

Why Church Confuses Missionaries

Speaker 1 0:10

Welcome to the Practical Missions Podcast. I'm your host. Today we are going to be taking a deep dive, a deep theological dive into the doctrine of the church. What is the church? And I think this is really necessary for us as cross-cultural workers because I think there's so much confusion in our community around what the church is. I was talking to an MVP the other day who was disciplined by somebody else, and he said the church is not a building. The church is us. We are the church. But what he understood from that was I don't need to be a part of a body of covenanted believers who regularly meet together. He's not part of anybody now because somebody told him that the church is not a building. Of course, the church isn't a building, but what is it? And how can we have a better understanding of what it is? I have the perfect guest for you today, so stay with us.

From Arabic Study To Pastoring

Speaker 1 1:00

Welcome to the podcast. We met back in 2012. You were studying Arabic. I think we're probably both studying Arabic at the time. What were you studying besides Arabic?

Speaker 1:08

I had just graduated from college. So I was studying modern standard Arabic, but I just graduated. I decided to go somewhere and uh wound up where you were. And how did you end up from there to being a minister in a church? That's a good question. I mean, in those days, I was thinking would ride this finance degree, do something in the investing or you know, banking world. But by God's grace, I was exposed to a number of guys in your orbit. Up until that time, I had, you know, grown up in a church that would have preached the gospel, perhaps not every single week, but I think that the Lord truly saved me. But I would

say that my maturation in the faith was not, I would have assessed it as better than it in the reality of it.

Speaker 1 2:01

So you would have thought you were more mature than you were spiritually.

Speaker 2:04

That's right. And a large degree of that is the function of the type of church that I was in and like the the Christian peers that I had. I'm from a part of the West where there's an awful lot of nominal Christianity. So I think the Lord had genuinely saved me. But, you know, when I came over to your part of the world, there were guys who loved reformed theology and would read Martin Lloyd Jones and, you know, systematic theology. And the Lord really used that to grow me to sort of synthesize my understanding of scripture and in many ways to change my desires so that by the time I left to come back here, I no longer, you know, wanted to be on that same trajectory. And it took a while to figure out what was going to happen. I remember nevertheless that the very first, probably weekend, yeah, no, definitely the first weekend I got back, the church I had grown up in, you know, is where my parents were. I needed a landing spot. And um, I did not know this, and I it wouldn't have meant anything to me at the time, but the the the church had a you know a relatively new pastor, and he was committed to things like expositional preaching and meaningful church membership. And I got back, and and and the first sermon was just a really faithful exposition through either first or second Samuel. You know, it wasn't anything like spectacular, but the gospel was so clear. And in the adult Sunday school hour, right before that, one of the brothers was just very faithfully leading us through an inductive study of Romans, just trying to tease out the logic, apply it to ourselves, and exalt Christ. I just knew, wow, my church search is done. So yeah, was at this church for a little bit, then went off to seminary and then came back about five years ago to serve as one of our pastors.

Speaker 1 3:47

In the same church, yeah, same church. Praise God that a church that was healthy became even healthier.

Speaker 3:53

I wouldn't say it was healthy before, but uh I mean there was kind of a reformational process the

Expositional Preaching Made Simple

Speaker 4:00

last almost 20 years.

Speaker 1 4:01

You mentioned expositional preaching. Can you just explain that for a moment? And what is the contrast, what is the mere opposite of expositional preaching?

Speaker 4:09

In my part of the world, there's an awful lot of what you might call like topical preaching, where the the preacher has a theme. He seeks to make his argument supportive what he wants to say by finding a number of biblical proof texts that support what he's saying. So, I mean, you could think of like, you know, a sermon series, like five ways to improve your marriage. And there's like, well, I want to improve my marriage, you know, and I but there's even more than five ways I could do that. Uh, so it's trying to say true things from scripture, but what's fundamentally driving, I guess, the content of the sermon is not necessarily scripture. Now, that's not to say that it's not like laden with scripture and it's not saying true things, but the interpreter and the preacher is going to do his best to sort of synthesize a variety of text to coalesce around the general argument he wants to make. And some guys do this really well, and some guys they're less tethered to scripture. Expositional preaching, on the other hand, is when the preacher says, Hey, I see that in Acts chapter 20, Paul, when meeting with the Ephesian elders, says, Hey, when I

was with you guys, I didn't shrink back from declaring to you the whole council of God's word. Paul to Timothy tells him to preach the word. And from passages like this, or even like the example of the book of Hebrews, which is this like letter of exhortation. It's like a sermon. And he's got all these biblical passages, then he's like explaining, interpreting, and applying them. Expositional preaching is drawn from that and saying, hey, what we want to do is we want to pick one passage of the Bible to be our sermon text, and we want to read it. We want to explain the logic of it, how the argument develops, we want to apply it. We want to make the gospel super clear. And if we did 15 verses this week, we'll do the next 15 verses in the same book until we're done with the book. We're going to go consecutively through passages in a book, and we want to make sure that the main point and even sub-argumentation of the sermon matches that of the biblical text, so that whatever the Holy Spirit put into scripture, the preacher is seeking to draw out and apply to his hearers.

Speaker 1 6:19

I feel like we have gotten into the weeds really fast here. I love it though. I love, I obviously I love the idea of expositional preaching. But I think, okay, so let me just let me just rewind a minute and say what we want to talk about today is actually what is a healthy church? What is a church? What is a healthy church and what is the value of the church in missions? I

Why The Church Matters In Missions

Speaker 1 6:40

think that's kind of the direction I would like to go. You did uh seminary, you ended up coming back to this uh healthy church, being on staff there, and now you're actually one of the missions pastors or the missions pastor.

