

You and Church Basics

Jack Hughes

January 7, 2007

This morning, we're going to do something a little different. That is, [I'm] not going to be preaching from Luke. [I'm] going to start a special series on the Church. We're going to be all over the Bible, so I'm not going to tell you to turn anyplace yet.

Every once in a while, the elders start talking, "We've been seeing people who are confused about certain things, and one of the things is about the Church, and our responsibility in the Church, and what we are to be doing as a church."

I say to myself, "I taught on that... four years ago." Time just goes by so fast that I don't realize that, yeah, there are probably some people here [now] who weren't here four years ago. So, what we're going to do is a six-week series—and I'm not going to promise that—but, I'm intending on doing a six-week series covering some of the basics of the Church, what the Church is, and what we are to be doing about the Church.

There is this fancy term that theologians use [when talking about the Church.] Sometimes I hate to even say these words, but I don't know what other words to use because [they're] the word[s]. The word is "ecclesiology"—probably not a term a lot of you use very often. But, the Greek word [that] is usually translated "church" in the New Testament is "ekklesia," so [the theologians] basically take that Greek word and tack on the word "ology"—the "study of"—so "ecclesiology" is the big term. It's

the study of the Church. The word “ekklesia” in the Greek basically means those who are called out into an assembly.

This morning, we’re going to be talking about Church basics—you and Church basics. And, as we shall see, it’s not so basic. The questions we’re going to be answering are going to take some time. We’re going to answer four basic questions, but the answers to those questions are not so basic. You’re going to have to really concentrate hard. The good thing is [that] in the next weeks I’m going to slow way down, and we’re going to look at these [basics] in pieces. But, this morning I’m going to give you something I usually tell my seminary students not to do, which is called a “data dump sermon.” What you are going to get this morning is the “data dump,” and then in weeks to follow we will slowly work through all this data.

If you look in the dictionary under the word “church,” you find some interesting definitions. Here are some that I found. It’s a building for public worship, as in, “They just finished building a nice, new church.” Or, [it is] a location where religious activities take place, as in, “Let’s go to church.” Or, [it is] a religious service, as in, “Let’s hurry so we are not late for church.” Or, [it is] clergy or paid pastors: “We will have to get permission from the church,” which means, “Let’s talk to the pastor.” Or, [it is] a religious authority, as in, “The Church, contrary to the government, has determined that abortion is wrong.” Or, [it is] a Christian denomination, as in, “The Presbyterian Church.” Or, [it is] a profession, as in, “I considered the church as a career.” Or, [it is] a time of public worship, as in, “I’ll be there *after* church.” Or, [it is] an optional religious task [that] people can choose whenever they want, as in, “I sporadically attend church.” Or, [it is] the doctrines of the Christian faith, as in, “Many are starting to set aside church morals.” Or, [it is] the Roman Catholic Church, as in “The head of the church, Pope Pius, has said we should pray to Mary,” speaking of the Roman Catholic Church. Or, [it is] a place of public worship for a non-Christian religion, such as, “They worship at the Mormon Church.” Or, [it is] any non-Christian religious society, [such as] the “Jewish church.”

These are just fourteen wrong definitions, the ones you see in most dictionaries. These are the ones we use a lot of times. I say, “Hurry up, we’re going to be late for church.” I tell my kids that all the time. “We’ve got to get to church,” as if “church” is a location, or a time. Or, “Yeah, they’re going to paint the church,” [which,] if you know the biblical definition [of “church”], is pretty funny.

This morning, we’re going to try and answer four basic questions concerning the Church. The first is: What is the Church? Let’s start out there. If you’re going to talk about something, you’ve got to get down to the definition. I hate to drag you through the mud of this, but here it is. We’ve got this word “church.” We know that in society and the dictionaries there are tons of definitions. But what about [in] the Bible? Well, in the Bible, the term “ekklesia” is used in two basic ways. One way is in a general sense, which describes people who assemble. For instance, in Acts 7:38, it speaks of Israel as a “congregation in the wilderness.” That word “congregation” is the word “ekklesia.” Later on, in Acts 19:32, it’s translated [as] “an assembly” and it’s referring to this big, confused mob. So whenever there is a group, there can be a general use of the term “church,” or “ekklesia.”

But there are hardly any occurrences of the general usage [of the term]. Usually, in the New Testament, [“ekklesia”] speaks of a specific group, a very special group. In Matthew 16:18, after Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” [16:16], Jesus said, “I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.” Jesus says some interesting things: “I am going to call out My own assembly in the future, Myself, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” That is the first special usage of the word “ekklesia.” Later on, in Matthew 18:17, in that classic text on church discipline, it says, “You go confront the person, if he doesn’t repent, take two or more. If that doesn’t happen, you bring him before the church, and you tell it to the church—the whole assembly.” That is another special usage of the word speaking of this group of people that are called out—Christians.

