**Foundations (46 of 60) Biblical Images of the Church - RC Sproul**

Theologians often refer to the visible church and the invisible church. We'll talk about what these are and why it matters on Renewing Your Mind. Welcome to the weekend edition of Renewing Your Mind.

Dr. R.C. Sproul continues our overview of systematic theology called foundations, and today we're talking about the nature and function of the church. There are so many denominations and interpretations of Scripture, it begs the question, what's the true essence of the church? What is the body of Christ? And more importantly, how should we interact with it? Is everyone who attends church a true part of the church? With his message titled, Biblical Images of the Church, here's the founder and president of Reformation Bible College, Dr. R.C. Sproul. Today we're going to embark on a new segment of our study of systematic theology as we enter the subdivision known as ecclesiology.

And as the name suggests, this has to do with our understanding of the nature and function and mission of the church. And so we're going to begin the day by asking some fundamental questions about the nature of the church. We're going to say, what is the church? I think we all are aware that the church is not simply a building where we attend services, but it is a much richer and deeper reality than that.

Let's look a little bit at some of the words that we use for church. The word itself, church, translates the Greek word ecclesia. That's why we call the study of the things of the church ecclesiology, and we have the English word ecclesiastical, and I'll look at that in a moment.

But the way in which we translate that is through the English word church. But what I'm interested in at this point is where this word emerges from historically, that is the etymology of the English word church. If we were to go to Scotland and go to the church there, we find that the church in Scotland is called something else.

It's called what? The kirk. And if we were to go to Holland and went to church there, the church there is called the kirk, K-E-R-K. And if we went to Germany and went to the church there, then I believe it's, I'm not sure how you spell it, K-I-R-S-C-H-E, something like that, kirk.

What you have here is a word that seems very common and similar across at least four different language groups, and that's because all of these words for church go back to the same original Greek word. You notice the difference in the way these appear is that this simply has the C-H sound at the end, whereas these change the C-H to K, and then it's only a matter of the difference of the vowel sound in there. But all of these words derive from the Greek word kyriakē, which means literally those who belong to or are possessed by a Kyrios.

That is, kyriakē has to do with the possessive form of this word Kyrios. And the word Kyrios, of course, is the word that we meet in Scripture that is translated by the English word Lord. So, literally, the kyriakē means those who are possessed by or owned by the Lord.

So, we get the word church from this because the church consists of all of the Lord's people, all of those for whom the Lord died, all of those whom He has ransomed and gathered together to Himself. And so, that's the historic meaning of the church. Now, as I said, we, however, the term church translates the Greek word ἀκλασία, and what we have here is a Greek word that is made up of a prefix and a root.

The ek or ex is the prefix that means out of or from, just like we have exit signs that tell us how we can get out of a room, so the ek here is a form of the ex out of prefix. And the root from which this word is built is the root kaleo, which means simply to call. So, literally, the ἀκλασία of the New Testament or the church refers to those who have been called out or, if you will, those who have been chosen by God.

It refers to the elect, to the people of God. That's what the term ἀκλασία means in the first instance. So, this raises the question, is not the church that we meet in our day and age, in many cases, a corrupt institution, an institution that includes people who aren't really the Lord's people, who haven't been ever numbered among the elect and so on? Well, yes, of course, and that's why back in the early days, St. Augustine looked at the concept of the church and said that the church is always a corpus per mixtum, a mixed body, and so the church is always made up in this world of a combination of wheat and tares.

In fact, even though the church is called to seek its purity, at the same time Christ warned His people against an overzealous form of church discipline that in trying to root out the tares might do damage and harm to the wheat. But there is that recognition from Jesus Himself when He said, you know, this people honors Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. He said on the last day, many will come to Him saying, Lord, Lord, didn't we do this in Your name, and didn't we do that in Your name? And He said, I will say to them, depart from Me, you workers of iniquity, I never knew you.

