

## The Church: Its Nature, Its Marks, and Its Purposes

### *What is necessary to make a church? How can we recognize a true church? The purposes of the church*

#### EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

##### A. The Nature of the Church

**1. Definition:** *The church is the community of all true believers for all time.* This definition understands the church to be made of all those who are truly saved. Paul says, “Christ loved *the church* and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25). Here the term “the church” is used to apply to all those whom Christ died to redeem, all those who are saved by the death of Christ. But that must include all true believers for all time, both believers in the New Testament age and believers in the Old Testament age as well. So great is God’s plan for the church that he has exalted Christ to a position of highest authority for the sake of the church: “He has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things *for the church* which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:22–23).

Jesus Christ himself builds the church by calling his people to himself. He promised, “I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). And Luke is careful to tell us that the growth of the church came not by human effort alone, but that “*the Lord* added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). But this process whereby Christ builds the church is just a continuation of the pattern established by God in the Old Testament whereby he called people to himself to be a worshipping assembly before him. There are several indications *in the Old Testament* that God thought of his people as a “church,” a people assembled for the purpose of worshipping God. When Moses tells the people that the Lord said to him, “*Gather the people to me* that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live upon the earth ...” (Deut. 4:10), the Septuagint translates the word for “gather” (Heb. לָקַח, H7735) with the Greek term ἐκκλησιάζω “to summon an assembly,” the verb that is cognate to the New Testament noun ἐκκλησία (G1711) “church.”

It is not surprising, then, that the New Testament authors can speak of the Old Testament people of Israel as a “church” (ἐκκλησία, G1711). For example, Stephen speaks of the people of Israel in the wilderness as “the *church* (ἐκκλησία) in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38, author’s translation). And the author of Hebrews quotes Christ as saying that he would sing praise to God in the midst of the great assembly of God’s people in heaven: “In the midst of the church (ἐκκλησία) I will sing praise to you” (Heb. 2:12, author’s translation, quoting Ps. 22:22).

Therefore the author of Hebrews understands the present-day Christians who constitute the church on earth to be surrounded by a great “cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1) that reaches back into the earliest eras of the Old Testament and includes Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets (Heb. 11:4–32). All these “witnesses” surround the present-day people of God, and it seems only appropriate that they, together with the New Testament people of God, should be thought of as God’s great spiritual “assembly” or “church.” Moreover, later in chapter 12 the author of Hebrews says that when

New Testament Christians worship we come into the presence of “the *assembly* (lit. “church,” Gk. ἐκκλησία, G1711) of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven.” This emphasis is not surprising in light of the fact that the New Testament authors see Jewish believers and Gentile believers alike to be now united in the church. Together they have been made “one” (Eph. 2:14), they are “one new man” (v. 15) and “fellow citizens” (v. 19), and “members of the household of God” (v. 19).

Therefore, even though there are certainly new privileges and new blessings that are given to the people of God in the New Testament, both the usage of the term “church” in Scripture and the fact that throughout Scripture God has always called his people to assemble to worship himself, indicate that it is appropriate to think of the church as constituting all the people of God for all time, both Old Testament believers and New Testament believers.

**2. The Church Is Invisible, Yet Visible.** In its true spiritual reality as the fellowship of all genuine believers, the church is invisible. This is because we cannot see the spiritual condition of people’s hearts. We can see those who outwardly attend the church, and we can see outward evidences of inward spiritual change, but we cannot actually see into people’s hearts and view their spiritual state—only God can do that. This is why Paul says, “*The Lord knows those who are his*” (2 Tim. 2:19). Even in our own churches and our own neighborhoods, only God knows who are true believers with certainty and without error. In speaking of the church as invisible the author of Hebrews speaks of the “assembly (literally, “church”) of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven” (Heb. 12:23), and says that present-day Christians join with that assembly in worship.

We can give the following definition: *The invisible church is the church as God sees it.*

Both Martin Luther and John Calvin were eager to affirm this invisible aspect of the church over against the Roman Catholic teaching that the church was the one visible organization that had descended from the apostles in an unbroken line of succession (through the bishops of the church). The Roman Catholic Church had argued that only in the visible organization of the Roman Church could we find the one true church, the only true church. Even today such a view is held by the Roman Catholic Church. In their “Pastoral Statement for Catholics on Biblical Fundamentalism” issued March 25, 1987, the (United States) National Conference of Catholic Bishops Ad Hoc Committee on Biblical Fundamentalism criticized evangelical Christianity (which it called “biblical fundamentalism”) primarily because it took people away from the one true church:

The basic characteristic of biblical fundamentalism is that it eliminates from Christianity the church as the Lord Jesus founded it ... There is no mention of the historic, authoritative church in continuity with Peter and the other apostles ... A study of the New Testament ... demonstrates the importance of belonging to the church started by Jesus Christ. Christ chose Peter and the other apostles as foundations of his church ... Peter and the other apostles have been succeeded by the bishop of Rome and the other bishops, and ... the flock of Christ still has, under Christ, a universal shepherd.