When you look in the book of Acts, you see [that] the first time this word [“ekklesia”] appears [in Acts] is in Acts 5:11, but the people who are called the “church” [in this verse] are all those who have come to the Lord from Acts 2–4. When the apostles preached at Pentecost, when the tongues of fire came down, when thousands began to be saved [see Acts 2:1–41], those [people] are called “the church,” an assembly of believers in Jesus Christ who are called out of the world into the light of the gospel, who, by grace through faith, have repented of their sins and placed their faith in Jesus. They are the church.

You might say, “Well, yeah, I know that.” But the question is this: Do you know what the “invisible church” is? You might be thinking, “Well, that sounds fun. I would like to be invisible.” It’s like the Invisible Man comes to know Jesus. He’s part of the invisible church.

Well, this is where things get kind of strange because you’ll hear somebody say, “Yes, well, you know the universal, invisible church. . . .”

And you’re thinking, “What is that? Invisible?” Well, the invisible church is a reference to all true believers whether [they are] on earth or in heaven. All the elect of all the ages comprise the “invisible church.” If you want to speak of [all of those elect] inclusively, you say the “universal, invisible church.” If you want to scare people in Protestant churches, you say, the “catholic, invisible church.” The word “catholic” [just] means “universal,” [but] every time Edward decides to do a creed and it talks about the “holy, catholic church,” the bristles go up on the backs of [some people’s] head[s], and they come up, [and say] “Hey, what are you talking about the creed of the ‘holy, catholic church’?” Well, all that’s talking about is the universal, invisible church, not to be confused with Roman Catholicism.

When you look in the Scriptures and you see a text like Hebrews 12:23, it says, “to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven,” you know that it’s talking about the invisible church. It’s invisible because only God knows who true believers are. All the true believers of all the ages are part of the invisible church.

So, that's pretty easy. Then we get into another term: the "local church," or the "visible church." Calvary Bible Church is a local church, part of the visible church. That is, I can see you, you can see me, we can drive around and see other people worshipping in different buildings. We are the visible church. The visible church is different from the invisible church in that the visible church, which is comprised of local churches like ours, contains both believers and unbelievers.

The Scriptures talk about local churches in a lot of different ways. Sometimes they talk about little house churches, like in Romans 16:5, or Colossians 4:15, [where] Paul addresses little groups of believers meeting in certain people's houses as "the church at" Bob's house. Whenever a group gathered together, they were the church at that house.

Later on [in Scripture], you see more general uses [of the term], but [they] still [refer to] the specific group of professing believers, like in Acts 13:1, [where] Luke speaks of the church at Antioch, which includes all of those little, local groups of believers as a whole—all of [those groups] in Antioch are "the church at Antioch." Paul talks to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 1:2, [and] speaks "to the church of God which is at Corinth." Or, in Revelation in the beginning chapters, in 2 and 3, it gives the letters to the "church in Ephesus," or Smyrna, or whatever. Those are local churches. So whenever you're talking about a "local church," you're talking about groups of professing believers who get together and most of them say they are believers in Jesus. [The "local church" is] the people you see coming to a certain location to worship the Lord.

There are believers *and* unbelievers in the local church. There are *only* believers in the invisible church, [and] only God knows who the invisible church is, we don't. We can guess, but we don't know. So, whenever you're talking about the totality of local churches, you're talking about the universal, visible church—all [of] the local churches in the world. If you want to be precise, that's how you do it. So, Calvary Bible Church is one local church, we have people here who are part of the invisible church, and we are part of the universal, visible church on earth.

Now, you're thinking, "Well, I'm glad we got that taken care of." Well, we haven't gotten it taken care of yet. You may have heard the term "Church Militant." That's kind of a scary term today, when you're thinking of religious militants. I don't know about you, [but] I think about "Islamic militants." So, when you start thinking of the "Church Militant," what does that mean? If you sing old hymns and stuff, [they] talk about the "Church Militant," and you're thinking "Hmm. Do we need bombs, and tanks, and guns, now, as Christians? Is that what it's talking about?" No. The Church Militant is the visible church on earth doing what God wants it to be doing: engaging in spiritual warfare, fighting the good fight, striving against sin and Satan, and evangelizing the lost. All of that is part of what is called "spiritual warfare" in the Bible. Paul says, for instance, in Ephesians 6:11–12:

Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

His point is, "For our struggle, believers, you Ephesians believers, you who are a part of the invisible church, your struggle," he doesn't say, "might be," [or] "sometimes is," [but], "always is"—you're always in a struggle. I don't know if you've ever [awakened] in the morning, and just [said], "I'm sinless! I'm fixed!" If that ever happens, you will be in heaven. You died in your sleep. No. We have to struggle just to do things like pray, and read our Bible, and serve, and just do those basic things. We're constantly struggling to do what is right. When we are striving to do what is right in the power of the Spirit, for the glory of God, we are doing spiritual warfare. Contrary to what some teach, spiritual warfare is not about casting out demons, and nullifying curses, and sprinkling holy water. Any believer who is living for the glory of God in the power of the Spirit according to the Word of God is doing spiritual warfare.