Speaker 6:53

Yeah, so uh, I mean, our church has we're nominating a few guys, but right now I think we have 13 elders. Four of them are in

the paid employee of the church. So four staff, elders, and then I guess that makes nine are lay. And the elders are the pastors, whether they're on staff or not. And um, we all do a lot of similar stuff: shepherding, teaching, counseling, discipling, all that kind of stuff. But my sort of buckets are responsibility at the end of the day. Someone's got to take responsibility for things like missions. That's me, uh, and membership. We have a pastoral internship. I receive a lot of different stuff, but yeah, missions is one of them.

Speaker 1 7:33

I want to come back to this topic of membership as well. Those are the two things you mentioned in the beginning was expositional preaching and membership.

Speaker 7:40

Yeah.

Speaker 1 7:40

And I think I want to, we want to come back to that in a minute, but uh, I just want to maybe set up things by saying one of the things I experience out here in the Middle East is that a lot of cross-cultural workers, maybe even the majority of cross-cultural workers that I know or that I bump into have a very kind of negative view of the church. Some people don't even like to use the word church. What I've noticed is that most people have been sent out from very unhealthy churches. So they've come from places where they've had church experiences where it's like they don't even know what the point of it was. Very kind of unhealthy churches, churches where maybe they thought the gospel was being preached, but it wasn't. Uh, and they didn't even realize that the gospel wasn't even being preached. Maybe just kind of uh churches that were uh meeting felt needs, but not really preaching uh God's word. And so they have this kind of negative experience of their church from back home, and they said, I don't want that. I mean, that didn't that didn't do anything

for me. Uh, we need to be doing something different here on the field. And so they look to different models of things. So I think I thought I thought it'd be interesting to talk to you. You're part of a healthy church, you're part of a God-centered church. I thought it would just be interesting to kind of have the other view of things. I think most of the people out here, most of cross-cultural workers that I run into, when you talk about church membership, they would they would probably balk at the idea and think, like, what is that kind of nonsense? Uh so it'd be interesting to hear what you say about it. Why do you think it is valuable in what we're missing, maybe what we're losing when we don't have some of these things. Maybe we can start with what is a church? Maybe let's just start at the basics. Because I think I think this is actually a point of confusion for a lot of people. What actually is the church? So if I were to ask you, what is the church?

A Clear Definition Of Church

Speaker 1 9:30

What would you say to that? And I suppose there's there's a church big C and Church Little C.

Speaker 9:35

That's a good question. So, and probably a great place to start on the definition of the church. You know, you can certainly look up like good confessions of faith, you know, like the Westminster Confession or the Baptist Confession of 1689, the Second Line of the Baptist Confession. And they're gonna give, you know, nice definitions of the church. I think, you know, what John Fulmer and Scott Loggs are doing, this book, prioritizing the church and missions, they're really taking the same definition that Aaron Minikoff and Harshit Singh did in their other book with almost the same name, prioritizing missions in the church. I was gonna go backwards. But this is how these guys define it. So this is page 23 of John Fulmer in uh Scott Logson's book. They say a church is a congregation of baptized Christians who have covenanted to gather weekly for preaching the Bible, celebrating

the ordinances, loving the saints, witnessing to the lost, and in all this glorifying God. And I mean, we could sort of look at that phrase by phrase if you want to, but I think that's a that's a helpful, accessible definition of what the church is.

Speaker 1 10:42

Yeah, let's unpack that.

Speaker 10:44

So, I mean, they say, firstly, it's a it's a it's a congregation. So, I mean, you mentioned a minute ago about this, about a number of individuals balking at church membership. And I'm not surprised because you know, where I am, tons of people have the exact same attitude here. It's pretty ubiquitous. Church membership is membership is a very biblical word. The church is its members. You can look to Ephesians 2.19. The church assembles Hebrews 10, 24, and 25. You know, and you think about the Greek word of what the church is, an ecclesia. By definition, this is an assembly uh of individuals who who come together. So it's this congregation. We can come back and talk about membership more, you know, but it's this congregation of baptized Christians. Christians are people who have repented of their sin, who've received the gospel, who've trusted in the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ on their behalf. And then baptism pictures that union that Christians have with the Lord Jesus. Romans 6, 1 through 11 has a lot to talk about this. But baptism doesn't just picture our union with Christ, it also pictures our union with each other. 1 Corinthians 12, 13. For in one spirit, we were all baptized into one body. So baptism is not only uniting us, picturing this union with Christ, but also this union, I would want to argue, with Christian to Christian with it within their own church. So there's lots we could say about this. But but Christians make their confession of who Christ is. That is like they're waving their flag, like I'm a believer, Jesus died for me, you know, I'm a member of the new covenant, I'm in on this, and they're the way they're authorized to wave that flag is through

