

THE NATURE AND FUTURE OF THE CHURCH

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**Grades 7-8
Year 2
Quarter 3**

THE INVISIBLE CHURCH

Lesson Aim

To give students an understanding of the universal body of Christ as distinct from professing Christendom.

Memory Verse

Matthew 16:13 - "When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?'"

Lesson Background

This week we embark on a new unit in which we will be dealing with what theologians call ecclesiology and eschatology - the doctrines of the church and last things. While these topics often spark interest because of the controversy surrounding them, it is not our purpose to deal with controversy. The study of the church from a doctrinal perspective is intended to supplement the unit on the family of God that we worked through earlier this year. As far as the material on eschatology is concerned, we should note that Jesus always taught about the future for the purpose of motivating faithfulness and holy living in the present. Hopefully, our study will be able to produce some of those same desirable results.

Today's lesson deals with the invisible church. Even if your students do not make the common mistake of thinking of the church as a building, they probably restrict their thinking for the most part to the local congregation to which they belong. The goal of today's lesson is to expand that vision and help them see the church as a universal body, united in Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit. The practical result of this should be a greater appreciation for other Christians and a greater concern for the worldwide work of the Gospel.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking your students what the church is. A few may respond that it is the building in which you are sitting, while more astute students should be able to tell you that the church is not the building, but the people in it. Once they get to that point, ask them what people they have in mind. This question should draw out of them the recognition that not all people who attend church are Christians (which will be one of the major thrusts of next week's lesson). Tell them that we are going to spend our time today looking at just what the church is, and of whom it consists.

1. What is the Church?

As your students should have already discovered, the church is not a building. In fact, the members of the early church did not have separate buildings in which to meet for several hundred years. They originally met in homes, and during times of persecution would even meet in catacombs, the tunnels used for burial under the city of Rome. Occasionally when a large number of Jews in one city were converted to Christianity, the synagogue would become a place of meeting for the Christians. It was not until the late third century, however, that church buildings began to be constructed.

The church, then, is not a building, but a group of people. The Greek word translated "church," *ekklesia*, means "a called-out assembly," and was used to describe town meetings in the first century. The Greek term indicates to us that God intends Christians to function as a group, not solely as individuals. Furthermore, this group has not pulled itself together - it has been called into existence by someone else, namely God.

The New Testament uses the word "church" in a variety of ways. Sometimes it refers to a local assembly, sometimes to all Christians everywhere. Sometimes it refers to all who profess to believe, sometimes only to those who are truly born again. In today's lesson, we will focus on the usage that speaks of the church as all true believers everywhere - what is sometimes called the invisible church.

2. The Church as an Organism

The visible and identifiable group of people that we call the church has a specific organization that gives it structure - officers, designated procedures, times of meeting, etc. The invisible church, however, is not so much an organization as an organism. The most familiar image used in the New Testament to describe this organism is that of the Body with Christ as its Head (see I Corinthians 12). While the body image can be used very fruitfully to describe relationships among the members of a local church organization (this, of course, was what Paul had in mind when he wrote to the Corinthians), it can also teach us some important things about the invisible church. Paul implied this also in I Corinthians 12:13 when he said that "we" were all baptized into one body by one Spirit - he includes himself in the same body of which the Corinthians are a part.

Peter communicates much the same idea using a different image in I Peter 2:4-10. Here he pictures Christians as living stones in a living Temple - an organic building, so to speak. He visualizes this building as being constructed of those who believe from all over the known world. Those who were separated from God and from one another have now been brought together into one unit - what Peter describes, borrowing language from the Old Testament, as a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people belonging to God.

What can these images teach us about the church as an organism? For one thing, they demonstrate that all Christians everywhere are part of the same body (or building). Distinctions like Baptist, Methodist, or Presbyterian are man-made, though they reflect very real differences. In Christ, all Christians are one. If this is the case, shouldn't we recognize this oneness in our attitudes toward other Christians? Too often we focus on our differences and act as if there is as wide a gulf between Baptist and Presbyterian as there is between Christian and pagan. I was speaking to a woman once about Christ, and when I mentioned the church from which I came, she said, "Oh, I have my own religion; I'm _____," and named another Christian denomination. God's people have been incorporated into one body by one Spirit. Let's not tear apart artificially what God has put together.

Secondly, these passages imply that, if all Christians are one, this unity does not need to be created, it merely needs to be recognized. In other words, the drive for organizational union that was such a matter of concern to so many in the last century misses the whole point of the unity of the body of Christ. Though there can be little doubt that the multiplicity of denominations does little to show the world that the church is one, the fact of the matter is that God's people everywhere belong to one body, one building, and no organizational structure (or lack thereof) will change that. The members of the body are to be bound to one another by cords of love, not interconnecting church hierarchies.

What does all of this mean for your middle school students? It means that those who are Christians should recognize that they have been united by the Spirit of God to all Christians everywhere. Christians in their neighborhoods and schools are a part of the body of Christ just like they are. They should therefore support one another, particularly in the face of the hostility of a secular world. Ask your students what the Christians in their schools might be able to do to help one another and reflect the fact that they are part of the same body. How can they show love to each other and spread the Gospel among their classmates?

It also means that your Christian students are joined together in the same body with Christians in other parts of the world. They should therefore be concerned about Christians in other countries. Encourage them to find out about churches in other countries where your church supports missionaries, and to write to someone in one of those churches in order to gain a better understanding of what it means to be a Christian in another part of the world. They also could acknowledge their unity with Christians in other lands by praying for them, using letters from missionaries as a source of information about specific needs.

3. The Characteristics of the Church

A. Unity

From the early years of the church's history, the church has been defined by four characteristics - unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. These characteristics were initially defined to help fight heresy in the early church, but can also be useful to us in helping us understand what the invisible church is. Unity we have already discussed, along with its applications.

B. Holiness

When we speak of the church as holy, we communicate the same idea Paul was trying to get across in Ephesians 5:25-27. The church is holy not because its people are perfect, but because it is in the process of being cleansed by Christ. It is also holy in the sense that it has been set apart by Christ for His purposes. Thus your students should understand that Christians are special people, not because of what they are in themselves, but because of the fact that God has chosen them, and because of what God is fashioning them into.

C. Catholicity

Because of the existence of the Roman Catholic Church, this term is easily misunderstood. Catholicity simply means that the church is universal. The Christians in Ephesus were part of the same church to which the Christians in Corinth belonged. The mistake made by the Roman Catholic Church, however, is that they have identified this universal church with a visible organization. As we will see next week when we talk about the visible church, not all who belong to organizations called churches are part of the Body of Christ. It is also clear that not all of the members of the Body of Christ belong to one earthly organization.

We should also note that the universality of the church extends over time as well as space. Not only are God's people all over the world part of the invisible church, but God's people throughout all time are also part of that same church. Christians today can thus look back to the deeds of Christians in Bible times and throughout history and be encouraged by their faithful service (as well as being warned by their mistakes). The universality of the church over time makes the study of history valuable for the Christian. What God did hundreds or thousands of years ago He is still doing today, and we can learn important lessons by examining it.

D. Apostolicity

This is another term that has been subject to misunderstanding because of its use in Roman Catholicism. The Catholic Church claims to be apostolic because its leaders are the successors of the apostles, and as such exercise the same authority over the church. They believe the Pope is the successor of Peter, and thus is the representative of Christ and head of the church on earth. This is not what apostolicity originally meant, however. The term does not imply that an earthly organization called the church perpetuates the *authority* of the apostles, but that the invisible universal church perpetuates the *teaching* of the apostles. That teaching, of course, is found in the Word of God, which was given to us by the apostles through whom the Spirit inspired it. The church is thus founded on Scripture.

4. Who is Part of the Church?

If the church is put together by the Holy Spirit, then only those who have the Spirit of God indwelling them are part of the church. Many may join earthly organizations, but that does not make them Christians, nor does it make them part of the invisible church. Only the Spirit of God can incorporate someone into the Body of Christ. It is not church membership or baptism that brings a person into the invisible church - it is a personal relationship with the Son of God.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by reviewing the four characteristics of the church, making sure your students understand what they mean, and reminding them of what they mean for them personally. Encourage your Christian students to do all they can to demonstrate the unity of the Body of Christ in the week ahead by showing love for other believers, and plan to follow up on any desire they might express to contact believers overseas. Be sure your non-Christian students understand the important distinction between involvement with a local body of Christians and membership in the Body of Christ. Don't let anyone leave your class today thinking he is a Christian because he goes to church. Challenge each one to ascertain his own spiritual condition and seek forgiveness from the Head of the Church.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT THE INVISIBLE CHURCH

1. Is the church best defined as a building or a group of people? What is meant by the term “invisible church”?
2. What people make up the church?
3. Is there one church or many? In what sense?
4. When we describe the church as holy, what do we mean?
5. What does it mean to describe the church as catholic? How does this differ from the meaning given to the term by the Roman Catholic Church?
6. In what sense is the church apostolic?
7. How does one become a part of the invisible church?

THE VISIBLE CHURCH

Lesson Aim

To help students understand that not all who claim to be Christians really are, and to encourage them to evaluate where they stand, as well as demonstrating to the class the importance of the visible church.

Memory Verse

Matthew 16:14 - "They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.'"

Lesson Background

One who has been saved by the grace of God is said to be justified - God has declared him righteous. He is also in the process of being sanctified - made righteous by the work of the Holy Spirit. Obviously, however, as long as we are on this earth, what we are in reality does not measure up to what God has declared us to be, or to what we will be when He is finished working with us. So it is with the church. Last week we looked at the invisible church, the Body of Christ. Clearly there is a big gap between the picture painted in Scripture of what the Body of Christ is supposed to be and what it is in its earthly manifestation. The visible church is quite unlike the invisible church in many respects.

The most obvious difference is that the membership in the visible church is not coextensive with that of the invisible church. Not everyone who claims to be a Christian, nor everyone who is a member of a local church, belongs to the Body of Christ. On the other hand, it is possible for someone to be a Christian without being formally affiliated with a local body of believers (although we want to make sure your students

understand that this is not pleasing to God and gives good reason to question the legitimacy of a person's profession).

The visible church is also unlike the invisible church in that it is a recognizable entity, defined either by profession or by organization. While it is relatively easy to discern whether or not someone is part of the visible church, it is much more difficult to discern in any absolute sense whether or not someone belongs to the invisible church.

In today's lesson, we will be looking at two aspects of the visible church - the local church and professing "Christendom." Since much of our attention in the lessons that follow will be directed toward the local church, we will give that subject most of our attention today. We will also spend some time, however, talking about the worldwide professing Christian community and helping the students to understand what that does and does not mean. As far as application is concerned, the main point to focus on today is the discontinuity between the visible and invisible churches. If not everyone who professes to be a Christian really is, then those who profess Christianity need to examine themselves to see where they stand. Since most of your students probably profess to be Christians, they need to ensure that their profession is not a sham, but corresponds to reality.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the class with a review of last week's lesson, focusing on the different ways in which the word "church" may be used. Distinguish between the universal and local church and the visible and invisible church. Be sure to include the following ideas:

- Universal church - the term is usually used to refer to all true Christians everywhere on earth at the present time.
- Local church - an identifiable body of professing Christians with a well-defined organization and membership.
- Visible church - all professing Christians everywhere on earth at the present time; sometimes also used to refer to "organized" Christianity, including large denominational and ecumenical structures.
- Invisible church - the Body of Christ at all times and places.

To make sure the students understand these differences, ask them the following questions:

- Is it possible to be a member of a local church without being a member of the universal church?
A: Of course; not everyone who joins a church is a Christian, even when churches are careful about whom they admit.
- Is it possible to be a member of the universal church without being a member of a local church?
A: Yes, but this is not God's intention. All Christians should be formally identified with a local body of believers and should submit themselves to the oversight of the leaders of that body.
- What is the difference between the local church and the visible church?
A: The local church is a subset of the visible church. While not all professing Christians belong to a church, and thus not every member of the visible church is part of a local church, every member of a local church is part of the visible church because he professes faith in Christ.

- What is the difference between the invisible church and the universal church?
A: Frankly, not much. Sometimes the former term is used to refer to all true believers at all times and all places, while the latter term is restricted to true believers presently on earth. Many times the two terms are used interchangeably, however.

Having gotten the terminology straight, note that last week's lesson focused on the invisible or universal church. Today we will be concentrating our attention on the visible/local church.

1. The Local Church

Most of the time when the word "church" is used in the New Testament, it refers to a local church. Paul wrote most of his epistles to local churches - those in Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, and Thessalonica. The letters written to Timothy and Titus were written to those young men while they were serving in churches in Ephesus and Crete, respectively, while the letter to Philemon was a personal letter written to a member of the church in Colosse. In fact, most of these letters were probably not written to individual local churches, but to groups of local churches. We know that the early churches met in homes, and many of the closing greetings in Paul's letters mention individuals whose homes served as meeting places for churches. At least several of these cities probably had a sufficiently large enough number of Christians in them that they were divided into several house churches.

These house churches were defined by membership and leadership. As far as we can tell, membership was defined by baptism. The writers of the New Testament make the assumption that all believers have been baptized, and address them as such (see passages such as Romans 6:3-4 and I Corinthians 12:13, for instance). The New Testament knows nothing of unbaptized or unchurched Christians. As far as leadership is concerned, Paul lays out standards for that in the pastoral epistles - those written to Timothy and Titus. Each congregation was under the supervision of a group of elders and deacons. We will be looking at the issues of baptism and leadership later in the quarter, however, so there is no need to dwell on them today.

