

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The Nature of the Church: Basic ecclesiology

In 1866, Samuel Stone wrote the hymn *The Church's One Foundation*. The words underlie a basic understanding of the Church universal that provides a foundational understanding of ecclesiology.

*The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord
She is His new creation by water and the Word
From heaven He came and sought her to be His holy bride
With His own blood He bought her and for her life He died.*

*Elect from every nation yet one over all the earth
Her charter of salvation: One Lord, One faith, One birth;
One holy name she blesses, partakes one holy food,
And to one hope she presses with every grace endued.*

*The Church shall never perish, her dear Lord to defend,
To guide, sustain and cherish, is with her to the end;
Though there be those who hate her and false sons in her pale,
Against both foe or traitor she ever shall prevail.*

*Though with a scornful wonder men see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed;
Yet saints their watch are keeping, their cry goes up, "How
long?"
And soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song.*

*Mid toil and tribulation and tumult of her war,
She waits the consummation of peace forevermore*

*Till with the vision glorious her longing eyes are blessed
And the great Church victorious shall be the Church at rest.*

*Yet she on earth hath union with God, the Three in One,
And mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won
With all her sons and daughters who, by the Master's hand,
Led through the deathly waters, repose in Eden land.*

*O happy ones and holy! Lord, give us grace that we
Like them, the meek and lowly, on high may dwell with Thee:
There, past the border mountains, where in sweet vales the Bride
With Thee by living fountains forever shall abide!*

For the next four weeks, let us immerse ourselves in the Bible and the confessions and find ourselves standing anew upon the one true foundation of the Church of Jesus Christ, saved by grace and sent as His witnesses with the message of the Gospel to the world that God so loves.

Ecclesiology is the theological study of the Christian church. Specific areas of concern include the church's origin, its relationship to Jesus, its role in salvation, its discipline, its destiny and its leadership.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Carmen Fowler LaBerge is the author of the equipping section that appears in the center of each issue of *The Layman*.

Your feedback is greatly appreciated as future studies are planned.

Share your comments with Carmen via e-mail at cfowler@layman.org, call 1-800-368-0110 or write her at P.O. 2210, Lenoir, NC 28645.

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Week I: What is the Church and what is the church?

The Church, big C, is catholic (universal), invisible, one, holy and undefiled. The churches of the Church, little c, are particular, visible, diverse, human organizations prone to err. The church is at the same time a “bricks and mortar on the corner” institution and a “living stones built together as a witness on the Cornerstone” body of believers. We think of ourselves as “going to” church instead of acknowledging and living into the reality that we are the church.

***The Church is built on confession in Christ
(He is the Cornerstone)***

Read Matthew 16:13-19.

- According to Jesus, on what will He build His Church?
- What will not prevail against it?

Read Ephesians 2:14-22.

- According to the Apostle Paul, who is the cornerstone of the Church?
- Who is “in” the Church and how is the Church described?

Read The Theological Declaration of Barmen, 8.17.

- According to this confession, what is the Church and what is the Church in the world to do?

Read the Second Helvetic Confession, 5.124-125, 130.

- How is the Church described in this confession?

The Church is the body of Christ alive, present and active in the world at any specific time and place by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Read I Corinthians 12:12-14, 23-27; Ephesians 4:1-16 and Romans 12:1-8.

- How do these three passages describe the Church as a whole and a sum of parts?

Read The Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.054/6.186.

- What does the confession say about Jesus’ active role in the Church by the power of the Spirit and what does it say about our interconnection to one another as parts of the body of Christ?

Group discussion:

1. Work your way through the questions presented after each reading.
2. Discuss the “ecclesiology” presented in the words of the hymn, *The Church’s One Foundation*.

All of the confessions referenced in this study can be found in the Presbyterian Church (USA)’s *Book of Confessions*
www.pcusa.org/resource/book-confessions/

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Week II: How has the Church seen itself throughout the ages?

The Church is one, invisible, holy, catholic (universal) and apostolic.

