



GATHERED

The Empowered Presence of God's People

TEACHER NOTES & DISCUSSION GUIDE

SESSION FIVE: **The Nature of the Church**

A Study on the Church by



SMYRNAFIRST
BAPTIST CHURCH

Session Five

The Nature of the Church

Introduction

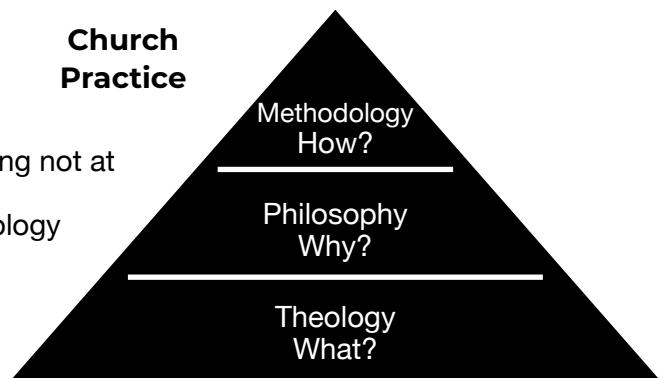
During the War of 1812, Fort McHenry in Baltimore was ready for an attack from the British Royal Navy who had complete control of the waters of the Chesapeake Bay. All they lacked was a flag.

- The “standard” was a sign of identity and pride.
- It was a message of sovereignty, that whoever marched under it would die in defense of their own people.
- When a flag came down, it meant that another people had taken control.
 - In 1813, **Mary Pickersgill** was commissioned to create a large flag that could easily be seen from the Chesapeake.
 - While on board a British ship, negotiating a prisoner exchange, **Francis Scott Key** saw the flag and was inspired to write The Star Spangled Banner.

Standards are important. They remind us who we are. They go before us and announce to the world who comes behind. And if a nation of man takes great care in the standard of their country, the church ought to care for their standards with far greater concern.

I. Why Theological Standards Matter

- Review of the paradigm for church practice.
 - Theology is the base/foundation
 - Philosophy is the direction/focus
 - Methodology is the practical
- The theological foundation is laid by first looking not at who we are, but who God is.
 - The central question of man-centered theology is “What does man want?”.
 - The central question of God-centered theology is “What does God require?”.
- We already learned:
 - God desires to dwell with his people and will gather us to himself.
 - We are created by God.
 - We are chosen by God.
 - We are cherished by God.
 - Jesus Christ purchased us with his own blood in order to make us one with himself.
 - He became the substitutionary sacrifice so we could be made clean before God.
 - We are bound to him as one so that we can inherit the promises God fulfills in Christ.
 - We are being built into a holy dwelling for God.
 - The Spirit applies the work of Christ to the church.
 - He reveals the church through regeneration and fruit.
 - He seals the church with his presence.
 - He fills the church with his power.
- This foundation provides the framework for how we see ourselves.
 - Our spiritual condition
 - Once dead in sin, we have been raised to life by God.
 - Our right standing before him comes from the righteous life of another.
 - We therefore belong to God and to his kingdom.
 - On top of all this, we love God and worship him only and long to be with him in glory.



- E. Without this theological standard, our foundation is off.
 - 1. The leaning tower of Pisa.
 - 2. Jesus said to build your house on the rock, not on shifting sand.
 - a) So much of the visible expression of the church today seems to loudly proclaim the wrong messages.
 - b) This is because we have spent generations building a faulty foundation.
 - 3. Faulty foundations come when we forget or twist God's message into something he didn't say.