The purpose of the local church is threefold - the worship of God, the edification of believers, and witness to the world. Note that these all have specifically corporate aspects, requiring that Christians gather together instead of living in isolation (Hebrews 10:25 indicates that the "lone wolf" Christian must have been a problem even in New Testament times). The Bible pictures worship as corporate as well as individual (the Psalms give examples of both); edification requires the gathering of the church, since it is interactive by its very nature; and while witness can be carried out alone, a key aspect of witness is the testimony of the church as the members relate to and love one another. Thus you should impress upon your students the importance of being part of a church body. God never intended His people to be alone in the world.

It is also important to note that God anticipated the mixed nature of the local congregation. Many of the New Testament epistles speak of those in the church who do not really belong to Christ, but are agents of Satan to undermine the work of God. Have your students turn to the book of Jude. Almost the entire book speaks of unbelievers who have crept in to pervert the church. Warn your students that not all those who claim to speak for Christ really do so. There are many false teachers in the world; not only the leaders of cult groups and such, but also some who gather large followings through television ministries or preaching tours. Anyone who claims to speak for God must be subjected to comparison with the Word of God.

Not all unbelievers in the church are deliberate deceivers like the men Jude describes, of course. Many are deceived themselves - deceived into thinking that they are part of God's family. It is because such people are in the church that the writers of the New Testament constantly encourage self-examination. Your

students, too, need to understand that being part of a church does not make them Christians, and that they need to be sure about where they stand in relationship to Christ.

2. The Visible Church

Beyond the scope of the local church, there are also many who claim to belong to Christ or to speak for Christ. What does it tell you, for instance, when the newspaper or television news talks about vicious fighting going on between Christians and Muslims in Lebanon, or between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland? Why are these people who are going around killing each other called Christians? Or what about history? What of the Crusades or the Inquisition, where people claimed that they were defending the cause of Christ when they were in the process of committing brutal acts of barbaric torture and slaughter? On a less drastic scale, what of those who claim to be Christian spokesmen and support notions of peace and freedom that are completely at odds with the teaching of Scripture, such as by defending abortion or supporting homosexuality?

These examples should all make it clear that the word “Christian” has been drained of much of its meaning to people today. It may refer generally to a broad religious tradition, or may simply distinguish a person’s upbringing from that of a Jew or Muslim. Only a relatively few who use the term really define it in a biblical sense. In fact, true Christians are a small minority in the visible church today. Though this was not the case in the New Testament church, it has been true through much of history (even in the Old Testament, not all who were identified as the people of God in the wilderness were true believers; many were judged for their unbelief). For your students, this means that those who are Christians will have to make a special effort to communicate to those around them what they mean when they say that they are Christians. The world is very confused about what a Christian is. It is up to true Christians to show them, both by how they live and by what they say.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by encouraging your students to examine themselves to ascertain their true relationship to Christ and His church. Those who are Christians must realize the importance of the local church and try to show by their own lives what a Christian really is. Those who are not Christians need to get right with God and not depend on a formal relationship with the church to save them.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

THE VISIBLE CHURCH

1. What is the difference between the visible church and the invisible church?
2. What is the difference between the universal church and a local church?
3. Are all who belong to a local church Christians? Why or why not?
4. Why is it important for Christians to recognize that not all who claim to be Christians really are?
5. Why is it important for non-Christians to recognize that not all who claim to be Christians really are?
6. Why is it important for a Christian to be associated with a local church?

THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH - THE WORD OF GOD

Lesson Aim

To show students that a true church will manifest teaching of and adherence to the Word of God.

Memory Verse

Matthew 16:15-16 - ““But what about you?” he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’”

Lesson Background

In a relatively few years, many of your students will be leaving home to go to college and will be faced with the task of finding a church to attend. It is therefore important for them to know how to evaluate a church. From the time of the Protestant Reformation, the church has been said to be distinguished by three “marks” - the preaching of the Word of God, the observance of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and the exercise of biblical church discipline. For the next four weeks, we will be looking at those marks in order to help students understand what constitutes a church.

It is important that your students be able to distinguish a true church for several reasons. The first is that many people who seek and evaluate churches do so for the wrong reasons. Too often, churches are evaluated on subjective grounds, such as the feel of the worship or the friendliness of the people. Certainly, a church ought to worship with enthusiasm, and its people should be friendly and reach out to newcomers, but these things are hardly the proper criteria on which to judge a church. If your students know what to look for, they will be far less likely to go on their feelings.

Secondly, of course, the skill of church selection is important because many organizations that call themselves churches simply do not fit the biblical description of the word. Whether one considers liberal churches or cult groups, there are all kinds of “churches” that do not deserve the name, and with which you would not want your students to associate themselves. In order to avoid such mistakes, your students need to develop discernment.

In the same way that Treasury agents learn to recognize counterfeit money by becoming intimately familiar with the right stuff, however, the best way for your students to learn what a good church is is to be part of one now as they grow up. If your church is a sound example of what a church should be, and your students appreciate what they have (though all too many young people raised in good churches take those churches for granted because they have never been in bad ones), they should be well prepared to make their own decisions in the years to come.

Today’s lesson deals with the first of the marks of a true church - the Word of God. We will see in the lesson that the Word of God must not only be preached, it must also be believed and lived. Of course, such a standard will never be observed perfectly this side of heaven, but an awareness of what the church ought to be should help your students to know the direction in which any church should be moving if they are genuinely trying to please God.

Be careful of one thing, though. People who know what a church should be sometimes look for perfection, and in so doing become dissatisfied with every church they try. They wind up becoming church-hoppers who have no commitment to any body of believers. Christians need to strike a balance between seeking a church that measures up to God’s standard, at least to a large extent, and committing themselves to a striving, yet flawed, congregation of God’s people.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking your students to move ahead a few years in their imaginations. They are now freshmen in college, living in a dormitory hundreds of miles from home. The town in which the college is located has many churches but none is a Reformed Baptist church (or whatever your church happens to be). They have been counseled by their parents and leaders at church to get involved in a good church while at college. How are they to decide what church to attend? Let them discuss the question for a while. Take particular note of whether their criteria for church selection are subjective (how the church “feels”) or objective (doctrinal statement, practice of the sacraments, etc.). Note also whether they are basing their choices on substantial issues (such as the quality and content of the preaching and teaching) or on relatively insignificant factors (a friend attends, it is close to the campus, the choir sounds nice, or a hundred other equally significant things that influence church decisions). Tell the students that, in the next four weeks, we will be looking at some criteria that will be helpful to them when it comes time for them to make such a decision, as all of them inevitably will at some stage of their lives. Those criteria are called the marks of the church, and include the preaching of the Word of God, the practice of the sacraments, and the administration of church discipline. Today we will focus our attention on the Word of God.

1. The Word of God Must Be Preached

The first and most obvious standard by which a church is usually judged is the preaching that comes from the pulpit. Ask your students what makes a good sermon. They will probably mention something about funny stories, but remind them that illustrations must have a point; like Jesus’ parables, they must illustrate truth, not merely entertain. A good sermon is of course biblical in content (to judge this, a person must know

the Word of God himself), but also should be clear, orderly, and contain application, both to the lives of believers and those of unbelievers. Illustrations help, but are not the essence of good preaching.

Another important aspect of good preaching is not something that can be judged by listening to a few sermons. In Acts 20:27, Paul tells the Ephesian elders that he has been faithful in instructing them because he has proclaimed the whole will of God. For the preacher, this means that his preaching ministry should not return again and again to a few favorite themes, but should cover the breadth of biblical doctrine. Systematic exposition of major portions of God's Word will insure this sort of coverage much more easily than a hit-and-miss sort of topical approach to preaching. A good preacher will preach series on a wide variety of books and sections of God's Word.

The ministry of the Word in a church is not restricted to the preaching from the pulpit, of course. A church's teaching ministry should also be judged by the teaching that occurs in Sunday School, prayer meeting, etc. All of this contributes to a balanced, comprehensive program of instruction in the Word of God that is necessary for a church to grow.

2. The Word of God Must Be Believed

Another relatively easy area to evaluate is the system of belief followed by the church. If the church truly preaches the Word of God, their belief will be reflected in their doctrinal statement. While many churches have creedal statements like the 1689 London Baptist Confession or the Westminster Confession of Faith, some independent churches have much briefer creeds consisting of little more than a basic statement of Christian truth. These are far less informative in terms of telling a person where the church stands on certain key issues, but to the careful and informed reader, they can indicate the theological tradition from which a church is coming. Again, though, as with the preaching, a person who hopes to evaluate a church's doctrinal statement must himself be somewhat knowledgeable about doctrine. In the same way that a personal study of the Word of God prepares a person to be discerning when he listens to preaching and teaching, a personal study of Bible doctrine and church history equips someone to evaluate a church's doctrinal position.

Another important issue here is the extent to which the congregation adheres to its doctrinal position. Is it a mere tradition that is widely ignored by the leaders and the people, or is it the basis upon which the church operates and the standard by which truth is judged? Do the people understand the church's doctrine, or are they themselves ignorant of what the church is supposed to teach? An effective teaching ministry produces an informed congregation. If the people know the Word and understand the church's doctrine, it speaks well for the ministry of the Word that is taking place there.

A final important aspect of believing the Word has to do with independent thinking. In Acts 16:11, Paul praised the Bereans for checking out the things he taught them to see if they agreed with Scripture. A church that believes the Word of God believes it because God said it, not because the preacher said it. A believing church has the Word of God as its standard, not the words of the pastor. If the church merely accepts what comes from the pulpit without comparing it with Scripture, they are in danger of falling into an authoritarian state similar to that which characterizes many of the cults. A believing church believes intelligently and critically, submitting to God's authority and holding all others to that standard.

3. The Word of God Must Be Lived

The final aspect of the ministry of the Word that should be evaluated in searching for a church is the extent to which the Word of God is put into practice by the people of the church. There are several factors to consider here, including both overt morality and the less obvious aspects of Christian sanctification.

The first of these has to do with moral standards. A congregation that lives the Word of God will not tolerate open sin without attempting to deal with it. We will deal more fully with this subject when we get to the lesson on church discipline, but your students should recognize that this is an important part of living the Word.

Secondly, there should be an evident effort on the part of the people to put the Word of God into practice in their lives. We're not only talking about moral standards here, though those are important. Those who live the Word of God seek to attain an increasing measure of holiness in their lives. They also interact with one another in a way that shows Christian love. Relationships among the members of a congregation are often a good indicator of the extent to which they are really living God's Word. If there is bitterness or coldness, the church is not practicing what it is preaching.

Thirdly, a church that lives the Word of God has a desire for growth. There should be a sense of striving for something better, both as individuals and as a church, rather than an acceptance of the status quo. The leadership can set the tone for this by determining to seek to become more and more biblical, thus being open to reevaluation and change. When the leaders do this, the people will generally do the same in their own lives.

Another aspect of putting the Word of God into practice involves reaching out to others. A church that lives the Word is a church that cares about those outside its number. This will be reflected in support of missionary work, active witnessing by the members of the congregation, care for those who are in need, and concern for visitors or people on the periphery of the congregation.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by summarizing the characteristics associated with the first mark of the church. Remind your students that, while these characteristics are useful for evaluating a church, they will never find a church that adheres to them perfectly. While intelligent evaluation of a church is important, negative criticism that keeps a person from participating in the life of the church is destructive. When a person finds a good church, he should get involved and work to make that church even better and more biblical. The person who stays on the outside, forever looking for the perfect church, will become a good critic but will never be a good Christian.

**FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT MARKS OF THE CHURCH
THE WORD OF GOD**

1. What are the three marks of the church?

2. What are some of the elements of a good sermon?

3. What does it mean for a church to teach “the whole will of God”?

4. Why is it a good sign if the members of a church check up on their pastor to see if what he is saying is right according to Scripture?

5. Why are bitterness and coldness in a church an indication that the people are not putting the Word of God into practice?

6. Why is a good church one that is always trying to improve?

7. Why is your personal study of the Word of God important if you are to choose wisely when it comes time for you to choose a church for yourself?

THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH - THE SACRAMENTS: BAPTISM

Lesson Aim

To show students from Scripture the importance of baptism in the public profession of the Christian.

Memory Verse

Matthew 16:17 - “Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.’”

Lesson Background

Baptism has been a source of disagreement among Christians for many centuries. Though almost all scholars would agree that the early church baptized by immersion, and the preponderance of the evidence indicates that they baptized upon profession of faith (the only arguments for infant baptism in the New Testament are arguments from silence based on the analogy with circumcision), a gradual change occurred in the first few hundred years after the death of Christ. In *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, a manual of church practice written early in the second century, the writer indicates that baptism is to be upon profession of faith, and that normally it is to be carried out by immersion. However, if sufficient water is not available, pouring or sprinkling is permissible. Thus, by the second century, the church had already developed some flexibility as to the mode of baptism. With the growth of the sacramental system came the increasing belief in baptismal regeneration (the teaching that baptism confers saving grace), and with the belief came the practice of infant baptism. By the end of the fifth century, the only adults being baptized were pagan converts; almost all “Christians” (which by then included most of the Roman Empire) were having their children baptized shortly after birth. With the coming of the “Christian” Europe of the Middle Ages, infant baptism became the rule and believer’s baptism virtually disappeared from the scene.

