

WordPlus – Doctrine of the Church part 2

27th March 2010

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Introduction

In your WordPlus notes you'll see that this second session on the doctrine of the Church covers the following three areas: Membership of the Church; The Ministry of the Church; and Means of Grace in the Church. We're going to slightly repackage this into two sections: Church Membership, and Church Practice, or, to put it another way: How do you become part of the Church, and what does the church do?

Means of grace is not a common word in Evangelical churches, though it is still prevalent in the Catholic, Lutheran and Methodist churches. It's used of such activities as Communion, Baptism, Teaching and Prayer, and refers to activities that the Bible encourages us to engage in. Though these are physical exercises, they are carried out in faith that God uses them to change and shape us by his grace. They are similar to Spiritual Disciplines, though the lists of the various activities do not always match up. We'll shove 'em in as we go along.

Church Membership

Let's start by looking with Church Membership. Bearing in mind our definition of the Church, as the people of God, we are looking at membership of the Universal Church, rather than the local church, though we'll look briefly at that in a bit. 'How do you become part of the Church', is the same question as, 'how do you become part of the people of God', or more simply, 'how do you become a Christian?'

John 3:16, being probably the most famous verse in the Bible says, "*God so loved the world. . . (that he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.)*" Whoever 'what'? (Believes in Him). Item number one, then is. . .

1. Belief: The Greek word for 'belief' is 'πίστις', and it's the same word used for 'faith' in such verses as "*It is by grace you have been saved through faith.*" (Ephesians 2:8) So we could just as actually translate John 3:16 as, "whoever has faith in Him will not perish", and Ephesians 2:8 as, "It is by grace you have been saved through belief." So what is belief, what is faith?

In English there is a subtle difference between these two words. The Oxford English Dictionary defines faith as, "complete trust or confidence", and belief as, "a feeling that something exists or is true". It's all a bit nebulous and airy fairy, when we want something solid and clear, and thankfully James comes to our rescue in the second chapter of his letter: "*What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? . . . Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*" (James 2:14, 17) A little later he says, "*You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.*" The demons believe, but he's suggesting this belief does not have the effect of saving them! Clearly there is something more required than what we would think of as mere belief, there is some sort of outworking required to go with it. . .

2. Repentance: In Acts 11:18, Peter speaks of "*repentance unto life.*" Here then we come to the partner of belief, the outworking of faith: Repentance. The WordPlus notes have lots of Greek in this session. I guess it's to try and keep you awake, and no doubt you'll be tested on them later. The word for 'repentance' in Greek is 'μετάνοια' – what does 'repentance' it mean?

It literally means 'a change of mind'. So the Gospel has been heard and believed, and now in light of this, and in faith that what they have heard is the truth, the hearer has changed their mind about. . . everything. Their whole way of life!

This is more than a merely mental act – it has an outworking in life as well. As John the Baptist said to the 'brood of vipers' (being the Pharisees and Sadducees), *"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."* (Matthew 3:8)

When, in Romans 6, Paul says, *"We died to sin, how can we live in it any longer?"* This is what he is talking about, a change of mind, that results in a change of lifestyle. John puts it even stronger in his first letter: *"No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God."* The suggestion is not that you are unable to sin, but that you have had a change of thinking about your old way of life, and don't want to live that way any more, because you died to your old worldly way of living, and now you have been made new. This is where we come to. . .

3. Water Baptism: I'm going to throw out a hypothesis here, and we can kick it around for a bit and see what we think.

Water baptism is a prerequisite for membership in many local churches. It is something Scripture clearly calls us each to undergo. My hypothesis for why this is so is that, since it is a physical picture of our spiritual baptism, by which our old cursed life in Adam is cut off, and we are given new life in Christ, the sole purpose of this physical baptism is to help the new believer understand the truth of this spiritual baptism.

Let me back up a moment, and fill in some gaps. We didn't cover it in the first two points, but while we were busy believing and repenting, the Holy Spirit was busy cutting off the cursed life that was ours thanks to our father, Adam, and was birthing us into new life in Christ, life that comes with a promise, not a curse; with hope, not despair; with friendship, not enmity with God; with eternal joy, not eternal condemnation. *"If anyone is in Christ he is (what?) a new creation – the old has (gone) the new has (come)."*

This is the truth that is sealed in the new believer through baptism, which is why baptism always comes together with conversion in Acts – 3,000 baptised at Pentecost on the day they believed; the Ethiopian eunuch asked to be baptised even as Philip was explaining the gospel; Cornelius, the first gentile convert, was baptised moments after his conversion; Paul too, and so on. We've tended to add a big gap, by adding a public ceremony and testimony giving, but in reality these things can be unbiblical distractions. Baptism isn't something you do when you are ready in your walk with God, but it is what you do to ready yourself for your walk with God.