II. Why Confessional Standards Matter

- A. In AD 381, the Council of Constantinople revised the Christian confession of faith written during the Council of Nicaea. This revision brought clarity to several important points of belief, including language that would more accurately describe the nature of the church.¹
 - 1. This creed, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (or Nicene Creed), is the first and still most widely-used statement of belief for Christians in the world today.
 - 2. The other creed you may have heard of is the Apostles Creed, which is more widely used in protestant churches.
 - 3. Creeds simply serve as a shorthand clarification of the totality of the Bible's teaching on matters of orthodoxy.
 - a) Simply put, a creed is a statement of faith.
 - b) The Nicene Creed has been used for centuries as a confession of orthodox belief.²
 - c) It uses language sometimes not used in Scripture in order to categorize the teaching of the Bible, distilling down into one succinct sentence the essence of the Bible's message.
 - d) Without confessions, the church tends to lose its focus on the truth.
 - (1) As the truth goes, so goes the church.
 - (2) Without a constant recalibration to the truth, the church will lose it's way and eventually leave the faith it once professed.
 - 4. The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed speaks of the church like this: "*I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.*"
 - a) This statement gives four descriptors of the nature of the church.
 - (1) One (Unity)
 - (2) Holy
 - (3) Catholic
 - (4) Apostolic
- B. Let's take a very brief look at each of these descriptions.³
 - 1. A Unified Church**

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rigBmnM6Js&t=9s>. You can watch a short video on the issues surrounding the Council of Constantinople and the outcome of that meeting. For context, be aware that this video is produced from a Roman Catholic viewpoint.

² In most contemporary Southern Baptist churches, a standard confession is normally not required for baptism or membership. This is a nuanced topic that deserves a lot of conversation, but I believe it is to our detriment that we have relaxed the requirement of a standard confession because it allows people to be baptized or to join a church without a clear statement of what they really believe. This is the vitally important issue of regenerate church membership, which we will look at more closely in a subsequent lesson.

³ For a longer treatment of these descriptors, you can watch the linked sermon by R.C. Sproul. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QmeBPHOXY>.



- a) **Deuteronomy 6:4** “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.”
 - (1) There is no division in God. He is one though he is three persons. He does not argue within himself and there is no struggle for power or dominance. He is perfectly in agreement with all his actions, purposes, and will.
 - (2) When he gathers his people to himself, he brings us into this unity.
- b) **John 17:21** “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us”
 - (1) This is the plain teaching of the NT - that believers should be unified.
 - (2) We can see the apostle Paul’s focus on this in his letter to the Ephesian church.
 - (a) **Ephesians 4:4-6** “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”
 - (b) **Ephesians 4:12-13** “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God”
- c) The church is to strive for practical unity even as she clings to the knowledge that she has been brought into spiritual unity.
 - (1) This is why the gospel, doctrine, belief, ordinances, and even creeds matter. They bring us into unity.

2. A Holy Church

- a) To be holy means to be “set apart”, “sanctified”, “other”.
 - (1) It is God’s chief attribute (**Isaiah 6:3**).
 - (2) Therefore it is the chief attribute of his people.
 - (a) OT - **Leviticus 11:44** “For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.”
 - (b) NT - **1 Peter 1:15-16** “but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’”
- b) Remember we have established that the church is now the dwelling place of God.
 - (1) We are his temple (**1 Corinthians 6:19**)
 - (2) Sanctified in Christ Jesus (**1 Corinthians 1:2**)
 - (3) Created for good works (**Ephesians 2:10**)
- c) And that Jesus gave his life to bring us into perfect conformity with himself.
 - (1) “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her” (**Ephesians 5:25-26**)
- d) The holiness of the church is two-fold:
 - (1) It is declared by the Lord that we are holy.
 - (a) We have a holy standing - being “right” before God.
 - (b) This is absolute and eternal.
 - (2) It is functional in that while we still sin against God, we are being conformed into his perfect image.
 - (a) We have an obligation to live ethically holy lives.
 - (b) This is progressive and temporary.

3. A Universal Church

- a) Don’t get tripped up over the word *catholic*.
 - (1) We do not believe that we fall under the *Roman Catholic* church. This is an organization that has lost the gospel and is therefore no longer preaching the truth.