We are in a battle, and because it's not against flesh and blood, and we don't use guns and bombs and things like that, we have spiritual weapons. For instance, in 2 Corinthians 6:7, Paul says, "in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left." He's talking about picking up these weapons of righteousness, these spiritual resources we have in Christ, to do what God wants us to do: engage in battle. In 2 Corinthians 10:3–4, Paul says: "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses." In your mind you may think of bombs hitting big, concrete walls and knocking them down, but the fortresses, he goes on to say, are every lofty thought raised up against the knowledge of God. So, how do we do [spiritual warfare]? By bringing the truth to the world, sharing the gospel, [and] saying, "The Bible says this. The Word of God says that. God says this." When we bring God's truth and it confronts errors, lies, deceptions, and false doctrine, we are knocking down those mental fortresses so that we can take "every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" [10:5]. That is spiritual warfare. That is why we are the "Church Militant," because we are striving against sin, Satan, deception, lies, and errors.

There's another term. You may have heard of the "Church Triumphant." What's that? Well, the Church Triumphant is when, after we all finish the race [see 1 Corinthians 9:24; Hebrews 12:1], die, and are glorified in heaven, when all the believers of all the ages are in heaven, and we're perfect, sinless, glorified, and away from sin's presence, we are the "Church Triumphant" in heaven.

So, those are the terms that you're going to hear and which have some serious theological implications: the invisible church; the visible church, or local church; the Church Militant; the Church Triumphant. So, you have those down.

That is enough to think about. You're probably thinking, "I feel like one of the Israelites, [but instead of] quail [see Numbers 11:31–32], these definitions of the Church are coming out my nostrils." But we aren't through

yet. There are more. Once you come to the understanding that the Church is not a location, it's not a building, it's not a profession, it isn't a worship service, and it isn't a denomination, a religion, or some cult group, and you understand that believers are the Church, you are the Church, you don't have to go to church, you're already [there] if you know Jesus. You wake up [and you're] at church. See? Remember that, kids.

“Hurry up! We have to go to church!”

“Mom, I'm already there! I know Jesus.”

When you look in the Bible, believers are the Church. But believers are called a lot of different things in the Bible. Let me just give you some examples. For instance, in Acts 6:1, they are called “disciples.” In Acts 11:26, they're called “Christians.” Romans 8:9 refers to them as “in the Spirit.” Romans 8:29 refers to them as “those whom He foreknew,” and “predestined,” and the “brethren.” Romans 8:33 refers to them as “God's elect.” In 2 Corinthians 5:17, as “in Christ,” and “new creatures.” Ephesians 1:1 calls them “saints,” and “the faithful in Christ Jesus.” Colossians 3:12 speaks of them as “the chosen of God, holy and beloved.” In 1 Peter 1:23 as those who are “born again.” In 1 John 3:10, as “the children of God.” These are just some of [the things Christians are called], and there are just [loads] of these definitions of believers.

Then you add to that, not only all [of] the definitions we gave just to keep things sorted, and the definitions of Christians, then you have the definitions of groups of Christians, such as the “body of Christ” [Ephesians 4:12], the “members of Christ” [1 Corinthians 6:15], the “temple of God” [1 Corinthians 3:16], “building blocks,” the “bride” of Christ [see Revelations 19:7], the “sheep” [Matthew 10:16], the “flock of God” [1 Peter 5:2] the “children of God” [John 1:12] the “beloved of God” [Romans 1:7], the “chosen of God” [Colossians 3:12] the “elect” of God [Matthew 24:22], the “branches” hooked to the vine [John 15:5], and a bunch of other ones. So then, you think, “Well, no wonder we're confused. There are too many words speaking of the same thing.”

If you're sitting out there, and you're thinking, "OK, that was a terrific data dump, [but] what difference does it make whether I go to church, or choose the church, or [I'm] in the church, or whatever? Why all these definitions and why all this discussion?" Well, it makes a huge difference. It makes a huge difference in what happens here at Calvary Bible Church, a huge difference in your life and [in] the lives of other people.