In response to that kind of teaching both Luther and Calvin disagreed. They said that the Roman Catholic Church had the outward form, the organization, but it was just a shell. Calvin argued that just as Caiaphas (the high priest at the time of Christ) was descended from Aaron but was no true priest, so the Roman Catholic bishops had “descended” from the apostles in a line of succession but they were not true bishops in Christ’s church. Because they had departed from the true preaching of the gospel, their visible organization was not the true church. Calvin said, “This

pretense of succession is vain unless their descendants conserve safe and uncorrupted the truth of Christ which they have received at their fathers' hands, and abide in it ... See what value this succession has, unless it also include a true and uninterrupted emulation on the part of the successors!"

On the other hand, the true church of Christ certainly has a visible aspect as well. We may use the following definition: *The visible church is the church as Christians on earth see it*. In this sense the visible church includes all who profess faith in Christ and give evidence of that faith in their lives.

In this definition we do not say that the visible church is the church as any person in the world (such as an unbeliever or someone who held heretical teachings) might see it, but we mean to speak of the church as it is perceived by those who are genuine believers and have an understanding of the difference between believers and unbelievers.

When Paul writes his epistles he writes to the visible church in each community: "To the *church* of God which is at Corinth" (1 Cor. 1:2); "To the *church* of the Thessalonians" (1 Thess. 1:1); "To Philemon ... and Apphia ... and Archippus ... and the *church* in your house" (Philem. 1-2). Paul certainly realized that there were unbelievers in some of those churches, some who had made a profession of faith that was not genuine, who appeared to be Christians but would eventually fall away. Yet neither Paul nor anyone else could tell with certainty who those people were. Paul simply wrote to the entire church that met together in any one place. In this sense, we could say today that the visible church is the group of people who come together each week to worship as a church and profess faith in Christ.

The visible church throughout the world will always include some unbelievers, and individual congregations will usually include some unbelievers, because we cannot see hearts as God sees them. Paul speaks of "Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth" and who "are upsetting the faith of some" (2 Tim. 2:17-18). But he is confident that "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Tim. 2:19). Paul says with sorrow, "Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica" (2 Tim. 4:10).

Similarly, Paul warns the Ephesian elders that after his departure "fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and *from among your own selves* will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30). Jesus himself warned, "Beware of false prophets, *who come to you in sheep's clothing* but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:15-16). Realizing this distinction between the church invisible and the church visible, Augustine said of the visible church, "Many sheep are without and many wolves are within."

When we recognize that there are unbelievers in the visible church, there is a danger that we may become overly suspicious. We may begin to doubt the salvation of many true believers and thereby bring great confusion into the church. Calvin warned against this danger by saying that we must make a "charitable judgment" whereby we recognize as members of the church all who "by confession of faith, by example of life, and by partaking of the sacraments, profess the same God and Christ with us." We should not try to exclude people from the fellowship of the church until they by public sin bring discipline upon themselves. On the other hand, of course, the church should not tolerate in its membership "public unbelievers" who by profession or life clearly proclaim themselves to be outside the true church.

**3. The Church Is Local and Universal.** In the New Testament the word "church" may be applied to a group of believers at any level, ranging from a very small group meeting in a private home all the way to the group of all true believers in the universal church. A "house church" is

called a “church” in Romans 16:5 (“greet also *the church in their house*”), 1 Corinthians 16:19 (“Aquila and Prisca, together with *the church in their house* send you hearty greetings in the Lord”). The church in an entire city is also called “a church” (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; and 1 Thess. 1:1). The church in a region is referred to as a “church” in Acts 9:31: “So *the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria* had peace and was built up.” Finally, the church throughout the entire world can be referred to as “the church.” Paul says, “Christ loved *the church* and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25) and says, “God has appointed *in the church* first apostles, second prophets, third teachers ...” (1 Cor. 12:28). In this latter verse the mention of “apostles,” who were not given to any individual church, guarantees that the reference is to the church universal.

We may conclude that the group of God’s people considered at any level from local to universal may rightly be called “a church.” We should not make the mistake of saying that only a church meeting in houses expresses the true nature of the church, or only a church considered at a city-wide level can rightly be called a church, or only the church universal can rightly be called by the name “church.” Rather, the community of God’s people considered at any level can be rightly called a church.

**4. Metaphors for the Church.** To help us understand the nature of the church, Scripture uses a wide range of metaphors and images to describe to us what the church is like.<sup>12</sup> There are several family images—for example, Paul views the church as a *family* when he tells Timothy to act as if all the church members were members of a larger family: “Do not rebuke an older man but exhort him as you would a father; treat younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, younger women like sisters, in all purity” (1 Tim. 5:1–2). God is our heavenly Father (Eph. 3:14), and we are his sons and daughters, for God says to us, “I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty” (2 Cor. 6:18). We are therefore brothers and sisters with each other in God’s family (Matt. 12:49–50; 1 John 3:14–18). A somewhat different family metaphor is seen when Paul refers to the church as the *bride of Christ*. He says that the relationship between a husband and wife “refers to Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32), and he says that he brought about the engagement between Christ and the church at Corinth and that it resembles an engagement between a bride and her husband-to-be: “I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin” (2 Cor. 11:2 NASB)—here Paul is looking forward to the time of Christ’s return as the time when the church will be presented to him as his bride.

