The Essential Ministries of the Church

Systematic Theology VI: Ecclesiology & Eschatology · Lecture 5 of 10

C. Michael Patton, Th.M., and Rhome Dyke, Th.M. · The Theology Program · 62 minutes

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Lecture by C. Michael Patton, Th.M., and Rhome Dyke, Th.M., from The Theology Program, published on their public channel. Study notes from Medina Community Church.

BEFORE YOU WATCH

You have one week left on the mission field, and one hundred brand new believers are asking what they must start before you leave. Not what would be nice: what is essential, the bare minimum without which they are not a local church at all. This session forces that question on the whole class, and almost every confident answer wobbles. Listen for the moment the class realizes that the purpose they voted most important last week is one they are now hesitant to call essential.

STUDY SHEET

1. From purpose to ministries

The course narrows another step: nature, then purpose, and now the ministries, the least theological subject so far and the most applicational, the part churches practice constantly without asking why. The timing is providential: that very day the pastoral staff attended a conference with Dan Kimball, author of The Emerging Church, part of the movement that answers postmodernism, and the teachers describe its method of deconstruction: forget the building, forget Sunday, forget everything you assume about church, and rebuild from the ground up. They do not leave such conferences agreeing with everything, but they defend the exercise, since deconstructing and rebuilding is what the whole theology program does, and this session will do exactly that with the ministries.

2. What ministries are

Ministries defined: the avenues through which the local church seeks to fulfill its purpose. The teachers pile up alternate framings that all say the same thing: the visible arm of the invisible church; the local ministry of the universal church; the contextualized avenue through which Christ is represented to the world; the local administrator of the church's purpose. The key word is intentionality: a ministry exists to fulfill some part of the purpose, which the class restates from last week: to worship and enjoy God, representing Christ through evangelistic outreach, discipleship, social concern, fellowship, and holiness, in balance. Then the class lists every ministry they can name, youth, music, small groups, missions, counseling, recovery, hospital visitation, the ordinances, dozens more, and the real question surfaces: out of all of that, what is essential?

3. The church plant case study

The case study makes it concrete. On a self funded mission trip to an unevangelized village, one hundred people enthusiastically receive Christ, and with one week before you leave they ask what to do next. You tell them to start a local church, teach them the nature and the purpose, and point them to the word in Hebrews 10 about not neglecting to gather together. Then they ask the question you did not expect to be hard: we are not many people, so which ministries are necessary for a local church to be a local church? The teachers name it precisely: this is the search for the sine qua non, the without which not, the bare essentials and no more. And it is no classroom game: missionaries and underground churches under persecution face exactly this question about what makes a planted work a church.

4. First essential: sitting under the word

The class starts with preaching, and the teachers immediately press for precision. Is the essential simply that people learn the word of God, in any setting, around any table? Or is it something more like the prophetic pattern handed down from the Old Testament prophets: one person declaring the word of God while the people sit under it submissively, not a debate but a receiving? The discussion builds a spectrum: broadly, a discipleship ministry; more narrowly, a teaching ministry; most narrowly, prophetic preaching. The class lands where most of history has: some form of sitting under the word of God is not optional, and how the rest of the marks are counted will turn out to depend on it.

5. What makes a church more than a parachurch

Prayer and singing come next, and the teachers push the harder question underneath: campus ministries and parachurch organizations also pray, and pray corporately, so what makes a gathering a church rather than a parachurch ministry? Part of the answer is the nature of corporateness itself: praise taken home alone is individual, but corporate confession, the whole body owning its unworthiness before God through one voice, runs through the Old Testament and the New. And two things are corporate by their very nature, impossible to take home: baptism and the Lord's supper. The Reformation sharpened all of this: when Rome told Luther he had no right to baptize or administer the supper, and beyond that no right to ordain, marry, or bury, the question of what makes a church stopped being academic.

6. Rome's answer and the Reformers' answer

On the Roman Catholic definition, the ministries of the church are the seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, the eucharist, penance, matrimony, holy orders, and extreme unction, the church acting as the institutional, God ordained administrator of grace. The teachers note again that Rome is at least consistent: its definition of the church produces its purposes, and its purposes produce its ministries; Luther had to go back and re-argue the definition itself. The Reformers stripped the list to two, baptism and the Lord's supper, and denied that either carries saving grace, ordinances rather than channels, while reinstituting what they called the true preaching of God's word. Some Protestants push one step further, holding the ordinances to be symbols only, since what matters is the heart, and the teachers decline to referee yet: Patton admits his own position has changed three times during the preparation of this class.