A few heretical groups in the Middle Ages challenged the prevailing Catholic view of baptism, but few of the Protestant Reformers did. The exceptions were a radical group known as the Anabaptists, or “Rebaptizers.” They saw the church as a voluntary association of committed believers (rather than something into which a person was born), and symbolized this belief by resurrecting the ancient practice of believer’s baptism. Though they suffered severe persecutions from Catholics and Lutheran and Reformed Protestants alike, they persevered. Their descendants include groups like the Mennonites and the Amish.

Later, in England in the seventeenth century, a group of men became convinced of the legitimacy of believer’s baptism and started the first English Baptist church. The English Baptists also experienced persecution, but ultimately won toleration along with other dissenting groups. From almost the very beginning, they were divided into Particular (Calvinistic) Baptists and General (Arminian) Baptists. It is these Baptist churches of England that are the ancestors of most Baptist churches in the United States today.

In dealing with the issue of baptism today, we will cover the usual questions - meaning, mode, and subjects. It is important, however, that this matter be put in proper perspective for your students. While the right administration of the sacraments is a mark of the true church, we are not therefore suggesting that churches that baptize infants are not true churches, despite our disagreement with their practice. The fact of the matter is, however, that agreement on the question of baptism is usually a prerequisite to union with a particular church body, so while we are not implying that churches that baptize infants are not churches, those who believe in believer’s baptism will face a barrier if they try to join such churches. Thus the question of baptism, though in some ways not of the essence of the faith, will be crucial as your students seek out churches of their own some day. They need to understand baptism and its meaning, not only for their own spiritual good now, but also because of the role it plays in evaluating a church in the future.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by finding out if any of the students in your class have been baptized. If you have students from families that have recently come to your church, you may even have young people who were baptized as infants; perhaps some of your students will have been baptized as believers also. Having done this, ask your students why people get baptized. Their answers should give you a good indication of how well they understand the subject and provide a basis upon which to build as you cover the lesson material.

Remind your students that you began last week to talk about the marks of the church, and that one of those marks was the proper observance of the sacraments. If they don’t know what a sacrament is, explain to them that it is an outward symbol of the grace of God that was instituted for practice in the church by Jesus Himself. He told His disciples to observe the Lord’s Supper in the upper room on the night before His death, and He told them to baptize those who believed when He commissioned them shortly before His ascension into heaven. Though we don’t have time to discuss the baptism of Jesus today, you may want to note in passing that the baptism practiced by John the Baptist, and thus the baptism undergone by Jesus Himself, was not the same as the sacrament of Christian baptism, though certain connections do exist.

1. The Meaning of Baptism

Have your students turn to Romans 6:1-14. This passage gives us the clearest discussion of the meaning of baptism to be found in the New Testament. Have them read the passage over for themselves, and then ask them what baptism is said to symbolize in this chapter. They should be able to ascertain fairly easily that baptism pictures the Christian’s identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus. What does this mean? According to Paul, since Christ has died and been raised again on behalf of the believer, it is as if the Christian himself has died and been raised to a new life. Baptism thus indicates to the world that the person

being baptized is identifying with Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection and that he has died to sin and been raised to a new life of righteousness.

It is also important for your students to understand what baptism does not mean. First and most obviously, when a person is baptized, he is making a public profession of the work of grace that God has done in his life, but baptism does not in itself bring about that gracious work. In other words, baptism does not save a person. In Acts 8, Simon the magician was baptized, but clearly was not saved. Similarly, the repentant thief on the cross was saved, but not baptized.

A related matter of confusion has to do with the symbolism of cleansing. Though some Jewish sects like the Essenes had practiced water baptism as a symbol of purification before the time of Christ, and the baptism of repentance of John the Baptist symbolized cleansing, that is not the main idea conveyed by Christian baptism. Those who have adopted that symbolism have drawn all sorts of harmful conclusions from it. While some have decided that baptism cleanses from sin, therefore is a means of salvation, others have taught that because baptism cleanses a person from sin, one who has been baptized becomes sinlessly perfect. Of course, the corollary to that is that the person who sins after baptism loses his salvation, and needs to be reconverted and rebaptized. Some in the ancient church held a peculiar form of this teaching whereby they maintained that a person who lapsed after baptism could be restored once, but a second lapse would condemn him to hell forever. This and similar teachings caused some in the ancient church to delay baptism until the last possible moment so that they could be assured of going to heaven. The Roman emperor Constantine, who was responsible for legalizing Christianity in the Empire, waited until he was on his deathbed before being baptized, despite the fact that he had professed conversion to Christianity almost twenty years earlier.

2. The Mode of Baptism

Your students, I'm sure, are aware that different churches baptize people in different ways. These different modes of baptism came into existence in the early years of the church largely as a matter of practical necessity. Though the original practice was immersion, baptismal pools were unheard of, of course. Thus when the church spread into cold-weather regions, hauling everybody out to the local river for a mid-winter dunking was not always a good idea. In addition, the church's early years were ones of frequent persecution. A public ceremony like baptism would often bring the authorities down on the heads of the Christians. At times, survival required that baptisms be performed in secret. Under such circumstances, sprinkling or pouring was a practical necessity. Furthermore, with the growing prevalence of infant baptism, immersion became less and less desirable.

If the early church considered it insignificant, why, then, do we continue to insist on immersion? To begin with, the biblical evidence, sparse though it is, points toward the practice of immersion. The word translated "baptize" means "to dip," and we are told that John baptized where he did "because there was plenty of water there" (John 3:23); after Jesus was baptized, He "went up from the water" (Matthew 3:16); when Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:36-39), it was after they had come upon some water - the supply he was probably carrying in the chariot did not suffice - and they both "sent down into the water." Furthermore, the symbolism of baptism is best served by immersion. The idea of picturing death and resurrection somehow gets lost in the translation when a few drops of water are placed on a person's forehead.

3. The Subjects of Baptism

Explain to the students how the practice of infant baptism developed, using the material from the Lesson Background and focusing on the two most important factors - the analogy with Old Testament

circumcision and the growing belief in baptismal regeneration. Since we clearly do not believe that baptism saves a person, nor do we believe that a person who is born into a Christian family is somehow brought under the influence of the saving work of Christ, the symbolism of identification with the death and resurrection of Christ is only appropriate for those who have been brought under His work through salvation. In every example to be found in the New Testament, the person who is being baptized is undergoing the symbol after the reality has occurred - in other words, they are baptized after they have been saved (arguments from silence based on the “household baptisms” found in passages like Acts 16:31-33 prove nothing either way; those who believe in believer’s baptism assume the family members were baptized because they were converted, while paedobaptists argue that the children were included because of the faith of the parents). We believe the order of Acts 2:38 still holds: “Repent and be baptized”

Conclusion

Depending upon how your church deals with the issue of baptizing adolescents, encourage your students to consider where they stand with respect to this issue. Baptism is a step of obedience and public identification with the cause of Christ that should be followed by every Christian. If you have students who are clearly trusting Christ but have not been baptized, they should give serious thought to this step of obedience. On the other hand, remind all of your students that baptism does not have the power to save anyone - it is merely an outward sign of what has already happened inside.

**FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT MARKS OF THE CHURCH
THE SACRAMENTS: BAPTISM**

1. What is baptism intended to symbolize?
2. What are some of the problems that have occurred when people have assumed that baptism involves cleansing or purification?
3. How did the practices of sprinkling and pouring develop in the early church?
4. Why does immersion more effectively convey the symbolism of baptism than either sprinkling or pouring?
5. Is baptism necessary for salvation? Why or why not?
6. What are the two main factors that brought about the practice of infant baptism in the church?
7. What are your personal feelings at this point about baptism? If you have been baptized, what does the experience mean to you now? If you have not been baptized, do you eventually plan to do so? Why or why not?

THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH - THE SACRAMENTS: COMMUNION

Lesson Aim

To show students the importance of the Lord's Supper in the life of the church and the individual Christian.

Memory Verse

Matthew 16:18 - "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."

Lesson Background

The history of the church's understanding of the Lord's Supper is filled with great ironies. The simple commemorative meal instituted by Jesus the night before He died ultimately became for many the most elaborate of rituals. The same ceremony that was the basis for the wild accusations of cannibalism directed against the early Christians by their Roman persecutors eventually came to be understood by Catholics as the literal eating of flesh and drinking of blood. And perhaps worst of all, the center of the New Testament church's love feast became the basis for bitter divisions and even warfare among the Protestants of the Reformation era. How could one simple observance produce so many contradictions?

The original observance of the Lord's Supper in the early church is described by Paul in I Corinthians 11:17-34. The sacrament was usually celebrated at the climax of an *agape*, or love feast, at which the members of the church would share a communal meal. It was abuses and lack of love during this communal meal against which Paul was speaking. There were two factors that contributed to the transformation of this simple observance into the Mass of the Roman Catholic Church. The first was the

growth and development of the priesthood. Following the analogy of the Old Testament priests, Christian ministers gradually came to be thought of as mediators between God and man who offered sacrifices to God on man's behalf. Rather than offering animal sacrifices, however, they offered anew the body and blood of Christ on the altar of the church. Combine this notion of priesthood with the numerous superstitions introduced into Christianity by the mass conversions of the European barbarians, and the groundwork was laid for the development of the doctrine of transubstantiation - the Catholic teaching that the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ when the priest speaks the words of institution (the doctrine was argued in the early Middle Ages, but became official Catholic teaching at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215). This is still taught by the Catholic Church today.

With the coming of the Protestant Reformation came a different understanding of the Lord's Supper. All Protestants rejected the mediatorial view of the priesthood, but they differed in their understanding of what, if anything, actually happened during Communion. Luther rejected transubstantiation but taught consubstantiation, which is the idea that the actual body and blood of Christ are present along with the bread and the wine, not by the power of the priest, but by the grace of God alone, and are partaken of by the participants through faith. Zwingli and Calvin disagreed, maintaining that Christ was present in the Lord's Supper spiritually, but not physically. Others went even further, and asserted that Christ is not present in any unusual way, teaching instead that the Lord's Supper is simply a communal observance in which Christians remember the death of Christ on their behalf. These differences among Protestants led to bitter disputes, particularly between the Lutheran and Reformed churches.

We do not want to focus our attention on history today, however. The most important thing for your students is to understand what the Lord's Supper means and what part it is to play in the life of the church. In order to help them see these things, we will look at the institution of the Lord's Supper, then at the meaning of the Lord's Supper in both its horizontal and vertical dimensions. As you study these matters with your class, it will be important to bring out that, like baptism, the Lord's Supper is a public acknowledgment of what has already occurred, not a source of saving grace. Christians are to take the Lord's Supper, but one does not become a Christian by doing so.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by reviewing with your class the three marks of the church about which we are studying, and go over with them the definition of a sacrament that they learned last week. Then ask them why the Lord's Supper is sometimes called Communion. Their responses to this question should tell you how much of the meaning of the Lord's Supper they understand and give you a foundation upon which to build as you teach the lesson.

1. The Institution of the Lord's Supper

Have the students turn to Luke 22:14-20. Here we find Jesus, eating with His disciples on the night before His death, instituting the Lord's Supper. Jesus and His disciples were eating the ceremonial meal called the *Seder* with which the Jewish Passover began. Ask your students to explain the relationship between the Passover and the death of Christ. Jesus took the redemptive symbolism of the Seder and applied it to His own coming death, showing the disciples that His broken body and shed blood would accomplish in reality what the sacrifice of the Passover lamb had accomplished symbolically. His death was to be the fulfillment of the Passover. He thus infused an old ceremony with new meaning. He also told them to continue the practice in remembrance of His death until His return.

2. The Vertical Dimension of the Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is sometimes called Communion because the ceremony speaks of a relationship and focuses on the reality of that relationship. The relationship of which it speaks is that between God and man - a relationship of love and forgiveness that has been restored by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. We can see something of this truth in Jesus' sermon on the Bread of Life in John 6:48-58. Have the students read over these verses and ask them what Jesus is talking about. Jesus' listeners obviously thought He had some form of cannibalism in mind, and they left Him thoroughly disgusted and confused. What He was advocating was not cannibalism, however, but a spiritual relationship that comes only from union with Him. Make sure you connect this with what we said about baptism last week. If baptism is a symbol of the believer's identification with the death and resurrection of Christ that produces new life, Communion is also a symbol of identification. Here, it is the death of Christ that allows the Christian to have fellowship with God. What had previously been alienation now becomes table fellowship - a sacred bond in the ancient world. Those who partake of the Lord's Supper are actually having fellowship with God through the death of His Son.

Make sure the students understand, though, that this fellowship only applies to those who eat in faith. Only the Christian who has already been cleansed by the blood of Christ is able to commune with Him at the Lord's Table. As Paul implied in I Corinthians 11:28-30, unbelievers who partake do themselves no good, but only bring judgment down on their own heads. The Lord's Supper is not a saving ordinance; it is an ordinance for the saved.

3. The Horizontal Dimension of the Lord's Supper

Now have your students turn to I Corinthians 11:17-34. After reading the passage together, ask them about the nature of the problems the Corinthians were having in their observance of the Lord's Supper. They should be able to see that their abuses related more to their treatment of the other Christians in the congregation than to any ignorance of what the ordinance taught concerning Christ. In other words, while the Corinthians recognized the vertical dimension of the Lord's Supper, they ignored its horizontal dimension.

