

LESSON 7

THE CHURCH AS THE AGENT OF MISSIONS

Introduction

A New Testament Church will be missionary if it is to be true to its nature. To paraphrase Emil Brunner, "A church exists by missions as a fire exists by burning." Missions is not some added activity to the programme of the Church, it is the central purpose in its being. Peters points out that missions is as natural to the Church as bearing grapes is to the grapevine. The central purpose of the Church is to glorify God, to make Christ known in the world, and to gather and teach the converts.

At times the Church has not fulfilled this responsibility, but in those cases God has raised up individual men and women and missionary societies and orders to carry out the task in the world. Some of its sons and daughters have been willing to be true Christians in the midst of Christendom.

The Nature of the Church

The New Testament word used to refer to church is *ekklēsia*. This word in turn is composed of two words meaning "the called out ones." Christ's people are called out of the world; they are also called out to service, to unity with their Lord, and to be His witnesses.

In more detail, the term church is used in at least four senses in the New Testament: (1) It is used to refer to any kind of assembly, a civic assembly, for instance. (2) It is used in the generic or institutional sense, for example, Matthew 18:17. (3) It is used in a universal sense to refer to all of the children of God, approximating the meaning of the Kingdom of God. Such an example would be Ephesians 5:25. (4) Its preponderant use in the New Testament refers to a local organized church, appearing in this category more than ninety times. We read of the church of God at Corinth, the churches of Asia, and the church of Ephesus, or the church in Philadelphia.

Some of the many terms that describe the Church in the New Testament give indications of its nature:

1. The Body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23; 1 Cor. 12:27)
2. The Temple of God (1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 2:5)
3. The Bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; Matt. 25:6)
4. The Flock of God (John 10:1-29)

These terms show the vital relationship of the Church to God. While it is composed of human beings with

The central purpose of a New Testament Church is missions: (1) To glorify _____,
(2) To make Christ known in the _____,
(3) To gather and _____ the converts.

(1. God, 2. world, 3. teach)

Ekklēsia is the New Testament word for
c _____ and means "the c _____
out ones."

(church, called)

The term church is used four ways in the New Testament:

- To refer to any kind of _____,*
To refer to the _____ church,
To refer to the _____ church
(Kingdom of God),
To refer to the _____ organized church.

(assembly, institutional, universal, local)

Four terms that describe the nature of the Church in the New Testament are:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

(Compare your answers with the text and the scripture references.)

human weaknesses, it is still a divinely established and protected fellowship. Only its godly nature can explain its persistence across the ages despite the adversities through which the Church has passed.

Some of the key functions of the Church are:

1. *Worship.* Christians are to speak to themselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, but the purpose is to make melody in the heart to God (Eph. 5:19-20). Corporate worship undergirds and strengthens individual worship.
2. *Teaching.* Jesus Himself was the master teacher, but He also enjoined His followers to teach the nations to observe what He had commanded (Matt. 28:20).
3. *Fellowship.* Jesus used love and fellowship as touchstones for discipleship. Men would know that Christians belonged to Christ by their expression of love. "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren" (1 John 3:14).
4. *Ministry.* Jesus went about doing good, and the Church as servant still follows in His train. When authenticating His calling and ministry before His townspeople in Nazareth, Jesus cited Isaiah 61 as a description of the Messiah's ministry that included both proclamation and ministry or service:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised.
 (Luke 4:18)
5. *Witness.* The central purpose of the Church is to witness to her Lord. Jesus used many expressions to undergird this concept. He said, "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you" (John 20:21). Clearly Jesus made His assignment when He said, "Ye shall be witnesses unto me . . ." (Acts 1:8), then He proceeded to describe a world without limitation of scope for witnessing.

The Central Purpose of the Church

Through the ages, the Church has had to face the temptation of doing many good activities to the neglect of its supreme calling and mission. George Peters gives a good summary of this purpose: "The principal task of the church is to communicate intelligibly and effectively a divine message to the world in order to bring man to a living relationship with Christ by faith."¹ He further points out some of the solemn obligations that come out of the task of the Church:²

¹ George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), p. 209.

