

Lecture 6: The Church

The class of Christianity 101 was not happy. Despite Professor Grimes' best efforts he had been unable to convince the university to provide him with a tent. Instead he had been forced to make do with a giant black tarp that was being held up by a series of strategically placed poles. Underneath the tarp were five chairs, the industrial shredder, and a very long extension cord that connected the shredder to an external wall outlet a thousand feet away. Grimes' classroom might not have walls, but he wasn't about to give up his ability to destroy electronic devices. As long as his shredder was there he was pleased.

His class, though, was less pleased. The tarp did technically shield them from the elements, but it left a great deal to be desired. It was hot, humid, and pouring rain, and every now and then a gust of wind blew rain into their faces and got them all wet.

"I can't believe they won't even give us a

lousy tent,” Brad grumbled as he took his seat. “Just where does our tuition money go, anyway?”

“These days it mostly goes to maintain the football stadium,” the professor replied. Outside the tarp the rain poured even harder. The ground was soaking wet, and a giant mud puddle was forming right where the students were sitting. Grimes was glad he had not picked today to wear his white sneakers.

“That stadium is such a waste,” Isaac complained. “The Sunset Hills team hasn’t won a single game in my entire lifetime. I’m surprised we’re even allowed to be in the league.”

The professor shrugged. “That is one of life’s great mysteries. Apparently that rather dubious decision made a great deal of sense to President Harris. He is the one who made the strategic choice to devote all of our resources to that stadium. In my opinion that decision did not prove to be a good one, but I don’t think Harris has learned anything. I suppose his inability to learn from his mistakes is another one of life’s great mysteries.

“Speaking of mysteries, today we are going to talk about one of the great mysteries of the Bible: the Church.”

“The church is a mystery?” Iris exclaimed. “What’s so mysterious about the church? I mean, there’s a church on every block around here. They’re not hiding or anything.”

“True. In this country it is very easy to find a church – although finding a *faithful* church is an altogether different story. What I mean by ‘mystery’ is that the institution of the Church is a relatively new thing in human history. It is something God did not reveal until New Testament times. Despite what you may have been told, there was no Church in the Old Testament.”

“Sure there was,” Brad commented. “In the Old Testament the Church was Israel.”

“I’m afraid not,” the professor replied. “Many people believe that, but it is not true. Throughout the entire Old Testament the nation of Israel is *never* referred to as the Church – not even once. The same is true in the New Testament. You can read your Bible from cover to cover but you will never find a verse that says that Israel and the Church are

one and the same. They are two completely different entities.

“The truth is that Israel is Israel and the Church is the Church. Just because there are Jews in the Church does not mean that Israel and the Church are the same. After all, there are Frenchmen in the Church but that does not mean that the Church is France. Israel is the nation of the Jews, whereas the Church is the collection of all Christians who are living in this age of history. The Church did not come into existence until the day of Pentecost, which took place several weeks after Christ’s ascension.”

Brad spoke up. “But there were Christians in the Old Testament.”

“Yes there were – but they were not a part of the Church any more than being a member of your local church makes you an Israelite. The Church is a new institution. There are many differences between Israel and the Church, and the two should *not* be confused.

“For example, the nation of Israel is composed of the children of Jacob. If you are a descendent of Jacob then you are an

Israelite. The Church, however, is composed of all those – both Jew and Gentile – who have repented of their sins and believed in Christ. In other words, Israel is composed almost entirely of unbelievers, while the Church is composed only of believers.

“These two groups have also been given different promises. For example, in Genesis 17:8 and 48:4 God gave Israel a permanent right to what used to be called the land of Canaan. That land was given to them as an ‘everlasting possession’. As long as the world exists that land will be theirs. However, the Church has not been given any territory in this world at all. Instead God said in Hebrews 11:16 that He has prepared for us a heavenly city – which is what we’ll talk about in our next class.

“There is also the issue of prophetic destiny. Since Israel rebelled against God and rejected Jesus, He punished them by scattering the Jews all over the world. Hosea 3:4-5 tells us that the Jews will abide without a king or a Temple for a long time, but then in the latter days God will gather them back as a nation. That prophecy has been fulfilled. The

Jews were without a country for a long time, but in 1948 Israel became a nation once more. God kept His word.

“Daniel 9:24-27 goes further and says that Israel’s rebellion will not last forever because God has set aside a period of time to chastise them and bring an end to their sins. They will go through a terrible time of suffering and will almost be annihilated, but at the end of that period they will repent and cry out to Jesus their Messiah for salvation. Zechariah 12:10 says that they will ‘look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him’. When they repent and cry out to Jesus, He will return and defeat their enemies. Jesus will then establish His throne in Jerusalem and rule over the entire world.

“The Church, however, has not been in rebellion. This is because *by definition* the Church is composed only of people who have *accepted* Jesus as Messiah. When that terrible time of suffering comes the Lord will take the Church out of the world so that they will not have to endure His wrath.”

Iris spoke up. “But Christians are suffering all over the world. In fact, they’ve

been persecuted for thousands of years.”