Why should the Lord's Supper include a horizontal dimension? The reason is a fairly simple one. Christ saved His people in order to incorporate them into a body, not so they could live as isolated individuals. Thus the death of Christ is not only a saving work that brings people into fellowship with God, it is also a saving work that brings them into fellowship with one another. This is what the Corinthians were forgetting. Instead of making their love feast a time of mutual caring, the rich were gorging themselves while the poor sat by with nothing to eat. When Paul tells the Corinthians to examine themselves before eating the Lord's Supper, he does not mean that they must be worthy before God, because none of us can attain that status on our own. Instead, he is saying that they need to make things right with one another before coming to the Lord's Table. This is the same point Jesus made in Matthew 5:23-24. One who is at odds with his brother cannot be right with God. Fellowship with God and fellowship with other Christians go hand in hand. The Lord's Supper is thus an occasion to express our oneness with other Christians, and at the same time an encouragement to straighten out any conflicts that may separate us from our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by encouraging your students to think seriously about what the Lord's Supper represents. If they are Christians, they should use their thoughts as a springboard to make things right with anyone they may have offended. They should also be able to appreciate the significance of the Lord's Supper better the next time it is celebrated in your church. For the non-Christians among your students, such thoughts should be a spur to examine their own lives and realize that apart from the work of Christ, they are not only separated from God, but also have little basis for sound relationships with other people.

**FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT MARKS OF THE CHURCH
THE SACRAMENTS: COMMUNION**

1. What is a Seder?
2. When did Jesus institute the Lord's Supper?
3. What is the relationship between the Passover and the death of Christ?
4. What did Jesus mean when He told His disciples they had to eat His flesh and drink His blood in order to have life (John 6:53-58)?
5. How were the Corinthian Christians abusing the Lord's Supper?
6. Why does the Lord's Supper also symbolize the fellowship that Christians have with one another?
7. What did Paul mean when he told the Corinthians to examine themselves before they took Communion?

THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH - CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Lesson Aim

To help students understand the necessity of dealing with conflicts within the church before they damage the body as a whole.

Memory Verse

Matthew 16:19 - "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Lesson Background

In the same way that children who think about discipline immediately tend to visualize spanking, people who approach the topic of church discipline generally think of excommunication. The discipline of children involves far more than spanking; it involves parents training their children to live godly lives. Similarly, church discipline has a positive aspect that is often overlooked. The goal of church discipline is for the body to function in such a way that conflicts are being dealt with immediately and effectively, so that problems rarely reach the stage where formal negative sanctions are needed. As parents strive to train their children so negative discipline is no longer necessary, elders seek to train their people to minister to one another constructively and maintain good relationships.

Much of the negative press given to church discipline comes from the abuse of the practice from several sources. In the Roman Catholic Church, which teaches that the church hierarchy administers the grace of God, excommunication is tantamount to condemning a person to hell. The popes of the Middle Ages were notorious for using their power of excommunication to exert political power over kings and

emperors and to punish their enemies. All too often, this supposed spiritual power was used to enrich the popes, who would threaten to excommunicate anyone who would not pay the taxes they demanded. It is no wonder that in the light of such practices, many came to see church discipline as nothing more than a means of securing the power and wealth of the church leaders.

Another abuse of church discipline from a completely different angle is the practice among some Anabaptist groups of shunning. What this means is that the person who is placed under the discipline of the church is cut off from all association with the members of the church. They may not speak to him or have any business dealings with him. Such harsh treatment misses the whole point of the biblical teaching on church discipline, which has a basically restorative, rather than punitive, intent.

Church discipline is considered one of the marks of the church because a church that does not exercise discipline over its members soon loses its purity. More concretely, a congregation that does not learn to deal with interpersonal conflicts as they develop will soon find the life of the church poisoned by deep-seated bitterness and resentment among the people. For your students, this is the most important application of the lesson. They must learn to apply the principles found in Matthew 18:15-17 to their relationships with others, so that minor disputes do not become major rifts and so the unity of the body may be preserved.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by reviewing with your students the marks of the church and noting that this week's lesson deals with the last of them. Then ask them what comes to their minds when they hear the word "discipline." They may mention any number of things from spanking to grounding to after-school detentions, but almost inevitably the things they mention will be negative in character. We all tend very naturally to focus on the punishment aspect of discipline. This is true of those who mete it out as well as those who are on the receiving end. In Hebrews 12:5-11, the writer speaks about the discipline God exercises in the lives of His children and compares it to parental discipline. In both cases, the ultimate goal is positive - such characteristics as holiness, righteousness, and peace. Church discipline is intended to produce the same sort of positive results.

1. How is Church Discipline Supposed to Work?

Jesus, when teaching His disciples how to deal with conflicts that were likely to crop up, defined a basic procedure that is at the heart of church discipline. Have your students turn to Matthew 18:15-17 and read those verses together. See if your students are able to discern the four steps involved in the procedure laid out by Jesus.

A. Step One - Private Reconciliation

The first step is by far the most important. When a conflict exists between two people, they need to get together and work it out. Conflicts that are resolved quickly don't get blown out of proportion so that they lead to grudges and cliques. Note that the responsibility for making the first move lies with both parties in the dispute. While Matthew 18:15 speaks of the offended party going to the offender, Matthew 5:23-24 tells the offender to go to the one he has offended. Theoretically, when two people in the church are having a conflict, they should run into each other on the way to get the matter resolved!

It is also important to see that the responsibility to reach out to others is not limited to personal offense. Galatians 6:1-2 encourages Christians to help others who have fallen into sin, even if that sin has no direct effect on the one who tries to help. One who approaches someone else about his sin, of course, runs the risk of rejection or hostility, but such an attempt at reconciliation is an act of courageous love. It is vital that such an effort be made with humility rather than pride, of course.

Spend a few minutes here talking to your students about situations where they ought to be applying this principle. Are there people at school with whom they are not on speaking terms? Are there friends of theirs who are involved in some sinful practice and need to be warned about it in a humble way? The practice of reconciliation is something your students need to learn. It will be of great value to them throughout their lives if it becomes a matter of habit.

B. Step Two - Wise Counsel

What happens if you go to a person to resolve a conflict and the person refuses to listen? The fear of rejection is the most common reason why many people never take the first step required by Jesus. But Jesus anticipated that objection and provided for a means of dealing with it. In verse 16, He tells His disciples that the next step is to “take one or two others along.” What could be the purpose of this? Jesus Himself indicates that they are to serve as impartial witnesses. Whenever a dispute exists, there are at least two sides to the story. Impartial witnesses are needed to see that both sides are fairly represented.

What does this mean in practice? If two people are unable to resolve a conflict, then they should ask one or two other people to sit down with them and help them get things straightened out. Obviously, the people who are asked to step in and help should not be “on the side” of either of the disputants. Furthermore, they should be spiritually mature people who are respected by both parties. In most cases where conflict exists there is some fault on both sides, and impartial witnesses are more likely to be able to see these faults clearly and help the people involved to deal with them. Ask your students to think of people they know whom they would be willing to call upon for help in the sort of situation Jesus describes. Such people might include spiritually mature friends, parents, or trusted adults such as teachers or youth leaders. Would they themselves feel comfortable mediating a dispute among their friends?

C. Step Three - Formal Intervention

In the vast majority of disputes, the matter will be resolved by the first or second step. Some people, however, are obstinate, and would rather nurse grudges and hang onto their pet sins than live in peace with those around them. Such people necessitate a third step for dealing with conflicts, which involves the formal intervention of the church leadership. Some would differ, but I don’t believe Jesus is here talking about opening the matter for discussion by the entire congregation and subjecting it to congregational vote. When He refers to “the church” here, I think He has in mind the leaders, who act as representatives of the congregation. The elders of the church have the responsibility to deal with sin in the church in the same way that parents are to deal with sin in the family. If private discussion and the counsel of a few mature Christians does not resolve the problem, then it must be taken before the elders of the church, who are entrusted by God with the church’s welfare. It is their responsibility to handle the matter according to Scripture, both through wise counsel and through remedial measures if necessary.

D. Step Four - Excommunication

If someone is so recalcitrant that he refuses to listen to the appointed leaders of the church, he is to be formally disciplined. The ultimate form of this is excommunication, which means that a person is cut off

from the privileges of church membership and that he is not able to participate in the Lord's Supper. Note that this does not mean that he is excluded from the services of the church, nor does it mean that the members of the congregation are to avoid him like the plague. The best example we have of such a procedure being carried out in Scripture is found in I Corinthians 5. In this situation, a man was living in open immorality, and Paul told the leaders of the church in Corinth that they should excommunicate him. While this final step does not condemn a person to hell, it does indicate that, in the judgment of the church, the person is not a believer (this is why Jesus says such a person is to be treated like a pagan or tax collector).

2. The Purpose of Church Discipline

In the same way that the purpose of spanking is not to release the pent-up frustration of the parent, the purpose of church discipline is not to rid the church of troublemakers. The parent who spans his child is trying to teach the child to do what is right. Similarly, the end result of church discipline is to be right living. In what ways is this true?

First of all, the procedure outlined by Jesus keeps small problems from becoming big problems. Conflicts that are not dealt with promptly tend to be internalized, exaggerated, and blown all out of proportion. Churches have been known to split over the right color of rug to put in the sanctuary. People have refused to speak to one another for so long that they have forgotten why they stopped speaking. If "a stitch in time saves nine," it is also true that a conflict handled privately saves multiplied grief later.

Secondly, if a church is functioning in the way Jesus intended, each member of the congregation will have a large support group to keep him from falling into gross sin. If the members of a congregation are really looking out for one another, each one enjoys the same security as a child whose mother is watching him play. While the mother just sits back and watches most of the time, she will quickly step in to stop the child if he gets too close to something he is not supposed to touch. In a church, each member watches out for the others and protects them from sin for their own good.

Thirdly, church discipline is intended to restore those who do fall into sin. Even excommunication is intended to show the sinner the seriousness of his position and bring him to repentance. In the example cited above, we find that the man excommunicated from the Corinthian church for immorality eventually did repent and was restored to the fellowship of the church (II Corinthians 2:5-11). Thus if everything is working according to the pattern established by Christ, instances of formal church discipline should be rare because conflicts are being resolved as soon as they crop up, and even when formal church discipline is required, it often results in restoration.

3. The Importance of Church Discipline

Why is this procedure so important that it should be considered a mark of the true church? Certainly an important reason is because a church that is following Jesus' pattern for church discipline is a church that is actively involved in mutual ministry. A body in which the parts do not interact is spastic and cannot function effectively. When a body protects and compensates for its injured parts, however, the body grows strong as a unit. A good church is one in which the members are involved in each other's lives as servants, not busybodies.

Secondly, church discipline is important because it determines to a large extent the testimony of the church in the outside world. If the church is to prevent the scandal of overt sin or bitter schism, it must deal with sin and conflict early. Furthermore, nothing contributes more to the positive reputation of the church than the clear evidence that the people care enough about one another to involve themselves in each other's lives.

Unfortunately, few churches practice healthy church discipline. While some cult groups are so authoritarian that the members must consult the elders about every detail of life and every member is required to conform to a set of arbitrary standards, it is much more common to see churches where no discipline at all is exercised. The result is churches full of bitterness and strife, where sin is either covered up or simply tolerated. Such churches destroy the lives of their own people, to say nothing of damaging the reputation of Christ in the world.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by encouraging your students to support one another by the kind of mutual ministry outlined by Jesus in Matthew 18. Challenge them as well to apply these principles to any conflicts in which they might presently be involved. Is there anyone at home or school with whom they need to make things right?

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT MARKS OF THE CHURCH CHURCH DISCIPLINE

1. What are the four steps of church discipline outlined by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-17?

2. Who is responsible for initiating discussion, the person who has sinned or the one who has been sinned against?

3. When help is needed to resolve a conflict between two people, what kind of people should be sought out? List some people whom you would be comfortable asking to help you resolve a conflict with someone.

4. What is excommunication? When should it be carried out? What does it imply about the person who is excommunicated?

5. In what way is church discipline intended to restore a person who has sinned?

6. How can church discipline keep people from falling into serious sin?

7. Why is the practice of church discipline important for a healthy church?

THE OFFICERS OF THE CHURCH

Lesson Aim

To give students an understanding of the roles and qualifications of elders and deacons.

Memory Verse

Matthew 16:20 - "Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ."

Lesson Background

Church government is an issue over which adults tend to get very worked up, and about which most young people know next to nothing. The purpose of today's lesson is not to familiarize students with the varieties of church government, but to help them understand the one practiced by their own church. The lesson is designed to cover the form of church government used by most Reformed Baptist churches, with a plurality of elders overseeing the spiritual life of the church and a group of deacons caring for the material needs of the church and its people. If your church has a different form of government, you should still be able to use much of the material found here, but you may need to adapt certain parts of it. The key is that your students need to learn how your church works. We will thus spend our time looking at the duties and qualifications of elders and deacons as outlined in the Scriptures.

It would seem at first glance that this lesson would have little in the way of practical application. There are two things, however, that you as a teacher can bring home to your students from this material. The first is that they ought to pray for the leaders of the church. As they come to understand the heavy responsibilities carried by these men, your students should be able to see how necessary it is that they be supported by the prayers of the congregation. Secondly, it is important to note that the qualifications for

church office have very little to do with ability and instead focus almost entirely on character. In fact, the character qualities that qualify a person for church office are things that should be true of all Christians. Church leaders are not different; they simply are men who live in a consistent way the kinds of lives that all Christians ought to be living. Thus the second application is that the qualifications for church office should serve as a model for your students, not because they necessarily aspire to be elders or deacons, but because they should strive to be the kinds of Christians God wants them to be.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by having the members of your class list the officers of your church. This may turn out to be a more or less difficult task, depending on the size of your church and the number of elders and deacons you have. If they are typical middle schoolers, they will probably have trouble listing all of your elders and deacons. Once they have finished the task (fill in the missing names for them if necessary), tell them that today's lesson deals with the officers of the church.