In other metaphors Scripture compares the church to *branches on a vine* (John 15:5), *an olive tree* (Rom. 11:17–24), *a field of crops* (1 Cor. 3:6–9), *a building* (1 Cor. 3:9), and *a harvest* (Matt. 13:1–30; John 4:35). The church is also viewed as a *new temple* not built with literal stones but built with Christian people who are “living stones” (1 Peter 2:5) built up on the “cornerstone” who is Christ Jesus (1 Peter 2:4–8). Yet the church is not only a new temple for worship of God; it is also a *new group of priests* a “holy priesthood” that can offer “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God” (1 Pet. 2:5). We are also viewed as *God’s house*: “And we are his house” (Heb. 3:6), with Jesus Christ himself viewed as the “builder” of the house (Heb. 3:3). The church is also viewed as “*the pillar and bulwark of the truth*” (1 Tim. 3:15).

Finally, another familiar metaphor views the church as *the body of Christ* (1 Cor. 12:12–27). We should recognize that Paul in fact uses two different metaphors of the human body when he speaks of the church. In 1 Corinthians 12 *the whole body* is taken as a metaphor for the church, because Paul speaks of the “ear” and the “eye” and the “sense of smell” (1 Cor. 12:16–17). In this metaphor, Christ is not viewed as the head joined to the body, because the individual members are themselves the individual parts of the head. Christ is in this metaphor the Lord who

is “outside” of that body that represents the church and is the one whom the church serves and worships.

But in Ephesians 1:22–23; 4:15–16, and in Colossians 2:19, Paul uses a different body metaphor to refer to the church. In these passages Paul says that Christ is the head and the church is like *the rest of the body, as distinguished from the head*: “We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love” (Eph. 4:15–16). We should not confuse these two metaphors in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4, but keep them distinct.

The wide range of metaphors used for the church in the New Testament should remind us not to focus exclusively on any one. For example, while it is true that the church is the body of Christ, we must remember that this is only one metaphor among many. If we focus exclusively on that metaphor we will be likely to forget that Christ is our Lord reigning in heaven as well as the one who dwells among us. Certainly we should not agree to the Roman Catholic view that the church is the “continuing incarnation” of the Son of God on earth today. The church is not the Son of God in the flesh, for Christ rose in his human body, he ascended in his human body into heaven, and he now reigns as the incarnate Christ in heaven, one who is clearly distinct from the church here on earth.

Each of the metaphors used for the church can help us to appreciate more of the richness of privilege that God has given us by incorporating us into the church. The fact that the church is like a family should increase our love and fellowship with one another. The thought that the church is like the bride of Christ should stimulate us to strive for greater purity and holiness, and also greater love for Christ and submission to him. The image of the church as branches in a vine should cause us to rest in him more fully. The idea of an agricultural crop should encourage us to continue growing in the Christian life and obtaining for ourselves and others the proper spiritual nutrients to grow. The picture of the church as God’s new temple should increase our awareness of God’s very presence dwelling in our midst as we meet. The concept of the church as a priesthood should help us to see more clearly the delight God has in the sacrifices of praise and good deeds that we offer to him (see Heb. 13:15–16). The metaphor of the church as the body of Christ should increase our interdependence on one another and our appreciation of the diversity of gifts within the body. Many other applications could be drawn from these and other metaphors for the church listed in Scripture.

**5. The Church and Israel.** Among evangelical Protestants there has been a difference of viewpoint on the question of the relationship between Israel and the church. This question was brought into prominence by those who hold to a “dispensational” system of theology. The most extensive systematic theology written by a dispensationalist, Lewis Sperry Chafer’s *Systematic Theology* points out many distinctions between Israel and the church, and even between believing Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament. Chafer argues that God has two distinct plans for the two different groups of people that he has redeemed: God’s purposes and promises for *Israel* are for *earthly blessings* and they will yet be fulfilled on this earth at some time in the future. On the other hand, God’s purposes and promises for *the church* are for *heavenly blessings* and those promises will be fulfilled in heaven. This distinction between the two different groups that God saves will especially be seen in the millennium, according to Chafer, for at that time Israel will reign on earth as God’s people and enjoy the fulfillment of Old Testament promises, but the church will already have been taken up into heaven at the time of Christ’s secret return for his saints (“the rapture”). On this view, the church

did not begin until Pentecost (Acts 2). And it is not right to think of Old Testament believers together with New Testament believers as constituting one church.

While Chafer's position continues to have influence in some dispensational circles, and certainly in more popular preaching, a number of leaders among more recent dispensationalists have not followed Chafer in many of these points. Several current dispensational theologians, such as Robert Saucy, Craig Blaising, and Darrell Bock, refer to themselves as "progressive dispensationalists," and they have gained a wide following. They *would not see the church as a parenthesis* in God's plan but as the first step toward the establishment of the kingdom of God. On a progressive dispensational view, *God does not have two separate purposes for Israel and the church* but a single purpose—the establishment of the kingdom of God—in which Israel and the church will both share. Progressive dispensationalists would see *no distinction between Israel and the church in the future eternal state* for all will be part of the one people of God. Moreover, they would hold that the church will reign with Christ in *glorified bodies on earth during the millennium* (see the discussion of the millennium in chapter 55).

