

## Outline

### Title Slide

- Hello, my name is Lane Willis. Thank you for the chance to present today and talk with you about what I have been learning and exploring.

### Who am I?

- Before I jump into my topic, I want to tell you a little bit about myself and how I arrived at my topic today.
- I am currently a student at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary studying to get my MDiv in Missiology.
- After graduating, my wife and I desire to go overseas to participate in the missionary task, with the IMB.
- Lastly, I work in the Center for Great Commission Studies. Our center focuses on getting missions in front of our students with mission trips, mobilization efforts, and by connecting with local churches.
  - Recently, I have been attending meetings with local missions pastors about how to develop a sending culture at their churches.

### **Transition: With this background in mind, I have been pondering three questions.**

- What makes a church a church?
- How does our definition of church provide us with a framework for missions?
- Lastly: How does our framework help us answer thorny missiological questions in a digital society?

### **Transition: As I considered these three questions, I began to identify a problem.**

- That problem is a “lack of going.”
  - This is not a new problem. Many books, papers, and blog posts have been written about this recently. The church is struggling to raise up and send out members from their pews. Now, this is not all churches, but there are many that are struggling.
- To take this deeper, I theorize that our lack of going stems from the following:
  - “Church members have a deficient understanding of church (ecclesiology). This misunderstanding inhibits churches and church members from moving outward in evangelism, discipleship, and sending.”

**Transition: As you hear this statement, you might think, what are we missing? How might we fix this problem?**

- I would propose the following: We must teach our members to have a more robust understanding of the church that includes the fact that churches are ontologically sent by God to be witnesses to the ends of the church!
  - Thus, we have lost the meaning of how the church should be looking outward to the lost. We want the church to be a kingdom outpost that brings the Gospel to the nations, not a social club that provides fellowship for believers. We also do not want the church to be a place of consumerism, where people come and consume media and it never effects change in their daily lives.
  - We want our church members to recognize that all are called to be witnesses and ambassadors for Christ, while some are called to do this vocationally by being missionaries.

**Transition: So, what would teaching a better ecclesiology to our members result in?**

- This could propel members forward in evangelism, discipleship, and sending (missiology).
- This might help us better answer thorny missiological questions that are presented by some of the new frontiers.

**Transition: At this point, you may be thinking about a few questions. Why does this matter? And what kind of ecclesiology should we be teaching our members? And how does an ecclesiology help us answer thorny missiological questions?**

- According to the Joshua Project, there are currently 3.4 billion people classified as unreached. This is 42.4% of the world! This statistic is staggering when you begin to think about it.
  - I know many of you know these statistics, but I wanted to bring them to your mind again as we think about the necessity of emphasizing the church as ontologically sent.

**Transition: Second, what kind of ecclesiology should we be teaching our members? Well, I am glad you asked.**

- This brings us to the question, what makes a church a church?
  - Is it a people, a building, a certain size?

- Is a church defined by its goals, characteristics, or functions? Or all three?
- This is a question of ontology, of being. What about a church's being should propel us toward evangelism, discipleship, and church planting?
- Over the next few slides, I will discuss different definitions presented by current theologians.
- After presenting these definitions, I will try to synthesize them into a framework that we can teach our members.
- This framework will also help us interpret these thorny missiological questions.

**Transition: Before jumping into these definitions, I want to show a secular definition.**

- If you searched church on Google, this is what you might find.
- "A church is a building, the officialdom of a religious body, a body or organization or believers, or a public divine worship space."
  - Merriam-Webster Dictionary
- As you can see, the definition of church is quite unclear when we leave it up to Google. And, today, this is often the quickest way that our membership gets their definitions. We cannot stop this from happening, but we must do the challenging work of teaching our members a deeper understanding of the church.

**Transition: Now that we have looked at a secular definition of church, let us jump into some different definitions from current pastors and theologians.**

Theological Perspectives on Ecclesiology

- During this time, I will present 6 different viewpoints on ecclesiology. This will be a flyby. I am going to list these characteristics and not spend a whole lot of time defining them.
- These definitions will deal primarily with the local church and not the universal church.
- Acts 2
- Payne's House Church
- Dever's Nine Marks
- Hammett's Seven Characteristics
- Allison's Seven Attributes
- Baptist Faith and Message

Acts 2

- First, I want to point to Scripture. Acts 2 is a passage often referenced in discussion about the church. In this description of the church, I see nine characteristics.