1. The Responsibilities of Church Officers

There are two ways in which you might go about presenting this portion of the lesson. One possibility is to invite an elder and a deacon from your congregation into your classroom for a few minutes to talk about what their responsibilities involve. If such an approach is not practical, begin the section by asking your students what they think the elders and deacons of the church do. Their answers will tell you how well they understand the subject; some students (or some classes) may be very knowledgeable, while others may get stumped after telling you that the elders preach. Several passages of Scripture should help to fill in the gaps.

A. Elders

Start with Acts 20:28. When Paul was saying goodbye to the Ephesian elders, he reminded them of their responsibilities. He tells them to “guard the flock” and “be shepherds of the church.” What do these things involve? Guarding, obviously, involves protection from danger. This means that the elders are responsible to keep false teaching out of the church. On a practical level, this means they supervise the church's teaching ministry. They don't always do all the teaching themselves, but they are ultimately responsible to God for what goes on. Guarding also involves the exercise of church discipline. As we saw last week, that means that the elders are responsible to deal with potentially divisive conflicts in the church as well as instances of overt sin.

Shepherding is more a matter of positive care. In the same way that the shepherd feeds the flock, the elders are responsible for the preaching and teaching ministries of the church. The shepherd also leads the flock, which means that the planning and direction of the church is to be in the hands of the elders. In the same way that Christ, as the Good Shepherd, knows His sheep by name, the elders are to care for the members of the congregation personally, counseling them and helping them with their spiritual needs.

Ephesians 4:12 brings out another important aspect of an elder's work when it talks about equipping God's people for works of service. The elders are not supposed to do all of the work of ministering, either to the congregation or to the outside world, by themselves. Part of their job is to train the members of the congregation to serve others, both inside and outside the church.

In summary, then, the elders preach and teach, guard against doctrinal error, administer discipline, give overall direction to the work of the church, counsel those who have spiritual problems, and train the people to use their gifts and serve others.

B. Deacons

The Bible has much less to say about the responsibilities of deacons than it does about those of elders. The key passage here is Acts 6:1-4. The church at Jerusalem was growing so fast that it was facing administrative problems, and the apostles were finding that all their time was being taken up dealing with practical matters, so that they had no time left for preaching or prayer. They then appointed seven men to take the administrative burden from their shoulders so that they could devote themselves to the responsibilities that God had given to them. This is essentially the job of a deacon. He is to remove the burden of practical administration from the shoulders of the elders so they are able to devote themselves to the spiritual leadership of the church. This involves, first of all, handling the finances of the church. In the same way that the deacons in Jerusalem handled the church's resources, so the deacons today take care of the church's money. Deacons also are responsible to meet the physical needs of the congregation. This usually falls under the heading of benevolence - dispensing church funds to meet special needs of people. Today's deacons also have problems that the deacons in Jerusalem didn't face. Since most churches today own property, it falls to the deacons to care for that property - handle the upkeep of the buildings and grounds, see that necessary maintenance and cleaning are done, etc. The deacons do this work under the supervision of the elders, since the practical affairs of the church must be subservient to the overall spiritual direction that the elders determine.

2. The Qualifications of Church Officers

The qualifications for church officers are found most completely in I Timothy 3. Have your students turn there, but before you read the passage, ask your students what they think it takes to make a good elder or deacon. Their responses will in all likelihood focus on the abilities of the person (an elder must be a good speaker, a deacon must be good with his hands, etc.); needless to say, Paul's approach is quite different.

A. Elders

In I Timothy 3:1-7, Paul lists the qualifications for the eldership. Go through them one at a time, making sure the students understand what they mean and why they are important for elders. Tie each one explicitly to the responsibilities discussed in the first part of the lesson. Several highlights to point out as you go include the following:

- Almost everything on the list deals with character rather than ability. God uses what a man has if that man devotes himself to God. The only ability required is the ability to teach. This is such a crucial part of the elder's ministry that no elder can be without it.
- An elder's relationship to his own family is vital to his ability to manage the church. Not only does a man prove his leadership ability in the home, but also his management of the family shows a lot about his priorities. It is tragic when so many men in positions of leadership in the church neglect their families and wind up destroying both their own ministries and the churches in which they are serving.
- Another important qualification is spiritual maturity. A recent convert should never be elevated to a position of leadership in the church. Spiritual experience is required of one who is to shepherd

others. Too often, when a recent convert is elevated to a position of prominence (e.g., the tendency to glorify converted celebrities), his lack of spiritual maturity embarrasses both him and the church, and his own growth is impeded by being in the spotlight.

- Make sure your students understand that these qualifications are traits that should be found in every elder, but that no elder will possess all of them perfectly, or even to the same degree as others. One advantage of having a plurality of elders is that the differing strengths of the men who share the leadership of the church compensate for each of their weaknesses.

B. Deacons

The list for deacons in verses 8-13 is remarkably similar to that given for the eldership. Just because deacons attend to the material aspects of the church's ministry does not mean that they don't need to be spiritual men. The wise stewardship of church funds and the administration of benevolence in meeting the needs of the poor and sick require spiritual wisdom and sound character just as much as the responsibilities of the elder. One should never get the idea that a deacon simply should be a good businessman or a good mechanic; he must first of all be a good, mature Christian.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by making the applications suggested in the Lesson Background. Encourage your students to pray for their church leaders, and to pray intelligently, mentioning their specific responsibilities and asking God to help them in carrying out those burdens of office. Secondly, remind the members of your class that Christian character is something after which all Christians should strive, not just church officers. Those in positions of leadership got there not because of superior talent, but because of consistent Christian living. All Christians should aspire to develop in their own lives the characteristics needed for church office - not because they desire to be church officers, but because they desire to be good Christians.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

OFFICERS OF THE CHURCH

1. List the elders and deacons of your own church.
2. What are the major responsibilities of an elder?
3. What are the major responsibilities of a deacon?
4. Why does Paul list character qualities instead of abilities when giving the qualifications for church office?
5. Why is it important that a church leader manage his family well?
6. Why is it wrong to elevate a new convert to a position of leadership in the church?

THE TRIUMPH OF THE CHURCH

Lesson Aim

To help students see that God intends for His church to conquer and endure, and to spread throughout all nations.

Memory Verse

Matthew 16:21 - “From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”

Lesson Background

It is very easy in the America of the early twenty-first century to view the church as a pitiful fringe organization struggling along on the outskirts of the powerful secular world. Christ, however, did not picture His church in that way at all. He spoke of a triumphant body against which the gates of hell would not prevail, and of an organization that would extend to every people, tribe, tongue, and nation. He spoke of a church that would grow like a mustard seed and spread like yeast. At the same time, He warned His disciples that only a relative few would follow the narrow way, and that they would face persecution in the world. It is our task today to explore further the nature of the triumph Christ promised for His church.

The key passage in which we will spend a significant amount of our lesson time is Matthew 16:13-27. Here Christ spoke of the triumph of His church; He also brings out a number of important ideas that will help us understand that triumph more fully. These ideas include the source of the church’s power (this will involve us in a discussion of the “rock” reference in verse 18 that has been abused so seriously by the Roman

Catholic Church), the extent of the church's authority, and the nature of the church's triumph. The last will require that we compare the ministry of Christ's body with the ministry of Christ Himself, and also that we consult other passages that have a bearing on the subject. The end result of all this should be to give your Christian students the confidence that they are on the winning side, that the church is not obsolete, and that God is doing His work despite the fact that the world may take little notice of it. For your non-Christian students, the lesson should help them see that, despite appearances, God's kingdom will triumph, and only those who trust Christ will find safety.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking your students whether they think the world is getting better and better all the time or whether it is growing consistently worse. You will probably have some students in the class who will favor each answer, though for different reasons. Some could argue that the world is getting better in terms of technological and scientific progress. Others might point out that morals seem to be getting worse all the time, while even the progress of science and technology is bringing terrible moral problems such as genetic engineering and pollution of the earth and its resources. While arguments can be made either way, the answer that the Bible presents is that both are true. The world is getting worse in the sense that sin is becoming more and more horrible and overt, while at the same time God is working out His purposes, bringing about the triumph of His Son through the growth of His church in the world. It is that triumph of the church that is the subject for today's lesson. Have your students turn to Matthew 16:13-27 and read the passage together.

1. The Source of the Church's Power

In verse 18, Jesus says that He will build His church "on this rock," and that the gates of Hades would not overcome it. What is this foundation that is so secure that the powers of hell itself could not topple Christ's church? Spend a few minutes acquainting your class with the Roman Catholic interpretation of this verse. Tell them that the Catholic Church teaches that Christ was here making Peter the head of the Church, and that his successors, the popes, continue to exercise the same authority Christ gave to Peter. They believe that authority includes the power to forgive sins, and even to admit a person to heaven or condemn that person to hell. Clearly if we are to understand the power and authority that Christ has vested in His church, we need to understand what these verses are and are not saying.

Protestants have traditionally given three different interpretations to Matthew 16:18. Some have argued that, while Christ was indeed calling Peter the rock upon whom the church was to be built, Catholics have misinterpreted what that was supposed to mean. Others have said that the rock was not Peter, but Christ Himself (cf. I Corinthians 10:4), though that requires a rather strained reading of Matthew 16 (We would have to imagine Jesus first pointing to Peter and saying, "You are Peter," then pointing to Himself and continuing, "and on this rock I will build my church." Such a reading is particularly shaky in the light of the fact that the word translated "rock" is a pun on Peter's name in both the Aramaic language in which Jesus spoke and the Greek in which the New Testament was written.). A third view is that the rock is not Peter, but his confession of faith in Christ as the Son of God.

I favor the first view simply because it involves the most straightforward reading of the text. Seeing Peter as the rock requires the following qualifications. First of all, Peter must be seen as the spokesman for the disciples. Peter often served in this capacity, and it is instructive to note that the same authority given by Christ in this passage (the "binding and loosing," which we will discuss in the next section) is given to the disciples as a group in Matthew 18:18. Furthermore, Ephesians 2:20 speaks of the apostles and prophets as the foundation upon which the church is built. In what sense is this true? First of all, because the apostles

were the initial messengers used by God to carry the Gospel throughout the Roman world. They were the ones who in a sense started the church, and thus can be spoken of as the foundation of that church. Secondly, it was the apostles who gave us the New Testament, and it is the self-revelation of God found there that continues today to provide the foundation upon which the church functions.

The second qualification is that Peter must be seen in the context of his confession, not as an individual per se. That Jesus is not granting infallibility to Peter is clear from verse 23, where He rebukes him harshly for trying to dissuade Him from going to the cross. Not only is Peter not infallible, but there is no hint anywhere in Scripture that the authority granted to the apostles was passed on to their successors, whoever they might have been. The apostolic office was unique; it has not been transmitted throughout the history of the church. The church thus finds its source of power in Christ, who laid the foundation for His church through the preaching and writing work of the apostles.

2. The Extent of the Church's Authority

The next question before us is the matter of the keys of the kingdom and the binding and loosing described by Jesus in verse 19. As already mentioned, the Catholic Church believes this gives to the pope the authority to forgive sins, and even to determine the eternal destiny of someone by condemning that person to hell. Clearly Scripture gives no such power to any man. What, then, does Jesus mean by these words?

Peter (and the other apostles) opened the door to the kingdom of heaven by preaching the Gospel, not by forgiving men's sins. When the Gospel was first preached to the Jews on the Day of Pentecost, Peter was the spokesman; later, when the Gospel was first preached to the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius, Peter was again the one used by God. The other apostles also actively spread the Word throughout the Roman Empire, thus throwing the doors of the kingdom wide open for all who would believe.

The binding and loosing may best be explained by the use of Matthew 18. We have already spent time in this passage, and we saw that it deals with church discipline. We find that these words speak of a wonderful promise. Church discipline is difficult, particularly in its latter formal stages, and we find in Matthew 18:18-20 that Christ promises that those who approach this difficult matter prayerfully will be guided by Christ Himself, who promises to be with them and lead them to the right decision. We are not therefore talking about the arrogant exercise of clerical power, but about leaders in the church who humbly seek the face of the Lord when dealing with difficult disciplinary matters. The church can only exercise the authority of Christ as it seeks the face of Christ.

3. The Nature of the Church's Triumph

When Jesus promised Peter and the other disciples that the gates of Hades would never overcome the church, what did He mean? Certainly even a cursory glance at the history of the church would turn up many instances in which the powers of evil seemed to triumph by deflecting the church from its intended purpose and turning it aside into all sorts of error and corruption. What kind of triumph are we talking about here?

A. A Long-Range Triumph

When Christ speaks, He is looking at the long-term picture, not the immediate situation. Many short-term defeats do not influence the final victory. Christ Himself won that victory on the cross.

B. A Triumph Through Suffering

In verse 21, Jesus turned immediately from speaking of the triumph of the church to a discussion of His own suffering. This was no coincidence. In the same way that His triumph over sin was to be accomplished through suffering, so the triumph of the church would require great pain. He applies this to the disciples in verses 24-26, when He speaks of their need to lose their own lives for the sake of the Gospel. The triumph that Christ promised His church will thus come through hard times and persecution, not through a continual string of easy and glorious victories. Matthew 24:10-13 has more to say about this, and indicates that some of the pain will be caused by those within the church who turn away from the faith and become false teachers.