² *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<p><i>Corporate worship strengthens _____ worship.</i></p> <p><i>(individual)</i></p>
<p><i>Jesus taught and commanded His followers to _____.</i></p> <p><i>(Compare your answer with the text.)</i></p> <p><i>Others know we are Christians by our _____.</i></p> <p><i>(Love)</i></p>
<p><i>The Church as servant is to follow Jesus' example of doing _____.</i></p> <p><i>(good)</i></p>
<p><i>What is the central purpose of the Church?</i></p> <p>_____</p> <p><i>(Compare your answer with the text.)</i></p> <p>LIST THE FIVE KEY FUNCTIONS OF THE CHURCH.</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p><i>Write George Peters' summary of the purpose of the Church.</i></p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>

1. To present Christ vividly, intelligibly and effectively.
2. To lead people into a faith relationship with Jesus Christ.
3. To . . . congregate believers through the administration of baptism, and build them into functioning Christian churches.
4. To establish the believers in Christian doctrine, principles and practices of Christian living, Christian fellowship and Christian service.
5. To train them in a life of the Holy Spirit.

The Importance of the Church in the New Testament

The Church was of such importance that Christ loved it and gave Himself for it (Eph. 5:25). In its mission to the world the very "gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). Most Christians have seen this promise as a picture of a beleaguered fort with the forces of hell hurling themselves against her gates but unable to penetrate her defences. Billy Graham pointed out that it is hell's gates that cannot prevail. The forces of hell have set up their defence. The Church is on the attack, to snatch brands from the burning, to rescue those that are lost to Satan's clutches. That is an entirely different picture. We see the Church in Jesus' promise as a marching, victorious fellowship.

Important because it is widely used

The term *ekklēsia* is used some 114 times in the New Testament. Its use is infrequent in the Gospels, giving us only enough reference to realize that this fellowship is of divine origin, that it will prevail, that it is founded on Jesus, and that it has a place in the discipline of its members.

In the Book of Acts, the term appears more frequently as the church in Jerusalem grows in numbers and then spreads out to become churches all over the Roman Empire and beyond. In the various New Testament letters, we find the churches established and receiving letters of instruction, encouragement, and exhortation in order that these little bands may reach out to the sea of lost people around them.

In post New Testament history, the reality of Christ's promises has been proved.

Important because it is a divine fellowship

"Though the history of the church is a marvel and her preservation through the centuries in a hostile world can be attributed only to her divine origin, design and destiny, the elements of time, space and human sinfulness

Five of the Church's obligations are:

1. To present Christ v _____, i _____, and e _____;
2. To lead people into a f _____ r _____ with Jesus Christ;
3. To congregate believers through the administration of b _____ and build them into functioning c _____;
4. To establish the believers in d _____ principles and p _____ of Christian l _____, f _____, and s _____.
5. To train them in a life of the H _____ S _____.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

READ EPHESIANS 5:25. The Church is so important that Christ _____ it and _____ Himself for it.

"The gates of hell shall not prevail against it" means that the Church is on the attack to rescue those that are _____ from Satan's _____.

(Loved, gave; lost, clutches)

The term *ekklēsia* is used _____ times in the New Testament.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

UNDERLINE THE CORRECT WORD OR WORDS.

Ekklēsia appears more frequently in the (Gospels, Book of Acts).

(Book of Acts)

have left their marks.”³ Its persistency in history shows it to be more than a human organization. It is a divine creation and a masterpiece of God (Eph. 2:10). It is an organization of the people of God. Its task and function are bound up in the responsibilities of the new people of God as described in 1 Peter 2:9.

Important because of its missionary outreach

Various New Testament churches are of importance because their missionary activities provide modern churches with examples to follow. The church at Antioch, where the believers were first called Christians, listened to the voice of the Holy Spirit and set aside Paul and Barnabas for their marvellous missionary journeys (see Acts 13). The churches of Macedonia so shared in relief and missionary activities that they became an example to Christians of Greece and other places as well. The church at Rome was faithful in its witness to the point that its faith was spoken about throughout the world (Rom. 1:8). The cluster of churches in Asia Minor around Ephesus must certainly be due in part to the witness of that church, as well as to the testimony of Paul.

The Permanence of the Church

In addition to Christ’s promise in Matthew 16:18, we find Him making promises in the Book of Revelation that a church faithfully related to its Lord will prevail. To the church at Ephesus, God promises that if the people repent and return to their first love, He will “give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7).