So, I repeat, my hypothesis is this: Water baptism is a physical picture of spiritual baptism, to help the new believer understand they have died and been given new life in Christ. This isn't really a way of becoming part of the Church, since if you've been born again, then regardless of whether you are baptised in water, you are part of the church; and if you haven't been reborn, you aren't part of the church, no matter how many times you get baptised! But it is an important partner to belief and repentance. Any thoughts?

The fourth item listed in your WordPlus notes is. . .

4. Baptism in the Spirit: What sort of things do you think of when you hear this phrase? 'Baptism in the Spirit' is a rather unhelpful phrase, since it not only comes with all the Charismatic baggage, but really this is the baptism by which we die in Adam and are given new life in Christ, it being taken straight out of 1 Corinthians 12, "*We were all baptised by one Spirit into one body.*" (v 13) What we're really talking about *now* is 'being filled with the Spirit' or 'Receiving the Spirit'.

This doesn't necessarily mean that people are going to come and lay hands on you and you'll drop down on the floor and start shaking, or laughing uncontrollably, or start speaking in tongues immediately. This is covered in more depth in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, but suffice to say, the Holy Spirit indwells all believers in the instant of spiritual rebirth. Romans 8 says, "*You received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.*" (vv 15-16) And in Ephesians 1, "*Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession.*" (vv 13-14)

The WordPlus notes describe: "*a powerful inner confirming of God's acceptance of them; and an empowering and equipping for worship, witness and service – often accompanied by the imparting of spiritual gifts.*" There has, in the past, been much teaching about a separate 'filling of the Holy Spirit', in addition to, but not necessarily at a different time from, salvation. I don't personally subscribe to this, and as I say it's more part of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit, but does anyone have any comments or questions about being filled with the Spirit?

These are all huge topics, which Christians love falling out over, but hopefully we can all agree that:

- Belief and faith are vital for our salvation
- They are shown in a repentant change of lifestyle
- The Holy Spirit comes to live in us at that moment of being spiritually reborn
- And water baptism is a picture of this spiritual transformation.

But in answer to our question, 'how do you become part of the church?', it is quite simply by receiving new life in Christ, by being born again, through faith.

When it comes to local church membership, I'm probably the wrong guy to be talking to you, since we don't have church membership at Harvest Church, having found it to be potentially divisive, and it's not like we can prove whether or not someone is a Christian! As it says in 2 Timothy, "*The Lord knows those who are His.*" (2 Timothy 2:19)

What we have is an administrative list of those who have gone on our welcome course or who attend regularly, but that's all it is – an administrative list, used purely for administrative purposes.

I'd be interested to hear what your church's requirements are for membership.

What Does the Church Do?

Let's turn our attention to Church Practice. There are many different activities that the church is called to engage in, and for the sake of clarity, we'll split them into three groups (in order of important): Honouring God; Caring for one another; Serving the world.

Twice in Ephesians 1, we are described as being, "*For the praise of his glory.*" (vv & 14) So group number one – Honouring God, starting with:

- Worship: Worship is one of those words that can mean so much that it's hard to nail down a definition of the word. What do you understand by the term worship?

There are a number of Greek words translated worship. Firstly the one mentioned in your notes: 'λατρεύω', which means to carry out service to God – eg. Romans 12:1, “*offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual (or reasonable) act of worship*”.

The most common one is 'προσκυνέω', which literally means 'to kiss the hand'. It's an expression of profound reverence and obeisance – humbling yourself before God. We see this in such passages as John 4, where it's used 5 times in two verses, “*True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.*” (vv 23-24) “Considering God as worthy to be served, and not just considering it, but living it out.”

How might we go about worshipping God in such a way? (activities) Another church practice that helps us to honour God is. . .

- Teaching: The early church is described in Acts 2 as, “*devoting themselves to the Apostles teaching*”. The WordPlus notes refer to Apostolic teaching as, “Building the church on a sound foundation of truth; guarding the church against error, causing the church to know God better, explaining the gospel to a sinful world, and bringing the church maturity ready for Jesus' return.” That's a pretty good description of how teaching in the church should be, but it'd be sad to think this was confined purely to the teaching of those with apostolic oversight. No doubt Adrian will be talking about the teaching role of elders, who's task it is to “*encourage others by sound doctrine*”. I would hope this description is true of their teaching also. In fact, I'd hope it is true of *all* teaching that takes place in our churches (I use the word church in the sense of any gathering of the people of God). This includes teaching in Sunday schools, in house groups, in welcome courses and other courses, on Sundays, and any other place where teaching takes place.
Teaching is honouring to God, because it helps us both to hear from Him, and to grow in our knowledge of Him.

