

# The Nature of Westbrooke Church

The Church of Jesus Christ is not an organization but a living organism. It is not buildings and offices, departments and programs, but a people redeemed from their sins by the same Lord and growing in their relationship to Him and to one another.

## One Church, Many Churches

In the broadest sense, there is only one true church of which all who belong to Christ are members. They are joined by a common faith into one body, serving one Lord. (Ephesians 4:4-6) Yet in another sense, there are as many churches as there are local gatherings of believers, for where two or three are gathered the Lord is there in their midst. (Matthew 18:20)

The New Testament rarely distinguishes between the invisible universal church and the visible local assembly of believers. What is true of one is true of the other. While the local church is in a sense distinguished by its organization (governing by elders, serving by deacons, meeting together for worship, prayer, praise and edification), it is not this organizational structure that makes a church a church. In fact, local assemblies may differ widely in their form of government, style of worship and doctrinal emphasis and yet still be part of the one true church of Jesus Christ.

The nature of the church then is not found in the externals we so often point to when we talk about churches. The nature of the church is not theological or even practical any more than the nature of a person is intellectual or emotional. The different personalities of different local assemblies may serve as important points of distinction among Christians, but they should never be mistaken for the true nature of the church. Our differences should never be allowed to over shadow our essential unity. Our conviction should never be allowed to undermine our fundamental commitment to one another. Our necessary concern for how the work of our Lord is to be carried out should never lead us to confuse the visible organization with the invisible organism.

## A Living Body

The church is alive. She pulses with the life of her Lord. What distinguishes the church from a social service club is that the members share one life, the life of the Lord Jesus. In fact the New Testament frequently refers to the church as the body of Christ. The individuals that make up a church are not unlike the part of a physical body, all part of one living organism, all directed by one Head (which is Christ), mutually dependent upon one another and yet distinct individuals. The proper function of each individual part is

essential to the body's growth and health and the well-being of each individual Christian is essential to the vitality of the entire church.

The same truth is taught in another figure when the church is called a building, a temple, a dwelling of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:17- 22) Individual believers are like the stones in a building, each one important each one dependent upon another, each in turn supporting others. Christ is the cornerstone, the one who holds all the others together. And the whole building is being built (notice the present tense, an on-going process) into a place where God resides in the Spirit.

The church then is people, but it is more than people. It is a people united by the fact that they share the same life. The same Lord leads them all, the same Spirit dwells in them all, the same divine life is shared by all.

### **We are the Church**

We are the church if we belong to Jesus Christ. Too often the church is thought of in terms similar to those we use to talk about the Federal Government, as if The Church were an entity apart from us with a will and personality of its own, an entity established by God to solve our problems.

But we are the church! When we ask, "Does the church have this?" or "Does the church do that?" we are asking the question of ourselves, not of some impersonal organization. And if we feel strongly that the church should be engaged in a certain field of ministry, we have to ask ourselves seriously if the Lord is calling us to do it!

Because we believe this to be the Scriptural picture of the nature of the church some of the approaches we take at Westbrooke may not fall into traditional patterns. Our constant struggle is to wrest from the institution (The Church) the responsibilities that belong in the hands of the people (the church). And our constant joy is to see people, realizing they are the church, step out in dependence upon the Lord to fulfill a need in the Body.

*"There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all." - Ephesians 4:4-6*