And so this church is always a mixed bag, if you will, and that is what prompted the idea that Augustine was the chief architect of in antiquity of the distinction between the visible church and the invisible church, and you've maybe heard that distinction. And so let me take a minute to ask the question, what do we mean when we speak about the invisible church? Some people think that the invisible church refers to some kind of happy group of Christians who have dropped out of the visible institutional churches of our day and belong now to the underground church that has no outward visibility to it. That's not what Augustine had in mind when he talked about the invisible church.

What Augustine was talking about when he describes the invisible church, which will become more important later when we look at the concept of the church's unity, is that the invisible church refers to that number of people who make up the true church of Jesus Christ, that is, those who are truly regenerate and have genuine saving faith in their hearts and are the elect of God. They represent the invisible church. Well, why are they called invisible when they are real people with real bodies and have real visibility? Well, the reason it's called invisible is this, is that the Scriptures tell us that we have the capacity to evaluate other people's profession of faith and their commitment to Christ only on the basis of outward appearances.

You tell me that you're a Christian, I assume that you're telling me the truth, but the one thing I'm not able to do is read your heart. The actual state of your soul is beyond the ability of my vision to penetrate. Your soul is invisible to me.

But what is invisible to us is plainly visible to God. We are limited to the outward appearances. God can read the heart.

And so for God, there is nothing invisible about the church. It's all plain and open to Him. But since we don't know the true state of other people's souls, their ultimate spiritual status is invisible to us.

Now, again, the mistake we want to avoid is to assume that there are two circles. One is the invisible church, and the other is the visible church. This was not what St. Augustine had in mind when he made this distinction between the visible and the invisible church.

Augustine made this observation that the invisible church is found substantially within the visible church. So, the invisible church refers to those true believers that are found within the visible church or the invisible church. This is the invisible church.

What Augustine was getting at with this little blip out here is that there are occasions when there are true believers who are members of the invisible church of Jesus Christ, but who cannot be found on the rolls of any institutional church or any true church. Now, how could that be the case? Well, there are several reasons for that possibility. One is that the person has become converted, but has been providentially hindered from ever joining a visible church.

Suppose somebody is converted, and he wants to join a visible church, and on the way to the ceremony he's hit by a car and he's killed. He intended to join the church, but he never got there and was providentially hindered. The prime example of that would be the thief on the cross, who made his profession of faith, never had the opportunity to join an official church.

So that's one tiny group of people who may be in the invisible church, never in the institutional. A second group may be those who are so isolated from other people or from any possible formation of a visible church that they aren't members, people who are in solitary confinement or living in the North Pole or are caught in concentration camps during the war where there's no visible church unless they begin one within the camp and so on. They may be, at least for a season, removed from any visible body of Christians.

Now, there's a third group, and this is an important one to understand. This next group is that group of people who, frankly, are derelict in their responsibility as Christians, who for one reason or another willingly and voluntarily keep themselves from joining a visible church. Now, there are many people, particular in our culture today, who are so disappointed and frustrated with the institutional church that they say, I can be a Christian without being a member of the visible church.

It's good enough for me to be in the invisible church, so I'm not going to become involved with the visible church. I'd like to say to you that that is, in my judgment, a serious transgression against the Lord Jesus Christ who established a visible church and who gave a task and a mission to a visible church and set up procedures for the organization of a visible church and calls us to be part of that visible church. Now, I realize that a person can be truly a Christian and can be in their infancy in terms of their understanding of the Scriptures and of the responsibilities that Christ imposes and that they have not yet come to the realization or the maturity to recognize that they belong in a visible church and that it is their duty to be there.

But in the meantime, in between time, they've absented themselves from it, and they're still believers. Now, if they come to learn that they are required to be in a church and they persist in that indefinitely, then you would raise questions of whether they were really believers at all. But we're allowing for the possibility of true believers to be outside the full.