I'm just going to give you some examples. Let's just say a person who is engaged in immorality—shacking up with his girlfriend—decides to come here and check things out for several months. The person is in sin. It's obvious—he's engaged in immorality—but he doesn't profess to be a Christian, he's just checking us out. Do we go to that person and rebuke him, confront him, try and get him to obey God? No. Why? [We don't do that] because he *can't* obey God. It is impossible for him to obey God. He is spiritually dead. He is devoid of the Spirit. He only and always sins. It doesn't matter that he is engaged in this sin, or that sin, or another sin. What matters is [that] he always sins and he only sins. So what needs to happen, first and foremost, is not, "Hey! You need to get your act together. Hey! You're living in sin." No, what needs to happen is, "You need to know Jesus. You need to come to Christ," because until he comes to Christ, he can never obey God for His glory—ever—because he is spiritually dead. That is huge!

If someone is an unbeliever, has not come to Christ, does not profess to be a Christian, his problem is not his immorality, his problem is hell and the wrath of God. That is his problem. Until he gets saved, no amount of confrontation, rebuke, or accountability will ever get him to be able to walk in holiness because he just can't do it. And you know what? This is huge if you're going to give somebody counsel. We all do it at times—before service, after service, talk[ing] to people during the week, talk[ing] to people on the phone, e-mails, whatever. You know, "Oh, I'm depressed. Oh, I'm struggling with this sin. Oh, I'm worrying. Oh, I'm anxious. Oh, I've got this trial in my life," whatever. People ask you for advice, and what's the most important thing you need to know? Is this person part of

the invisible church? Does this person know Jesus? Because if he doesn't know Jesus, I don't care what he thinks his problem is, his problem is hell and he needs Christ. Your only counsel is: "This is the gospel and this is what you do to become a Christian." Until you get to that place, nothing else in your life will get fixed. Nothing matters. People need to come to know Christ.

We can never be totally sure [of someone's salvation], but we can be sure that somebody understands the gospel, and understands how to be saved, and professes to be a Christian. [We can recognize] at least the bare minimum of resemblance of somebody who knows Jesus. And, sometimes we're wrong. Sometimes we think somebody's a Christian and he or she isn't.

Consider [the implications of this in regards to] church membership. What if we just said, "Listen, if you want to become a member of Calvary Bible Church, you just show up or call up the office and say, 'Hey, put me on the roll.' All right, we'll type you in. You're a member! You don't have to go to any membership class and learn about what we believe. You don't have to fill out an application and give your testimony. You don't have to get interviewed by an elder and get approved by the elders. You don't have to go through all that. You just sign up"? Think about the consequences of that. What would happen? Then we would have a whole bunch of unbelievers leading the church, teaching. People who are devoid of the Spirit, people who are held captive by Satan to do his will [see 2 Timothy 2:26], people who are spiritually dead, who don't have the Spirit, who can't understand the things of God [see 1 Corinthians 2:14], who are hostile to God [see Romans 8:7], who are unable to please God [see Romans 8:8], are teaching your children in Sunday school, leading you in worship up here. That would be a nightmare!

We're trying to do everything we can to prevent that kind of nightmare. But you know what? As careful as you can try and be, as fine as you can make the grid to try and strain people out, to make sure only the invisible church gets through, unbelievers still get through. They tell you all the right

things. They know all the right verses. They speak all the right jargon because they grew up in a Christian family, and went to a Christian school, and a Christian college, and they've got it all down. They convince you that they know Jesus. They get involved in ministry, and then two years later, they come to Christ. Praise God! We're trying to do everything we can to keep people who are like that [from] leadership because you know what? They have nothing to offer a believer.

So that's why [the terms, and the discussions, and all of this information we're learning] make a difference. There would be huge consequences if you didn't realize [that] there are tares among the wheat [see Matthew 13:25–40], and sheep among the goats [see Matthew 25:32–33]—always. You don't want to take the goats and the tares and put them into leadership because they really have nothing to offer. Only true believers, who know Jesus Christ, those who are part of the invisible church, have spiritual gifts, and can minister for the glory of God [should be in positions of leadership within the church]. OK, so that's the Church: true believers in Jesus Christ, those who are part of the invisible church.

Second question: Why is the Church unique? Have you ever thought about this? [Are] Adam, and Eve, and Noah, and Joseph, and Moses, and David, and Daniel part of the Church? No. Yes. No. Yes. People are going, “Hmmm. No. Yes. No. Yes.” Well, they were believers. You see, if you believe in what is called—big term—“covenant theology,” you believe that the church is defined as the “people of God.” Now, if that's your definition, the “people of God,” then that means [that] the Church existed in the Old Testament, that anybody who knew God in the Old Testament was part of the Church, and that the Church isn't something new, the Church is something old. But this is a false view. I'm going to explain why. It has huge ramifications in how you interpret hundreds, if not thousands, of Scriptures.

