THE EQUIP INSTITUTE Theme: Christian Belief Topic: The Church Spring 2024 Introduction The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and His Word for the sake of living rightly before God in His world. This week's topic is sanctification. What's the Big Idea? Perhaps no doctrine divides different types of Christians from one another more than ecclesiology, or the doctrine of the church. Baptist Christians especially are defined by our understanding of the church and have probably spent more time reflecting on this doctrine than any other. Our ecclesiology is what makes our tradition distinctive. Scripture speaks of the church in two different and complimentary ways. First, the church is a universal movement, the community of all Christians everywhere and at all times. The universal church exists partially at the present time and will one day gather in its fullness at the end of the age. Second, the church is a local movement of particular communities of disciples. Christians most clearly experience the reality of the universal church through their identification with a local church. What Does the Bible Say? In the New Testament, the Greek word ekklesia is normally translated a "church" in our English Bibles. The word literally means "called-out assembly" and was used in everyday Greek to refer to groups like town councils. When applied to believers, ekklesia means a group of individuals called out by God who gather in his name. Ekklesia is used several different ways in the NT. Of the 114 occurrences of ekklesia, 3 refer to a secular assembly, 2 refer to OT believers, and 109 refer to NT believers. About ninety times ekklesia refers to a local church, while nineteen times it refers either to all Christians or to



Christians in general. (Matt. 16:18; Matt. 18:15-17; Acts 8:1b-3; Acts 9:31; Acts 14:23; Acts 15:22; Acts 20: 17, 28; 1 Cor. 1:1-3; 1 Cor. 7:17; Gal. 1:1-3; Eph. 1:22-23; Eph.

5:22-23; Rev. 1:10-11)

The New Testament often speaks of the church without using the word *ekklesia*. Normally, the biblical writers use some image as a metaphor for the church. Key images include variations of phrases such as God's people, Christ's body, and God's building, house, or temple. Many of these images draw upon similar phrases in the OT, demonstrating continuity between the old covenant and the new covenant believers as the one people of God. (1 Peter 2:9-10; Rev. 21:3; 1 Cor. 12:12-20, 27; Eph. 4:4-6; 1 Cor. 3:9-17; Eph. 2:19-22)

Finally, the NT sometimes doesn't use any particular term to refer to the church, but simply refers to believers in the plural and describes the activities of the church. The most famous passage is Acts 2:41-47.

What Has the Church Said?

Different Christian traditions have emphasized different aspects of the nature of the church. Some groups closely identify their movement with the universal church and downplay the importance of local churches. This is true of Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox, both of which argue that the universal church is most clearly represented by their tradition. Being Catholic or Orthodox is far more important than being vitally related to a particular parish or congregation. Other traditions are inferior expressions of the universal church.

Some groups give greater emphasis to local church membership, but also argue that the church exists at a regional or national level "between" local churches and the universal church. Presbyterians, Methodists, and Lutherans tend to argue that local congregations are of first importance, but the local church is part of some wider Presbyterian, Methodist, or Lutheran Church (capital "C"). Anglicans argue that the worldwide Anglican Communion is most important, but membership in a local parish is the primary way one relates to the Anglican Communion as well as regional bodies such as the Episcopal Church or the Anglican Church of North America.

Some groups give primary emphasis to local church membership, arguing that there is no such thing as a national or regional church. Local churches are part of the universal church, but regional or national bodies are extrabiblical networks whereby local churches voluntarily cooperate for common ministry priorities rather than

authoritative ecclesial bodies. This view is common among Baptists, Anabaptists, Congregationalists, and the Evangelical Free.

Some groups almost totally emphasize the local church, denying the validity of both regional or national churches and even the universal church. In this view, there is no such thing as "the" church—only churches. A minority of Baptists hold this view, as does the Churches of Christ. Some nondenominational congregations also lean in this direction.

What Should We Believe?

There is one people of God, the body of Christ, which includes all believers past, present, and future. Under the new covenant, this people is known as the church. The church is both universal and local, and at this present moment in redemptive history, we relate to the universal primarily by means of being related to a local congregation. One day, the universal church will gather together at the end of the age and will worship and serve the Lord for all eternity in the new heavens and new earth.

The Baptist Faith and Message (2000)

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture. The New Testament speaks also of the church as the Body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation.

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How Should We Then Live?

We need to maintain the biblical emphasis on the centrality of the local church. In the Scripture, Christians relate to the universal church primarily through vital involvement in a local congregation. The general NT pattern was for converts to be baptized and become incorporated into the membership of a local body. Every Christian should be a member of a particular local church, accountable to that body, under the teaching and care of her pastors, and serving alongside brothers and sisters in Christ. While parachurch ministries do much good for the kingdom, they are extrabiblical strategies that are no lasting substitute for committed connection to a local body of believers.

We also need to maintain a strong commitment to the reality of the universal church. Though the local church is primary, it is part of the wider body of Christ. Local churches should not isolate themselves from other congregations. Churches should find as many ways as possible to partner with other local churches and even parachurch ministries to advance the cause of Christ. This includes formal denominational involvement and more organic, grassroots collaboration. Churches should give financial support and pray regularly for other churches and ministries. As individual believers and families, we should consider which parachurch ministries we might partner with in addition to our primary involvement in our local church.

We should strive to promote greater health and flourishing of our church. Local church membership isn't enough. We each need to be playing a part in helping Taylors FBC become the healthiest church it can.

Recommended Reading

<u>Seminary Level Introduction:</u>

Gregg Allison, Sojourner and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church (Crossway, 2012).

John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology,* 2nd ed. (Kregel Academic, 2016).

Popular Book:

Collin Hansen and Jonathan Leeman, *Rediscover Church:* Why the Body of Christ Is Essential (Crossway, 2021).

Jonathan Leeman, Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus (Crossway, 2012).

Practical Introduction:

Thom Rainer, I Am A Church Member: Discovering the Attitude that Makes the Difference (B&H, 2013).