However, there is still a difference between progressive dispensationalists and the rest of evangelicalism on one point: they would say that *the Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel will still be fulfilled in the millennium by ethnic Jewish people* who will believe in Christ and live in the land of Israel as a "model nation" for all nations to see and learn from. Therefore they would not say that the church is the "new Israel" or that all the Old Testament prophecies about Israel will be fulfilled in the church, for these prophecies will yet be fulfilled in ethnic Israel.

The position taken in this book differs quite a bit from Chafer's views on this issue and also differs somewhat with progressive dispensationalists. However, it must be said here that questions about the exact way in which biblical prophecies about the future will be fulfilled are, in the nature of the case, difficult to decide with certainty, and it is wise to have some tentativeness in our conclusions on these matters. With this in mind, the following may be said.

Both Protestant and Catholic theologians outside of the dispensational position have said that the church includes both Old Testament believers and New Testament believers in one church or one body of Christ. Even on the nondispensational view, a person may hold that there will be a future large-scale conversion of the Jewish people (Rom. 11:12, 15, 23–24, 25–26, 28–31), yet that this conversion will only result in Jewish believers becoming part of the one true church of God—they will be "grafted back into their own olive tree" (Rom. 11:24).

With regard to this question, we should notice the many New Testament verses that understand the church as the "new Israel" or new "people of God." The fact that "Christ loved *the church* and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25) would suggest this. Moreover, this present church age, which has brought the salvation of many millions of Christians in the church, is not an interruption or a parenthesis in God's plan, but a continuation of his plan expressed throughout the Old Testament to call a people to himself. Paul says, "For he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. *He is a Jew who is one inwardly* and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal" (Rom. 2:28–29). Paul recognizes that though there is a literal or natural sense in which people who physically descended from Abraham are to be called Jews, there is also a deeper or spiritual sense in which a "true Jew" is one who is inwardly a believer and whose heart has been cleansed by God.

Paul says that Abraham is not only to be considered the father of the Jewish people in a physical sense. He is also in a deeper and more true sense "*the father of all who believe* without

being circumcised ... and likewise the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but also follow the example of the faith which our father Abraham had” (Rom. 4:11–12; cf. vv. 16, 18). Therefore Paul can say, “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants ... it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants” (Rom. 9:6–8). Paul here implies that the true children of Abraham, those who are in the most true sense “Israel,” are not the nation of Israel by physical descent from Abraham but those who have believed in Christ. Those who truly believe in Christ are now the ones who have the privilege of being called “my people” by the Lord (Rom. 9:25, quoting Hos. 2:23); therefore, the church is now God’s chosen people. This means that when Jewish people according to the flesh are saved in large numbers at some time in the future, they will not constitute a separate people of God or be like a separate olive tree, but they will be “grafted back *into their own olive tree*” (Rom. 11:24). Another passage indicating this is Galatians 3:29: “And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” Similarly, Paul says that Christians are the “true circumcision” (Phil. 3:3).

Far from thinking of the church as a separate group from the Jewish people, Paul writes to Gentile believers at Ephesus telling them that they were formerly “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise” (Eph. 2:12), but that now they have been “brought near in the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:13). And when the Gentiles were brought into the church, Jews and Gentiles were united into one new body. Paul says that God “*has made us both one* and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility ... that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might *reconcile us both to God in one body* through the cross” (Eph. 2:14–16). Therefore Paul can say that Gentiles are “*fellow citizens with the saints* and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:19–20). With his extensive awareness of the Old Testament background to the New Testament church, Paul can still say that “the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body” (Eph. 3:6). The entire passage speaks strongly of the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers in one body in Christ and gives no indication of any distinctive plan for Jewish people ever to be saved apart from inclusion in the one body of Christ, the church. The church incorporates into itself all the true people of God, and almost all of the titles used of God’s people in the Old Testament are in one place or another applied to the church in the New Testament.

Hebrews 8 provides another strong argument for seeing the church as the recipient, and the fulfillment, of the Old Testament promises concerning Israel. In the context of speaking about the new covenant to which Christians belong, the author of Hebrews gives an extensive quotation from Jeremiah 31:31–34, in which he says, “The days will come, says the Lord, when I will establish a new *covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah* ... . This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Heb. 8:8–10). Here the author quotes the Lord’s promise that he will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and *with the house of Judah* and says that that is the new covenant that has now been made *with the church*. That new covenant is the covenant of which believers in the church are now members. It seems hard to avoid the conclusion that the author views the church as the true Israel of God in which the Old Testament promises to Israel find their fulfillment.