baptism. I bought a house a couple of years ago and I had to sign my name on like 100 pieces of gigantic paper, and we it's like a race, you know, and like that that's verifying my my identity and it's saying, yeah, I'm on the hook for all this money and this alone now, you know. But the way a Christian owns that they're with Jesus is biblically, it's through baptism. I think it's even helpful to kind of go back another step. Like conversion is when somebody enters this new covenant that God made with Jesus, and the Christian becomes the beneficiary. They're brought into God's family, adopted as his sons, they're justified, their sin is atoned for, they receive the Holy Spirit, but then that that covenant is publicly, demonstrably, visibly ratified when a group of Christians say, Hey, it sounds like you're with Jesus, you believe the same gospel we do. Let's bring you through these waters to symbolize your death, your old way of life, you're a new creation, you're risen with Christ. Come join us. That that covenant is ratified. And baptism through that then marks off the church from the world by gathering believers who come to Jesus one by one. So, I mean, we can keep going through this definition, but you know, you mentioned like universal church versus like local church, and this is where that distinction becomes visible. Whenever somebody repents of their sin and trusts in Christ, they're they're a Christian. And in that sense, you could think they're part of the universal church. I think it's helpful really to think about, I don't prefer to use the word universal church, but like historically people have used it, and that's fine. But I think with a little bit more clarity, is kind of this like eschatological and heavenly church. Because when you think about the word church, like ecclesia, like by definition, there's this assembling that has to happen. But like as much as you and I love each other, we tend to see each other every like, you know, five years in the flesh. You know, we're not gathering together all that often, certainly not weekly for like the preaching of the Bible and stuff like that. But according to Ephesians 2, 6, you know, you know, we've been united to the resurrected Christ who's ascended into heaven. And in some way, says Paul in Ephesians

2, we're we're there with him. And Hebrews, you know, is making the same point. Um, I think it's Hebrews chapter 10, where we've you know entered the assembly of the firstborn. Already all Christians are somehow like assembled in heaven with Christ. Not that we're physically there, but we're united to the Christ who is there. But how do you know who is who who's part of that heavenly church? Well, it's it's through Christians baptizing, saying, Hey, this guy is with Jesus, and we're, we'll get to this in a minute, I guess, but we're authorized on behalf of heaven to declare, yeah, you're with Jesus. They can make mistakes, and that's why there's church discipline. I'm not sure how much your audience likes to talk about church discipline, but I think it's super important, you know. But so, yeah, a church is a congregation of baptized Christians, and they've covenanted the new covenant that you know Jeremiah speaks of in Jeremiah 31, inaugurated through the death of Jesus, each Christian enters one by one as each is converted. But then this covenant is ratified actually through the ordinances, through baptism in the Lord's Supper. This is where the covenant is idea is kind of coming from. Whenever, you know, for example, like in my church, when we take the Lord's Supper together, we we always read our church covenant before we do so. It is summarizing like the New Testament's teaching of our commitments and promises really we make to one another. And we do that right before we're taking the Lord's Supper, because what's sort of happening in all this is we're saying, hey, like baptism was the first way I could officially fly on my Christian flag, but the Lord's Supper is the second one. It's saying, hey, you know, I'm remembering Jesus' death for me. I'm remembering he's brought me into the new covenant, but you know, I'm only really authorized to do this. Paul says five times in 1 Corinthians 11, take the Lord's Supper is when you come together as a church. So it's it's when the members are assembled, and by definition, like, okay, you must be a member in good standing. You're still turning away from your sin. You're still believing the gospel, you're still pursuing holiness. And it's within that web of like horizontal relationships

saying, Yeah, like you're still a member in good standing in here, that you're then authorized to make that vertical declaration. Yeah, we've covenanted, you know, to gather weekly. We see this pattern in the scripture of Christians on the Lord's Day, gathering together, the day the Lord Jesus was raised from the dead, you know, the first day of the new creation week, gathering weekly for preaching the Bible. What does Jesus say at the end of the Gospel of John? You know, feed my sheep, you know, he says to Peter a variety of times. Paul to Timothy, preach the word. So we're gathering for preaching. We see that in the example of these churches throughout the New Testament, for celebrating the ordinances. We've already talked about baptism and the Lord's Supper a little bit, and maybe we can come back to this later on if you want. But for loving the saints, Jesus talks about there's a new commandment I give to you. So in this new order, this new covenant community he's creating, he tells his followers to love one another just as I loved you, right? Self-sacrificially and for your good, witnessing to the lost. We see that, you know, example in so many, you know, churches of the New Testament. You know, 1 Thessalonians 1:8, this brand new church's faith has gone out of their congregation. So by the time the apostles show up in neighboring towns, they're like, hey, I'm out of a job. You know, these churches are sending missionaries, you know, Romans 10:15, Acts 13:3, and in all this glorifying God. Ephesians, I think 3 is helpful here, 3:20 and uh 21. Paul writes now to him, who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, according to the power at work within us. To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. For some reason, Paul thinks there's glory to God that's going to arise in churches, and that's what they're designed for. And he even puts that before saying in Christ in this verse. So, okay, so to give you that definition one more time, a church is a congregation of baptized Christians who have covenanted to gather weekly for preaching the Bible,

Covenant Commitment When Conflict Hits

Speaker 18:40

celebrating the ordinances, loving the saints, witnessing to the lost, and in all this glorifying God.

Speaker 1 18:46

When you were talking, I was thinking about this guy I was talking to a few months ago who he's an MBB, he's a member of my church, baptized member of the church, and all of a sudden, like he wasn't there anymore. He stopped coming. And I was like, What's going on with this guy? So I caught him after a few weeks. You know, people get sick or people move or people, you know, whatever. Uh so I caught him after a few weeks, and he said, Look, I had a fight with this guy, one of the elders at the church, and he said, I'll never go back to that place again. And I was like, Oh man, this is not a conversation for the phone. I said, Let me come over to your house, and we can talk about this. So I went over to his house and he said, you know, he said, like, man, I'm never going back there. And he said, I started going to another church in a different part of town. And he said, When the pastor saw me, he said, You're coming here. I can see that you're coming here wounded from your past experience. Welcome. Welcome. And I just remember thinking, like, man, you have covenanted with our congregation. You've covenanted with us, you're a covenant member of our church. And then you just break the covenant when you get into a fight with the elder and you go to another church. And instead of the pastor in the other church saying, dude, you need to put your your sacrifice down before you get to the altar and go reconcile with your brother. You need to go reconcile with him first. And then if you reconcile with him, then maybe you can come back. You can think about coming back to our church. But instead, the pastor was just like, Man, I can see you're wounded. Welcome. You know, I just thought like, man, we have such a pathetic understanding of

what it means to covenant with each other within the body of Christ.

