**Foundations (47 of 60) The Church One and Holy - RC Sproul**

You're listening to Renewing Your Mind, an outreach of Ligonier Ministries, the teaching fellowship of Dr. R.C. Sproul. Our purpose is to awaken as many people as possible to the holiness of God by proclaiming, teaching and defending God's holiness in all its fullness. By God's sustaining grace, Ligonier has for more than 40 years produced resources for the growing Christian, specifically designed to fill the gap between Sunday school and seminary.

Renewing Your Mind is but one of our many outreaches to that end. To learn more about Ligonier Ministries and how we can serve you, visit Ligonier.org or call 1-800-435-4343. How can the global church, divided by schisms and numberless denominations, be called one and holy? That's our topic on Renewing Your Mind.

Welcome to Renewing Your Mind, featuring the founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries, Dr. R.C. Sproul. In our overview of systematic theology, we've reached the topic of ecclesiology, the study of the church. The ancient creeds described the church as one, holy, apostolic and Catholic.

Today, he's explaining the terms one and holy. This study is part of the series titled Foundations, and we'll explain how to get a copy of this systematic theology series right after the lesson. But right now, here's Dr. Sproul.

We're studying the nature of the church, and in our last session we looked at the invisible and visible church. We looked at the meaning of the word church and the meaning of the word ecclesia. And now we want to look at some of the qualities of the church that we find in it.

Now, before I do that, just a couple of more images about the church. We're all aware that the New Testament uses different metaphors in describing the church. One of the metaphors that we see most frequently is that metaphor of the human body, which we explored briefly when we looked at the concept of the Holy Spirit and how that the image of the body that is used by the Apostle Paul speaks of the unity and diversity that is found within the visible church of Christ.

Not everybody has the same task, not everybody has the same gift, and yet all of these tasks and all of these gifts are given to provide an organic health to the whole body which is under its head, who is the Lord Jesus Christ. And that body image is one that is instructive for us in many ways. It shows that the church is a church of unity and diversity, which I'll explore a little bit more in a moment.

Also, another image that is used for the church in the New Testament is that the church is called the Laos Theos or the Laos Theou. Laos is the name of a country in Southeast Asia, but here I'm using the Greek meaning which means the people of God. We get the word laity from that Greek word laos, and the people of God are simply the people who have been gathered together in a group that we call the visible church.

Obviously, Christianity does not endorse a rugged individualism. Nobody is saved by somebody else's faith. In that regard, your redemption is highly individual.

You must have your own personal faith. But any time that God saves an individual, He puts them in a group. He establishes a corporation, just as there was a corporation of Israel in the Old Testament, so there's a corpus or a body that we find in the New Testament.

So this body is a body of people. Now, the other image that I want to mention briefly is one of the most frequent images used with respect to the church in the New Testament. We often overlook, and that is the building image.

You may raise your eyebrows at that because you always hear the minister say, the church is not a building. It's not this brick and mortar that we use to hold our services and our meetings and so on. You say that's the church, and you point to a building, and you say, no, no, no, the church is the people in the fellowship and in the community, not the building, and that's true.

Nevertheless, when Jesus and the apostles speak about the nature of the church in the New Testament, they use the metaphor of a building, that the church is not a building, but the church is like a building, because a strong building has a foundation, and then it has pillars, and it has stones, and it has walls, and so on. Now, the first thing that we understand in the Bible about the church is its foundation, and if I would say to you, what is the chief metaphor of the church's foundation, who is the foundation, the vast majority of Christians would answer, Christ, and I'd say, no, that's not right. The Bible, you know, rarely refers to Christ in terms of being the foundation of the church.

Rather, it says that there's no foundation which can be laid except that which is laid in Christ. But the chief metaphor of Christ with respect to the building is that He is the cornerstone. He's the cornerstone.

The foundation is laid in Him. But the chief metaphor of foundation in the Bible is that the foundation of the church are the apostles and the prophets. That's the foundation of the church, with Christ being the chief cornerstone.

And then the rest of the church is made up of individual stones, and who are the stones? We are. Every person who is a believer in Christ and is part of the visible church is one of the building stones of the church of God, and that's the analogy that we use there. Now, as I said earlier, there's a lot of disenchantment with the institutional church in our day, and people in many ways feel that the church is antiquated.