Similarly, James can write a general letter to many early Christian churches and say that he is writing “To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (James 1:1). This indicates that he is evidently viewing New Testament Christians as the successors to and fulfillment of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Peter also speaks in the same way. From the first verse in which he calls his readers “exiles of the Dispersion” (1 Peter 1:1) to the next-to-last verse in which he calls the city of Rome “Babylon” (1 Peter 5:13), Peter frequently speaks of New Testament Christians in terms of Old Testament imagery and promises given to the Jews. This theme comes to prominence in 1 Peter 2:4–10, where Peter says that God has bestowed on the church almost all the blessings promised to Israel in the Old Testament. The dwelling-place of God is no longer the Jerusalem temple, for Christians are the new “temple” of God (v. 5). The priesthood able to offer acceptable sacrifices to God is no longer descended from Aaron, for Christians are now the true “royal priesthood” with access before God’s throne (vv. 4–5, 9). God’s chosen people are no longer said to be those physically descended from Abraham, for Christians are now the true “chosen race” (v. 9). The nation blessed by God is no longer said to be the nation of Israel, for Christians are now God’s true “holy nation” (v. 9). The people of Israel are no longer said to be the people of God, for Christians—both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians—are now “God’s people” and those who have “received mercy” (v. 10). Moreover, Peter takes these quotations from contexts in the Old Testament that repeatedly warn that God will reject his people who persist in rebellion against him and who reject the precious “cornerstone” (v. 6) that he has established. What further statement could be needed in order for us to say with assurance that the church has now become the true Israel of God and will receive all the blessings promised to Israel in the Old Testament?

**6. The Church and the Kingdom of God.** What is the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God? The differences have been summarized well by George Ladd:

The Kingdom is primarily the dynamic reign or kingly rule of God, and, derivatively, the sphere in which the rule is experienced. In biblical idiom, the Kingdom is not identified with its subjects. They are the people of God’s rule who enter it, live under it, and are governed by it. The church is the community of the Kingdom but never the Kingdom itself. Jesus’ disciples belong to the Kingdom as the Kingdom belongs to them; but they are not the Kingdom. The Kingdom is the rule of God; the church is a society of men.

Ladd goes on to summarize five specific aspects of the relationship between the kingdom and the church: (1) The church is not the kingdom (for Jesus and the early Christians preached that the kingdom of God was near, not that the church was near, and preached the good news of the kingdom, not the good news of the church: Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). (2) The kingdom creates the church (for as people enter into God’s kingdom they become joined to the human fellowship of the church). (3) The church witnesses to the kingdom (for Jesus said, “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world,” Matt. 24:14). (4) The church is the instrument of the kingdom (for the Holy Spirit, manifesting the power of the kingdom, works through the disciples to heal the sick and cast out demons, as he did in the ministry of Jesus: Matt. 10:8; Luke 10:17). (5) The church is the custodian of the kingdom (for the church has been given the keys of the kingdom of heaven: Matt. 16:19).

Therefore we should not identify the kingdom of God and the church (as in Roman Catholic theology), nor should we see the kingdom of God as entirely future, something distinct from the church age (as in older dispensational theology). Rather, we should recognize that there is a close connection between the kingdom of God and the church. As the church proclaims the good news



of the kingdom, people will come into the church and begin to experience the blessings of God's rule in their lives. The kingdom manifests itself through the church, and thereby the future reign of God breaks into the present (it is "already" here: Matt. 12:28; Rom. 14:17; and "not yet" here fully: Matt. 25:34; 1 Cor. 6:9–10). Therefore those who believe in Christ will begin to experience something of what God's final kingdom reign will be like: they will know some measure of victory over sin (Rom. 6:14; 14:17), over demonic opposition (Luke 10:17), and over disease (Luke 10:9). They will live in the power of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:28; Rom. 8:4–17; 14:17), who is the dynamic power of the coming kingdom. Eventually Jesus will return and his kingdom reign will extend over all creation (1 Cor. 15:24–28).

## **B. The "Marks" of the Church (Distinguishing Characteristics)**

**1. There Are True Churches and False Churches.** What makes a church a church? What is necessary to have a church? Might a group of people who claim to be Christians become so unlike what a church should be that they should no longer be called a church?

In the early centuries of the Christian church, there was little controversy about what was a true church. There was only one world-wide church, the "visible" church throughout the world, and that was, of course, the true church. This church had bishops and local clergymen and church buildings which everyone could see. Any heretics who were found to be in serious doctrinal error were simply excluded from the church.

But at the Reformation a crucial question came up: how can we recognize a true church? Is the Roman Catholic Church a true church or not? In order to answer that question people had to decide what were the "marks" of a true church, the distinguishing characteristics that lead us to recognize it as a true church. Scripture certainly speaks of false churches. Paul says of the pagan temples in Corinth, "What pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God" (1 Cor. 10:20). He tells the Corinthians that "when you were heathen, you were led astray to dumb idols" (1 Cor. 12:2). These pagan temples were certainly false churches or false religious assemblies. Moreover, Scripture speaks of a religious assembly that is really a "synagogue of Satan" (Rev. 2:9; 3:9). Here the risen Lord Jesus seems to be referring to Jewish assemblies that claim to be Jews but were not true Jews who had saving faith. Their religious assembly was not an assembly of Christ's people but of those who still belonged to the kingdom of darkness, the kingdom of Satan. This also would certainly be a false church.

In large measure there was agreement between Luther and Calvin on the question of what constituted a true church. The Lutheran statement of faith, which is called the Augsburg Confession (1530), defined the church as "the congregation of saints in which the gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments rightly administered" (Article 7). Similarly, John Calvin said, "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists."<sup>25</sup> Although Calvin spoke of the pure preaching of the Word (whereas the Lutheran Confession spoke of the right preaching of the gospel) and although Calvin said that the Word must not only be preached but heard (whereas the Augsburg Confession merely mentioned that it had to be rightly taught), their understanding of the distinguishing marks of a true church is quite similar. In contrast to the view of Luther and Calvin regarding the marks of a church, the Roman Catholic position has been that *the visible church* that descended from Peter and the apostles *is the true church*.