Speaker 20:14

I wish I could say it was only MBBs who struggle with that. But where I am, there are tons of churches around, and that's I wish I could say that's not normal here, but unfortunately it is. I think it's not just a problem in the Middle East. I think it's a problem everywhere. I think it's difficult to say, like, I did wrong in some capacity, or that guy wronged me. And I gotta do the awkward thing of like saying, Hey, Jesus sort of told us that like a brother has something against the other. We've got to like go and tell him his fault, and like, here, here we go. That's what I'm doing. I that's awkward for like 99% of us.

Speaker 1 20:53

And um What do you think we don't understand about being covenanted to a local church, to a local body of Christ, when when the first uh wind of conflict comes, we can just piece out and join another church. And they also don't have a problem with the fact that we just left uh one body that we had covenanted with and joined another.

Baptism And The Lord's Supper

Speaker 21:15

This is a I think this is an excellent question. This is honestly something I think that like pretty much every church has to wrestle with because it affects so many different things. I think it's really helpful if you kind of understand the theology of the Lord's Supper. You know, we talk about this being an ordinance, it's something that Christians have supposed to do, celebrate the ordinances. Churches do that and they they've covenanted and there's somehow a relationship with all these different aspects. But like what's happening, like I think whether or not you grow dissatisfied with your present church and you want to escape or something, nevertheless, every Christian wants to continue to

affirm that they're a Christian and that like they're with Jesus and Jesus is with them, even if these These people over here are like giving them a hard time and they gotta get out of there. But like, what is the way Jesus is said to do that? Is it to get a t-shirt that says you know, John 3 16 on the back? Or is it to like whatever? I mean, there's there's two authorized ways to officially do this such that it's like sanctioned by scripture. The first is through baptism, and the second is through the Lord's Supper, because this is where the new covenant is being ratified. And in the new covenant, right, this is I will be your God and you will be my people. You know, I will remember your sin no more. All this kind of awesome stuff. You get the Holy Spirit. Like that's what happened when Jesus atoned for our sin forever and imputes to us his righteousness. So, and we get that upon conversion. But that covenant is being officially ratified. And by ratify, I mean like, imagine you've got like, let's just say, like in the United States, the president authorizes an ambassador to go negotiate with the folks in Paris about some treaty, some trade deal. The ambassador can go and like make the deal happen in Paris, but he's got to come back and whoever, to the House of Representatives or the Senate, somebody's got to actually like vote to like agree to the terms that the ambassador made. Like it's like part two of the of like the affirmation process and enactment. They've got to ratify what that ambassador's done. So the Christian has been converted upon repentance and faith, but that that's when they enter the new covenant. But that new covenant is being ratified when they take the Lord's Supper. But again, like you can't just do that on your own. Paul says again and again and again, five times in 1 Corinthians 11, it's when you come together as a church, you know, that you're gonna remember the new covenant. So therefore, I've got to actually like assemble with my brothers and sisters, and I've got to be a member in good standing with them, such that they can keep saying, Hey, yeah, I mean, like you're not perfect, but like I see that you're dying to your sin. I see that you're like, you even confessed your sin to me yesterday. I see that you're

remembering the promises of God to you in the gospel. You're a Christian. You know, you're you're a member in good standing with us. Like, take the Lord's Supper. But that is at the same time ratifying our covenant with God and with one another. And so I think if I, you know, when I just in my own mind try to put this most crisply, like, what's the breakdown? It's I think I'm free to declare that I'm a Christian or live the Christian life in freedom from how God's bound me in scripture. I can't call myself a Christian officially unless there's a bunch of other Christians who are calling me that as well. They're authorized to do that through church membership, and which is summarizing our covenantal relationship with each other, the promises we've made to each other.

Speaker 1 24:53

I think this is very interesting because one of the things I've observed on the field is that both the Lord's Supper and baptism are, I mean, nobody disagrees with that we should be doing them. Everybody says we should be doing them. I think a lot of people kind of don't understand why we're doing them. So, for example, with baptism, I know you know some cross-cultural workers who, when they want to baptize a new MPB, they're like, take them out in the desert and find an oasis, separate them from everyone, including the church, you know, and just kind of baptize them, baptize them in the oasis and then send them back, baptize them in a vacuum without the church there. And also, I remember talking to somebody, she was the wife of a senior leader in some organization. I asked her where she was going to church because of course we're out where I live, you know, we have international church. We're very blessed, you know. We have international churches, we have local local Arab churches and so on. There are many different options one can choose from. She said, No, you know, we don't go to church. Uh, I was like, You don't go to church at all?

Speaker 25:53

Uh and she said, And this is like Christian ministry she's part of?

Speaker 1 25:56

Yeah, she was the wife of a senior leader of uh church planting organization. I said, When was the last time you went to church? She said, probably two years ago when I was back in my home country. And I said, I said, so you haven't had the Lord's Supper for two years. And she said, Yeah, but it's not a big deal. She said, I don't struggle remembering that Jesus died for me, so I don't really need to take the Lord's Supper. So, you know, you can see both in the Lord's Supper and in baptism, we're just like, we don't even know what they are. We don't even know why we're doing them. And that's obviously, I mean, that's not coming from the field, that's coming from poor discipleship back in our home churches. That's right.

