The Church and its Ministry

Throughout these past few years I have seen experienced a clarification in my personal views and convictions concerning the church. As a freshman the initial awe of coming to Southern Nazarene University filled me with the hopes of reaching the lost for Jesus. There was definitely a sense in which I was a part of a bigger picture, but was not sure exactly how everything would come together. As I have reflected upon the idea of the church like any good Nazarene, I can now see what things I have missed out on for not being able to see the big picture. The idea of church and ministry is much too great of a concept for anyone to really perceive and understand without Jesus.

The church can be defined by our own experiences, but in the end the church should be the reflection of Jesus Christ. Our image of the church could be comprised of a building with four walls, an open air tabernacle, or even a simple home bible study. However, within our understanding of the church there must only be one focal point: God. We must live according to God in order to truly live holy lives whether we are in church or ministering to the community. This Theology and Ministry department has definitely established a belief system is shaped and molded through the image of Jesus Christ. This understanding, in turn, allows for a better grasp in defining both the church and its function in ministry.
What does a good church look like?

Depending on which culture lens you are looking through the church can be defined in many different ways. A good church hopefully incorporates the body of believers as a community. This community is evident in the lives of people within the congregation that have the willingness to be like Christ. A church not only embodies everyone as a part of the community, but also allows others from outside the community to become involved as well. So many people these days feel that a good church is a church that is growing out the roof, but I do believe that the size or the number of members is the least of God's worries. I believe that if the church is a place of worship it should be evaluated not by its numerical growth, but, instead, by the spiritual growth each individual adds to the community.

The people that come together as the body of believers and are known as the church are a crucial aspect in understanding how we identify ourselves as the children of God. We first understand our identity as the church through our horizontal relationship with others. We are constantly in community with people within not only our church, but also our everyday lives. We as believers must be willing to extend our hand to a brother or sister that is in need. The needs of people within this world are constantly shifting between the emotional, the spiritual, and the physical. A church embodies this relational nature by always wanting to incorporate the poor, widowed, and orphaned. Jesus was not depicted as the person that wanted only the priest and Pharisees to come to Him. Instead he accepted those who were considered to be sinners and gentiles. He wanted extended his love to others who did not otherwise have the opportunity of experiencing love.
Not only is there a horizontal relationship between us and others, but there is also a vertical relationship between us and God. Our relationship with God is greatly shaped by our understanding of what the church looks like. God extended his love towards us through His son Jesus Christ. As the children of God we must constantly build and grow in maturity within our relationship with God. God will sustain our every need once we continue to remember. The Shamah in Deuteronomy 6 clearly states that we are called to be people that never forget in order that future generations will remember the glory and love that God has bestowed on each and every one of us.

We must be able to understand that as the body of believers our calling is not only to be the children of God, but also extend God’s love to others. I believe when a body of believers looks beyond their own world and recognizes that living a holy life is crucial to our ministry to others, then they can call themselves the church. A church is not solely about the way in which we worship on Sundays and Wednesdays, but also the way that we live out our lives everyday. There are many people in this world that claim to be a Christian or claim to be a part of a church, when in reality they may not attend on a regular basis and do not live out their lives according to holy living. Holy living is not just about our actions, but instead it has everything to do with living our lives in the very image of Christ. Jesus lived a life that was pleasing to God. We should be able to do the same within and around our church. Our purpose in the world is not simply to live an ordinarily life, but instead to live an extraordinary life.

When we, as the church, have accepted the community as our own we can begin to extend God’s grace and love in order to disciple them in their walk with the Lord. The church embraces those that are willing to accept God’s guidance as their own. The
church can be seen as more than just a commercialized way of enforcing Christianity, but instead of discipleing those that are willing to listen. The church should continually embrace those that are considered to be the oppressed because they have been persecuted for far too long. The church should bring these people under their wing in order to nurture them from being baby Christians to becoming excited disciples.

The Bible is a great source of understanding the way in which the church can be viewed, especially within the Gospels where Jesus ministry is clearly evident. According to Matthew, Jesus came to this earth not to abolish the law, but instead to fulfill the law. Jesus wanted to direct the church understand that it was to live among the unrighteous, and to help those who had gone astray. The fulfillment of the law is clearly evident in Matthew 16:18 when Jesus appoints the twelve as His disciples. They have come together in hopes of bringing the believers together as one community.