Read John 15:1-9 and John 17:20-23.

- What does Jesus say about the necessity of the individual believer's intimate connection to Him and the sustainability of any good work apart from Him?
- What does Jesus say about the role of the Church in the world and the expectation that the Church can have of the world?

Read the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed.

- What does each say in reference to the Church?

Read The Scots Confession, 3.16.

Read The Heidelberg Catechism 4.054.

Read The Second Helvetic Confession, 5.126-.127.

Read The Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.140-.145.

- Now, fill in the blanks: The Church is made up of _____ who have responded to _____ call; have received the _____; and have been sent forth by _____ to His mission in the _____.
- Note that the Church begins with God, finds its life in God and is always directed toward His purpose.

Group Discussion:

1. Work your way through the questions following each reading.
2. What is important about each of these characteristics: one, invisible, holy, catholic (universal) and apostolic?
3. How do your experiences of the Church over the years and your experience of the Church in the world today line up with or depart from the vision of the Church cast by the confessions?

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Week III: The 'Who' and 'Why' of the Church

Who and Whose?

You may from time to time hear someone refer to “my” church or use the pastor’s name and refer to “Rev. Smith’s church.” Truth be told, the Church belongs in every time and place to Jesus. Denominations may lay claim to bricks and mortar, but the Church belongs to Jesus and no force on earth can take her from His embrace.

Read Colossians 1:15-20.

- What does this passage declare about Jesus?
- What is the relationship between Jesus, God the Father and the Church?

Read The Second Helvetic Confession, 5.131

Read The Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.043, .140

Read The Confession of 1967, 9.10

- To whom does the Church belong, who is “in” it and who determines that?

Read I Peter 2:4-10

- What does this passage say to you about Jesus’ “place” in the Church and our place in reference to Him?
- When you think about the way the church is organized, in what ways is Christ acknowledged as the head of the Church?
- In your experience, what competes with Christ for “authority” in the Church?

Why?

The Church exists to put Christ on display, to be a living demonstration of grace and truth, to proclaim the Gospel for the salvation of humankind, to worship God authentically, serve Christ faithfully, and follow Christ obediently.

The Church’s mission is to be the body of Christ in the world, bearing witness in all ways and always to Him; to be the sent people of God, declaring His glory and grace to a world that knows Him not.

Read Matthew 28:18-20

- What is the Great Commission of Jesus Christ to His disciples?
- What do Jesus’ declarations that “sandwich” the Great Commission add?

Read II Corinthians 5:11-20

- How does Paul describe the role and responsibility of the Church in the world?
- To whom is God sending you to be Christ’s ambassador today? Tomorrow?
- To whom are you going as a minister of reconciliation, imploring someone on Christ’s behalf to be reconciled to God?

Read Philippians 2:1-11, 3:14

- How are you actively cultivating the mind of Christ and the spirit of Christ?
- What motivates you to do what you do?
- What does it mean to have the same spirit that was in Christ Jesus?
- Do you genuinely look forward with great anticipation to the day when every knee will bow down to Jesus?
- Considering Phil. 3:14, what do you need to put behind you in order that you can more fully press ahead toward the upward calling of Christ in your life?

Read The Confession of 1967, 9.31-32.

- How is the mission of the Church described?
- How does Jesus set the pattern for the Church’s ministry and the ministry of your local church?
- How do you understand the word “missional” and what do you know about the missional church movement in the 21st century?

Group Discussion:

1. Work your way through the questions following each reading.
2. Read the words to the hymn, *The Church’s One Foundation*. Has your study brought you any new insights or deeper understanding of the ecclesiology presented in the hymn?

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Week IV: Closer to home, the church right here and right now

We've examined the nature and mission of the Church universal, so, what about us? Where do we fit in to the work God is doing in the world through the Church of Jesus Christ?

Why does *this* church exist?

Consider the example of the early church as one standard against which to measure the local expression of the body of Christ of which you are personally a part:

Read John 15.