“That’s true,” the professor agreed. “But there is a key difference. It is one thing for Christians to be persecuted. As I explained in our very first class, Jesus told us that in this world we would be persecuted. Since He suffered, we will suffer as well. We do not deserve to be treated better than He was.

“However, one day God will pour out His wrath upon the world. Facing the wrath of God is *very* different from facing persecution. I Thessalonians 5:9 tells us that God has not appointed us to face His wrath, but instead has delivered us from it. This is something that we can see throughout history. When God poured out His wrath upon the ancient world and destroyed it all in the Flood, He first put Noah in the Ark so they would not be harmed. When God poured out His wrath upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, He first sent His angels to rescue Lot so that he would not be destroyed in the fire that was about to fall from heaven. When God poured out His wrath upon Egypt, He prevented the plagues from striking the Israelites in Goshen. When God will one day pour out His wrath

upon this world, He will first remove His Church. It is true that Christians suffer, but they will not face the wrath of God. That is one thing we will be spared – but we'll talk about that in our final class.

“As I was saying, after the Lord rose from the dead He told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came. Acts 2 tells us that on the day of Pentecost the disciples were all gathered together in one place. The Holy Spirit then came upon them and they went out and started preaching.”

Brad spoke up. “But what does that have to do with the Church?”

“It has everything to do with it! A few very significant things happened on that day. First of all, Jesus promised to give us the Holy Spirit, and that is the day it happened. Ever since then all Christians have had the Spirit, and no matter what happens they *cannot* lose it. In fact, in Romans 8:9 the apostle Paul said that if you don't have the Spirit then you are not a Christian at all. That is a remarkable change from the Old Testament, where very few people ever had the Spirit, and those who did have it had to be very careful lest, like

Samson, they sinned and lost the Spirit. That is one of the key distinguishing characteristics of the Church: unlike those who came before us (and unlike those who will come after the Church is gone), we have the Spirit as a permanent possession.

“There is also the significance of the day of Pentecost itself. That day is also referred to as the Festival of Loaves, and was one of the Jewish festivals that God gave Israel in the Mosaic Law. In that Festival the priest waved two different loaves before the Lord and then joined them together. The festival signified that whereas there used to be two different groups of people – Jew and Gentile – the day would come when they would be brought together into one body. On the day of Pentecost that is exactly what happened: the Jews and Gentiles came together as one in the body of the Church.”

Brad spoke up. “So you’re saying that there isn’t an Israel anymore?”

“Of course not! Israel is never going to be destroyed. God chose her as His people and He will never abandon her. What I *am* saying is that within the Church itself there is no

distinction between Jew and Gentile. In the Old Testament the Gentiles were unclean; they could not enter the Temple. That has changed. Gentiles are no longer the unclean ones who are cast out of the Temple and kept away from the holy place; instead we have been grafted in to God's family. However, Israel and the Church are *not* the same, and God has different plans for them – which is something we've already discussed.

“Another thing to think about is that the New Testament refers to the Church as the Bride of Christ. However, John the Baptist did not consider himself to be a part of the Bride. Instead in John 3:29 he called himself a friend of the bridegroom. If the Church began on the day of Pentecost – which occurred some time after John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod – then that makes sense. After all, he couldn't possibly be a part of a group that didn't come into existence until after he was dead.”

Rob spoke up. “But what about the Pharisees? Weren't they the Church of Christ's day?”

“They most certainly were not,” the

professor said firmly. “That bunch of self-righteous hypocrites were the *religious leaders* of Christ’s day, which is an altogether different thing. There are lots of very religious people in the world who are very, very far from God. Remember, the Church is composed strictly of Christians, and the Pharisees hunted down Christians and murdered them. The Pharisees were most definitely *not* Christians, and therefore they were not a part of the Church. Besides, the Church didn’t exist before Christ died, so they couldn’t have been members of it.”

Brad spoke up. “But there are lots of unbelievers in churches across the country.”

The professor sighed. “There is a huge difference between your local church and the Bride of Christ. The global Church is composed of all those who have come to believe in Christ since the day of Pentecost. However, your local church is composed of a random group of people who happened to show up in a particular building on a particular date and time. Those two things are *not* the same. Going down to your local church and joining it is utterly meaningless if

you are not a believer in Christ. God does *not* look at the local church rolls when determining who gets into Heaven.

“Another example of this same sort of confusion can be found in what this world erroneously refers to as ‘gay marriage’. When two men go down to the local courthouse and get united in a legal contract, the world refers to it as marriage. However, it is most certainly *not* marriage. Marriage is an institution defined and created by God Himself, and it is the union of a man and a woman. The world can try all it wants to change that definition, but God is not interested in their efforts. The world may call it marriage, but it will never actually *be* marriage. Instead it will be exactly what God has always said it is: a very serious sin.”

“But it’s legal,” Brad protested.