The gospel of Mark focuses on the importance of churches’ teaching of the new community and believers. Through Jesus, ministry, it is clearly evident that He taught His disciples to teach the essential principles of the church. Through this teaching, the church learned of the self denial that they all needed to face through Christ. In Mark, the apostles were a circle originally appointed by Jesus when he chose twelve to be in ministry with Him (Mk 3:14).

The church should always remember the outcast, sick, widows and marginalized. Luke provides the shift and transition of Jesus, mission towards the church. God’s purpose through the Old Testament was to be a continuation of the church to witness the salvation through Jesus (Lk 24:47-49). Through the church, Luke portrays an understanding of compassion for those who are considered to be the outcast. The mission
of the church was geared to preach the good news to the poor, widowed, and outcast.

The Kingdom of God was seen as turning the world’s values upside-down. The Spirit enables the church to truly witness through the life of Jesus. The importance placed on the future occurrences within the community were essential in understanding the way in which the church was to bring in both Jew and Gentile, poor and rich, widow and orphan.

The fourth Gospel is primarily concerned with salvation of the individual. However, this does not limit the understanding of the church and community to be a part of their unity. Jesus is depicted in the gospel of John as coming to form a new community to contrast that of the old Israel. This new community is made up of both Jews and Gentiles, which are now to be known as the children of God “scattered abroad” (11:52). John also uses the metaphor of the vine and the branches in contrast to that of Paul’s metaphor of the body of Christ. John 15:1-6 provides the image of love being the evidence of Christ’s life. The unity within the church is an organizational structure that is crucial in their relationship among each other and God.

The founding of the church fits the total teaching of Jesus and means that he saw in the circle of those who received His message the children of the Kingdom, the true Israel, the people of God. The church can be seen as a community within the Kingdom, but never just as the Kingdom of God. The church is but the result of the coming of God’s Kingdom into the world by the mission of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ life and ministry enabled the foundation of the church, but was never the focus or intention of Jesus Christ. The entrance into the Kingdom means participation in the church; but entrance into the church is not necessarily identical with entrance into the Kingdom.
What defines the shape of ministry in that church?

The shape of ministry is an extremely difficult aspect to define within any church. The ministry within any given church is dynamically different from one congregation to the next. The ministry incorporates the vision and goal that the church is aiming towards. However this ministry can only be shaped by one thing, God. God is and should be the forerunner of any ministry. The idea of intending to start a ministry without the guidance and prayer from God seems to be absurd. Our intentions for any ministry should always have the end goal of reaching the lost for the Kingdom. A goal we adapt from God’s own history given to us in the Bible.

God’s grace and love is sufficient for any ministry to extend its arms towards those not only within the church, but also within the community. I believe that God’s grace is a gift extended to us if we choose to accept it. However, God’s love comes unconditionally whether we want it or not. We have to be willing not only to receive that love and grace, but in turn give it back to someone in the community. Our ministry should always revolve around the intentionality of discipleing new believers in such a way that they are on fire for God. Ministry does not end within the four walls of any church. A church can minister in any area in which persons are susceptible to the Gospel. A ministry could simply be a home bible study among men and women yearning to learn more about Jesus and His teachings. Ministry is also evident through the lives of teenagers whether that is within the youth group or simply playing basketball. Ministry incorporates both the love of one another in caring and spending quality time. God’s time with us is not simply an afterthought, instead we are always His number one priority.
Ministry is also largely shaped by the identity of Christ. Jesus ministry was clearly extended to the outcast. As believers, we should be able to place all barriers aside and allow each of us to be open and vulnerable in the love extended to others from Jesus. We should identify ourselves in the image of Christ. Christ did not want to turn away people based on either being sinners or being righteous. Ministry allows for us to not only be vulnerable to our needs spiritually, but also to others spiritual needs. Our understanding of ministry extends through our perception of the way in which God works in and through the world. God wants us to continually show grace to those that have lost hope. Ministry allows for the marginalized to reconcile with God in every aspect of their lives. The role of any church is to bring salvation to those it comes into contact with.

