

What To Look For In A Church: Right Practice

I'm thankful to have this opportunity again this evening as we wrap our study on What To Look For In A Church. Of course, we're competing with the Super Bowl, so for those that remain I trust that it will be even more of a blessing to you tonight.

I want to review a little bit about what we've covered so far to make sure we're up to speed on things. We're asking the question, "What should I look for in a church?" And I noted that we have several new members as well as regular attenders, and it's always a difficult question to sort through in your brain what should be the defining characteristics of a good church. So hopefully you can use this series to either confirm or guide your decisions, and we would love to see you decide to become a member if you are not already. But more than that, I hope you realize that most churches do not have these characteristics, and there are many folks in those churches who just want something better, but they don't know where to go. So maybe you can use this series as a launching pad to reach out to those people and invite them here so they can be part of a Biblical church community.

Recall that I suggested three areas to look for in a church: right leadership, right doctrine, and right practice. In the first week, we saw the necessity of right leadership, where a local church is shepherded by a plurality of qualified men who fulfill Peter's command in 1 Peter 5 to "shepherd the flock of God among you." There were two key points that I want you take away from that: first, that shepherds are to be examples of the flock. Remember that they are to be a "type" of Christ, or a die that has been stamped by the image of Christ through repetition. Second, the way that pastors are to be that example is through continual and repetitive expository preaching and teaching. As the pastor devotes himself to the study and exposition of Scripture, that impacts his life, and then he communicates that study to us by "preach[ing] the word", and then is able to show us what that looks like because he's already wrestled with the text and come to grips with it in his own life.

So that was the crux of Right Leadership. Then, last week, we looked at Right Doctrine. And we studied through 1 Timothy 4 where Paul commands Timothy to "Pay close attention to yourself and the teaching." We saw that doctrinal preaching and teaching in the church, by gifted and qualified pastors and other teachers, is of paramount importance. And that stands in sharp contrast to most churches today, where most so-called "sermons" are just feel-good pep-talks that designed to puff up your ego or make you feel better about yourself, instead of drilling biblical, doctrinal truth into your brain so that the truth of God's Word is deposited in your heart and then is lived out in your life.

Finally, tonight, we're going to round out our series by looking at the third aspect of a good church, and that is Right Practice. What does a church do, or what should a church look like in its corporate life? That's the question we want to look at tonight, and we're going to do that by looking in Hebrew 10.

Now, the question of Right Practice of a church has been a widely debated question with many answers throughout church history. The Reformers answered the question in this way: they identified three markers of right practice within the church. First, they said "Wherever the gospel is preached rightly." They used that as more of a blanket statement along the lines of what we've covered the last two weeks, meaning qualified men preaching sound doctrine. So that was the first marker for the Reformers.

Second, they said that a church should be the place where "The Sacraments are rightly

administered.” Many Reformers viewed communion and baptism as what we call “means of grace”, and to delve into what they meant by that is a little beyond us tonight, but in terms of a good church, what they meant at a minimum was that communion and baptism were only administered to those within the church that were in good standing. So, as far as the visible church goes, communion and baptism were the means by which churches made the public statement to the world that because of Christ’s blood on the cross, here is who partakes of that.

Third, and related to those ordinances, was “The right exercise of church discipline.” For the Reformers, excluding unrepentant sinners from communion and withholding baptism from them was the most visible sign of church discipline. We see the Lord’s pattern for church discipline in Matthew 18. Church discipline is an often misunderstood topic. Some think that’s a tool for the pastor to keep the folk in line; some think it’s a tool for retribution against someone you don’t like; mostly today people aren’t even aware of church discipline or what it is supposed to be. But reading through Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 5, and 2 Corinthians 2, it’s clear that church discipline has a Biblical, twofold purpose: first, it’s goal is to restore a wayward sinner to fellowship within the church. It’s not a punishment, it’s a rescue mission. Second, it’s designed to maintain the purity of the church. Unchecked sin running rampant within a church will destroy that church, and so church discipline functions as the corporate body’s immune system to regulate and expel the leaven of sin.

So those were the three markers of a true church according the Reformers: pure preaching of the gospel, pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline. Those are good markers, and I encourage you to research some of the historical confessions and the Reformers’ writings if you want to find out more about those three items.