C. A Slow and Gradual Triumph

The church will not conquer the world by force of arms, nor will it ever become the dominant force in a world that is in rebellion against God. Jesus told His disciples in Matthew 7:13-14 that Christians would always be in the minority in this world. The triumph of the church does not mean the conversion of the whole world, or even that the church will come to dominate society. A better picture is found in the parables that Jesus told in Matthew 13:31-33. When He uses the examples of the mustard seed and the yeast, He communicates the fact that the church, which started as a small and insignificant group of people in a backwater province of the Roman Empire, would ultimately be made up of many millions throughout the entire world. What starts small (the mustard seed) will become large, and what starts in one place (the yeast) will soon permeate the whole world. Though this spread will occur slowly, the church will ultimately encompass people from every tongue and nation (Matthew 24:14; Revelation 7:9).

D. A Final Triumph

In Matthew 16:27, Jesus told His disciples that the final triumph of His church would not be completed until His Second Coming. It is only then that Satan will be destroyed and hell itself be cast into the Lake of Fire. Conclude the lesson by reminding your students that the church will triumph despite appearances to the contrary, and challenging your unsaved students to prepare for the day of that triumph by putting their trust in the Head of the church rather than in the fading powers of this world.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

THE TRIUMPH OF THE CHURCH

1. When Jesus spoke in Matthew 16:18 about building His church on a rock, what did He mean?
2. In verse 19, what are the keys to the kingdom of heaven? How were they used?
3. In verse 19, what sort of “binding and loosing” does Jesus have in mind (refer also to Matthew 18:18)?
4. How do we know that Christians will always be a minority in the world?
5. What do the parables Jesus told about the mustard seed and the yeast in Matthew 13:31-33 tell us about the growth of the church?
6. What example did Jesus use to tell His disciples that the triumph of the church would involve suffering and persecution?
7. When did Jesus indicate that the triumph of His church would finally be complete?

THE RETURN OF CHRIST

Lesson Aim

To use the biblical teaching concerning the return to Christ to motivate your students to greater faithfulness and obedience.

Memory Verse

Matthew 16:22 - "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!'"

Lesson Background

The Second Coming of Christ is a subject that is an obsession with some Christians and is hardly ever mentioned by others. Both approaches are wrong. While it is absurd for Christians to argue interminably over details of eschatology, it is also contrary to the teaching of Scripture to live as if the Second Coming were irrelevant. In the teaching of Jesus and His apostles, the Second Coming is presented as a motivator. The truth that Jesus is coming again is used to encourage believers to serve Him faithfully and persevere in the face of trouble, while the Second Coming serves for unbelievers as a warning to put their spiritual houses in order.

In today's lesson, we will look at three passages dealing with the Second Coming of Christ. In Matthew 25:14-30, we will see that the appropriate response for Christians to the knowledge that Jesus is coming again is to engage in faithful and obedient service. In I Thessalonians 4:13-18, we will see that the Second Coming can be a source of comfort in the face of suffering and death. Our final passage, II Peter 3:3-14, shows us that the Second Coming will bring not only a day of joy, but also a day of judgment, and that this knowledge is to serve as a warning to unbelievers and an encouragement to believers to live godly lives.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking the students what they know about the Antichrist. Depending on their sources of information, they may give you accounts of occult melodramas from popular movies, political or economic speculations that they may have heard in a Christian school, or blank stares - the typical response of kids who have grown up in Reformed Baptist churches and have never heard anyone mention the subject. After your students have exhausted their knowledge of the subject (or ignorance thereof), tell them that the Bible's teaching on the Second Coming of Christ (of which the teaching concerning the Antichrist is only a very minor part) is not intended to be the basis for pointless speculation, nor does God want us to be ignorant of what the Bible says about it. Today we will look at three New Testament passages that teach about the Second Coming, with a special focus on how the teaching is to affect our lives today.

1. Motivated to Serve (Matthew 25:14-30)

Read over the Parable of the Talents with your students. Then ask them to explain the meaning of the parable. Who is the landowner supposed to be? What is the journey he undertakes? Who are the servants? What do the talents represent? What are the rewards given to the faithful servants, and what is the punishment received by the lazy one? What is the lesson Jesus was trying to teach to His disciples?

If they are not able to figure these things out for themselves, make sure they understand that the landowner is Jesus, and the journey on which he goes represents His return to heaven after His death and resurrection. The time when He is away is now - the time between the end of His first advent and the beginning of His second one. The servants are those who profess to serve Christ - all who claim to be Christians (the part about profession is important, especially in the light of what happens to the lazy servant at the end). The talents are the gifts God gives to His people - perhaps a reference to spiritual gifts, but probably including the gifts of common grace as well in light of the fact that not all the servants are faithful ones. Note that God does not give everyone the same gifts; some get more than others.

In reference to the rewards given to those who are faithful, two important points should be made. The first is that God, having given a variety of gifts and abilities to His people, does not expect the same results from everyone. What He does expect is faithful stewardship of what He has given. The servant who was given two talents and gained two more was given the same commendation as the servant who was given five and earned an additional five. The second point is that the Bible says little about the nature of heavenly rewards. Whatever the rewards happen to be, they seem to involve authority and joy in the presence of God. Who could ask for more?

As far as the lazy servant is concerned, the description seems to indicate that he is cast into hell. Since we have no reason to believe that a true child of God can ever lose his salvation, we must conclude that the lazy servant was not a Christian to begin with. While he claimed to follow Christ, he had no desire to serve Him.

The lesson Jesus was teaching His disciples is the same one your students need to learn. Being ready for His return does not involve waiting on a mountaintop in white robes; it means faithfully using the gifts He has given you to serve Him and accomplish His work. The fact that Christ will come back and take account of the work done by His servants should motivate them to faithful service in the interim. Furthermore, this parable leads us to the conclusion that those who are not using their gifts and abilities in the service of Christ are probably not Christians at all. If the thought of the Second Coming does not motivate your students to faithful service, what does that say about their spiritual condition?

2. Motivated to Persevere (I Thessalonians 4:13-18)

Now have the students turn to I Thessalonians 4:13-18. Here Paul gives a description of what will happen when Christ returns. At that time, believers who have died will be raised from the dead, and those Christians who are still alive will be taken up to heaven with them to be with Christ forever in the presence of God (this event is sometimes called the Rapture, and is the subject of voluminous eschatological speculation, but don't get caught up in that sort of thing in class - stick to the basics).

The important thing about this passage is how Paul uses the promise of Christ's return as a motivator for the Thessalonians. Ask your students how Paul expects the readers of his letter to react to what he says. They should see that he intends his teaching to be a source of comfort and encouragement. For Christians who are grieving over the death of a loved one who died in Christ, Paul gives encouragement. The Christian can be confident that in the future he will be reunited with his friends in heaven. Also for those who are going through trouble or persecution, the promise of the Second Coming provides hope. This world, with all its injustice and wickedness, is not all there is; the Christian can look forward to a better world. What this means for your students is that the Second Coming is intended to motivate Christians to perseverance. No matter how bad things in this world seem to get, Christians can be sure that Christ will come back again to make all things right.

3. Motivated to Fear (II Peter 3:3-14)

Our final passage for consideration today gives a much bleaker picture of the events surrounding the return of Christ. Peter speaks, not of comfort for believers who are received into the presence of God nor of rewards for faithful servants, but of judgment against those who do not believe. He paints a horrible picture of destruction, but undergirds that with a reminder of God's love, since God is waiting patiently rather than raining down judgment immediately.

Ask your students what kind of motivation Peter is trying to generate here. Several responses are possible. One is that God's patience means He is still in the process of saving people and bringing them into His kingdom. This should serve as a motivation to spread the Gospel so that others can avoid the judgment Peter describes here so vividly. A more obvious direction in which Peter intends Christians to think involves holy living. He brings this out in verses 11 and 14. Why is holiness so important in the light of the return of Christ? First of all, holiness is an indication that a person truly belongs to God. Thus, in the light of the judgment that will one day fall on the world, it is appropriate for those who claim to know Christ to be sure of their spiritual standing. In the same way that our first passage today taught that service is an evidence of saving faith, this one shows that holiness is an evidence of that same faith. Even more strongly, both passages teach that the absence of service and the absence of holiness call a person's relationship with God into serious question.

Not only is holiness an evidence of the work of God in a person's life, it is also a testimony to a wicked world. Make no mistake about it, Peter's words here are calculated to generate fear in unbelievers. If believers live godly lives, the sinfulness of unbelievers will become all the more evident and they will be brought face to face with the threat of God's judgment. God has often used just such a fear to bring a person to Himself. For the unsaved students in your class, that kind of fear is very healthy indeed.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by reviewing the different responses that the teaching concerning the Second Coming of Christ is supposed to produce. Encourage your Christian students to live lives of obedient service and personal holiness and to take seriously the promise of future happiness with other Christians in the presence of God. For the non-Christians in the class, emphasize that the return of Christ is a real event, not some cinematic melodrama, and that the terror associated with His judgment is far worse than anything depicted in the movies. Those who profess Christ need to be sure of where they stand, and those who know they are unsaved need to trust Christ, so that when He returns, they can anticipate reward rather than punishment.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT THE RETURN OF CHRIST

1. What does the Parable of the Talents teach about the effect the knowledge of the Second Coming of Christ should have on Christians?

2. Who does the lazy servant in the parable represent, and what important lesson does he teach us?

3. Why does Paul say that the promise of Christ's return is a source of comfort?

4. Why does Peter tell us that God has postponed His judgment of sinners?

5. What effect should the knowledge of the coming judgment have on Christians?

6. In what sense are active Christian service and holy living an evidence of the reality of a person's faith?

DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Lesson Aim

To help students understand what God's Word teaches about what happens after death to each individual, and why the resurrection of the body is important.

Memory Verse

Matthew 16:23 - "Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Out of my sight, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.'"

Lesson Background

There are many religions that believe in the immortality of the soul. They teach that the soul continues to exist after death, either in a series of successive reincarnations or in union with some eternal divine principle. For the most part, such religions teach that the body is evil, the prison of the soul; some even maintain that the body is an illusion. The three major religions within the Judeo-Christian tradition (I include Islam here; many of Muhammad's ideas were developed through contact with Jews and Christians, and many in the ancient church even considered Islam to be a Christian heresy), however, teach the resurrection of the body, and thus affirm the value of the physical aspect of man's being. The Apostle Paul went so far as to state that, apart from the resurrection of the dead, Christianity was an empty religion, a waste of time. The reason for his strong statement, of course, is that the resurrection of Christ set God's seal of approval on the work of salvation He had accomplished. Had Jesus remained in the grave, there would have been no salvation from sin.

In today's lesson, we will be entering upon a brief study of the subject known to theologians as individual eschatology - in other words, we will be looking at what happens to individual people after they die. Today, we will restrict ourselves to what happens between death and the resurrection; our consideration of heaven and hell comes later. Our lesson will be divided into three parts. The first will be a brief consideration of death and what actually occurs when a person dies. Secondly, we will look at what is sometimes called the Intermediate State - that time between death and the resurrection of the body. Our third section will look at the resurrection of the body itself, with special attention being given to I Corinthians 15.

Young people don't particularly enjoy thinking about death (neither do most adults). Such thought is valuable, however, since it often causes them to ask questions about their own eternal destiny. You as a teacher need to encourage questions of this sort. If this lesson is to do any good, the members of your class need to personalize it, rather than viewing it from a distance as some sort of theological abstraction. A good way of doing this is to introduce the lesson with a discussion of death, having some of your students share the feelings they experienced when someone close to them died.

A secondary application that is also important for your students has to do with the value of the body. If God cares enough about the human body to retrieve it from the grave, then we can hardly afford to be careless in the way we use it in this life. Too many Christians think that God is only interested in their souls, and thus they abuse their bodies, either by self-indulgence or by immorality. Your students need to know that God cares very much what they do with their bodies; for those who know Christ, their bodies are called the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking the members of your class to remember a time when someone close to them died. Some of your students may not yet have had such an experience, but many probably have. Ask them to remember how they felt at the time. Death causes grief and frustration. The pain of separation is often difficult to handle. For those who are unsaved, the pain must be especially great. Such people either view the separation as final, and try to take it philosophically, or else retreat into some sort of mysticism that has no relationship to their everyday lives ("I feel like he's still here with me whenever I walk into the room"; "I like to believe that someday, somewhere, we will meet again in a better world"). For Christians, however, death is merely a transition from time to eternity. Christians certainly grieve at the need to be separated from loved ones, and grieve even more when those who are close to them die without Christ, but, for the Christian, death is not the end. God's Word tells us what happens next.

1. Death

Ask your students for a definition of death. They will probably come up with various descriptions that have to do with the cessation of bodily functions - a person stops breathing, his heart stops beating, or, if they are a bit more sophisticated, the brain stops emitting electrical impulses. Death involves more than these things, though. Man is more than merely a body. The Bible teaches us that man is made up of both material and non-material components. He is not only a body, but also a soul and/or spirit (this is not the time to get into the dichotomy/trichotomy controversy). From a biblical standpoint, then, death is not only the time when the body stops working; it is also the time when the material and non-material parts of man are separated. In other words, when a person dies, the soul leaves the body. In Genesis 2:7, we see that God formed the body of Adam from the same materials from which the earth was made. He then breathed life into him. When the soul leaves the body, that life is gone (see Luke 23:46).

