rejoicing was often accompanied by music (2 Chron. 29-30). The prophets also frequently use images of feasting with great joy to describe the fulfillment of God's mission to redeem the world (e.g., Isa. 25:6-9; Jer. 31:1-14). This tone of joy applies to the Lord's Supper because it is a celebration of peace and friendship with God that we receive on the basis of the victory of Christ over sin, Satan, and death. It is also a foretaste of the final wedding feast of the Lamb that will happen when Jesus returns to make all things new with great rejoicing (Rev. 19).

#### IV. The Church's Leadership

- Jesus is the head of the church (Matt. 16:18; Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:22-23; 4:15; 5:23). He is the ultimate fulfillment of every major office of leadership in Israel: prophet, priest, and king.
- Jesus → Apostles: Jesus gathered, trained, and commissioned a group of men (apostles) who became the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20).
- Apostles → Pastors, Elders, and Deacons  
Jesus' apostles trained and formally authorized (ordained) men to build on the foundation that Christ laid through them and to faithfully lead the church in the ministry of the gospel of the kingdom. Building on the foundation of the Old Testament, they established several distinct types of leaders to exercise three major types of ministry within the local church:

1. **Pastors:** The ministry of teaching and leading worship  
Like the Old Testament priesthood, God calls and authorizes pastors (also known as bishops, ministers, or overseers) to have a ministry of teaching and leading in worship.
    - Ministry of the word of God: Pastors are called and authorized by God to speak as his representatives in authoritatively proclaiming his word to the church in worship, which includes the reading, preaching, and teaching of scripture (1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:1-5; Tit. 1:9; 1 Thess. 5:12).
    - Ministry of sacrament: Pastors administer baptism and preside at the Lord’s Supper to signify that it is Jesus who gives us communion with God through these tangible means of grace.
  2. **Elders:** The ministry of ruling or governing the life of God’s people  
Like the Old Testament elders and kings, elders shepherd God’s people by overseeing the spiritual life and ministry of the church (1 Tim. 5:17; Acts 20:28-35; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:1-4). Pastors share the ministry of ruling along with the elders (In presbyterian-speak, pastors are “teaching elders,” and elders who are not pastors are “ruling elders.”)
  3. **Deacons:** The ministry of administering practical affairs  
Like the Old Testament Levites, deacons perform works of practical service in many aspects of the church’s ministry. In the history of the church, and especially in Reformed churches, deacons oversee ministries of merciful care for the practical needs of people in the church and community, e.g., widows, people with financial difficulties, etc. They also oversee the use and maintenance of church property.
- **Presbyterianism:** Authority and ministry beyond the local church
    - Terminology: The term “presbyterian” comes from the Greek term “presbyteros”, which means “elder.” Presbyterian churches are churches led by leaders called “elders.”
    - Origin: Jewish synagogues had a presbyterian structure of government. The New Testament refers to offices in the church called “bishops” and “presbyters,” and these terms are used as synonyms. These New Testament references to elders most closely correspond to a kind of presbyterian government in the Christian church, a system carried over from the Jewish synagogues into the predominantly Jewish Christian context of the earliest era of the church (see e.g., the council in Acts 15). A highly developed form of presbyterian government emerged in the 1500s during the Protestant Reformation in the Reformed tradition of Protestant churches.
    - Hierarchy: Three levels of authority from local to national

**General assembly** (council of pastors & elders in the nation)

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**Presbytery** (council of pastors & elders in the region)

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**Session** (pastors & elders in a local church)

- Distinctions from other systems of church government:
  - Unlike episcopal government (e.g., Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican churches), Presbyterianism rejects the office of bishop as an authoritative office higher than that of a local pastor or priest. Thus, where an episcopal system has a single bishop as the leader of a regional grouping of churches, a presbyterian system has a council of the ministers and elders from all the congregations in that region, all of whom have equal authority.
  - Unlike congregational government (e.g., many Baptist, nondenominational churches), Presbyterianism sees

## V. The Church's Defining Marks and Mission

- **Worship:** Engaging in communion with God through his means of grace (primarily the word of God, sacraments, and prayer) in response to God's gracious initiative to renew and nourish his covenant relationship with us and equip us for life in the kingdom. Worship occurs in the following forms, all of which are important for a healthy spiritual life: Corporate worship on the Lord's Day (Sunday); set times of daily worship by individuals, families, and other groups centered in the word of God and prayer; continual communion with God (practicing God's presence with unceasing prayer).
- **Community Life:** Actively loving fellow church members as family with committed encouragement and support by means of: committing time and resources to cultivate close friendships with other church members; sharing time, possessions, and other resources to serve fellow church members in need.
- **Spiritual Formation:** Being transformed by God in a process of active spiritual growth so that we put sin to death, walk by the Holy Spirit, and manifest the character of Christ and fruit of the Spirit. This occurs by means of active participation in corporate worship; teaching and learning the Christian life through committed relationships with other Christians in which we can know and be known by others and develop increasing devotion to pursuing spiritual growth with personal application and accountability; regular, personal engagement in the practices of the Christian life that cultivate holy rhythms and relationships with intention and committed purpose, resulting in spiritual health (physical, intellectual, emotional, social, financial, vocational). All of this occurs under the oversight and (when necessary) discipline of pastors and elders.
- **Outreach in word and deed:** Bearing witness to Christ by sharing the gospel with others, including inspiring and responding to questions about our faith; giving reasons for our faith; meeting practical, physical needs; loving and serving the world through our work/vocation; promoting the common good and public justice of our city, nation, and world.