Speaker 26:33

Yeah, that's right. Absolutely. So, and I think, you know, you talk about membership earlier. I mean, I don't know if you've read this book. Bobby Jameson has a super helpful book. Going public baptism is required for church membership. And it's just a helpful, like biblical case, like outlining how this stuff works. At the end of the day, Christians know in the New Testament churches, they're baptizing and they were taking the Lord's Supper, but it's the promises and the commitments that are captured in both of those that theologically create church membership. Now, church member membership is still a word like in the Bible that we should not throw out. First Corinthians 12, 27. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. So you gotta like deal with that, you know. Um, but there's there's a series of like verses here. I mean, we already looked at 1 Corinthians 12, 13. But what I want to do with this is like it's it's baptism and the Lord's Supper that create this idea of membership, which is this covenantal relationship. Right? Why? Because baptism and the Lord's Supper ratifying the new covenant, but it's also binding us not only to Christ but to each

other. First Corinthians 12, 13, Paul writes, for in one spirit, we were all baptized into one body. And 1 Corinthians 10, 17, because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread, right? Paul can say, when you take the Lord's Supper together with one bread, you're actually like being bound in into one body. It's it's you take the Lord's Supper together as a church, you are one body. And then in 1 Corinthians 12, 27 we just looked at, it's using all this language again: one body, one body. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. Baptism brings you in to membership. The Lord's Supper continues to ratify your ongoing status in it. There's different other ways we could look at this too. Like, what is it members do with each other? You know, will they exercise, you know, care, accountability, and oversight of each other? There's about 75 of these one another, you know, so-called commands in the New Testament. Bear one another's burdens, outdo one another in showing honor, encourage each other, pray for each other, love one another, this, that, and the other one another. Like literally, like 75 of these. And then there's also negative ones, you know, like do not provoke one another. You know, there's a bunch of those too. Well, who am I supposed to do that with? Like my next door neighbor? Well, no, it's those that, like, you know, are are bought by the blood of the Lamb and whom you've already committed to. It's not confusing who the one another object is. It's not just all people anywhere and everywhere, but it's fundamentally those for whom Christ died that you've already committed to in church membership. These are my membership obligations. You can think more about even like the inherent like authority and authorization of structures within the church that kind of go into this too. But yeah, it's super important, I think. And

Keys Of The Kingdom And Authority

Speaker 29:20

and it really affects the Christian life.

Speaker 1 29:22

Maybe tell me how you think it affects the Christian life. And then I would actually like to talk about those authority structures. So when you say it actually affects the Christian life, what do you mean by that?

Speaker 29:30

Uh and I think they go together, this and the the next question very closely. If it's not clear to me what a church is and what a church member is, then I'm gonna be a little bit rudderless, I think, in my in my regular ongoing Christian life. It's not gonna be real clear to me, like, why do we keep assembling every Lord's Day? Like, do we have to? And like if I don't love the preaching, is it the preacher's fault? Is it my fault? Is it is it a thing indifferent? And how do I think about this? And how do I think about my relationships with other church members? Like, should I even think about that? Like, should they be my friends? Like, should they be my closest friends? Even if we're not exactly like each other, should I still like be hospitable? Or like, should I just hang out with my college friends, you know, or people that I've come to enjoy from work who aren't believers or who maybe who are believers, but they don't go to my church. So I think it it dramatically affects the Christian life. I think in terms of the authority structures, I'm a pastor of a Baptist church. I thank God for like gospel preaching, other churches that aren't Baptist churches, but I do honestly think that they'd be helped by becoming Baptist churches. And like the only reason I say that is because I think it's biblical. There's an individual who our church is having conversations with who has embraced a very different understanding of the gospel and um a very different understanding of church. He wants to be biblical, but he also is very happy with listening to later sources from church history. But I think one of the things that I was wanting this individual and individuals like him to consider is it's great to think about church tradition and church history. There's often a lot of valuable stuff there that you got to be super discerning. But at the end of the

day, like, don't you want to do what Jesus does? And don't you want to do what Jesus said? And if you're like off-kilter with him, like, isn't that a huge problem? So to think about like a positive like prescription for what church is that we ought not to deviate from, it's helpful just to see like, does the New Testament seek to like bind our church's practice? And I want to say the answer is yes. And some people may think that's very crippling, but I just want to say, like, I think it's really freeing. Like, we don't have to be confused, we don't have to innovate, we don't have to see in every three to five years if things don't work, how we need to change. I think for folks who are contributing financially, you don't have to like bind their consciences to participate in stuff and give to stuff that like isn't in the Bible. You know, it's just very clear. Okay. But in Matthew 16, the word church comes up, and it comes up also in in chapter 18. So this is the passage where Peter ends up answering some questions from Jesus, but Jesus wants people is is inquiring, you know, hey do people say that the Son of Man is? And eventually in verse 16 of Matthew 16, Simon Peter replied, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. 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. 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. 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. So again, this is Matthew 16, 16 to 19. And the big idea here is that Jesus authorizes the church. So Peter, representing, I think, the apostles here, is entrusted to get who Jesus is correct, and then to make sure that others get who Jesus is rightly as well. So it's kind of the like the two big ideas here. You know, what is the church built on? What is this rock fundamentally? It's it's Peter's confession, you know, you're the Christ. Now he gets who he is wrong right after this. You're not gonna suffer, you know. And he asked originally in verse 13, who do people say the Son of Man is, right? Peter hasn't figured out that he's like this dude from