The New Testament perception of the church developed from an understanding in which, at the center, we find Jesus and God. They have brought the community together, even if it is viewed as accidental. Jesus’ intention for the community of believers was never to separate them from the Jewish practices, but instead to be aware of God’s redemptive power. Throughout the New Testament, each theology enabled a greater understanding of the role and impact of the church in our world today. The church is greatly united as the body of Christ. The New Testament writers were aware of the role of the church to be the body of Christ. The church can be perceived to be easily seen as a single institution. However, even as an institution, the church and its members can strive to be active participants in a community that embodies the image of Christ. The Lord must be represented in every area in which the church already exists. In the end the church should be perceived as the one place that embodies God’s love as our own and
then extends that love to others. We are able to accomplish this goal of ministry through preparing our hearts in such a way that Jesus can be seen living in and through us.

Jesus’ earthly life and ministry provide an insightful view of what the perception of the church was through the New Testament. Jesus did not expect to build a church through his ministry. Through Jesus’ ministry, He wanted to establish an understanding of the coming Kingdom of God, but instead the church came. Ladd explained,

“that those who receive the proclamation of the Kingdom were viewed not only as the people who would inherit the eschatological Kingdom, but as the people of the Kingdom in the present, and therefore in some sense of the word, a church.”

Jesus was fully aware and accepted the authority of the Old Testament. This acceptance and understanding of the Old Testament church came through the temple practices to which the Jews were accustomed.

Jesus’ mission was to proclaim that God was “now acting to fulfill his promises and to bring Israel to its true identity. Israel’s true identity came from their knowledge of being the children of the covenant. According to Niebuhr, “the Church as institution can preserve as well as corrupt the Church as community; it can express and define through word and deed the common mind as well as thwart the common spirit.” Overall the idea of an institution among the church was something that Jesus never intended, yet seemed to destroy the unity of the church. Instead, “Jesus, by His very commission to His messenger, is summoning a community to live beneath God’s kingly rule.” The church was seen as a community that would reduce the formation of the church as an institution.

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1 Ladd, George Eldon. A Theology of the New Testament, p 104
2 Niebuhr, H. Richard. The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry, p 22
3 Flew, R. Newton. Jesus and His Church, p 110
How do I fit into that church in pastoral ministry?

Children's ministry...it is such a growing aspect of ministry within the church. More and more churches are beginning to implement children's ministry as a crucial aspect in growing the Kingdom. Jesus portrayed it best when he allowed the children to come to him despite the disciples intention of turning them away. The cliché that children are our future has begun to influence not only education, but even more so to that of the ministry within a church. In Deuteronomy, the Shamah text clearly identifies the Israelites as a people that remembered in order for future generations to never forget. If we do not allow children's ministries within each and every church in our denomination, we will be known as a dying church. A church grows not only through its adult members, but even so within the children. Children are easily shaped and molded at their young ages. A higher percentage of people once they become teenagers are no longer susceptible to the Word. However, children are open to learning about stories within the Bible. We as a church may not be able to reach each and everyone of them and bring them into salvation. However, each child within our own personal ministry is a product of the kinds of seeds we plant. We want them to always remember what truths they learned within the church even if it takes them until they are adults to recall and actualized them.

My passion within ministry at any church will always be children. They are the most caring and open-hearted group within any church. They will accept you as you are and even tell you when they do not accept. The pastoral ministry allows for the children's ministry to focus on learning ideas in which will instill in them a sense of ownership in understanding their beliefs. My role within ministry will not only to have
fun times with the children, but also place stepping stones so that they are guided. Paul made it clear in 1 Corinthians 13 that He had placed childish ways behind him. In a sense Paul may have grown up, but never forgot His childlike spirit. A child is a precious gem among all of the evil in this world. My hope is to guide them in confessing their faith in God as their own personal decision. Children for the most part are able to truly appreciate the worshipful time in which we take time out to remember all of the great things God has done and will be doing within their lives.

Pastoral ministry also allows for me to embody Christ in my life in such as way that I am a good reflection of what a Christian is to be. Children amazingly watch every action you make whether that is within the church walls or even in our everyday lives. We are to embody Christ with a childlike spirit that accepts those around us as we are in order to usher them into the Kingdom as one of God’s children.

A church is greatly influenced by the way in which ministry is enacted in and among the people of the congregation. Many times people discredit the church simply claiming hypocrisy and other stereotypes. However, as the church called to minister to others, we must always remember to live our lives in the image of Christ. Once we realize that the church is only defined by Jesus can we truly begin to live holy lives. Our holy lives should be not only pleasing to God and, but also to the people we are ministering and witnessing too. We must be willing and able to reconcile the world in God’s name in order for the church to implement ministry in and among our community.
Work Cited