- (2) The word catholic means “all-embracing”. Another word we use in it’s place is *universal*.
 - b) The church is both local and universal.
 - (1) The local church is the expression of the people of God bound by common place, time, and confession.
 - (2) The universal church is the people of God throughout time and space.
 - (a) **Revelation 5:9** “by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation”
 - c) Because God is eternal and “Lord of all the earth” (**Psalm 97:5**), his people will also be from every place and throughout all of time.
 - (1) I never feel at home when I travel until I am with God’s people.
 - 4. An Apostolic Church**
 - a) The church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (**Ephesians 2:20**).
 - (1) Being built on the apostles isn’t about the *people* but about the *proclamation*.
 - (2) We stand not on their identity, but on their declaration.
 - (a) **John 17:20** “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word”
 - b) The people of God are made so through his word.
 - (1) So we are a people created by his word.
 - (2) And we live by “thus says the Lord”.
- C. Which brings us to our final standard.

III. Why Biblical Standards Matter

- A. **1 Timothy 3:16-4:2** “**16** All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, **17** that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. **4:1** I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: **2** preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”
 - 1. The church does not create itself, and she cannot create her own standards of truth.
 - a) We spoke about this in our first session.
 - b) We will either follow a **biblical** standard or we will follow a **cultural** one.
 - 2. Therefore we believe that we receive all we need for life and godliness through the Word of God (**2 Peter 1:3**)
- B. The Bible is the only source for truth because it is:
 - 1. **Authoritative** - breathed out by God
 - 2. **Inerrant** - “The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times.” (**Psalm 12:6**)
 - 3. **Clarity** - It can be understood by all
 - a) “The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple” - **Psalm 19:7**
 - 4. **Necessity** - without it we cannot be saved
 - a) **Romans 10:17** “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”
 - 5. **Sufficiency** - it has everything we need.
 - a) **Psalm 119:1** “Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord!”
- C. If we lose our delight in God’s Word, we will lose our delight in God.



Conclusion

- The nature of the church is theological in that she studies God; not for the sake of knowledge alone, but so that we can become intimately and inextricably bound to God.
- The nature of the church is confessional in that she understands the truth of her existence.
- The nature of the church is biblical in that she will never invent her own way, but submit in all things to God's Word.

The gates of hell will not prevail against the church.

- Christ Jesus will always lead us in victory.
- So long as we march under the standard of the Lord and not replace that glorious flag with one of our own making.



Session Five

Discussion Guide

USE AS MUCH OR AS LITTLE OF THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE AS YOU LIKE.

Introduction

By what standard do you live your life?

Maybe the truest description of your life isn't your own, but the way those closest to you would describe you. What do you think they would say about the standard of your life?

I. Why Theological Standards Matter

How does our knowledge of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit change the way we look at ourselves?

Think about your life as a whole. Is it built on a theological foundation that supports everything you do, say, and think?

What parts of your life do you feel you have authority over? Do you think God should have authority over every single aspect of life?

What does it mean for the knowledge of God to control *everything* we do?

II. Why Confessional Standards Matter

If you had to articulate the gospel in one sentence, what would you say?

Do you understand the theological implications of faith in your life well enough to clearly articulate what they are to someone who does not believe as you?

Have you ever memorized a creed for an organization (school, civic club, social club)? Have you ever memorized a Christian creed? How are these helpful?

How do you actively promote unity in the church?

How do you actively promote discord in the church?

How would you respond if someone confronted you about a sin you committed?

Do you love other people around the world? Would you be upset if you had to worship in a different culture than your own? What would you like about it?

III. Why Biblical Standards Matter

Describe what it means for the Bible to be sufficient. Does that really mean in every single circumstance?

Have you ever felt like the Bible was too hard to understand? Do you think it really is clear enough for anyone to understand it?

Is the Bible really inerrant? Doesn't it contain scientific errors?

Can the church take cues from the culture when it comes to ministry? If so, in what way?