Daniel 7 who ends up doing the things that only God does, you know, like the Sabbath is his, and you know, and he forgives sins. But within the wider context of Matthew 16, it's okay, what is this confession of Jesus? He's he certainly is the Messiah, but he's also God who came to die for us. And then Peter needs to take that understanding of Jesus and see, like, hey, do you overhear, like, is that your understanding of Jesus? And then does your life match it? So it's like the gospel confession being matched with gospel confessors. So that's when he talks about on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 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. So what is Peter binding and loosing? It's this is the language, and the rabbi would have to make judicial pronouncements with this binding and loosing. If the rabbis would bind or loose something, that would be some, you know, this interpreted, you're you're bound to do this, or you're loose from doing this. You must do this, is what scripture says, or you're freed from it, binding and loosing. It's this judicial pronouncement. These keys are this authorization. Jesus is telling Peter, here's this heavenly authorization that I am bestowing upon you and the apostles to make sure that gospel confessions are accurate and that potential gospel confessors get that correct. So that's what's going on there. But then in Matthew 18, when you turn over, these keys of matching gospel confessors to gospel confessions is now not only for the apostles, it's apparently for the church. So in 1815, it says, 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, 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. 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. Surely 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. 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, for where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. So this same binding and loosing, matching this proper understanding of the identity and role right of of Jesus needs to be matched from two individuals who are making that confession. And here it's sort of the negative example. You know, Matthew 16 was positively getting Jesus right. Here, here it's negative, like perhaps it's it's with their words, like, hey, I don't believe in hell anymore. Or, you know, maybe it's it's with their life, like, hey, you know, fellow church member, like it's not okay to like have an affair. You know, you need to repent. And eventually, if individuals are not interested in eventually listening to the church, the church is charge to put them out of their fellowship. So no longer identify and affirm this individual as a Christian, as someone who is part of the gathering. It's your job, you're authorized to basically match what's true on earth with what's true in heaven. So, like a while ago, we were talking about how this distinction between the eschatological and heavenly church versus the local church. And like here it shows up. I want the role on earth to match that which is in heaven. And I want you to go ahead on earth to make that pronouncement of what they should expect to hear from me on that last day, you know, when they're assembled before me. This is the authorization of the church, which fundamentally, I would want to argue, gives the gathered congregation authority over the doctrine of the church, who is Jesus, and then also the membership of the church, get you know, who is who is a gospel confessor, who's who's a true Christian. Elsewhere in Acts chapter six, we see that the congregation has authority over its leaders. They're electing deacons. And I think you can show similarly, and elsewhere for election of elders, but here also in Matthew 18, you see the congregation having authority over discipline. So I think there's four fundamental things that the gathered congregation has authority over then, right? Membership, discipline, doctrine, and leadership. And many people would conceive of the leadership

aspect being a function of doctrine, who are those who are going to be most charged with leading the church doctrinally. But this is where I think this is really no longer maybe abstract or esoteric, but really affects the life of the church member. If a member of your church understands that they're authorized by Jesus to guard the doctrine and the membership of the church, they're gonna listen closely to what's being preached, you know, from the pulpit. And they're gonna, you know, be listening. Like, like, is my pastor getting the gospel right? Is he becoming a heretic? Like, has he become a Jehovah's Witness or is he being faithful to scripture? Paul in Galatians 1 can say, even if I, you know, an apostle or an angel from heaven is preaching you a different gospel, like let him be, you know, anathematized. And I think it's like Galatians 4.25, where it's like, drive out, you know, this individual through the image of Hagar, right? So the church is supposed to remove right false teachers from their midst. It's supposed to guard the doctrine of the church. But they're also, you know, guarding the membership of the church. So when we present new member candidates to the church, we don't want to do that until a sufficient amount of time has passed, like a crazy amount of time, but where the church has an honest opportunity to like get to know this individual, see their life a little bit, hear how they talk about the Lord, see if they get the gospel right. The elders will certainly do a new member interview with them and then we'll end up recommending them to the congregation and presenting a snapshot of their testimony. And there's a new members class where we're going to the documents of the church and the statement of faith and things like that. But it ultimately it's the congregation that's got responsibility over these matters. Now, as elders, we want to set the congregation up for success to handle this authority, these keys. But ultimately, we better, because it's theirs on a Sunday morning when the saints gather here, they're gonna engage each other like after the service and follow up with each other. Is Joe still repenting of his sin and believing the gospel? How can I encourage him? How can I pray for him? What are his struggles I can, you know, what

are his burdens that I can bear? Why? Why are they doing that? Because they're authorized with the membership and the doctrine of the church. When we come together for our members' meetings, which we'll have every other month, the congregation is gonna vote if there's any new elder candidates, they're gonna vote if there's ever a revision of the statement of faith, they're gonna vote on any new members potentially entering, they're gonna vote on transferring out any members, they're gonna vote if there's any church discipline cases because it's their authority. And this is like kind of where like you see the teeth of it, like the congregation actually needs to say yes, like we're gonna vote this individual in, we're gonna vote this individual out, yes, we're gonna elect this individual as an elder, as a deacon, or whatever we're gonna do. But again, that isn't then incentivizing them when we gather together on the Lord's Day and throughout the week to pursue each other, to apply the gospel to each other's lives. Why? Because it's the it's the members of the church who've got authority over the doctrine and over the membership of the church, and therefore to be in each other's lives, discipling each other.