More recently, however, others have answered the same question differently. Phil Johnson has given a sermon in the last few years where he takes those same three points that the Reformers gave, and he summarized them by expositing through Revelation 2, where Jesus scolds the church at Ephesus because they had “left your first love.” And Phil Johnson concludes that if you had to identify just a single characteristic that encapsulates everything a church should be, it should be their love for Christ. And so he goes into more detail on that, and I encourage to listen to that sermon as well. You should be able to search for “phil johnson love for christ” or “phil johnson revelation 2” or something like that and you should be able to find it. If you can’t, and you’re interested, let me know and I’ll find it and send it to you. It’s well worth it.

So those are just some historical and recent ideas that others have had about what a church should look like. And tonight I want to take a different approach, and I want to answer that question by expositing through Heb. 10:19–25. You can turn there with me, and as you are finding that passage, we’re going to see what some of the fundamental characteristics of corporate church life should look like according to God’s Word. So Hebrews 10, starting in verse 19. The author writes,

Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure

water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Before we get into these verses in detail, I want to walk you through the context leading up to these verses so you can pick up the train of thought that the writer of Hebrews has here in this passage. These verse in Hebrews 10 are really the end of a long section that really began back at the end of chapter 4. So turn with me there back to Heb. 4:14–16. Last week we saw Brett preach on Sunday morning on Jesus sympathizing with our weakness. That is really the introductory thought that the writer of Hebrews uses to build the idea that Jesus is a better and greater high priest. You see in verse 14 that the writer identifies Jesus as a “great high priest”.

Then, starting in chapter 5, the author then shows how Jesus is a priest that comes from a greater spiritual office and lineage than did Aaron. Aaron was a Levite, and under the Mosaic covenant the priesthood rested with Aaron and his sons. However, there was a priesthood before Aaron, and that is why the writer identifies Jesus as a “high priest according to the order of Melchizedek” throughout chapter 5 and chapter 6.

Then in chapter 7, we see why Jesus, as a priest according to the priesthood of Melchizedek, is so much better: he appeals to a kind of “federal headship”, and in effect says that because Abraham was the father of the Levite tribe from which we have Aaron and the Levite priests, then because Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, then in effect Aaron and the Levites also paid tithes to Melchizedek, making Melchizedek a superior priesthood to Aaron’s priesthood. He then moves to argue that because Aaron’s priesthood could never attain perfection by itself, there was a requirement for a better priest to arise from the greater priesthood, the priesthood of Melchizedek. And so the question in chapter 7, is “Who is that priest?”

We find that out in Heb. 8:1. Look with me at that real quick. We see a plain statement about the author’s thesis when he writes, “Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest.” In other words, the author identifies Jesus as the superior high priest that comes from the priesthood of Melchizedek. Then, throughout chapter 8, chapter 9, and all the way into chapter 10, he then shows why Jesus, as the high priest from the priestly line of Melchizedek, is so much better.

He starts by reminding us of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 33, then in chapter 9 he highlights the shortcomings of the Old Covenant, the Mosaic Law, as being unable to truly take away sins, and then he points to Jesus as the mediator of the New Covenant, which is better, because through instituting the New Covenant, Jesus did what the Levite priests with all their sacrifices could never do: permanently and forever take away our sins. Jesus became the once-and-for-all sacrifice that fulfilled the righteous requirement of the Law to atone for sin, and because He has provided forgiveness for us, there no longer remains a need for continual offerings and sacrifices. That’s the point in Hebrews 10, up through verse 18, and that brings us to verses 19–25 and our passage tonight.

Now, you might be looking at these chapters, and saying to yourself, “Well that’s a lot of ground you just covered! How do you know this is all a single, related section?” Well, I’m glad you asked. Let me show you. Look in verses 19–25 of chapter 10, and I want you to notice two phrases that occur in a specific order: first in verse 22, we see “let us draw near

with a sincere heart”. Then, in the next verse, verse 23, we see the phrase “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope”. Do you see those? Got it?

Ok, flip with me back to chapter 4. Look in verses 14–16 again, and what do we see there? We see first in verse 14 a similar phrase, “let us hold fast our confession”, and then in verse 16, we see again, “let us draw near with confidence”. And notice that those two statements are in the reverse order from how we see them in chapter 10. In other words, Hebrews 4:14–16 and Hebrews 10:19–25 are acting like kind of bookends that bracket this central flow of thought in the chapters in between. In fact, we even have more detail as to the connected nature of these several chapters, because we’ve already looked at 8:1, where we are told what the main point of the writer is, and that occurs approximately in the middle. So there is clearly an intent by the writer to structure these chapters in such a way as to make a coordinated argument for a central point, and we’re told what that central point is in chapter 8, and our passage tonight represents the part where he wraps up that thought and finishes it.