7. Is outreach essential? The class caught in its own vote

Then the trap springs. Must a legitimate local church have outreach? The class hesitates, hedges about circumstances, and the teachers point back one week: when asked the most important purpose of the church, nearly every hand went up for outreach, on the compelling ground that it is the one purpose that cannot be accomplished in heaven. Now the same class is reluctant to call it essential to being a church. The model of Acts 1, witnesses in your own city first, then the surrounding regions, then the uttermost parts, suggests at least some local outreach belongs to a church where there are lost people to reach. And a further wrinkle: is the gospel only for those who have never heard it, or do the hundred believers on the field need to keep hearing it themselves?

8. Fellowship, or you did not attend church

Can people come together without actually coming together? The teachers describe the familiar pattern, and call it the paradigm of the American, individualistic church: arrive, sit under the sermon, greet a few familiar faces, go home, everyone off each other's minds by the parking lot. If fellowship means bearing one another's burdens under a common confession, over time, with ongoingness, then a gathering like that is, at best, a parachurch teaching ministry, or, as Rhome puts it more carefully, there may be a church in that room, but the person who only attends the sermon did not attend it. The conference that day supplied a reframing the teachers commend: you do not go to church, because you already are part of the local church; you go to the gathering of your church. The building is not the church, and even the meeting is not the whole of it.

9. Worship, defined broadly and narrowly

The class agrees the word worship is used so loosely it must be pinned down. Broadly, Romans 12 makes the whole of life worship: bodies offered as living sacrifices. The word itself carries the picture of prostration, falling down, which the teachers unpack as sitting under God, receiving instruction, so that Abraham's believing God was worship. But the church setting needs the narrow sense: worship as the body speaking to God, through praise, prayer, confession, testimony, hymns, creeds, and readings, distinguished from God speaking to the body through the preaching and through the ordinances, the visual word of God. That distinction lets the discussion proceed without the word swallowing everything.

10. The historical marks: Calvin, Bucer, and discipline

Hans Kung, whom the teachers introduce as something of a Martin Luther inside Roman Catholicism, frames the question well: there are signs by which the church can be recognized, perceivable even by outsiders. The Reformers' model named two: the word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution; wherever those are found, Calvin held, there is a church of God, beyond doubt. Everything, the teachers stress, shelters under the common confession the preaching creates: outreach without it spreads no particular gospel, worship without it addresses no particular God, fellowship without it shares nothing. Patton names the one mark he holds at a ten: the preaching of God's word. Martin Bucer added a third mark: church discipline, the order that comes with the ability to put someone outside, and the class, without a single slide, agrees almost instantly, because without that ability a gathering is a club, a ministry, anything but a church. The difficulty is contextual: excommunication meant something in first century Corinth, where the disciplined person had nowhere else to go; today there is a church on every corner, and only Rome ever solved the problem, with the trump card that there is no salvation outside the church at all, the very card played against Luther, and the card East and West once played against each other.

11. The Pietists and William Booth

Two later traditions lengthened the list in different directions. The Pietist movement named the preaching of God's word, genuine fellowship among believers, since they saw what happens when people merely attend, and missions to the lost, making outreach itself a mark of a legitimate church. William Booth kept the preaching and added the caring for the needs of society, under his famous motto: soup, soap, and salvation. You cannot bypass a person's most basic needs on the way to their soul, he argued, pointing to the challenge in James 2 about blessing someone who goes away naked and hungry; good news that ignores real hunger has misunderstood what it is announcing.

12. Principle and pattern

A distinction now organizes everything: the principle is the function, absolute, timeless, transcultural, biblically commanded, the what; the pattern is the form, relative, contextualized, culturally subjective, biblically illustrated but not commanded, the how. Fellowship is a principle; fellowship at Starbucks is a pattern, and a pattern that could not have existed fifty years ago. Meeting in homes is a pattern; the people who insist on doing church exactly the way the New Testament did, homes and all, have mistaken the pattern for the principle. The task in every culture is to find the New Testament's principles and set them into local forms.

13. Acts 2: the summary, and the five principles

Acts 2 gives the model reading of historical narrative. Luke pauses after Pentecost and, in a way the interpreter can tell is commendation rather than bare description, summarizes the church: devoted to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer; a sense of awe; possessions shared as anyone had need; meals taken together with gladness and sincerity of heart; praising God, enjoying favor, the Lord adding daily to their number. Principles, the teachers point out, and not one pattern prescribed. From it they draw the five principles they would leave with the village church: outreach; teaching and discipleship; fellowship; inreach, the care and concern for the church's own people, greeters, counseling, meals, hospital visits, motivated by the care God showed you or it is not the gospel at work; and community worship, including the Lord's supper. The acronym WIFE, worship, instruction, fellowship, evangelism, captures most of it, with the teaching foundational to all, since only under a common confession is any of the rest legitimate.