Speaker 1 40:39

Does that make sense? Uh it does, and I think a lot of people have pushback from their own church experience because their own church experience has been more like going to a movie theater and watching a movie than anything else. So, what you're what you're kind of explaining here is that this is a new race of people, a new community of people bound together by a covenant, and people actually have responsibility over it, like everyone has responsibility over everyone

When Church Feels Like You Get Nothing

Speaker 1 41:10

in the church, and leadership is there to kind of guide that along. But it's very different than just you know coming and you know, listening to a sermon and then heading out. But I did want to ask,

okay, so here's what I hear a lot. I hear a lot with people who they just say, like, I'm I just don't get anything out of it. Or why should I be part of a church when I'm not really getting anything out of it? What would you say to that person?

Speaker 41:33

I think there could be a variety of reasons underlying this. Maybe the sermons are like 10 minutes long and they're very shallow. If the leaders of that church have no desire of providing more substance, then maybe that's not the best place for that missionary and that missionary to bring those whom they're evangelizing and their family to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. So there's places where someone's not getting a lot out, because unfortunately there's not a lot of there. But there's other times where maybe there's just not a lot of church options, and this just is what it is, and it's a true church, they are preaching the gospel, they do believe the right gospel, but their pastor doesn't have a PhD in New Testament and they're doing the best they can, or their style just isn't your style, or you love podcasts and books, and you know, you get more out of that than than than the sermon. And I think that's okay. But I think fundamentally, when you think about back to the definition of the church, if you want to, or even like, you know, traditionally how how the marks of the church have been discussed in, you know, Protestant history, there's two chief marks, the right preaching of the word and the right administration of the ordinances. Now, the right preaching of the word is the gospel being preached. And I, again, I want to argue you should do it expositionally, it's just gonna work better in the long run. Less pressure on the pastor, too, let me tell you. But but secondly, the right administration of the ordinances, like, why do you care about that? Well, it's because that's what actually constitutes the church. That's what creates the membership of the church. So, because it's this one of two marks of the church, uh, fundamentally, and this authorization that we see Jesus gives to the church, your job as a church member is to watch over, to care for, to encourage, to

bear the burdens of, to disciple uh the other members. It's very normal in my part of the world for people to have the same kind of mentality. It's a very really consumeristic one, you know, how much am I getting out of it and does it suit my preferences? But the the better kind of more New Testament practice is to think I'm coming to bring glory to God and to and to find out how I can encourage and get to know and help my brothers and sisters along. So there's always certain sermons where I don't learn a ton, and there's other ones where I'm like, you know, I'm tired and like maybe I'm not getting as much out of. And like that's just how it goes. But again, it's my if it's my job to like make sure that other folks in my congregation are are getting along and growing in the grace. Of the Lord, then um whatever. Like that's totally independent of what's being preached. It's not totally independent, it informs it, but but it's and by your job you mean as a member because you're a member of the church.

Speaker 1 44:12

That's not because you're a staff member.

Speaker 44:14

Exactly.

Planting A Church With Few Believers

Speaker 44:15

Just any member, a 24-year-old member, an 80-year-old member. Yeah, any every member.

Speaker 1 44:20

So this is very structured, this is very organized. But have you thought about like in frontline ministry when you know there are no local churches and you've got three believers and the missionary? Then what do you do? Have you have you uh given that any thought?

Speaker 44:33

So I mean, obviously, you it's good before you arrive in such a situation like that to know that you're setting yourself up to be in a situation like that and to come in prepared. I don't encourage members of my church to go to a part of the world, all things being equal, where there's no church. You know, you're a Christian. Like God has He cares about your job, but He cares more about like His church.

Speaker 1 44:58

I'm talking about a missionary who's going, who's going to places where there is no church because specifically because there is no church.

Speaker 45:05

Yeah. So what I would say there is, have you thought really clearly about what the church is and how to provide the foundation of one for Lord willing ages to come? And if you've not, then I would just hit pause and and make sure you have. Have you thought about like the structure of the church? You know, have you thought about like how the elders lead the congregation to exercise this authority? Have you thought about, you know, what happens when the church gathers together? What are they going to do? What are they not going to do? Have you thought about the documents of the church, et cetera? And like how that all hangs all the ties all these things into each other. But this is what I would encourage someone who we could send out of our church to find themselves in a situation like that. I would want them to understand already and kind of have like provisional church documents in place, summarizing all these things. So we talked about the church's authorization. We talked a, we just hinted at how the elders lead. So that kind of stuff gets written up in like a church constitution. We've talked about membership responsibilities. That's a church covenant. We've talked about like a little bit about the church's guard and the doctrine. And, you know, there's certain necessary things that Jesus is the right answer to who the Son of Man is and who's a

wrong answer. What's this statement of faith that they're going to hold to? What's going to bind them together? You want to kind of go ahead and think through that stuff. You want to think through who's going to be with you. And maybe it's, you know, your family and one other family before there's any believers out there. And you need to think through like, we actually need to form ourselves into a church. We need to covenant together. And maybe while we're working on Arabic, we'll take turns. I'll preach one week, you preach the next week. We're going to have elders. We may only have four members, you know, but we're going to be a church because our wives need to grow. We need to grow. We need accountability, care, and oversight. And frankly, this is like God's design and like there's no workaround. So we're going to do that. And as soon as our friends who are unbelievers start coming, you know, maybe we'll flip over the language into Arabic. Maybe we'll start preaching into Arabic in that way. And we may be teeny tiny and we may be meeting in a living room. But like there's nothing in the New Testament about how many chairs you need or what the lighting needs to be. That is really irrelevant. What does matter is is there a congregation of baptized Christians who have covenanted to gather weekly for preaching the Bible, celebrating the ordinances, loving the saints, witnessing to the lost and all this, glorifying God. You can do that with a thousand people. You had more than that in Solomon's Portico in the early chapters of Acts, you can do that with just a few people. It doesn't really matter. But I would say that's what I would encourage. Okay, I say one more thing. Um, you know, you're discipling the individual you're evangelizing or the new convert when you bring them into whatever it is you're doing, your Bible study, your house fellowship, or your church. And if the New Testament has like a prescribed practice of like what church is and how that's Jesus' really discipleship program. Jonathan Lehman has a book called Don't Fire Your Church Members, a case for congregationalism. I think he calls it, you know, Jesus Discipleship Program because of what I'm talking about. It's incentivizing and authorizing members to be involved,