Now, the next group is that group of people who have been thrown out of the visible church, that is, have been excommunicated, but who are still members of the invisible church. Remember that the process of excommunication in the church is that process of discipline that has several steps to it, the final step of which is to be excommunicated or removed from the fellowship of the church and to be regarded by the church as an unbeliever. Now, remember that there's only one sin for which a person can ever be excommunicated, and that sin is impenitence.

There's a host of sins that could begin the process of discipline, and if a person repents of their sin along the way, then they can maintain their communion in the visible church. The only one that would lead you to the last step would be if you refuse to repent along the way. And true Christians can theoretically have such a serious fall from grace that they get into an egregious sin and persist in it through the whole process of church discipline, and that the only thing that brings them to their senses in the final analysis is their excommunication, because one of the purposes of excommunication is to cut off a person from fellowship in the church so that if they are truly a Christian, that will be the final disciplinary action that will bring them to true repentance.

So you can have true Christians actually excommunicated who at some point will be restored, but for a while at least are outside the visible church. Well, what about the final group of people who are outside the visible church but in the invisible church? And those are people who are members of institutions that claim to be churches, but the churches are not authentic or valid churches. They're either apostate groups or heretical groups that the visible church of Christ will not recognize as bona fide Christian communities.

For example, in our day, you have the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints, which claims to be a Christian institution, the Mormon church. Historic and orthodox Christianity has refused to recognize the Mormon institution as a legitimate church because it categorically rejects the deity of Christ, which orthodox Christianity sees as a non-negotiable point of doctrine for a church to be a church. And so at the time of the Reformation, you had the fiercest theological battle in the history of the church, and what happened was a mutual accusation of heresy where Martin Luther was condemned as a heretic and excommunicated by a papal edict, and in turn Luther condemned the Roman Catholic Church, said, no, they're the heretics, and the whole doctrine of justification, which was the question of what is the true gospel, was the centerpiece of that controversy, and both sides regarded the other side in their view of the gospel as being heretical.

And both sides agreed that the gospel is essential to a true Christian church, that when a church does not have the gospel, it's no longer a church. And so Rome did not recognize at that time the Lutheran church as a valid church, and the Lutheran church did not recognize Rome as a valid church. Now we'll lay that argument aside as to what churches are valid and what aren't, but if we can assume for a moment that there are institutions that claim to be Christian institutions that in fact are not, is it still possible for a true Christian to be inside of one of those institutions? For example, is it possible that a person could be a member of the Mormon church where Jesus is exalted, and people are told to look to Christ, and somebody doesn't fully understand the theology of Mormonism, but they actually meet Christ in that environment? Is that not possible that a true believer could be within the Mormon community? I would say yes, and even though they're not in a genuine visible church, they still are a member of the invisible church.

And so those are the different hypothetical possibilities, but the point of all of this is to come back to this idea that the invisible church, the true people of God, exist substantially within the visible church, and that it is our duty as one who belongs to the Lord, who's owned by the Lord, who's been purchased by the Lord, and who's been called by the Lord to be a part of the visible institutional church that He has established on this earth. And the church has its roots all the way back to the Garden of Eden, and in the immediate and direct worship that was expressed by Adam and Eve to their Creator, they were the church. Some have traced the church after the fall back to Abel.

Eves Conger, the Roman Catholic theologian, once wrote a book called Ecclesiam ad Abel, the church from Abel, in which he went back to the distinction that we find in the Scriptures, particularly in the book of Hebrews, between the offering that was made by Cain and the offering that was made by Abel, one of which offerings was pleasing and acceptable to God, the other was unacceptable to God. And as you know, because God accepted the offering of Abel, Cain became jealous and rose up in fury and killed his brother because his sacrifice was not acceptable to God. Now, some think that that's because his was a grain offering and Abel was an animal offering.

I don't think so. The author of Hebrews tells us that it's by faith that Abel made his offering, and the presumption is that that which pleases God is the worship of His people, which is done by faith. And so the church of Christ, the invisible church, is the church made up of all those who have saving faith.

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