



Ecclesiology: The Study of the Church

Lesson 6: The Distinct Church

INTRODUCTION

Some church leaders speak as if the church needs to do its best to look and act like the world in order for it to be successful.

Of course, such leaders don't want the church to morally emulate the world, but they do want the church's music, leadership structures, physical appearance, and way of speaking to make non-Christians feel at home, to feel as if they belong.

It's true, the Bible does call Christians to adapt to others' cultural preferences in order to avoid putting any unnecessary offense in the way of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:19–23). But the impulse to try to make non-Christians feel as comfortable as possible within the church can be a dangerous one. It can lead us to downplay the ways in which the church is meant to be distinct from the world.

1. What are some ways in which you think the church should be distinct from the world? _____

MAIN IDEA

God calls the church to be distinct from the world through our faith in the gospel and conformity to his character.

DIGGING IN

Matthew 5:13–16.

The common theme in the images of salt and light is that Jesus's disciples are to be distinct from the world and so be a blessing to the world. Salt preserves and gives flavor because of its distinct saltiness. It has to retain that distinct quality, or else it isn't good for anything. Likewise, light shines brightly, illuminating people's way because it stands out from the surrounding darkness.

How are we to be distinct? Consider what Jesus says in the verses just before his words about salt and light:

Matthew 5:3-12.

1. What do being poor in spirit, mourning, being meek, and hungering and thirsting after righteousness all have in common (vv. 3–6)? _____

2. What do being merciful, being pure in heart, and being peacemakers all have in common (vv. 7–9)? _____

3. Why do you think people who live and act in these ways would find themselves being persecuted (vv. 10–11)? _____

The distinctness Jesus wants his people to have is a distinctness of both broken-hearted trust and faith-fueled obedience. He wants us to be meek and merciful, to be poor in spirit and peacemakers. Our distinctness from the world begins with the recognition that apart from Christ we are utterly lost, utterly sinful, utterly broken. Our distinctness from the world begins, in other words, with repenting of sin and trusting in Christ alone to save us.

Yet while Jesus calls his followers to be salt and light in the world, we don't always live up to that, do we?

Throughout the book of 1 Corinthians, Paul brings the gospel to bear on ways in which the Corinthians were acting more like worldly people than like followers of Christ. In the first four chapters Paul focuses on their wrong attitudes toward Christian leaders, which were resulting in factions and divisions within the church.

Then in chapter 5, Paul addresses a grave moral failure on the part of the whole church.

1 Corinthians 5:1–13.

In another volume in this series called *Guarding One Another*, we will explore in greater depth Paul's instruction to put this sinning man out of the church.

In this study, we will focus on what this passage, especially the last five verses, calls the church to be: a people distinct from the world.

4. According to verses 9–10, what did Paul tell the Corinthians to do in a former letter? _____

5. Did Paul mean that the Corinthians should have nothing to do with non-Christians who live this way? _____

6. What specific instructions does Paul give the Corinthians in verses 11 through 13? _____

7. In verse 11, Paul emphatically states, “But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one.”

Why do you think Paul gives opposite instructions regarding how the Corinthians are to treat an immoral person who does not claim to be a Christian and one who does? _____

8. According to verses 1 and 2, who does Paul hold accountable for maintaining the purity of the church? _

9. What does this say about your responsibility to the church you’re a member of? _____

10. According to verse 2, the Corinthians not only tolerated this man’s immorality, but they were also puffed up with pride because of their “tolerance”! That’s why Paul rebukes the whole church for giving their approval to such behavior.

But this kind of overt boasting is not the only way that a church gives their approval to someone’s behavior. Rather, church membership itself is the church’s endorsement, as it were, that a person is a Christian. So, a church doesn’t have to boast about a member’s immoral behavior in order to endorse it; simply allowing a person to remain a member of the church is endorsement enough.

What message does it send to the world if a church approves of radically immoral behavior, such as sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, drunkenness, or swindling (see v. 11)? _____

11. On the other hand, what message does it send to the world when the church’s life together is marked by love, unity, forgiveness, and holiness (see John 13:34–35; 17:20–21)? _____

Not Perfection, but Repentance

Paul's exhortation not to associate with any professing believer who practices the behaviors he lists in verse 11 does not mean that a church should consist of only perfect people. Just the opposite! Remember that Jesus says that we are to be spiritually poor, to mourn, and to be meek. All of this implies the ongoing presence of sin in our lives. And it reminds us that we're saved by Christ's work, not our own.

Paul's teaching in this passage is not that the church should exclude imperfect people but people whose sin is so severe and unrepentant that the sin undermines their claim to be a Christian in the first place.

The goal is for the church to be distinct from the world. It should shine with God's holy and righteous character, thereby giving witness to the gospel we preach.

12. What are some ways that you can personally contribute to the church's distinctness, to its task of reflecting God's character to the world?¹ _____

¹ Bobby Jamieson, [Built upon the Rock: The Church](#), ed. Mark Dever, 9Marks Healthy Church Study Guides (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 35–39.