Group number two, then, serving one another. No doubt the first word that springs to mind in this area is. . .

- Fellowship: (Greek word for teaching = διδασχρή) The Greek word for fellowship is 'κοινωνία', it also means community, partnership, and intimate association. It's most well-known occurrence is back in Acts 2:42 again, which says that the early church, “*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*” However, this word is actually not at all common. Only four, out of the twenty times it occurs in the New Testament, is it used in this sense of believers having fellowship with one another. That said, this fellowship is seen most clearly in what I like to call 'one another'-ing.

I did a little word search to find the verses that mention our responsibility for one another. Nothing fancy, it was literally just looking for the phrases 'one another' and 'each other'. I've got them printed out here if you want a copy, but in summary they give us the following responsibilities:

- Love and be devoted to other believers, and spur *them* on to love as well
- Accept, serve and show concern for other believers

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- Instruct, teach and admonish other believers (or at least be willing and able to do so)
- Be kind and compassionate towards other believers
- Speak to other believers with hymns etc, and encourage them on a daily basis
- Live in peace with other believers, being patient and bearing with them
- Submit to other believers and live in harmony with them
- Meet with other believers and spend time with them
- Confess your sins to other believers (or an other believer)
- Pray for other believers
- Offer hospitality to other believers, gladly, not grudgingly

That's quite some responsibility that we've been given for one another! We looked at prayer for other believers, but there is also corporate prayer, which is another part of this one another-ing. . .

- Prayer: While we might do most of our prayer on our own, taking time to engage in one-to-one communication with God, there is also great value in corporate prayer. The same early Christians who devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching, also devoted themselves to prayer.
 - In Acts 4, the church in Jerusalem came together and it says, *“they raised their voices together in prayer to God.”* (v 24) with the prayer taking up the next seven verses!
 - In Acts 13, there is corporate prayer and fasting prior to the church sent Paul and Barnabas off on their first mission.
 - And on writing to the churches in Rome, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessalonica, Paul asked them all to pray for him and the work he was doing.
 - The Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6 is a corporate prayer, full of 'us's and 'our's: 'Our Father', 'Give us our daily bread', 'forgive us our trespasses', 'lead us' and 'deliver us' – all plural pronouns.

Remember Jesus' warning though, just a few verses earlier, in Matthew 6: *“When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.”* (vv 5-6) He is not saying, never pray in public, but he is focussing on the heart behind the action. If we are tempted to pray in public, with other believers, so that we look good, and everyone can be impressed with our well-crafted prayers, it's better not to pray. We're still joining in, even by listening and 'Amen'-ing when we agree.

- Giving: is another part of caring for one another. This is another topic that could keep us going for hours, and is an important church practice. Listen to these two statements about the early church in the book of Acts: *“All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need”* (2:44-45) *“No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. . . There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.”* (4:32, 34-35) And Jesus famously said in Luke 6, *“Give, and it will be given to you. A good*

measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” (v 38)

We see giving in the early church for various reasons, including providing for others in the church who are in need, and supporting the ministry of churches and missionaries such as Paul, himself (2 Cor 11).

As I said, giving is a huge topic, and not one I want to get too bogged down in. Suffice to say, giving and sharing with and supporting others in the church is an important part of serving one another.

I don't want to put anyone on the spot, or ask how much you give, but I'd be interested to hear how people decide on how much to give, and when to give, and to whom to give.

- Requests from church leaders
- Not tithing, but seeking the Holy Spirit (Rom 7:6)
- Love of money (IF TIME – MAYBE 15 MINS FROM HERE)

Third and final group: serving the world. The prime calling and command, when it comes to serving the world is. . .(?)

- Evangelism: I'm fairly sure you looked at this earlier when looking at the Kingdom of God, but just briefly to remind ourselves of Jesus commission to his disciples in Matthew 28:19, He said, “Go (and what?) *make disciples of all nations, baptising them and teaching them.*” Who is this command for? (*Disciples*) How can we be sure that it wasn't just for the disciples that Jesus was talking to at that time? (*Scope – all nations*) The believers to whom Jesus was specifically speaking probably didn't quite make it to all nations – to the desert tribes of Africa, or the Australian natives, or even to the Welsh. Still today there are unreached people groups who have never heard the Gospel, so the command is still clearly in effect for us.

The WordPlus notes use the word 'witness' to cover this area, and this is helpful. Evangelism, from the Greek 'εὐαγγελίζω', simply means 'to proclaim Good News', whereas witness comes from the Greek 'μαρτυρέω', which means to give a testimony, or a truthful report. What sort of concepts does this 'witnessing' add to the idea of simply sharing the Gospel?