The Church did not exist until Acts 2, when the apostles first preached the gospel in the power of the Spirit, and people came to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, and then were united to the Church and received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Church never existed or even was re-

vealed in the Old Testament. For instance, in Romans 11:25 and 16:25, Paul describes his ministry to the Gentiles [and the] form[ation of] the church as a “mystery that has been kept secret for long ages past.” Kept secret. That is, it wasn’t before revealed, but the people of God were before revealed. Listen, the Jews had no idea. If you were to talk to a Jew before Jesus came along, and said, “Now, tell me, do you think when the Messiah comes you’re going to reject Him, hate Him, falsely accuse Him, have Him tried, crucified, and then God is going to take you and set you aside and He is then going to send His prophets, His apostles, out to the Gentile world and bring the Gentiles into the kingdom and give them the promises that were first spoken to Abraham?”

They would say, “What? Are you crazy? No way! No way! *We* are the chosen people; *we* got the universal promises. I mean, we have those unconditional promises given to Abraham, and *they* aren’t part of Abraham. They’re Gentile dogs!” That’s how they would think. See, and that’s what’s going on here. This is why the Church is unique.

Now, turn to Ephesians 2—we’re going to do a racing exposition [of Ephesians 2]. [From] Ephesians 2:11 and following, we’re going to go through [and] I’m going to make some comments. I want you to see the big picture of why the Church is such an incredible, unique, mind-blowing thing. Ephesians 2:11—look there. Paul says: “Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh,” so he’s talking about Gentiles. When he says “Gentiles in the flesh,” [he] is saying “you who are physically Gentiles,” that is, you’re not Jewish by nationality.” [The verse continues]: “Who are called ‘Uncircumcision’ by the so-called ‘Circumcision,’ which is performed in the flesh by human hands—“ the “Circumcision” refer[s] to the Jews who, out of their commitment, wanting to have the sign of Moses in obedience to the Law, were physically circumcised. The Gentiles, who did not have the law, who did not care to have that sign, were not—the “Uncircumcision” were the Gentiles.

Verse 12: “Remember that you were at that time. . . .” He’s speaking to the Gentiles and he’s going to tell them what they were like before Christ.

Listen to how bleak this is: “Remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” That is, the Gentiles were godless heathens headed for hell with no possibility of being saved. That’s what he basically says there.

[Verse 13]: “But now in Christ Jesus,” we know that phrase “in Christ Jesus” is a term speaking to those who are part of the invisible church—true believers—“you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” You have been brought in by the blood of Christ. Verse 14: “For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups,” Gentile and Jew, “into one,” the Church, “and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall.” Now just stop there. Picture in your mind this huge concrete wall, like the wall in Berlin. On this side we have Jews, [and] on [the other] side we have Gentiles. There’s this huge barrier in between the two groups, this dividing wall. What he’s talking about here is the Law of Moses and all the regulations [the Jews] added to it.

Verse 15: “By abolishing in His flesh,” His death on the cross, “the enmity,” and I know “enmity” is not a word probably most of you use, but it just means “that which causes hostilities or differences”—you have conflict between the two [peoples, Jews and Gentiles]. So the Jews over here are saying, “You Gentile dogs; you lawless pagans.”

The Gentiles are over there, [saying], “You religious hypocrites; you isolationists and legalists.” They’re at odds; they’re at enmity. This barrier is the enmity, and it’s separating this group of Jews from this group of Gentiles. The thing is, verse 15 says, that Jesus abolished in His flesh this barrier, “which,” [Paul] says, “is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances.” Jesus broke down the barrier—the Law of Moses and all the traditions that were added to it. [Verse 15 continues]: “So that in Himself He might make the two,” Gentile and Jew, “into one new man,” that is, the Church, “thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both,” Jew and Gentile, “in one body,” the Church, “to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.”

This is the whole thing. This text is so loaded it's just insane, but, this is how it is, basically, in summary: The Jews are the chosen people of God, the descendants of Abraham. The Jews receive the Law of God, the Jews receive the promises of God, of the coming Messiah, of eternal life. The Jews have all of that. In addition to that, they add on a whole bunch of their own regulations. Then they're on their side of the wall, saying, "You guys, [Gentiles], don't belong to us because you don't have the Law, and you don't have the promises, and you don't keep our traditions." Well, no duh. [The Jews] kept it from [the Gentiles]. They were supposed to be a light to the Gentiles [see Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47]. Instead, they used the Law and their traditions as this big wall [that] divided them from the Gentiles.

So Jesus comes along and He knocks down the wall. He sets aside the Law of Moses and He establishes the Law of Christ. He teaches His apostles and sends them out to preach the gospel that whosoever believes will be saved and brought into the kingdom [see John 3:16]. Whether Jew or Gentile, you all get in through faith in Christ under the new law system, the Law of Christ. And so, now all these traditions and the Law of Moses are no longer a barrier, they've been knocked down, and both Gentile and Jew are brought together through faith in Christ "into one new man" called the Church. That's where we are.