- Christocentric: in Peter's emphasis about Christ being the only way for salvation.
- Conversion: In the repent and be baptized.
- Apostolic Teaching: The church was devoted to the apostles' teaching.
- Fellowship: The church was devoted to local fellowship.
- Prayer: The church was devoted to prayer.
- Spirit-Empowered: The church was led along by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Ordinances: We see baptism and the Lord's Supper taking place.
- Worship: We see awe and reverence as the disciples are partaking in worship of God.
- Reproduction: This worship and awe results in a reproduction of the faith. They could not help but share.

#### Payne's House Church

- Today, the term house church is widespread. Many definitions of house church are out there. As I was researching, I enjoyed Payne's emphasis on participatory and community driven.
  - As I think about our ontological sentness, I find these words very appealing. They focus on how we are to be active participants in the church, not only looking to follow one another commands, but also to look outward toward the community.
- Other attributes of house church ecclesiology are
  - Organic
  - Simple
  - Celebrate Equality in Ministerial Roles.

#### Dever's Nine Marks

- On the opposite side of house church is Dever's Nine Marks of a Healthy Church. These marks include:
  - Preaching
  - Biblical Theology
  - The Gospel
  - Conversion
  - Evangelism
  - Membership

- Discipline
- Discipleship
- Leadership
- These marks are all self-explanatory. I do want to highlight how Dever includes evangelism and discipleship as marks of the church. Even amidst emphasizing health of the local body, Dever sees the need to be missional.

#### Hammett's Seven Characteristics

- Dr. Hammett presents seven characteristics of the church in his book, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*. They are as follows:
  - God's
  - Organized
  - Purposeful
  - Local
  - Living
  - Gospel-Centered
  - Spirit-Empowered
- As Hammett begins his definition, he highlights how the church is God's and for the glory of God. I also enjoy how he emphasizes the church was created for a purpose.

#### Allison's Seven Attributes

- Allison's definition is one of the harder definitions to wrap my mind around because he uses the more technical and academic terminology for these attributes. However, I really do like this definition, as Allison is trying to create a robust definition grounded in Scripture.
  - Doxological: The church is a place that seeks the glory of God.
  - Logocentric: Centered on the Living Word and Scripture.
  - Pneuma-dynamic: Led by the Holy Spirit.
  - Covenantal: Joined together intentionally as a group.
  - Confessional: Committed to a common belief/confession.
  - Missional: The church is to be a light to the community, sent to the world.
  - Spatio-Temporal/Eschatological: Localized bodies of believers with concrete addresses that operate in the already/not yet paradigm.

#### Baptistic Church

- The Baptist Definition of church comes from the Baptist Faith and Message 2000. This is the portion of the definition that applies specifically to a local church.
  - “An autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord.”
- In this definition, we see attributes such as local, covenantal, confessional, Christocentric, and missional.

**Transition: Now that I have quickly gone over some definitions of church, let us build a framework that synthesizes these.**

- **As a disclaimer, I am not trying to produce something new here. I am pointing to the similarities in definitions that might help us in teaching our membership about church and help us answer thorny missiological questions.**

The five words I want to point to as my framework are as follows:

- Doxological
- Gospel-Centered
- Spirit-Empowered
- Local
- Sent

**Transition: As I present these five words, you might wonder how I got there. Let us talk about each one.**

The first category in my framework is Doxological. This is the same word that Allison used in his definition. I thought it encapsulated everything I wanted to say about this point well.

- The church is God’s and should be centered on Him.
- The church should be focused on glorifying God in all things because the Church is His.
- Hammett puts this at the beginning of his definition by saying the church is God’s organized, purposeful, local, living, Gospel-Centered, Spirit-Empowered assembly.
- We also see this point in the Baptist use of the word His.
  - Governed by HIS laws.

- Invested by HIS Word.
- Under the Lordship of Christ.
- This also echoes the early church in Acts 2. They consistently worshipped the Father and had awe and reverence for His name. Their worship was centered upon the Father.

In building this framework, we must recognize that the church is God's and for His glory, not for our own.

**Transition: Second, the church should be Gospel-Centered.**

This category is the message we preach and the confession we hold to. If Christ and the Gospel is not our foundation, we are espousing the wrong message.

- I arrived at this piece of the framework by identifying Dever's use of Biblical Theology, the Gospel, and conversion, Allison's use of logocentric and confessional, the Baptist Faith and Message's emphasis on the lordship of Christ, and Acts 2 portrayal of the Gospel, conversion, and its Christocentric nature.
- Ephesians 2 tells us that the body of Christ has Christ Himself as the chief cornerstone. Thus, our local ecclesiology should include the life changing message of the Gospel. If we get away from preaching Christ, his birth, life, death, and resurrection, in all its glory, we are moving in a direction that threatens the church itself.