14. Corporate worship that is actually corporate

Corporate worship is defined as the responsibility of the local church to come together and express God's worthiness with one voice, and the teachers ride an honest hobby horse: the songs. Search hymnals and choruses across every era and almost everything is first person singular, and can it be that I should gain, here I am to worship, my God, my King would die for me, all true, all fine alone in the car, but strange on the lips of a gathered body that has supposedly come together to speak to God as one. The opening prayer of the class was deliberately full of us and our; the singing rarely is. The hard won exception the teachers found: a mighty fortress is our God. The point is not a new style but consistency: if the church gathers for corporate praise, let it be corporate, not a room full of individuals worshiping alone in parallel, the musical version of coming to church and leaving without speaking to anyone.

15. The teaching spectrum, the one anothers, and the guiding principles

The teaching ministry runs on a spectrum the local church must cover at both ends: the sermon, low commitment and low expectation, devotional, exhortation, encouragement for a week; and the interactive classroom, high commitment, foundational, education, theology for a lifetime. A church that only preaches sermons has not finished its teaching responsibility. Fellowship is fleshed out by the one another passages: members of one another, love one another, be devoted to one another, encourage and build up, pray for, suffer with, bear the burdens of, tolerate, and you cannot tolerate without someone to tolerate, be kind to, sing with, teach, confess to, serve one another, none of it possible without actually being in one another's lives. The closing principles: there is no one right way to do church; forms may differ freely so long as the essential functions are accomplished according to the purpose; and the attempt must be made at all of them in balance, with priority, in Patton's stated opinion, to the teaching of God's word, outreach, and the creating of relationships.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

Acts 1 · Acts 2 · Romans 12 · 1 Corinthians 5 · Hebrews 10 · James 2

KEY TERMS

Ministries

: The avenues through which the local church seeks to fulfill its purpose: the visible arm of the invisible church, the contextualized avenue through which Christ is represented, always defined by intentionality toward the purpose.

Sine qua non

: The without which not: the bare essential ministries a gathering must have before it can be called a local church at all, the question the church plant case study is built to force.

Principle and pattern

: The principle is the function: absolute, timeless, transcultural, biblically commanded, the what. The pattern is the form: relative, contextual, biblically illustrated but not commanded, the how. Confusing them turns first century forms into law.

The marks of the church

: The signs by which a true church is recognized. The Reformers named the word purely preached and the sacraments rightly administered; Bucer added discipline; the Pietists added fellowship and missions; Booth added care for society's needs.

Ordinance

: The Protestant term for baptism and the Lord's supper after the Reformers denied that they carry saving grace: commanded practices of the church, the visual word of God, rather than channels through which grace is administered.

The seven sacraments

: Rome's ministries of the church: baptism, confirmation, the eucharist, penance, matrimony, holy orders, and extreme unction, the church acting as the institutional administrator of God's grace.

Church discipline

: The order and control of the local body, including the ability to put someone outside it. On Bucer's reckoning a mark of the church; without it, the teachers note, a gathering is a club or a ministry, not a church.

Inreach

: The church's care for its own people, meeting physical and spiritual needs and making them part of the family, from greeters to counseling to hospital visits, motivated by the care God has shown us.

WIFE

: The acronym for the essential functions: worship, instruction, fellowship, and evangelism, with the instruction foundational, since only under a common confession is any of the rest legitimate.

Corporate worship

: The responsibility of the local church to come together and express God's worthiness with one voice: the body speaking to God together, as distinct from a room of individuals worshiping alone in parallel.

Descriptive and prescriptive

: The interpretive question for historical narrative: is the author merely recording or commending? In Acts 2 Luke pauses to summarize the church in a clearly commending way, and gives principles without prescribing patterns.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

Answer each question, then check yourself against the key at the end of this section.

1. What is the emerging church movement, as the teachers describe it?
   A. A denomination founded in the nineteenth century
   B. The church answering the postmodern world, using deconstruction: set aside every assumption about how church is done and rebuild from the ground up
   C. A movement to restore the seven sacraments
   D. A publishing company

2. What defines a ministry?
   A. Any activity that meets in a church building
   B. Any program with a budget
   C. An avenue through which the local church seeks to fulfill its purpose; the defining mark is intentionality toward the purpose
   D. Whatever the largest churches happen to do

3. What question does the church plant case study force?
   A. How to raise funds for missions
   B. Which denomination the new church should join
   C. How to translate the Bible
   D. The sine qua non: which ministries are essential, without which a gathering is not a local church at all

4. What distinction did the discussion draw within the teaching essential?
   A. Between Old and New Testament teaching
   B. Between a spectrum running from discipleship broadly, to teaching, to prophetic preaching where the people sit under the declared word submissively
   C. Between written and spoken teaching
   D. Between paid and volunteer teachers