Many threats have been hurled against the Church in our own day. There are those anti-establishment people that say the Church, like the family, will wither on the vine. There are enemies of the Church who say it is no longer needed or relevant and must fade from the scene. They seek to destroy the Church and to undermine it by governmental control and limitations. Yet on a world-wide scale the Church continues to expand and to renew itself. The fact that there is much in it that is false and far afield from the ideals of our Lord does not change the essential fact that the Church is God’s chosen instrument to proclaim His message in our world. We must remember that “genuine Christianity has always survived in the midst of nominal Christendom . . .”⁴

The established churches have passed through periods in which there was little missionary activity, in which heresy entered, and in which a church became concerned with its own comfort and prestige. At the same

The Church's persistence in history shows it is a divine _____ and a _____ of God.

(creation, masterpiece)

You have just read three reasons the Church is important in the New Testament. Can you list them? Try it.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

(Compare your answers with the text. If you could not list the reasons, read them in the text again.)

List some of the attacks that have been made against the Church.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

³ Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions*, p. 205.
⁴ *Ibid*, p. 207.

time there was within the biblical Christian faith the seeds of renewal and repentance.

Often when the mainstream of a state or official Church would not engage in missions, there was a small band of men and women, or a society of like-minded souls, that engaged in missions. Often, at a later time, the Church would realize the rightness of the minority and would give undergirding to the movement, but the basic impulse had come from the Lord who spoke through His word.

The Church and Its Missionary Calling

Many criticisms are levelled against the Church in our day. Some would make it a political institution or an economic institution. It must remain true to its calling of showing forth the transforming power of Christ in the lives and fellowship of its members. It must maintain the witness of the saving power of Jesus Christ through the Cross and the Resurrection, and it must do so in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The local congregation, like the one to which the student likely belongs, has a missionary task that grows in concentric circles as the command of Jesus sets forth in Acts 1:8. We must begin with our own Jerusalem, the place in which we live, and tell the redeeming love of Jesus to friends, associates, fellow students, and others that they might know His redeeming power in their own lives.

When we reach the extent of our personal contacts, we must band together with other churches and Christians to reach our city, our province, or our state. Then with a growing number of churches we must join hands in co-operative efforts to reach our island, our nation, and our country with good news about Jesus. Thus the Church, the creation of Jesus Christ, moves forward to victory in Christ Jesus.

According to Acts 1:8, we must begin witnessing in our own _____, the place where we live.

(Jerusalem)

We are to extend our witness beyond our personal contacts by banding together with other Christians and churches to reach our c _____, s _____ (or province), n _____, and the world.

(city, state, nation)

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (Levels 1, 2, and 3)

After reading the study guide text, answer the following questions.

1. Describe the essential relationship between a New Testament church and missions. _____

2. Define *ekklēsia*. _____

3. List four uses of this term in the New Testament. _____

4. List four terms used to refer to the Church in the New Testament that reveal something of its nature.

5. List five key functions of the Church. _____

6. How does Peter describe the principal task of the Church? _____

7. Give three of the five solemn activities that come out of the task of the Church. _____

8. How does Ephesians 5:25 show the importance of the Church? _____

9. Explain the expression "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." _____

10. How many times is church or *ekklēsia* used in the New Testament? _____
12. What are some of the attacks the Church faces today? _____

13. How should the student relate to Acts 1:8? _____

14. When we reach the limits of our personal contacts, how do we extend our witness? _____

Supplementary activity (Levels 2 and 3)

Read Acts 15–28 and answer the following questions.

1. Explain the purpose of God in selecting the Church as the new chosen people of God.
2. Define adoption and show its meaning in the Bible.
3. To what geographical limits should the Christian's vision of missions extend?
4. Describe the missionary activities of the church at Antioch.

Advanced activity (Level 3)

Read pages 36-47 in *Frontiers in Missionary Strategy* and answer the following questions.

1. Describe our task as representatives of Christ.
2. Evaluate the validity of the Church Growth school of thought in light of the Scriptures.
3. List and define the three agricultural laws as they relate to the extension of the Kingdom of God and show how Paul used them.
4. Prepare a two months' plan to involve your church in missions.

Seminar Discussion

1. What is the relation of the Church's evangelistic responsibility to its missionary task?
2. To what purpose are Christians called out?
3. Discuss the terms body of Christ, temple of God, bride of Christ, and flock of God as they reveal the nature of the Church.
4. Discuss how the Church can keep the missionary task central in its worship, teaching, fellowship, ministry, and witness.
5. Discuss how Acts 1:8 describes the outreach of the Church in ever-widening concentric circles. How does this compare to your own country?