It seems appropriate that we take Luther and Calvin's view on the marks of a true church as correct still today. Certainly if the Word of God is not being preached, but simply false doctrines

or doctrines of men, then there is no true church. In some cases we might have difficulty determining just how much wrong doctrine can be tolerated before a church can no longer be considered a true church, but there are many clear cases where we can say that a true church does not exist. For example, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormon Church) does not hold to any major Christian doctrines concerning salvation or the person of God or the person and work of Christ. It is clearly a false church. Similarly, the Jehovah's Witnesses teach salvation by works, not by trusting in Jesus Christ alone. This is a fundamental doctrinal deviation because if people believe the teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses, they simply will not be saved. So the Jehovah's Witnesses also must be considered a false church. When the preaching of a church conceals the gospel message of salvation by faith alone from its members, so that the gospel message is not clearly proclaimed, and has not been proclaimed for some time, the group meeting there is not a church.

The second mark of the church, the right administration of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper) was probably stated in opposition to the Roman Catholic view that saving grace came through the sacraments and thereby the sacraments were made "works" by which we earned merit for salvation. In this way, the Roman Catholic Church was insisting on payment rather than teaching faith as the means of obtaining salvation.

But another reason exists for including the sacraments as a mark of the church. Once an organization begins to practice baptism and the Lord's Supper, it is a continuing organization and is *attempting to function as a church*. (In modern American society, an organization that begins to meet for worship and prayer and Bible teachings on Sunday mornings also would clearly be attempting to function as a church.)

Baptism and the Lord's Supper also serve as "membership controls" for the church. Baptism is the means for admitting people into the church, and the Lord's Supper is the means for allowing people to give a sign of continuing in the membership of the church—the church signifies that it considers those who receive baptism and the Lord's Supper to be saved. Therefore these activities indicate what a church thinks about salvation, and they are appropriately listed as a mark of the church today as well. By contrast, groups who do not administer baptism and the Lord's Supper signify that they are not intending to function as a church. Someone may stand on a street corner with a small crowd and have true preaching and hearing of the Word, but the people there would not be a church. Even a neighborhood Bible study meeting in a home can have the true teaching and hearing of the Word without becoming a church. But if a local Bible study began baptizing its own new converts and regularly participating in the Lord's Supper, these things would signify *an intention to function as a church* and it would be difficult to say why it should not be considered a church in itself.

**2. True and False Churches Today.** In view of the question posed during the Reformation, what about the Roman Catholic Church today? Is it a true church? Here it seems that we cannot simply make a decision regarding the Roman Catholic Church as a whole, because it is far too diverse. To ask whether the Roman Catholic Church is a true church or a false church today is somewhat similar to asking whether Protestant churches are true or false today—there is great variety among them. Some Roman Catholic parishes certainly lack both marks: there is no pure preaching of the Word and the gospel message of salvation by faith in Christ alone is not known or received by people in the parish. Participation in the sacraments is seen as a "work" that can earn merit with God. Such a group of people is not a true Christian church. On the other hand, there are many Roman Catholic parishes in various parts of the world today where the local priest has a genuine saving knowledge of Christ and a vital personal relationship with Christ in

prayer and Bible study. His own homilies and private teaching of the Bible place much emphasis on personal faith and the need for individual Bible reading and prayer. His teaching on the sacraments emphasizes their symbolic and commemorative aspects much more than it speaks of them as acts that merit some infusion of saving grace from God. In such a case, although we would have to say that we still have profound differences with Roman Catholic teaching on some doctrines, nonetheless, it would seem that such a church would have a close enough approximation to the two marks of the church that it would be hard to deny that it is in fact a true church. It would seem to be a genuine congregation of believers in which the gospel is taught (though not purely) and the sacraments are administered more rightly than wrongly.

Are there false churches within Protestantism? If we again look at the two distinguishing marks of the church, in the judgment of this present writer it seems appropriate to say that many liberal Protestant churches are in fact false churches today. Is the gospel of works-righteousness and unbelief in Scripture that these churches teach any more likely to save people than did Roman Catholic teaching at the time of the Reformation? And is not their administration of the sacraments without sound teaching to anyone who walks in the door likely to give as much false assurance to unregenerate sinners as did the Roman Catholic use of the sacraments at the time of the Reformation? When there is an assembly of people who take the name “Christian” but consistently teach that people cannot believe their Bibles—indeed a church whose pastor and congregation seldom read their Bibles or pray in any meaningful way, and do not believe or perhaps even understand the gospel of salvation by faith in Christ alone, then how can we say that this is a true church?<sup>30</sup>

### C. The Purposes of the Church

We can understand the purposes of the church in terms of ministry to God, ministry to believers, and ministry to the world.

**1. Ministry to God: Worship.** In relationship to God the church’s purpose is to worship him. Paul directs the church at Colossae to “sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16). God has destined us and appointed us in Christ “to live for the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:12). Worship in the church is not merely a preparation for something else: it is in itself fulfilling the major purpose of the church with reference to its Lord. That is why Paul can follow an exhortation that we are to be “making the most of the time” with a command to be filled with the Spirit and then to be “singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart” (Eph. 5:16–19).