5. Why do baptism and the Lord's supper matter for the church versus parachurch question?
   A. They are the only practices commanded in Scripture
   B. They require ordained clergy in every tradition
   C. They are corporate by their very nature, impossible to take home and do alone, unlike prayer or praise
   D. They were invented after the parachurch movement

6. On the Roman Catholic definition, what are the ministries of the church?
   A. The seven sacraments, administered by the church as the institutional administrator of God's grace
   B. Preaching and singing only
   C. Whatever each parish chooses
   D. The spiritual gifts of the members

7. What did the Reformers do with the sacramental list?
   A. They added three more sacraments
   B. They kept all seven but renamed them
   C. They abolished baptism and the supper entirely
   D. They stripped it to baptism and the Lord's supper, denied that either carries saving grace, and reinstituted the true preaching of the word

8. How did the teachers catch the class in its own vote on outreach?

A. The class had voted outreach the most important purpose, the one impossible in heaven, yet hesitated to call it essential to being a church

B. The class denied that outreach exists

C. The class voted to close the missions program

D. The class confused outreach with inreach

9. What is the sharpest verdict on the arrive, sit, and leave pattern?

A. It is the biblical ideal

B. There may be a church in that room, but the person who only attends the sermon did not attend it; at best it is a parachurch teaching ministry

C. It is required by Hebrews 10

D. It began with the Reformation

10. How does the class define worship narrowly for the church setting?

A. Any activity that occurs on Sunday

B. Only the singing of hymns

C. The body speaking to God, through praise, prayer, confession, testimony, and readings, distinguished from God speaking to the body through preaching and the ordinances

D. Silent meditation alone

11. What was Calvin's test for where a church of God exists?

A. Wherever a bishop presides

B. Wherever a building is consecrated

C. Wherever miracles occur

D. Wherever the word of God is purely preached and heard and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution

12. What third mark did Martin Bucer add, and why did the class agree so quickly?

A. Missions, because of the Great Commission

B. Church discipline: without the ability to put someone outside, a gathering is a club or ministry, not a church

C. Music, because worship requires song

D. A confession of faith in written form

13. Why is discipline harder to practice today than in first century Corinth?

A. Because discipline was abolished by the Reformers

B. Because modern law forbids it

C. Because there is a church on every corner, so the disciplined person simply walks down the street; only Rome, claiming no salvation outside the church, ever held the trump card

D. Because churches no longer keep membership

14. What was William Booth's addition, and his motto?

A. Caring for the needs of society: soup, soap, and salvation, since good news that bypasses basic needs has misunderstood itself

B. Foreign missions: go into all the world

C. Sacramental renewal: word and table

D. Education: schools in every parish

15. What is the difference between a principle and a pattern?

A. A principle is Old Testament, a pattern New Testament

B. They are synonyms

C. A principle is optional, a pattern required

D. The principle is the commanded, timeless function, the what; the pattern is the contextual, illustrated form, the how, and copying first century forms mistakes one for the other

16. How should Acts 2 be read, on the teachers' interpretation?

A. As Luke commending the church's devotion and giving principles, teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer, generosity, without prescribing any pattern

B. As a legal code for church order

C. As a warning against the early church's excesses

D. As a parable rather than history

17. What is the teachers' complaint about congregational singing?

A. That it is too loud

B. That nearly every song is first person singular, so a body gathered for corporate worship ends up worshiping individually in parallel; a mighty fortress is our God was the hard won exception

C. That hymns are too old to use

D. That choruses repeat too often

18. What priority does Patton state among the essential ministries?

A. Buildings, budgets, and boards

B. Music, greeting, and announcements

C. The teaching of God's word, outreach, and the creating of relationships

D. He declines to name any priority

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 B · 2 C · 3 D · 4 B · 5 C · 6 A · 7 D · 8 A · 9 B · 10 C · 11 D · 12 B · 13 C · 14 A · 15 D · 16 A · 17 B · 18 C

TALK IT OVER

1. Run the case study on your own church: if everything not essential were stripped away, what would remain, and does what remains match the marks this lecture surveyed? What is one thing your church treats as essential that is really a pattern, and one principle it may be neglecting?

2. The teachers said the sermon-and-go-home pattern means you did not attend the church that was there. How much of your own participation is attendance, and what would bearing one burden, and letting someone bear yours, look like in the next month?

3. Listen to the songs your church sang last Sunday: how many were we songs and how many were I songs? What changes, in you and in the room, when a congregation actually speaks to God with one voice?

ONE VERSE TO CARRY

Luke summarizes the first church in Acts 2: they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers, sharing with any in need, taking their meals with glad and sincere hearts, praising God, while the Lord added daily to their number.