“So is murder,” Professor Grimes replied. “All over the world it is perfectly legal for mothers to murder their own children, as long as they do it either before their child is born or while their child is being born. There is even growing support for the right to murder your children after they are born. But

being legal *doesn't make it right*. God still condemns it as a terrible sin, and God is the one that we will answer to. I realize there are Christians all over the world who have no problem with adultery, murder, homosexuality, abortion, and many other extremely serious sins, but that does *not* mean God has changed His views on the matter. I assure you that on Judgment Day no one will be able to use the 'but it was legal!' defense. God has His own standard, and all of mankind's laws and arguments will never change it. The opinions of our culture will never change God's mind."

Outside the flimsy tarp the storm had not let up. A small muddy stream was now flowing between the classroom chairs. Lightning flashed in the distance, but it was so far away that the thunder could not be heard. The tarp was keeping out the rain – but just barely; it was beginning to sag.

But Grimes lectured on. He was not going to let the rain stop him. He had a job to do and he was going to get it done – even if the creek did rise. He would not be thwarted by a simple storm.

“My point is that the Church is a new institution, created by God in this era of history and charged with spreading the gospel over all the world and discipling the nations. That is why we are still here on this planet: to tell others about Jesus. That is our primary mission.

“Today there are many people who are very confused about the purpose of the Church. They seem to believe that its goal is to save the environment, or fight global warming, or helping people lose weight, or whatever the current fad happens to be. I agree it is a good thing to feed the poor and help the needy, but we must never forget that that *cannot* be our goal. Feeding the poor will do them no good if they still die and go to Hell. Christ charged us with *preaching the gospel to the world*. That is the only thing that can save people from an eternity of fiery judgment. What the world desperately needs is *the gospel*, and Christ commanded the Church to deliver it.”

Wally interrupted. “You know, I like the sound of that. If churches would actually deliver their stuff to my house then I wouldn’t

have to show up. That would be even more convenient than drive-thru sermons! You might be on to something.”

Brad spoke up. “Couldn’t you just watch televangelists? How is that any different?”

“They never pass the communion bread to me,” Wally complained.

Professor Grimes groaned. “No, no, no, and *no!* God requires Christians to study their Bibles, to pray, and to attend church on a regular basis. Now, this does not mean that it is a sin to skip church on Wednesday nights. The Bible never mentions Wednesday night services, and it never requires people to attend church every single time their local church holds a service. However, Hebrews 10:25 says you are not allowed to stop attending church altogether and just stay home. You really do have to show up in person.”

“But why?” Rob asked. “I mean, there are lots of good sermons online. What’s the point?”

“It’s not just about the sermon, you know. When you attend church you experience Christian fellowship. You join with others in

the worship of God. You give your offerings to further the kingdom of God. You have the chance to use your spiritual gifts to help other believers – and you give others a chance to help you. God did not mean for Christians to become hermits who lived in caves. We are supposed to be a Body that works together – and in order to do that we have to actually *show up* and be together.”

“That just sounds so boring,” Wally complained. “It’s too much work.”

Professor Grimes looked at him, puzzled. “Young man, you are attending a *seminary*. The whole point of this institution is to train people to work in churches, to help churches grow, and to found churches in foreign nations. If you don’t even want to *attend* church then what on earth are you doing in this school?”

Wally shrugged. “It was the only one within walking distance of my house. It would have been too much work to go anywhere else.”

Grimes sighed. “As I was saying, the local church is composed of many different parts. One thing I want to emphasize is that the

church is a *group of people*, not a building. In the Old Testament God actually manifested His glory in the Temple itself. When the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies he could literally see the glory of God. However, God doesn't do that anymore. In this era of history our bodies are actually the temple of God. I Corinthians 6:19 says that the Lord now dwells inside *us* instead of inside a building in the Middle East. The only thing special about the church building is that it's where the congregation gathers together to meet. Remember that, class: the *people* are the church. That is going to be on your next exam.

“The other thing I want to point out is that the pastor is *not* the head of the Church. Ephesians 5:23 says that Jesus Christ has that role. Instead, pastors are actually the shepherds of their flock. It is their job to care for the sheep – but the sheep belong to Christ, not to him. Pastors will be held accountable for their actions, and should live accordingly. If they abuse their position then they will have to answer for it.”

Iris spoke up. “What about deacons and elders?”

“It is their job to serve the congregation,” Professor Grimes replied. “Unfortunately I am running out of time, so I’m going to have to wrap this up. In your sophomore and junior years you will be eligible to take an advanced course on the structure of the Church. There you will learn all about how churches should function, what the different roles in the church are, and what deacons, elders, and pastors should be doing. Since this is a basic introductory course I won’t go into all of that detail.”

“But there isn’t going to be a sophomore year at Sunset Hills,” Iris pointed out. “How can we take your advanced class if you’re not going to be teaching it?”

“This isn’t the only seminary left in the world,” Grimes replied. “You will be able to continue your studies elsewhere – if you pass this class, that is. If you don’t pass then you will find even the easiest theological courses a bit too difficult for you.”

At that moment a powerful gust of wind caught the tarp and blew it down the field. Since the class no longer had any protection from the elements, the torrential rain began

soaking them. The students immediately began screaming.

“You are dismissed!” Professor Grimes said calmly, as rain poured down onto his head. “I’ll find a nice, dry place for us to meet next time – even if I have to commandeer the President’s office. I will be in touch!”