Look down at Ephesians 2:19. Paul now sums up what he has just been talking about to the Gentile Ephesian believers. It says: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens," which is what the Gentiles were before Christ, "but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household." There is an equality now with Jews in salvation—you are "fellow citizens with the saints," the holy ones, and you are of "God's household." Jews could never think about this. This is just totally new stuff called the "New Testament mystery."

Look down [at Ephesians 2:19–20]: "but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone." The apostles were the ones used by God to establish the Church, preach

the gospel, [and] communicate the Law of Christ, which replaced the Law of Moses so both Gentiles and Jews could be one together in the Church. Verse 21: “In whom the whole building,” speaking of the Church, “being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit,” speaking of true believers. This is just blasphemous, heretical, inconceivable to a Jew, and that’s why Paul calls it the “mystery,” that is, a truth never before revealed in the Old Testament.

Look down at Ephesians 3:1. Paul continues, and this is just incredible:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace which was given to me for you; that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief.

Again, this is something new, something never before revealed. Verse 4: “By referring to this,” this mystery that he was the steward of, that is, the gospel, “when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets,” New Testament times, “in the Spirit; to be specific,” and here’s the mind-blower, “that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” [3:4–6]. That is, by believing in the gospel of Jesus Christ they are brought in to the free gift of eternal life, brought in to the blessings of Israel, brought in to the promises of the Messiah.

Verse 7 [continues]:

Of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God’s grace which was given to me according to the working of His power. To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given,

to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ,
and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery.
[3:7–9]

[That] whole phrase just means “to bring to light the gospel,” which Paul was to be an administrator of, or, he was called to preach the gospel, “which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things” [3:9] It wasn’t around in the Old Testament.

Verse 10: “So that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known,” *now* made known—New Testament times—“through the church to the rulers and the authorities in,” this is weird, “the heavenly places.” Angels. The Church was so shocking, so unique, so special that even the holy angels never would have conceived that God would have taken His chosen people, Israel, and set them aside for a time to bring Gentiles into the kingdom of Christ and the promises made to Abraham and his descendants. [It was] just totally out of the realm of angelic thinking it was so unique. This is also why the Church never existed in the Old Testament. It was not revealed until the New Testament, it was not born until Pentecost. The Holy Spirit was not yet given. The gospel was not yet preached. Gentile and Jew were not brought together in “one new man,” which is the Church.

Paul, in Galatians 3:26–29, says this to the Jews and Gentiles:

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise.

You see that? When you place your faith in Jesus Christ, trusting in His life, His death, His burial, His resurrection, His person to save you [and] in that alone and are saved, you then become a spiritual child of Abraham,

if you're a Gentile, and you then receive the promises given to Abraham—"in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed" [see Genesis 22:18]. [You are brought into] the Abrahamic Covenant, and from that the Davidic covenant, and from that the New Covenant, and all those covenants that come into play here. You get all of those blessings promised to Israel because you are in Jesus, Jesus is the true Jew, and by being in Jesus you get to be the children of Abraham and receive the promises. That is what makes the Church unique, because it takes a group who formerly did not have the promises and could not be included, and includes them together with the Jews.

This whole time period when God is working to bring Gentiles into the kingdom is called the "dispensation of the Church." That's our third [question]: What is the "dispensation of the Church"? You [may have] heard somebody say, "Yeah, I believe in 'dispensational theology.'"

And you're thinking, "Oh, no. Another term!" Yeah, another term. A "dispensation" is just a time period when something is occurring. And so, when you look in the Bible, you see different dispensations. Calvary Bible Church believes what is called "dispensational theology." Some believe in what is called "covenant theology" and they break the Bible up based [on] covenants that are stated and even unstated. We believe in dispensational theology, [which] teaches that in different time periods God worked in different ways.

Some people like to say there are seven [dispensational periods] because, seven is a biblical number. The Bible never says that. I think there are more than seven. But, here are the classic seven dispensations. As I read these I'm not even going to comment on them. You can just think in your mind how God worked differently and how things were different during these time periods and how they changed from one period to the next. [One:] How God worked before the Fall. [Two:] How God worked after the Fall until the Law of Moses was given. [Three:] How God worked from the time the Law of Moses was given until the time of Christ's death and the establishment of the Church. [Four:] The time, or dispensation, from

the beginning of the Church in Acts 2 to the beginning of the Tribulation. [Five:] The time of the Tribulation, when God returns again to redeem Israel. [Six:] The time from the Tribulation and the Second Coming and then the Second Coming to the end of the Millennium. [Seven:] Then the Great White Throne and the judgment of Satan, and demons, and all unbelievers, and from that time on into eternity. You can clearly see that there are dispensations.