- Personal testimony to the work of Jesus in one's own experience. 1 Peter 3:15-16, “*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander*”
- Christian Character is Vital! Have you ever heard a non-believer saying that the behaviour and attitude of Christians is what most puts them off Christianity? If we were to give a testimony as a witness in a court of law, and we were of poor character, our testimony could be completely discredited. The same is true for our Christian lives.
- Christian character is vital – but we must also speak! Francis of Assisi is often quoted as saying, “*Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.*” Actually he never said this, rather than the monks of his order should seek permission before preaching, going on to say “*Let all the brothers, however, preach by their deeds*”. This ‘if necessary, use words’ has been used as a convenient get out clause by many, but we can't escape the fact that we do need to share the truth of the Gospel, and testify to the truth of it through out lives. Romans 10: “*How, then, can*

they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom (they have not heard)? And how can they hear without (someone preaching to them)?” (v 14)

- Another area of serving the world is Prayer for the lost: In Colossians 4, Paul asked his recipients to pray, *“that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ. . . Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.”* (vv 3, 4) Just this Sunday, someone in my own church told me they didn't pray for the lost, because you never see anyone doing that in Scripture. He didn't even seem that convinced when I pointed out Paul's words to the Jewish King Agrippa, who had asked him *“Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”* Paul's reply was: *“Short time or long – I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am.”* (Acts 26:29) It's unimaginable that Paul would not have bothered praying for the lost, for those with whom he came into contact, even for those that other believers were sharing the Gospel with.

Who here is part of a church that supports missionaries overseas? Do you pray for them? How else do you support them? Do you pray for the people they are working among?
- The last item we'll cover is Provision for the poor: The Bible is littered with calls to care for the poor, and needy, the homeless and hungry, the oppressed and those who have no one to care for them. It was commanded in the Old Covenant, eg. Deuteronomy 15:11, *“I command you to be open-handed toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.”* and it is shown as honouring to God in Proverbs 14:31, *“He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God.”* Jesus commanded his followers to care for them, in Luke 12:33, *“Sell your possessions and give to the poor.”* The book of Acts sets up examples for us, such as Tabitha, *“who was always doing good and helping the poor”* And Cornelius, and Paul and Barnabas as well. Such mercy ministry is a demonstration of God's love to the world around us, and there are no ends to the opportunities! *“The poor you will always have with you,”* (Matthew 26:11) said Jesus. However, as your notes say, there does need to be a balance. When Jesus said those words in Matthew 26, it was actually to bring a balance to such social action. Our primary call in 'serving the world' is to make disciples – to share the Gospel and be witnesses to a lost and dying world. We can provide physically for those in need, but if do not also seek to provide for them spiritually, by sharing the Gospel with them, and praying for them, we are, in the long run, guilty of a greater lack of mercy. There are many, so-called, para-church organisations who seek to help the poor and needy around the world, but our prime objective as the church must be to see them saved eternally, not merely served temporarily.
- Let's end with a look at Communion: I've left it until the end as it's slightly outside these three groups, being one of only two physical rituals that are handed down to us from Scripture to help us fix our minds of something vitally important. The other is, of course, baptism, which we looked at earlier. As with baptism, there are all kinds of disagreements over how communion should be practised.
 - There are those who believe it should be taken only once a year, as a replacement for the Passover.

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- There are those who believe that the bread and wine, when blessed, become the actual flesh and blood of Jesus.
- There are those who insist it must always be done with alcoholic wine, never a substitute.
- There are those who believe it should always be officiated by a priest or elder, and it just goes to show – Christians love to dress things up and make things as complicated and religious as possible. Actually it's quite simple.

What's Communion all about?

Where baptism was all about our own death, burial and resurrection, Communion is all about Jesus' own death, and resurrection, and our unity in Him. It's simply an opportunity for us to remind ourselves of what Jesus has done for us. It's a wonderful, joyous reminder of the fact that we, who are the church, have been saved through the sacrifice of Jesus, have received forgiveness of sins through the shedding of His blood, have been united in His body, and have come into a New Covenant of hope and promise of everlasting, joyful life with Him. Communion reminds us that without Jesus, there would be no church!

Conclusion

Hopefully this session has been a useful time of working through a few areas of church life. In an hour, we can really only scratch the surface of these things, but I encourage you not to rely on a mere 60 minutes glance, but to look into these things – how does someone become part of the church? What activities does the church engage in, and why? There's days and weeks of fruitful study just waiting to captivate you.

For now, let's pray and I'll hand you over to Adrian.