It doesn't really have any significant contribution to make. Some have declared that the churches are only mausoleums of outdated religion. As we are living in the post-Christian era, others have said that the church is so filled with corruption and hypocrisy that it has lost its respect among the people.

And so, again, we ask the question, from our perspective at the end of the twentieth century, what are the chief characteristics or qualities of the church of Christ? We can go back in history, back to the fourth century, where the church was defined with four distinct attributes or qualities, where the church of Jesus Christ was called the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic. I'd like to take some time to explore these characteristics that were established in the church from the very earliest times of Christian history, because it's rare, particularly in Protestantism and even more particularly in evangelical Protestantism, in our day to use these terms to describe the church of Jesus Christ. What do we mean when we say that the church is one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic? Well, let's start with the first one.

What is meant when we say that the church is one? We live on this side of the so-called ecumenical movement, where there have been passionate efforts to create one worldwide, visible Christian institution. Now, there are several motivations for that, but two of the most frequent motivations for ecumenical unity that has been explored in our day would include such things as this, that one, the great scandal of church history is the fragmentation and disintegration of the unified, visible church, that people look around and they say, well, will the real church please step up, because everybody's claiming to be interpreting the Bible correctly, and yet in the United States there are over 2,000 distinct Protestant denominations. And this is confusing to people.

How much more effective the church would be if they could communicate to the world one Lord, one faith, one baptism in a unified way where everybody was on the same page, where you wouldn't have duplicated efforts, wasting of money, and all these internal conflicts that we have between denominations and ecclesiastical groups. And so, you know, there are many who want to overcome the scandal of the multiplicity of the church through bringing church unity. Another strong motivation, anytime we get engaged in a discussion about the unity of the church, somebody will immediately bring to the fore the whole question of the high priestly prayer of Jesus Christ.

In John chapter 17, when Christ prayed His prayer of intercession for His disciples and for His church, He prayed that they might be one, even as He and the Father were one. And so that we are not one is all the more scandalous, because it flies in the face of the obvious desire and concern of the head of the church, Jesus Christ. And yet, in the early days, the church was called one, and usually at that time people were thinking of the visible church, and they were thinking of the Roman Catholic church being the only real church, and so on.

But we know that that doesn't exist. There's not a unity of the visible church in our world today. Does that mean that, A, there is no union of the true church, and B, that Christ as our intercessor has failed? Not if you really hold to the concept of the invisible church as Augustine had spelled it out, because there is an existing, authentic, real, genuine unity of the church of Jesus Christ.

And that unity is found across denominational lines in the invisible fellowship in the communion of saints that we've alluded to earlier. When I talked in our section on soteriology about what it means to be in Christ, I anticipated this idea of the church as the communio sanctorum. We'll get to the sanctorum next when we get to the holy, but the communio is that phrase in the Apostles' Creed that said, I believe in the communion of the saints.

That is not saying I believe in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It's talking about unbroken fellowship that exists among all true Christians by virtue of their common union in Christ. As I mentioned, anyone who is a Christian is in Christ, and Christ is in him.

And not only does that mystical union apply to the individual, such as myself or yourself, in your personal relationship to Christ, but if you have a mystical union with Christ, and your neighbor has a mystical union with Christ, then by extension you have a union, a spiritual union with your neighbor, as the axis of that union is found in Christ Himself. And so there already exists a spiritual unity of the invisible church in this world. And that is not to be sneezed at.

When we say that Christ failed in His prayer because of us or whatever, I don't like that kind of thinking. I mean, to me it's unthinkable that our great high priest in his prayer of intercession would be an abject failure. I think that what Christ prayed for has been answered.

There is a unity that all Christians right now enjoy, a unity of mission where we have one Lord and one faith and one baptism fundamentally. And I grant that we have disunity in the visible churches, and I think that's important, by no means unimportant, but not nearly as important as the reality of the unity that we do enjoy by virtue of our shared communion in Christ and in the invisible church. In other words, right now we have to say that the visible church is not one, it's many.

But the invisible church is one, and we ought not to despise that. And sometimes some of the motivations for visible unity are less than godly. And the irony is that every time two churches merge, you end up with three churches instead of one.