Those who believe in covenant theology do see the dispensations, and those who believe in dispensational theology do see some of the covenants the covenant guys see. But, we, as a church, believe in dispensational theology. That is, we believe we are in a special age called the “Church Age.” This is the dispensation, or the time, of the Church. How do we narrow that down? How does that happen in history? Well, some of you have been coming to the Daniel class. How many of you have been coming to the Daniel class, at least sometimes? (Yeah, [it seems like] we don’t have it anymore, but it’s happening tonight.) We have learned in the Daniel class, those fortunate few, that Nebuchadnezzar [had a vision of this big statue] and Daniel [interpreted] the vision. Remember, the statue had a head of gold, and arms and chest of silver, and belly and thighs of bronze, and legs of iron, and feet mixed with iron and clay, and then those feet were standing on a stone not made with the hands of men, speaking of the kingdom of Christ [see Daniel 2:31–45].

All of those kingdoms have pretty much come and gone except for the last one. The Roman empire kind of decayed [and] fell apart, but will be revived again, and it’s represented by the feet mixed with iron and clay. Later on, in [Daniel] 7, [this revived Roman empire] is described as the beast with ten horns. Well, the time period when Gentiles are dominating the world, that time from the Babylonian captivity through the Medo-Persian empire, Greek empire, Roman empire, revived Roman empire all the way to the end of the Tribulation, that time period is called the “times of the Gentiles.” For instance, in Luke 21:24, Jesus is speaking of what’s going to happen during the last seven years—the Tribulation—before Jesus returns to earth,

and He says: “And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and will be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” That time happens when Jesus comes back to earth to set up His kingdom, and then Gentile kingdoms [will] no longer [be] reigning on the earth. His kingdom, and His kingdom alone, [will] reign.

The Church Age appears within the times of the Gentiles, and the first mention we get of it is in Matthew 21, [where] there is that parable about the landowner and his laborers. You probably remember it. I’ll just remind you. [A] guy owns [a] vineyard, and he has these laborers appointed to take care of it. The laborers represent the leaders of Israel, [and the landowner represents God]. God decides to check up on the laborers when He hears they aren’t really doing a good job, so He sends some of His servants, which represent the prophets. The [laborers, or the Jewish leaders,] kill them. He sends more servants; [the laborers] kill them. So then He sends His own Son, which represents Jesus, and [the laborers] kill Him. Then Jesus asks the Jewish leaders, “So, what should be done to those laborers?”

The Jews indict themselves, and they say, “He should ‘bring those wretches to a wretched end’” [see Matthew 21:41]. Do you remember what Jesus says right after that? I’ll remind you. Matthew 21:43: “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it.” Jesus says, “You know what’s going to happen? God entrusted you with His vineyard, leaders, and you didn’t do a good job. He sent His prophets and you killed them. He sent more and you killed them. He sent His Son and you’re going to kill Him. Guess what? God is going to take the kingdom offer away from you, set you aside, and He’s going to find another people—Gentiles—who are going to produce the fruit of repentance and faith in your Messiah.” And so, in that text, Jesus lets them know that He is establishing this new offer to a new people.

We learn all about it in Romans 11. Turn there. I would love to go through the [whole] chapter, but we’re just going to look at one verse. It’s really a shame. I would encourage you to take a quiet time this week, or

five, and try and figure this whole chapter out. It is very wonderful, and has some great things to say. But, in short, in this chapter Paul is talking about his passion for the Jews as an ethnic nation and how, yes, they have been set aside for a time like Jesus said, yes, Gentiles have been grafted into the natural olive stock [see Romans 11:17–24], but there is a time when [the Jews] are going to be included back in during the Tribulation. Look at verse 25, where [Paul] kind of sums up everything he says in the chapter. He says this: “For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—“ notice it’s a mystery, “so that you will not be wise in your own estimation,” now don’t get all cocky because you’re going to heaven and a lot of the Jews aren’t, “—that a partial hardening has happened,” speaking of the Jews. [It is a “partial” hardening] because Jews did come to Christ, a lot of them, at the beginning of the Church, and all the way through some Jews have come to Christ. We have some in this congregation.

[The verse continues]: “A partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.” This is not to be confused with the *times* of the Gentiles. The “fullness of the Gentiles” is that time period of the Church, the Church dispensation, when God has “set aside His people,” and started harvesting Gentiles to bring them into the kingdom. When that time comes to an end, the Rapture of the Church happens [and] the Tribulation ensues (yes, Gentiles will be saved during the Tribulation), but that is the time of Jacob’s trouble, when God then seeks to redeem Israel and get them to look on Jesus. They will look on Him who they have pierced and mourn for Him as one mourns for an only begotten son, and then all Israel is saved [see Zechariah 12:10]. That happens during the Tribulation and then Christ returns. So that time period from Acts 2 to the Rapture is the Church Age, or the Church dispensation.