**2. Ministry to Believers: Nurture.** According to Scripture, the church has an obligation to nurture those who are already believers and build them up to maturity in the faith. Paul said that his own goal was not simply to bring people to initial saving faith but to “present every man *mature in Christ*” (Col. 1:28). And he told the church at Ephesus that God gave the church gifted persons “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, *for building up the body of Christ* until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:12–13). It is clearly contrary to the New Testament pattern to think that our only goal with people is to bring them to initial saving faith. Our goal as a church must be to present to God every Christian “mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28).

**3. Ministry to the World: Evangelism and Mercy.** Jesus told his disciples that they should “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). This evangelistic work of declaring the gospel is the primary ministry that the church has toward the world. Yet accompanying the work of evangelism is also a ministry of mercy, a ministry that includes caring for the poor and needy in the name of the Lord. Although the emphasis of the New Testament is on giving material help to those who are part of the church (Acts 11:29; 2 Cor. 8:4; 1 John 3:17), there is still an affirmation that it is right to help unbelievers even if they do not respond with gratitude or acceptance of the gospel message. Jesus tells us,

Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for *he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish*. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:35–36)

The point of Jesus’ explanation is that we are to imitate God in being kind to those who are being ungrateful and selfish as well. Moreover, we have the example of Jesus who did not attempt to heal only those who accepted him as Messiah. Rather, when great crowds came to him, “he laid his hands *on every one of them* and healed them” (Luke 4:40). This should give us encouragement to carry out deeds of kindness, and to pray for healing and other needs, in the lives of unbelievers as well as believers. Such ministries of mercy to the world may also include participation in civic activities or attempting to influence governmental policies to make them more consistent with biblical moral principles. In areas where there is systematic injustice manifested in the treatment of the poor and/or ethnic or religious minorities, the church should also pray and—as it has opportunity—speak against such injustice. All of these are ways in which the church can supplement its evangelistic ministry to the world and indeed adorn the gospel that it professes. But such ministries of mercy to the world should never become a substitute for genuine evangelism or for the other areas of ministry to God and to believers mentioned above.

**4. Keeping These Purposes in Balance.** Once we have listed these three purposes for the church someone might ask, Which is most important? Or someone else might ask, Might we neglect one of these three as less important than the others?

To that we must respond that all three purposes of the church are commanded by the Lord in Scripture; therefore all three are important and none can be neglected. In fact, a strong church will have effective ministries in all three of these areas. We should beware of any attempts to reduce the purpose of the church to only one of these three and to say that it should be our primary focus. In fact, such attempts to make one of these purposes primary will always result in some neglect of the other two. A church that emphasizes only worship will end up with inadequate Bible teaching of believers and its members will remain shallow in their understanding of Scripture and immature in their Christian lives. If it also begins to neglect evangelism the church will cease to grow and influence others; it will become ingrown and eventually begin to wither.

A church that places the edification of believers as a purpose that takes precedence over the other two will tend to produce Christians who know much Bible doctrine but have spiritual dryness in their lives because they know little of the joy of worshiping God or telling others about Christ.

But a church that makes evangelism such a priority that it causes the other two purposes to be neglected will also end up with immature Christians who emphasize growth in numbers but have less and less genuine love for God expressed in their worship and less and less doctrinal maturity

and personal holiness in their lives. All three purposes must be emphasized continually in a healthy church.

However, *individuals* are different from churches in placing a relative priority on one or another of these purposes of the church. Because we are like a body with diverse spiritual gifts and abilities, it is right for us to place most of our emphasis on the fulfillment of that purpose of the church that is most closely related to the gifts and interests God has given to us. There is certainly no obligation for every believer to attempt to give exactly one third of his or her time in the church to worship, one-third to nurturing other believers, and one-third to evangelism or deeds of mercy. Someone with the gift of evangelism should of course spend some time in worship and caring for other believers, but may end up spending the vast majority of his or her time in evangelistic work. Someone who is a gifted worship leader may end up devoting 90 percent of his time in the church toward preparation for and leading of worship. This is only an appropriate response to the diversity of gifts that God has given us.

### **QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION**

1. When you think of the church as the invisible fellowship of all true believers throughout all time, how does it affect the way you think of yourself as an individual Christian? In the community in which you live, is there much visible unity among genuine believers (that is, is there much visible evidence of the true nature of the invisible church)? Does the New Testament say anything about the ideal size for an individual church?
2. Would you consider the church that you are now in to be a true church? Have you ever been a member of a church that you would think to be a false church? Do you think there is any harm done when evangelical Christians continue to give the impression that they think liberal Protestant churches are true Christian churches? Viewed from the perspective of the final judgment, what good and what harm might come from our failure to state that we think unbelieving churches are false churches?
3. Did any of the metaphors for the church give you a new appreciation for the church that you currently attend?
4. To which purpose of the church do you think you can most effectively contribute? Which purpose has God placed in your heart a strong desire to fulfill?