**Transition: Third, the church should be Spirit-Empowered.**

This category deals with how the Third Person of the Trinity works in our local churches. As believers, we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and it is the Holy Spirit who guides us, convicts us, and pushes us towards truth.

- In the book of Acts we see the Holy Spirit working and moving to establish churches. The Holy Spirit is the main character who directs the apostles in their work! Thus, we cannot leave out the Holy Spirit in our framework.
- The definitions we looked at do not leave the Holy Spirit out either.
  - First, we see the characteristic spirit-empowered in Hammett's definition and the attribute pneuma-dynamic in Allison's definition. These two theologians clearly want to emphasize the Spirit's work in establishing and directing the church.
  - Second, as I pointed out, we see the Holy Spirit directing the work. Thus, Acts 2 shows again how the work of the church is spirit empowered.

**Transition: Fourth, the church should be local.**

This category in my framework is where the rubber hits the road. This is the piece that makes this framework geared specifically toward the local church and not the universal church.

- A quote from Allison describes this well: "Scripture indicates that specific churches were established in specific places with concrete addresses."
- As we look at establishing our framework, we pull this category from several definitions.
- Allison locates this idea in the words spatio-temporal and covenantal. By spatio-temporal, Allison means a local church exists in a certain time and certain space. He furthers this by showing how the local body chooses to covenant together under a common confession.
- In JD Payne's definition, he includes how church is community-driven and participatory. These two words establish a small fellowship geared towards developing an identity cohesive in one geographic space.
- Hammett and the Baptist Faith and Message use the word local in their definitions. They both emphasize how a church is an area-specific expression!
- Dever emphasizes the locality of a church with his words membership and discipline. To do these well, believers in the church need to be in a relationship doing life with one another.
- Acts 2 emphasizes the local nature of the church through the fellowship of believers in specific places. It says that they held all things in common and participated in worship together. This kind of unity is tough to have unless you share a physical geography.
- As a note, this part of my framework also deals with words like presence and embodiment. These are some buzz words when it comes to thorny missiological questions applied digitally. So, this will be where a lot of stress is placed.

**Transition: The last characteristic in my framework is the characteristic sent.**

I want to focus on this characteristic because it connects to the other part of my thesis. This is the characteristic we often lack when discussing the church. If we develop an ecclesiology that lacks sending, we will end up with a deficient ecclesiology, and a deficient missiology.

- Allison uses the word missional to describe this aspect in his definition. By this he refers to the outward facing goal of the church.



- Hammett gets after this same idea by using the word purposeful. He recognizes that the church as a sent body has been given a purpose and that is to proclaim the Gospel to all nations.
- Dever makes this point in his nine marks by using the words evangelism and discipleship. He highlights the need for members to participate in these activities.
- The Baptist Faith and Message highlights this with the phrase extending the Gospel to the ends of the earth.
- Lastly, Acts 2 shows us that the number of disciples did not stay stagnant, but that they were consistently reproducing!

**Transition: So, once again, the five words that help define my framework are:**

- Doxological
- Gospel-Centered
- Spirit-Empowered
- Local
- Sent

Again, the goal with this framework is to emphasize what we need to include when teaching our members about the church and to help us answer missiological questions. This is not all encompassing in any way. It is Baptist in nature, as many of these definitions come from Baptist backgrounds. Hopefully though, all of this should be applicable across cultures and denominations. A difficulty I have in my framework is placing the ordinances. I know that the ordinances are necessary for church life, but I am not certain if they fit anywhere in the words I have chosen. This is an area where I would love your thoughts.

**Transition: Now that we have placed some planks in the floor, let us apply this framework to current digital missiological frontiers. We will do this by asking a couple of questions: does this framework allow for the missiological implication? Second, what parameters does our framework lay for this issue?**

Listed below are some contemporary missiological implications. Let us take these case by case.

Sending Culture

- To the first question, does this framework encourage building a sending culture in church?
  - Yes!
- To the second question, what parameters does this framework set?

- The answer to this question goes back to the root of our problem. We have a lack of going because our members have a deficient ecclesiology that does not include sending. Members do not realize that the church is meant to be more than consumeristic.

Now to the meat and bones here.

