When is a Church a Church?

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The following was prompted by a Facebook discussion thread about church.  You can find the thread at <http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#/topic.php?topic=12813&post=113046&uid=162022126196#post113046>.

I have been in hundreds of discussions about church over the past 40 years, some formal, most informal.  There are numerous quagmires in all of these discussions:  Frequency of meetings; size; leadership; discipline; replication; mission; functions and nature; universal and particular, and … you can add to the list.

Several observations:

1. We all tend to define/limit/project on others our view of church based on our current experiences.  We want what we are doing to be right, and if we are right, should not everyone be doing church the way we are doing it?  What is right for a new church may be very different than what is right for a 100 year old church.  Of course, this presumes we know the definition of right.  There are certainly absolutes, but there are also situations where there are seasonal answers/responses.

2.  We all tend to take snapshots of church and define it by that one snapshot.  Life is not a snapshot.  It’s not even a movie.  Church is complex and is in constant flux.  It has visible aspects, but also invisible aspects.  Relationships grow, change, get in trouble, recover or not, dissolve, and more.  It is the nature of organisms to change.  I am not the same person I was 50, 40, 30, 20, or even 10 years ago, yet I am the same person.  Life changes me, yet I continue to be me.  It is not natural to always be the same.  But even as we change we continue to be recognizable.

3.  We often confuse “nature” and “function” of the church.  “Nature” cannot be changed.   “Function” changes with the needs of the church and the internal/external populations the church serves.  The church belongs to Christ is part of the nature of the Church.  The church meets is one of the functions.  Nature is always true.  Function cannot be continuous, but is true at moments.  This is the old story of “who we are” and “what we do”.  Which defines us?  Both!  When we do something that is contrary to the nature of the church, then who we are is questioned.  When we fail to do what our nature would demand, then who we are is questioned.  We can occasionally do things that are not related to our nature.  We can occasionally not do things our nature would demand.  But, if we continue to defy our nature, does this not in fact change our nature?  And if our nature changes, does this not change who we are?  A church that ignores social injustice cannot stay a church regardless of what it calls itself.  A church that condones disobedience to God’s laws cannot stay a church.  A church that does not practice grace and mercy cannot stay a church.  It is not easy to be church.  We must stand up for what is right, obey all the laws of God, and show grace and mercy in the face of the human condition.  How can any human do all this?  That’s the point.  The church is not just human.   Is also includes God.  This makes it possible to be and do all that is required of church.

4.  We fail to recognize that churches have life cycles, and snapshots during these cycles do not define the whole of what church is.  Is a tree seed a tree?  Is a sprout a tree?  Is a sapling a tree?  Is a reproducing tree a tree?  Is lumber a tree?  When is a tree a tree?  If we measure by potential, then the seed or sprout is a tree.  If we measure by fruit, then only adult trees are trees.  If we measure by value, then tree products and their benefits to us define the tree.

I often get asked for my definition of church.  It is:

The church is a group of baptized Believers in the Lord Jesus Christ who meet regularly to worship, nurture one another (feed and grow one another), and fellowship (practice the one another statements of the Bible, see<http://www.davidlwatson.org/2009/11/20/church-planting-essentials-%e2%80%93-living-in-community-as-the-body-of-christ/>); and depart these gatherings endeavoring to obey all the commands of Christ in order to transform individuals, families, and communities.

A friend of mine said many years ago, “I can’t give you a definition of a church, but when I see one I know it.”  No definition of church will insure that church exists.  But, somehow, we know real church when we see it.  This doesn’t mean we should not be asking the questions regarding the definition of church.  It’s healthy to ask the questions.  But, we must also recognize that any answer to the questions will not be enough of an answer to insure that church is real.  It is the asking of the questions and the discussions these questions raise that help us to make sure that we are recognized as the church because whose we are, who we are and what we do.

Blessings!

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