You always have the two groups that merge into one. You always have some portion of those two groups that are dissatisfied and go out and start their own continuing church. Now you have the union group, you've got three visible churches now, thinking you're going to have one.

That happens every time. But in any case, this also means that because of the unity factor, we need to be conscientious about bending over backwards to seek to preserve unity with other professing Christians. Not in a naive state.

There are times when you must break fellowship with other groups and institutions, or you must draw lines of how, to what degree you can cooperate with them. But in the main, our basic attitude should be to bend over backwards to be at one with as many professing Christians as we possibly can. Churches split far too easy over far too many things, and often won't over the real substantive issues.

I mean, you don't negotiate the essentials of the gospel, that's for sure. But to be at each other's throats over minor matters of the faith is something that is a very serious thing. Well, we see that the church is not only one in this respect, but it is also holy.

How in the world can we look at the visible church and call it holy? From one perspective, I think you have to say that the church is the most corrupt institution on the face of the earth. You say, wait a minute, that's a little extreme. Don't you think that Murder Incorporated is more corrupt, or the federal government is more corrupt than the Christian church? Depends on how you establish and evaluate corruption.

The way God does it is, to whom much is given, much is required. And corruption is measured in its relative degree against its gifts and its purpose. No institution on the face of this earth has been so gifted as the Christian church.

No institution has been given a more sacred mission than the visible church of Jesus Christ. So that what I'm saying is, relatively speaking, when we fail to obey that mission, and we allow the corruptions of the flesh to come into this institution, then relatively speaking, it's more corrupt. Yet here we're not saying a many, thoroughly decadent, local, and non-apostolic.

We still say that the church is holy. Why? Why is it holy? First of all, the primary meaning of the term holy, biblically, is that which is set apart, that which is consecrated. Again, the very definition of ecclesia, those who are called out, those who are separated from the world, who are consecrated to a sacred mission, to a holy task, are a part of this institution.

So that the church is holy insofar as the church has a sacred vocation. The church has a sacred mission. And it is the only institution in the history of the world to whom God has given an absolute guarantee that in the final analysis it will not fail.

No one says that the gates of hell will not prevail against General Motors or against the United States of America or against the Roman Empire. These institutions come. These institutions go.

But the church of Jesus Christ will remain. Now, of course, I have to say quickly, the reference I just made of the gates of hell, the gates of hell, of course, are defensive. Gates were defensive mechanisms in the ancient world.

And when Jesus said the gates of hell will not prevail against His church, that means that the church is called to be an offensive army attacking the strongholds of Satan, and that Satan cannot withstand the power that has been invested in the visible church that Christ has established. Well, in what other sense is the church holy? It's holy because it is the institution that is made up substantively of people who are indwelt by God the Holy Spirit. This is the Holy Ghost's institution.

Now, you can find the Holy Ghost working in the lives of people in a lot of other institutions, but the one institution in this world that has been the focal point of the concentration of the ministry of God the Holy Spirit is the church. If I were to ask you, where did you come to Christ, many of you would say I became a Christian outside the visible church. I became a Christian outside the visible church.

However, I first heard the Scriptures, I first heard the truth inside the visible church, and if I was going to be nurtured as a Christian, I had to get myself in the visible church because though the means of God's divine grace are not restricted to the local visible church, they are concentrated there. Look at Israel in the Old Testament. Not everybody who was in the visible camp of Israel was saved.

Paul labors that point in Romans. Not all of Israel were of Israel, and here were people who were non-Israelites getting saved. And so Paul asks the rhetorical question, what advantage then was there in being a Jew? And what does he say? None.

No. He says much in every way. For first, they had the oracles of God.

It is in the church that we have the heaviest concentration of the preaching of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments, the worship of God in corporate gatherings, and so on. So that here is where the ministry of the Holy Spirit is not exclusively found, but is concentrated, and that's where the people who have been indwelt by the Spirit gather together in fellowship. And so insofar as that this is the principal domain of the Holy Spirit, and this is where the hagioi are, where the saints gather, the church can said to be one and holy.

Dr. R.C. Sproul, wrapping up a series of messages on the One Holy Apostolic Catholic Church. You're listening to Renewing Your Mind. Today's message comes from the comprehensive series titled Foundations, an overview of systematic theology.

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