Your students will probably bring up questions about the various out-of-body experiences that some have claimed to have had when on the point of death. Don't get bogged down on this issue. It is enough to say that death occurs only once for each person, and that the trauma of being close to death can in some cases produce unusual psychological phenomena. It is no coincidence that these experiences always point to a universalistic view of salvation in which God is pictured as some benevolent source of infinite love who embraces all in His arms. Satan wants people to believe that all who die will go to God. Such deception keeps people from getting right with God in this life. The Bible tells us, however, that men die only once, and after that must face judgment (Hebrews 9:27).

Death is not the end of life; it is not even the end of bodily life. It does, however, signal the close of the period of time during which a person's eternal destiny is decided (I'm speaking from a human standpoint, of course). There are no second chances for salvation after death, nor any future lifetimes in which to wipe out the mistakes made in this one. Thus though this life on earth is relatively brief when compared to eternity, it is vitally important as the time of decision. When a person takes his last breath on this earth, his destiny is fixed for all eternity.

2. Between Death and the Resurrection

The separation of soul and body that we just described is an abnormal situation. God made man as a psychophysical unity. Sin disrupted that unity, and death was the ultimate result of sin. This abnormal condition, in which the material and non-material parts of man are separated, is something theologians call the Intermediate State. It is the time between death, which separates the soul and the body, and the resurrection, which reunites them.

The only real description of the Intermediate State to be found in Scripture is in Luke 16:19-31. Have your students read over this familiar story of the Rich Man and Lazarus (there remains some disagreement as to whether or not it should be considered a parable). Then ask them what it tells us about the Intermediate State, the time between death and the resurrection. Some of the things they should be able to discern include the following:

The Intermediate State is a state of conscious existence. Some of the cults (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists) teach a doctrine called "soul sleep," which maintains that there is no conscious existence between death and the resurrection. This story makes it clear that there is.

Secondly, the Intermediate State is one of torment for the wicked and bliss for the righteous. Despite the fact that it is a time of disembodied existence, there is nonetheless an experience of suffering or joy. The greatest torments and pleasures are spiritual ones, not physical ones. [As I will explain in the lessons on heaven and hell, I am convinced that the use of bodily images here is a device Jesus chose to communicate something far deeper, beyond the realm of human earthly experience.]

Thirdly, according to verse 26, there can be no change in a person's destiny after death. The Intermediate State is not a probationary period, nor a second chance, nor a period of cleansing or purgation. One who is in Christ goes immediately after death to a state of bliss, while one who is outside Christ goes immediately into a state of torment from which there is no escape. The Catholic notion of Purgatory is rooted in the belief that a man must in some sense pay for his own sins. Sins that are not paid for by penance on earth must be paid for in Purgatory. Such a concept of salvation by works is completely foreign to the teaching of Scripture, and draws its only support from the tradition of the Catholic Church.

3. The Resurrection of the Body

The greatest discourse on the resurrection of the body is found in I Corinthians 15. The early part of the chapter deals with the importance of the doctrine of the resurrection in relationship to the salvation accomplished by Christ. We don't have time to consider that section today. Later on, Paul relates Christ's resurrection to that of believers. We want to focus our attention today on verses 35-49. Have your students read over this section of the chapter. Ask them what it tells us about the resurrection body. They should be able to discern the following:

- There is a relationship between the bodies we have now and those we will have in the resurrection. It is like the relationship of a seed to the plant it produces. They are really the same organism, yet one is far more highly developed than the other. Thus the resurrection body will be a significant improvement on the ones we have now.
- Secondly, the resurrection body will be immortal, not subject to the ravages of time, disease, or death. It will be strong instead of weak, and glorious rather than dishonorable. Please note, though, that when Paul calls it a "spiritual body" in contrast to a "natural body," he does not mean that it is not material in nature. The body is "spiritual" because it does not partake of sin, not because it does not partake of matter. Besides, how would it be a body if it were not physical? How would it then be distinct from the soul? What would be the point of the resurrection?
- Lastly, the resurrection body will be like that of the "man from heaven," Christ Himself. Thus our best example of what the resurrection body will be like is the body in which Christ made His post-resurrection appearances on earth. He was recognizable (though He chose to hide His identity on several occasions); His body was tangible, and He could eat food; but He could also pass through locked doors. Thus we see that the resurrection body will be both the same as and different from our earthly bodies.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by returning to the beginning and reminding the students of the reality of death. The fact that life is short and could end at any time means that it is urgent for all to be sure where they stand with God. Once the doors of death are closed behind a person, there is no turning back, and a change of direction is impossible. Remind them also that if God cares enough about their bodies to raise them from the dead, He also cares what they do with them now. God is not just concerned about our souls; we are to honor Him with our bodies also.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

DEATH AND RESURRECTION

1. What happens to the soul and the body of a person when he dies?
2. Why is this an abnormal situation?
3. What is the Intermediate State?
4. What story in the Bible gives us the clearest picture of the Intermediate State?
5. What are the doctrines of soul sleep and purgatory? Why are they wrong?
6. What does the resurrection body of Christ teach us about the bodies that will be given to His children at their resurrection?
7. What does the teaching of the resurrection of the body tell us about how we should treat our bodies in this life?

THE LAST JUDGMENT

Lesson Aim

To convince students that everyone will ultimately be judged, and that their only hope of survival at the Last Judgment is salvation through Christ.

Memory Verse

Matthew 16:24-25 - "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.'"

Lesson Background

The scene of the Last Judgment is a terrible one to comprehend. The horrible picture of sinful men standing before a holy God has been used with great effect by preachers (Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* comes readily to mind) and artists alike over the centuries. Yet the very horror of it has often caused it to be reduced to caricature. The medieval and Renaissance artists who painted the Last Judgment pictured hideous demons clutching at the souls of the damned in such a way that those who look at such pictures today see in them no more than quaint superstition, and are able readily to dismiss the reality of divine judgment. Your students cannot afford to do such a thing.

You must also be careful that your students are not motivated by false pictures of the Last Judgment. Students often get the idea that, throughout their entire lives, God has been running a sort of celestial videotape machine that has the capacity to record all of their actions, words, and thoughts. At the time of judgment, God will play back the tape for the whole world to see. Preachers have been known to use such

a picture as an incentive to good behavior. Such an approach shows the pitiful worldliness of so much of our thinking. Do we fear God so little that we must be motivated by the fear of men? Does standing before the God of the universe move us so slightly that we must be threatened with embarrassment before our fellow creatures? The Last Judgment is a time when men will be called to account before God, not before other people.

In our approach to this subject, we will begin by answering some basic questions about the Last Judgment, then move on to consider more critical issues, such as the basis for judgment and the role of the Last Judgment in the lives of Christians. Again, it is important that you not permit the lesson to get bogged down in eschatological speculation. Though our knowledge of the future is limited, it is more than enough to motivate God's people to holy living now and to warn unbelievers to flee the wrath to come.

Lesson Procedure

If possible, locate a picture of an artistic rendering of the Last Judgment and bring it to class with you (be sure to show some discretion; many such works contain rather blatant nudity, and middle schoolers don't handle that very well). Use it as a discussion starter to get the members of the class talking about the Last Judgment. Do they think the picture captures the essence of that event? Did the painter really understand what the Last Judgment was all about, or is his portrayal inaccurate? Once they have had the opportunity to discuss the issue for a while, have them turn to Revelation 20:11-15. Read the passage together, then take them through the following series of questions.

1. What is the Last Judgment?

The Last Judgment is exactly what its name implies - the time when all appear before God to be judged with regard to their spiritual standing and to be sent to their eternal destiny. The difficulty we face, here, of course, is that, as we saw last week, a person's fate is sealed at the time of death. Why, then, is the Last Judgment necessary, and what significance does it have? Give your students a chance to think about this and discuss it a little. The point of the Last Judgment is not so much that it determines a person's eternal destiny - that has already been decided. The key is that the Last Judgment brings a person face to face with God. This encounter is essential in that the person comes to know not so much what his eternal abode will be, but to understand why that is the case. The unbeliever who stands before God will be bereft of all excuses. The believer who comes into His presence will know the true meaning of grace.

2. When Does the Last Judgment Occur?

This, of course, has been a matter of considerable debate over the years. I would not advise getting involved in the esoterica surrounding the interpretation of the early verses of Revelation 20. Your students don't really need to concern themselves with the different millennial positions at this point. What is clear from this passage, however, is that the Last Judgment occurs after the return of Christ and after the resurrection of the body (again, whether everyone is resurrected at the same time or whether this occurs in stages is not the issue). Life on earth as we know it has come to an end, and all who have ever lived have been reunited with their bodies (though the logistics of this may be hard to fathom, we can assume that the God who created our bodies in the first place is able to reconstruct them, no matter what may have happened to them after death). The aberration of the Intermediate State has been ended and the psychophysical units that are called human beings stand before their Maker intact.

3. Who is Involved in the Last Judgment?

The Last Judgment is something through which everyone must pass. Revelation 20 allows no exceptions. II Corinthians 5:10 is even more explicit in including Christians in the scene. There is no escape, for everyone must stand before God.

4. On What Basis Will Judgment Be Made?

Have the students examine Revelation 20:11-15 again to answer this question. They should be able to see that, while people are said to be judged on the basis of what they have done, the final determination will depend upon whether or not a person's name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life. Passages such as Matthew 25:31-46 can be misleading in that they tend to imply that judgment is made on the basis of works. We know, however, from II Corinthians 5:21, that Christians are judged, not by their own works, but by the righteousness of Christ. Thus in a sense it may be said that the Last Judgment is a judgment based on works; the unbeliever is judged for his sin, while the believer is judged on the basis of Christ's righteousness.

5. What Does the Last Judgment Mean for Christians?

As we saw above, the Last Judgment for Christians means being declared righteous on the basis of the righteousness of Christ; this is the meaning of the word "justification." The Last Judgment means more than this, however. I Corinthians 3:12-15 seems to indicate that the Last Judgment will also be a time when the service of a Christian is judged and rewards are given for faithful service (the fact that II Corinthians 5:10 uses a different word for "judgment" than that found in Revelation is really beside the point; it does little good to quibble about how many different judgments the Bible describes, or whether the judgment at which believers are rewarded is the same as that at which unbelievers are condemned).

It is important that your students not get the wrong idea about this whole concept of rewards. Christian service is the result of the working of the grace of God in a person's life every bit as much as is salvation itself. No one can claim credit or glory for serving God (see Luke 17:7-10). It is true that God rewards those who serve Him faithfully, but no one should serve Christ out of a desire for reward. Christians are those who serve God out of love and gratitude; "crowns" are as much gifts of grace as is salvation.

6. What Happens After the Last Judgment?

Revelation 20 makes it clear that after the Last Judgment, all go to their eternal place of residence. Those who belong to Christ go to heaven to be with Him forever, while those who remain in their sins go to a place of torment described as the Lake of Fire. The difference between these and the scenes described in relation to the Intermediate State is that people enter eternity as whole beings - bodies and souls. The joys of heaven are physical and spiritual alike, as are the terrors of hell.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by emphasizing that all people will one day meet God face to face. The horror of judgment is not having your thoughts, words, and deeds revealed for all the world to see, but standing before the Lord of the Universe with no excuse for your rebellion against Him. Only the Christian will be able to stand in the Judgment, for only he will have an Advocate whose righteousness is credited to his account. Your students need to take this picture seriously, and to make sure that they will not stand before God defenseless.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

THE LAST JUDGMENT

1. What is the Last Judgment?
2. When does it occur?
3. Who must appear at the Last Judgment?
4. On what basis are those who appear before God judged?
5. What happens to unbelievers at and after the Last Judgment?
6. What happens to Christians at and after the Last Judgment?
7. If people go to heaven or hell when they die, why is the Last Judgment necessary?

HEAVEN

Lesson Aim

To give students an understanding of the glory of heaven and its greatest pleasure, the presence of God forever.

Memory Verse

Matthew 16:26 - “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”

Lesson Background

Everyone knows that going to heaven does not mean getting fixed for a pair of angel wings and sitting around on a cloud strumming a harp. Once that stereotype is dismissed, however, it is difficult to know where to turn. Christians are not like the Buddhists, who speak of a Nirvana that can only be described by negation, so that one can say what it is not but never say what it is. But when we look to the Bible for a description of heaven, what we find are pictures that are clearly figurative in nature. How, then, are we to understand the reality of the future that God has promised to His children?

We are only able to understand things in terms of our own experience. Thus when the Bible describes the power of God, it talks about the strength of His arm; when it speaks of His care for His people, He is pictured as a shepherd watching over His sheep. While describing God as a man with strong arms or a vigilant shepherd in no sense gives us a full picture of who God is, these images communicate truth and help us to understand God better. The same is true of heaven. The eternal glory that God has promised to His children is something totally beyond human experience. Therefore if we are to understand it at all, it

must be by analogy with something that is part of our earthly lives. This is why we find such extensive use of imagery in the biblical descriptions of heaven. Another reason might have to do with the limitations of human language. When John was on the island of Patmos, he saw a vision of the New Jerusalem. What he saw was something no other man has ever seen, and something that human language is insufficient to describe. Consequently, John described his vision by using the most beautiful things of earthly experience - a fruitful garden, streets of gold, gates made of huge pearls, etc. These descriptions communicate truth about heaven, but that truth is limited simply because human experience and human language are not able to comprehend or describe the beauties of heaven. Paul's statement in I Corinthians 2:9 is relevant here: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him." Of course, he goes on to say that God has revealed it to us by His Spirit, but what does he mean by that? What has been revealed is not a detailed description of heaven, but a picture of God's glorious plan of salvation, which in Isaiah's day (Paul quotes verse 9 from Isaiah 64:4) was understood in only the most rudimentary way.