#### Digital Church Services

- To the first question, does this framework allow for digital church services?
  - Yes.
- To the second question, what parameters does this framework set?
  - To answer this question, we must focus on the word local. What does it mean to be embodied? What does it mean to have presence? Is attending a service online enough to say I am going to church?
    - At this point, reflecting on my framework, I would say no. Attending a service online is not enough.
  - I also want to point to JD Payne's definition and the word participatory. Church is not a place for consumerism, but it is a place where members participate in the worship of God with one another.
  - God created humans with a body and a mind. By just attending online church, we are engaging our minds, but we are not engaging physically. This could lead to a gnostic view of worship that disconnects the body and the mind, throwing away the body completely.
  - In saying these things though, digital services are not completely wrong. Last week I was listening to a podcast by FamilyLife on digital church. In this discussion, they remarked that the online service is like the new lobby. Many people today watch a service or two before attending service in person. This allows people to get connected before entering the church. And I would say this is okay! If the digital service does not substitute for physical presence, then we are on the right track.

Now, let us take this one step further.

Can we call a Metaverse Church a church according to our framework?

Before jumping to the two questions, you might be asking, why does this even matter?

- There are currently billions of active gamers around the world. The platform of games and the metaverse may give us access to share the Gospel like never before.

- According to Jeff Reed, there are also 171 million people in VR right now.
- A study done in 2013 by Kim stated that at that point, 97% of people in virtual reality were unchurched. If that statistic still stands, then 165 million people are lost in the metaverse.
  - The church must be willing to do something about this.
- This also matters because Metaverse church is already taking place.
  - In 2012, the first metaverse church launched in a game called Roblox.
  - Today, there is a whole digital church network with resources on how to plant a digital church.
  - Just one example of this is VRChurch. This church meets completely in the metaverse with people having their own avatars.
  - Another example of this is Life Church. Life Church started as an analog church, but has evolved to a phygital church, offering online services and a metaverse opportunity. They have even tried to implement a cell model or house church model by championing watch parties. They invite their members to host watch parties for their neighborhood to get them involved.
  - Little Hills Church is in St. Charles, Missouri. They are another phygital church, but not on the scale of Life Church. They host an interactive online service where pastors and members seek to interact with those who join online. They are seeking to foster an intentional community where others can interact with their church for the Gospel to go forth.

Now that you know some of the reality we are facing, back to our two questions:

- To the first question, does this framework allow for metaverse church?
  - Not really. According to this framework, to be a local church, a church must be placed physically in a concrete space and time. A purely metaverse church separates the physical from the mental and creates an idealized reality where people can be whoever they want to be and look however they want to look. This is a false reality in many ways that does not translate to the physical world.
  - It is also difficult to have fellowship or follow the one another commands of Scripture.
  - I would also say that we cannot call people out in their sin and exhort them to holiness. In the metaverse, we will only get to see what people want us to see. Their

ideal image is fantasy. It does not encourage people to be vulnerable and honest in their struggles.

- To the second question, what parameters does this framework set for utilizing the metaverse?
  - So, if the framework does not allow us to call a metaverse fellowship church, then is it okay to utilize the metaverse? And if so, how?
  - Here again I repeat, we must not look at the metaverse as anathema. It must be a place where Christians are present, interacting with those around them and sharing the Gospel faithfully.
  - It can even serve as a lobby which encourages people to go to church physically.
  - It can be a place where we do evangelism, discipleship, coaching, and leadership development.
  - It can also serve as a secondary meeting place for members of your local congregation to gather, to play video games and have shared experiences.
    - However, these fall short of the image that we have presented above.

Now, I am running out of time, but I wanted to put up some areas of future research.

Some Future Case Studies I want to consider are in the areas of Raleigh, Kenya, and Ethiopia. I would love to look at how VR and other digital services are being used in these areas.

Some Future Questions to Consider in this area:

- What is the full scope of the VR "Church"?
- Can it be used in countries where believers cannot gather? Is this a useful bridge?
- Will the transition to VR get to a place where someone lives in that reality (like Ready Player One)? If so, we must have a plan to undertake missions in the metaverse.
- How can we utilize VR to train indigenous leaders? Is this feasible?
- Have we missed the video game/movie/metaverse arena for too long? Can we catch up?
- What does it mean for someone to be present or local? Can an avatar count as being present? Or does it need to be my physical body?
- How are the ordinances observed? Is this even possible?

I want to conclude my talk with a couple of exhortations:

- We must cultivate a mindset of looking out instead of looking in, so that all might hear!

The need is great.

- We must seek to teach a more robust ecclesiology to our members. If we do this, we might encourage sending and we might be able to better navigate thorny issues in the digital age.
- Lastly, when we teach our members about ecclesiology, we must choose a definition of the local church that highlights the ontological nature of the church as doxological, gospel-centered, Spirit-empowered, local, and sent.

I hope this has encouraged you to think more deeply about your own ecclesiological and missiological convictions, as well as how they can be applied to the already happening digital revolution.

Thank you.