- Is my church "in Christ," acknowledging that apart from Him we can do nothing?
- Do we exist as one visible branch of the one holy, catholic Church, rooted deeply in the Word, growing up into Christ, reaching out into the World, bearing fruit for the Kingdom of Heaven?
- If not, how do we begin to become that?

Read Acts 2:42-47.

- What is the evidence that we are devoted to the apostles' teaching? To fellowship? To worship? To prayer?
- What miraculous wonders and signs is God doing in our midst to draw others to Himself?
- How are we doing when it comes to giving to those in need?
- How strong is our sense of community (common unity) with one another – shared meals in homes, eating together with glad and sincere hearts?
- Do we enjoy the favor of people (how's our reputation in the community)?
- Is God adding to our number every day those who are being saved?

Read II Corinthians 5:11-20.

- What is the evidence that this church is a new creation?
- What are our ministries of reconciliation?
- How and where are we going as Christ's ambassadors into the world?

Read I Corinthians 1:10.

- Do we have a unity of mind and purpose?
- In what ways are we serving as a provisional demonstration of the Gospel to the world?

Read Colossians 3:12-17.

- How do we acknowledge to one another that we are God's chosen people, holy and beloved?
- What is the evidence that we have clothed ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience?
- Do we bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances

we may have against one another, forgiving one another as the Lord has forgiven us?

- Are we bound together in perfect unity? Are we a peace-full people?
- What's the magnitude of our gratitude?
- Do we teach and admonish one another with all wisdom?
- How active is our accountability to Godly living?
- What do you suppose God's perspective is on what we call worship?
- Are we consciously and conscientiously striving to do everything (in word and deed) to the glory of God?

Re-read I Peter 2:4-10.

- How are we being built together into a spiritual house, a royal priesthood, offering ourselves as living sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ?
- Even more personally, how am I being built into the spiritual house of God's people at "my" church?
- Who are the other living stones that God is actively knitting my life to in this community of faith?
- What are the specific ways that I am offering my life as a living sacrifice to God?
- Is the Word, as presented in worship and Bible study, encountered by non-believers, new believers and mature believers as a stumbling block or cornerstone of faith?

Read I Peter 2:11-12.

- Do we acknowledge in this church that a war is being waged for our souls?
- Do we live in a defensive or offensive spiritual posture? Are we actively working to take ground for the Kingdom of Christ or are we just trying to protect those already saved from the encroaching waywardness of the world?
- What's our battle plan? What are our strategies for protecting and nurturing the young and weak as well as arming the warriors for the fight?
- In what specific ways are we living "such good lives among the pagans that ... they may see our good deeds and glorify God?"
- How are we holding one another accountable for our behavior in the world?
- How am I actively encouraging my brothers and sisters who live in the world to not live as a part of it?

Week IV continued on next page.

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Week IV: Closer to home, the church right here and right now

Getting really personal ...

- How is my personal relationship with Christ being nurtured and encouraged in and through the life, ministry and fellowship of the church I attend?
- In what settings, what groups, what classes?
- In what areas of my spiritual life do I hope that my church might help me make progress toward maturity of faith, fruitfulness in discipleship, building relationships with other believers or impacting the world for Jesus?
- Why am I affiliating with this particular church and not some other church?
- How am I offering my life as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God? (In other words, how am I offering my gifts, talents, abilities and resources to the work and worship of God and how are those offerings be used by God to grow the kingdom of Christ?)
- What are the gifts and talents that God has given me that I am presently not using to build up the body of Christ in this place?
- How might I offer those gifts in service to God this week, this month, this year?

Group Discussion:

1. Choose one of the passages featured this week and really dig deeply into the text and the questions following.
2. Share as freely as you can your responses to the “Getting really personal” section.
3. Pray for one another, pray for the local church, pray for other churches and pray for the Church of Jesus Christ universal.
4. Close with singing (or reading through) *The Church’s One Foundation*.