What this tells us, among other things, is that when thinking of heaven we are not meant to dwell on the beauty of the place so much as on the beauty of the Savior. God promises us a wonderful dwelling place, but more than that He promises us Himself. Consequently, the major focus of today's lesson will be on the fact that heaven is an eternity in the presence of God. To help us do that, we will examine John's description of his heavenly vision in Revelation 21-22.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by giving each student a large piece of paper and colored pencils, markers, chalk, or crayons. Then have them read Revelation 21:9-22:5 silently and try to draw what John saw. Encourage them to do a nice job, and give them time to work carefully and thoughtfully (no more than 15-20 minutes, however). Then have them look at what they have drawn and ask them if that really looks like heaven. No matter what their level of artistic ability may be, they all should realize that what they have drawn falls far short of John's description, let alone the actual reality. Ask them next if it would be possible for even the greatest artist to draw an accurate picture of heaven. They should realize that such a thing is impossible. The reason for this is that heaven is beautiful beyond human description.

We are ready now to look at John's description of his heavenly vision in more detail. The description is important both for what it says heaven is and for what it says heaven is not.

1. What Heaven Is

Go through Revelation 21:9-22:5 verse by verse and pick out the images John uses to describe heaven as he saw it in this vision. What do they tell us?

- In verse 9, what John sees is described as the "bride of the Lamb." It is interesting to note that the angel doesn't tell John that he is seeing the dwelling place of the bride, but the bride herself. In fact, could this vision refer not to a place at all, but instead to the glorified people of God? In the same way that the church on earth in the present age is described as the temple of the Holy Spirit, so the glorified church is pictured as a city in which God dwells. This possibility should warn us against taking the description that follows too literally.
- Verse 10 describes the subject of the vision as the Holy City, a new Jerusalem. In the Old Testament, Jerusalem was the place upon which God put His name, and the place where He dwelt. The bride of Christ thus belongs to Him in a peculiar way. The idea of the church as a city also

contains in it an element of redemption. Back in Genesis 4 and 5, the earliest city builders were rebels against God. In Genesis 11, the Tower of Babel became the symbol for that rebellious spirit. Yet when God redeems His people from sin, He pictures them as a city. The symbol of rebellion has been transformed into a symbol of redeemed beauty.

- Verse 11 tells us that the city shines with the glory of God. One of the joys of heaven is the glorification of Christians. John tells us in one of his letters that we will be like Christ, for we shall see Him as He is (I John 3:2).
- Verses 12-14 tell us that the city is guarded by angels and has the names of the tribes of Israel on its gates and the apostles on its foundations. Angels continue to be God's servants to minister to His children, even in eternity (Christians do not become angels in heaven). The bride of Christ brings together saints from both the Old and New Testaments (tribes and apostles). While Israel was God's chosen vehicle within which to initiate His revelation, the apostles were the ones through whom it achieved its final form.
- Verses 15-21 tell us that the city is large, strong, and beautiful. What John saw was beyond the reach of human language, and all he could do was choose the most beautiful things he knew in order to approximate the glory of the vision before him. Part of the beauty of the city lies in its balance and symmetry. When God does something, it is perfect and complete; so it is with His people and the place in which they will dwell forever.
- As we move to chapter 22, verse 1 pictures a river of the water of life flowing through the city. This is the same water that Jesus promised to the Samaritan woman in John 4 and the same that Isaiah promised to the thirsty in Isaiah 55. It represents salvation itself, and all who are in heaven drink freely from its waters.
- In verse 2 we are told that the tree of life grows by the river and produces a variety of fruit that all are free to eat. Here we see the Garden of Eden all over again, but instead of being barred from the tree of life, all have access to it. God protected Adam and Eve from being forever confirmed in their sin by keeping them from the tree of life after the Fall. In heaven, all are confirmed in a state of righteousness and may eat of the tree of life freely.
- The final positive description is found in verse 4. Here we are told that the name of Christ will be on the foreheads of all the inhabitants. This is the new name promised to the overcomers in Revelation 3:12. In biblical times, "putting your name" on someone meant that that person belonged to you and you exercised authority over him (for instance, when Nebuchadnezzar gave new names to Daniel and his three friends). Heaven is thus a place where every inhabitant belongs to God and where He has redefined their characters to make them like Christ.

2. What Heaven Is Not

John's description of what heaven is not is every bit as important as what he tells us about what it is. We now return to the verses we skipped - Revelation 21:22-27.

- Verse 22 tells us that the city needs no temple. The Temple, of course, was the place where God's presence was to be found. In the New Jerusalem, the whole city is a temple; God is there in a far greater way that He was in the Temple in Jerusalem in the Old Testament.

- Verses 23-25 indicate that no created sources of light are necessary - no sun, moon, or stars. The reason for this is that God Himself is the light, and no artificial illumination is required. It will never be night, for the light of God is everlasting. Revelation 22:5 repeats the same idea.
- Verse 27 tells us that no sin will be within the city. All inside will be purified, and no corruption will ever touch them again. The same theme appears again in Revelation 22:3.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by reminding students that heaven is not streets of gold and pearly gates, but the presence of God forever. If a person cannot take joy in God's presence now, it is doubtful that he will do so later. The Holy Spirit, in fact, is given to Christians as a down payment or foretaste of heaven, so that those who belong to God can have a little bit of heaven on earth because they have the Spirit of God within them.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

HEAVEN

1. Why is it impossible to draw an accurate picture of heaven?
2. Why does John use such highly symbolic language to describe his vision in Revelation 21-22?
3. Why is the city John saw called the New Jerusalem?
4. What is the significance of the fact that the names of the tribes of Israel and the apostles are on the gates and foundations of the city?
5. What do the presence of the water of life and the tree of life indicate about heaven?
6. Why does heaven need no temple or created source of light?
7. What is the most glorious fact that John tells us about heaven?

HELL

Lesson Aim

To convince students of the reality of hell and emphasize what must be done in order to avoid it.

Memory Verse

Matthew 16:27 - "For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done."

Lesson Background

It really shouldn't surprise us in the least that the Bible talks more about hell than it does about heaven. This imbalance was particularly characteristic of the ministry of Jesus Himself. The reason for this should be fairly obvious. More people will respond to the fear generated by a description of hell than will be attracted to the glory of a heaven in which the principal attraction is God Himself. Those who are in rebellion against God don't want to be with Him. They don't want to go to hell either, however. Thus when the Bible talks about hell, it is in the context of warnings issued to sinners who need to repent. The only exception to this is the description found in the book of Revelation, where it appears as a comfort to those who are suffering at the hands of persecutors and who need to know that evil will ultimately be defeated.

The thrust of today's lesson will be both informational and motivational. By the time the lesson is over, your students should understand the meanings of the major words used for hell in the Bible and have a better knowledge of the imagery through which hell is pictured. The main purpose of all this, of course, is to give students a desire to avoid it. While no one would say he actually wanted to go to hell, most people simply do not take the whole thing very seriously, and thus it loses all its motivational impact. Today's

lesson should be serious enough to provide a healthy dose of fear for your class, while at the same time producing gratitude in your Christian students for the judgment from which God has delivered them.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking the students when was the last time they heard the word “hell.” In all likelihood, the context will be a profane one for most of them. See if they understand why it is wrong to use “hell” as an exclamation. They should be able to see that, in the same way the profane use of the name of God shows a lack of respect for Him, so the profane use of the word for the eternal home of the wicked shows that people simply do not take the idea of God’s judgment seriously. It seems that the less people believe in hell, the more they use the word.

Another symptom of the general disbelief in hell is the way it is pictured in popular culture. Cartoons are probably the worst offenders, but movies dealing with the occult are little better. All of this contributes to a general understanding of hell, Satan, and demons as being unreal. Collect a few examples from your students, but don’t prolong this segment to the point where they begin to revel in the discussion of disgusting movies that they probably shouldn’t have been watching to begin with.

In comparison with its treatment in the mass media, Jesus was remarkably restrained in His treatment of the subject of hell. Though He spoke of it often, He gave just enough information to make people sure that it was a place to which they had no desire to go. He also pointed to Himself as the way of escape.

1. Hell in the Old Testament

The Old Testament tends to present a rather vague picture of immortality in general, and the same is true in its view of hell. While the Old Testament did make clear that there was life beyond the grave and spoke infrequently of the resurrection of the body, it gives very little in the way of description of life after death. In fact, the word translated “hell” in the Old Testament (the Hebrew word *sheol*) is also translated as “pit” or “grave.” The word is thus sometimes neutral, speaking only of the abode of the dead, and sometimes is used in a negative sense to speak of a place of torment (though some have disputed even that, suggesting that when David begs God to send his enemies to sheol he is simply praying that they would die). Consequently, the Old Testament is of little help in understanding the Bible’s teaching about hell, and it should surprise us very little that the Jewish concept of hell is not very highly developed.

2. Jesus’ Description of Hell

Have your students turn to Mark 9:43-48 and read it together (they will probably notice that verses 44 and 46 are missing, but don’t get bogged down in the manuscript issue). Ask them what this passage tells us about hell. Do they think that hell is really a place where worms crawl all over people and a fire burns continually? Remind them of last week’s exercise in which they tried to draw heaven. Their efforts fell far short of the reality. If they were to do the same with hell, they would have considerable difficulty in keeping it from looking just as silly as the cartoon caricatures of it. Jesus is here doing essentially the same thing John did in Revelation 21-22 - He is using images that are familiar to His listeners to convey a truth that is far greater than the images are able to bear. In the same way that heaven is far more glorious than a golden city with gates made from large pearls, hell is far more terrifying than a pit filled with worms and burning continually.

Your students may quite legitimately ask how we know that this is the case. The reasoning is simple. The word Jesus uses for hell in this passage is the Greek word *Gehenna*, which is a transliteration of two Hebrew words meaning “valley of Hinnom.” The valley of Hinnom is one of the valleys surrounding the mountain on which the city of Jerusalem is built. When King Solomon began to form political alliances by marrying pagan wives, he built temples in which they could worship their gods in the valley of Hinnom outside the city limits of Jerusalem. These temples eventually became a temptation too great for the people of Israel to resist. They began to worship the pagan gods of the temples, often in combination with the God of Israel. Things got so bad that during the reign of Manasseh, human sacrifice was being performed in some of the temples. When Josiah came to the throne, he embarked on a program of reform. One of the first things he did was to tear down all the temples in the valley of Hinnom. He then burned what was left, and to make sure that it was never used for idol worship again, turned it into the city dump. In Jesus’ day, it was still used for that purpose. The refuse of Jerusalem was carted out to the valley of Hinnom, where it was burned. Not only that, but beggars who died in the streets and criminals who were not entitled to a religious burial were simply thrown onto the pile with the rest of the trash. The rotting carcasses and garbage were filled with maggots, and it seemed like the perpetually burning fire didn’t hurt them at all. The result of all this was a continual fire accompanied by an incredible stench.

When it came time for Jesus to describe the horrors of hell, He didn’t have a great deal of difficulty in finding an appropriate image to convey His teaching. Did His listeners wish to be thrown into the valley of Hinnom? Of course they didn’t. The valley of Hinnom was the most disgusting thing they could imagine. The danger against which Jesus warned them was far worse, however.

If Jesus were speaking today, what image would He use? In the book *1984*, by George Orwell, politically unorthodox people were brainwashed to make them love the tyrannical Big Brother who was the symbol of the totalitarian state. The final step in the brainwashing occurred in Room 101 of the Ministry of Love (the state torture chamber). For each victim, Room 101 contained whatever they feared the most. For Winston Smith, the hero(?) of the book, it contained rats. He was so terrified of rats that he would say or do anything his captors wanted in order to avoid them. Ask your students what Room 101 would contain for them. What is it that horrifies them the most, in their most secret nightmares? If they think of that innermost fear, then multiply it by an infinite number, they will begin to get an idea of what hell is like. Our worst imaginings cannot even approach the horrors of hell.

3. The Lake of Fire

In Revelation 20:10-15, we find hell described using the term “lake of fire.” When John says that death and hell will be cast into the lake of fire, he means two things. The first is that those who were suffering torment in the disembodied Intermediate State will now have their souls and bodies cast into a place of suffering. The second is that death and the place of the dead will no longer be needed. Those who are without Christ are condemned to suffer an eternal death, while those who are the sons of God live forever. Death itself comes to an end.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by asking your students to consider seriously what would happen to them if they were to die. Jesus intended His teaching on hell to frighten people. It is not funny, nor is it merely the product of the demented imagination of some cartoonist. It is Room 101 multiplied by infinity, and the only way to avoid it is to turn to Christ for mercy.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

HELL

1. What does the Old Testament teach about hell?
2. Where was the valley of Hinnom located?
3. What happened there in the Old Testament?
4. How was the valley of Hinnom used in the days of Jesus?
5. Why did Jesus use the valley of Hinnom as an illustration for hell?
6. Why did John say that death and hell would be cast into the lake of fire?
7. If you were to draw a picture of the most frightening thing you could imagine in order to illustrate hell, what would you draw?
8. Why do you think people go to hell?
9. What is the only way to avoid going to hell?