discipling each other, calibrating each other's lives to the gospel into Christian maturity because they have these keys. But that's what you're modeling and instructing. And if missionaries don't need the church, there's no way a new convert needs the church. But if missionaries need the church and they're modeling, like, you know, an excellent version of it, then this is gonna be golden. Like, no matter if it's slow, no matter if there's very few converts, that just doesn't matter. Like conversion is the work of the Lord. I think you just expect God to get glory in the church, as you say you would in Ephesians 3, right? So even if it's small, even if it's hard work, now you got to prep a sermon, oh man, it's worth it. You're you're you're modeling and you're calibrating yourselves, which you need yourselves need already, and this, you know, hopeful later

Bible Study Versus A True Church

Speaker 49:00

believer or or new believer in into what the Christian life is.

Speaker 1 49:03

Maybe just real quick, what would you say is the difference? What makes a church when you think about like say a group of people coming together to study the Bible together, the difference between a Bible study and having a church? So if you're four guys, four four people having a Bible study, yeah, uh, and you're asking maybe these kind of inductive questions to one another, uh, what's the difference between that? Would you consider that a church? What's the difference between that and a church?

Speaker 49:30

Again, like like the fundamental dividing line is is this regular group of Christians, are they are they gonna baptize individuals into its group and are they gonna take the Lord's Supper together? And as soon as you do that, you are taking the like signs of of being a church onto yourselves. You're declaring

yourselves to to be a congregation. And now you I guess you need to make sure, like, is are we really willing to be committed to each other? Are we gonna be willing to elect elders? Are we gonna like commit to get together every single week for preaching the Bible, that kind of thing? But it's baptism and the Lord's Supper, which are designed to mark off everything else in the world from a church. So when I have a Bible study with my neighbors, we're not a church. When I have a Bible study with other church members in my home, you know, this is like a small group of the church. But if we were to start taking the Lord's Supper, we would be declaring like independence from our from the from like the main church, you know, the the church that we're members of, you know, that'd be a weird thing to do. But like that's sort of what's actually happening. Because that whole like, remember first Corinthians 10:17, those who partake of the of the one loaf are one body because there is one loaf, right? So it's those who are taking the Lord's Supper together is Jesus' way of saying that is what constitutes a church. Because again, it's capturing like their membership commitments one to another and their willingness to be his body here on the earth.

Speaker 1 51:04

Man,

Slow Faithful Work And Closing Charge

Speaker 1 51:05

I think uh that's a lot to think about, and I think it's really helpful. It certainly gives me a lot to think about. And there are, I mean, there are so many more questions and things we could talk about, but maybe we'll save that for another time. Was there anything that you had on your mind that you wanted to say that we didn't cover?

Speaker 51:20

We talked a lot about like what the church is. We've kind of gotten into some of the weeds on it, which I think is really

important, honestly. Like if you're a missionary, this is your job, you know, is to be an expert in these matters. So I'm really grateful that you want to talk about this as a pastor. Like, I gotta know this stuff as a missionary. You know, your your job fundamentally at the end of the day is to be in the business of starting and strengthening other churches. But what's a church then, you know, and then how do you start? How do you strengthen? I would just encourage, you know, you all your listeners, you may not agree with everything I say, but I think it's good to like go back to scripture to see like where do you agree, where do you disagree, and why, and how do you have like a fully orbit, like really deep understanding of the local church? I think if you do this and you've got like a like a sound ecclesiology doctrine of the church, that is only going to help what you're doing. As a pastor of this church for five years, but I grew up in this and I've been around here for 30 years. You can do a lot of different things fast that often have no payoff down the road. And it's like that in a lot of areas of life, you know. I I don't want any like doctors that I go see who just flew through medical school, you know. I want the guys who worked hard, who know what they're talking about, you know, who spent a lot of time and a lot of blood, sweat, and tears on this. I don't want to, you know, buy a house and the lawyer who's representing me to flown through law school and have no idea what he's doing and he's really cheap, you know, and he can get it done immediately, but like it's not gonna stand up in court. You know what I mean? There's just certain things where it's just worth the effort and it's fine going slow. And if God is the one who gives the growth, then like you leave that up to him. But you do what his word has said, and it's gonna be great, and he will bring the growth. You don't manipulate based off of you know what you think is gonna work. Uh, you go to scripture.

Speaker 1 53:09

Amen, brother. Amen. Hey, thanks so much uh for being with me today. I really appreciate it.

Speaker 53:13

You're so welcome. Love you, man.

Speaker 1 53:15

Amen. To that well, I hope that really brought some encouragement to you. I know it did for me. I know this idea of resting in God, let him build his church, and we just be faithful to what he's instructed us to. That really brings me a lot of comfort, a lot of rest. Well, before we end, I just want to remind you that it's okay to be normal.