[The] final question, which we are going to just totally blow out in weeks to come so we’re just going to survey it [now], is: What is the purpose of the Church? If you were to go to [the] Calvary Bible Church Web site, [and] click on “What We Believe,” it brings up our philosophy of min-

istry.¹ There's your answer in as concise a form as we could put it. The first [purpose of the Church] is to "exalt God by doing ministry according to God's Word, relying on God's resources, for God's glory," and a couple references are given. That's the first purpose of the Church—to glorify God. Second, [the Church's purpose is] to "edify the believers by teaching and shepherding them with the whole counsel of God in love, so that they can live and minister in the likeness of Christ." [The] third [purpose is] to "evangelize the lost by proclaiming the gospel of Christ both privately and publicly, in all the world." So you have those three things: exalting God, [or] worshipping God, equipping the saints for the work of the ministry, and evangelizing the lost.

So, if you want to start something—[a ministry]—here [at Calvary], that's the grid we're going to strain it through. [You say,] "I've got this idea. We could recycle rubber in the parking lot. People could bring their old tires, and broken rubber bands, and we could pile them all up there and keep the world from being polluted."

The elders are going to [say]: "Now, does that have anything to do with exalting God in worship? No. Edifying believers? No. Evangelizing the lost? No. No, you can't do the rubber recycling idea because it doesn't fit into the purpose [of why] we're here."

A lot of times, people bring up things and they're great things, they aren't evil things, but we don't get behind [them] because we say, "No, that's not why we're here."

So, summing up, what have we learned this morning? (Probably too much.) We've learned that there is the invisible church comprised of all true believers of all ages. You might call it the "universal, invisible church," or even the "catholic, invisible church," if you want to sound scary. There is the visible church, or local church, which is all of those visible people who profess to know Jesus who gather in local congregations, and houses, and places around the world. We have learned about the "Church Militant,"

¹http://www.calvarybiblechurch.org/what_we_believe.aspx/philosophy_of_ministry

which is true believers obeying God in the power of the Holy Spirit doing spiritual warfare by pursuing righteousness and evangelizing the lost. There is the “Church Triumphant”—when all the invisible church gets to heaven, [it is] the Church Triumphant. We have learned that there are many unbiblical definitions of the church and we like to use them. We’ve learned that there are a lot of synonyms for true believers in Jesus and groups of true believers in Jesus in the New Testament.

What is the application of all this? It’s this: Are you part of the invisible church? That’s the first thing. Before we get into all the details of doing church, and being involved in church, and fulfilling your responsibilities, you have to first become part of the invisible church through faith in Christ. If you’ve never repented of your sins, if you’ve never placed your faith in Jesus, if you’ve never asked God to save you, if you’ve never believed that Jesus died for your sins, was buried, and rose again on the third day, and trusted in that and only in that to save you, then do it today and become part of the invisible church. Then I have more for you to do. Then start exalting God. Glorify God, “worship God in spirit and truth” [see John 4:23]. Start being part of this body. Be equipped for the work of the ministry. Share your faith.

If you are [already] part of the invisible church, and you know you’re saved, the question is: Are you doing those things? Is your life right now a life that is giving glory to God, that’s worshipping God in spirit and truth, that’s being part of the discipleship process that’s going on here, [and] that’s evangelizing the lost? These are just [the] abc’s of church.

Now, I just want to encourage you, if you realize, “You know, I’m pretty sure I’m saved. I know I’m saved. I’m just not doing all I should.” Well, God’s “grace is sufficient for you” [2 Corinthians 12:9]. God’s power is perfected in your weakness [see 2 Corinthians 12:9]. I mean, even Paul said, “The things I want to do I don’t do, and I do the very things I don’t want to” [see Romans 7:19]. So be encouraged, it’s a process. Growth is a process. God will abundantly supply all of your needs through His riches in Christ Jesus [see Philippians 4:19]. But if Calvary Bible Church is ever

going to be the church that God wants it to be, we all have to come to know Jesus and begin to fulfill what God wants us to do as a body of believers. Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for everything we quickly went over. I pray that if there are people here who are confused and maybe lost in too many big terms and too many big passages, help them just to relax and in the weeks to come, as we slowly go through a lot of the particulars of what we have covered this morning, that they would come to understand Your Church, what it is, its uniqueness, the time You have for it here on earth, and our responsibility as believers in the Church. Father, help us all to seek to do Your will, to wage the good warfare in the power of Your Spirit, to be good soldiers of Jesus Christ so that when You come back, we will not be ashamed. And, Father, if there are people here who don't know You, please save them, for we cannot. Help them to cry out to You in their hearts so that they might come to know Jesus Christ, be transformed, transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of Christ, and, Father, be united with the fellowship of all believers—the invisible church—who someday will be the Church Triumphant in heaven. We pray this in Christ's name, Amen.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture is taken from the New American Standard Bible[®], ©1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995, by The Lockman Foundation.