### **SPECIAL TERMS**

body of Christ  
church  
ekklesia  
invisible church  
marks of the church  
visible church

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

(For an explanation of this bibliography see the note on the bibliography to chapter 1, p. 38. Complete bibliographical data may be found on pp. 1223–29.)



This is a description of one of the key values of Christ Community E-Free in Kansas City, "Church." It is a good, concise summary of the importance of the local church.

## INTRODUCTION

We believe the primary context in which we are to experience the life God designed is the local church.

### WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

Before I became a Christian, the concept of church was a bit confusing to me. Is church a building? Is it a glorified support group? Is it Catholic? Is it Protestant? The word just seemed ambiguous to me. One thing I knew: whatever church was, I did not feel particularly inclined to join one.

Obviously, now that I'm a pastor, things have changed. But I think the way I felt about church as a young man is an increasingly popular sentiment in our culture today. Many people, in fact, remain very interested in Jesus but want very little to do with the church.

When you actually begin to listen to Jesus, however, you notice that he never allowed this dichotomy. In fact, you begin to see just the opposite: the more you want to know and belong to Jesus, the more you must know and belong to His church.

The Bible has much to say about the relationship between Jesus and His church. The church is, at various times, called Jesus' home (Ephesians 2:19-22), Jesus' family (Hebrews 2:10-13), and Jesus' bride (Revelation 21:9). But perhaps the most illustrative description of the church is as Jesus' own body:

*[God] put all things under Christ's feet and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:21-22).*

Eugene Peterson, in his translation of the Bible called The Message, puts the passage this way:

*[Christ] is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything. At the center of all this, Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ's body, in which He speaks and acts, by which He fills everything with His presence.*

In other words, to know Jesus in a real and meaningful way, one must know His church, which is His physical representation to the world. Jesus fills the church to the brim with His presence, His character, and His priorities. And Jesus' presence is to so transform the people who make up the church that Paul says in this passage the church is Jesus' body: the tangible, living, breathing, moving, and working expression of Jesus to the world. There is simply no way to follow Jesus without belonging to His church. And it was Jesus who designed it that way.

### WHAT DOES THE CHURCH DO?

As Jesus' representative, the church is supposed to do what Jesus did on earth. And Jesus, more than anything, came to save humanity from one way of life – which leads to pain, confusion, isolation, and



death – into a new way of life, the life that God designed for us in the first place. Put simply: Jesus came to transform us.

The church is the place where this transformation is visible for the whole world to see. When we believe in Jesus, when we trust in His death and resurrection as the very foundation of our lives, we are transformed. The church, then, is where this transformed identity in Christ is nurtured and practiced together.

It is nurtured by the regular, weekly preaching of the Bible, God's Word, and design for our lives. It is nurtured by rhythms of corporate worship of our Lord Jesus. It is nurtured by engagement with a community of other people, just as in need of God's grace and truth as we are. It is nurtured through service to one another as Jesus taught us to do.

It is practiced in the way the church interacts with the world throughout the week. It is practiced in the way we love our families, even when such love is difficult. It is practiced in the way we seek to serve our neighbors, even if they do not share our faith, our ethnicity, our political affiliation, or our socio-economic status. It is practiced in the way we work, not simply for compensation or self-promotion, but for the good of the community and to God's glory.

Here's another way of looking at it: the church, just like Jesus, models to the world a brand new way to be human, to live the life God designed for all to flourish. This is what the church does. This is what it is all about.

## SO WHAT IS STOPPING YOU?

Even knowing that *authentic Christian spirituality* cannot happen without the church, many are still hesitant to visit one, to commit to one every week, and to share this Christian life with other people there.

But if the church is truly the presence of Christ on earth, why do we hesitate? Probably because no church has ever modeled this calling perfectly. There's always a current event in the news, a hypocritical person we know, or a past pain we can point to that excuses us from moving forward.

I don't imagine the blatant imperfections of church to go away anytime soon. That's because every church, though always growing in her identity in Christ, is still full of people who are sinning, who are struggling, who are weak, who are broken. Dysfunction happens. But this has never stopped Jesus from loving, nurturing, and equipping his body. It shouldn't stop us either. Because when we're honest, we know that if we ever found the perfect church, we couldn't join it. We would ruin it.

If you want to get to know Jesus, sooner or later, you're going to have to get to know His church. And, yes, no church is perfect, including this one. But neither are you. I think that's the whole point. So what's stopping you?

No matter where you are in your faith journey, Jesus wants you to know Him. His design for your life is better than anything the world has to offer. But you can't find it alone. You need other people. You need the church. And the church needs you.

Who knows more about the current needs of the church – Christ or man?

Who can provide better for the church – Christ or man?

From whom did the original idea of the church come – Christ or man?

In whom rests the church's future hope – Christ or man?

Who built the church up until now – Christ or man?

Whom do we trust for future direction – Christ or man?

Who owns and sustains the church – Christ or man?

For whose glory does the church exist – Christ or man?

Who is the head of the church – Christ or man?

Because 'Christ' is the correct answer to each of these questions, we turn to Matthew 16:18 where Jesus delivers at least seven hallmark principles for building the church. No one should launch out in planning a new church or take on the risk of revitalizing a worn-out church until the defining truths of this Scripture have gripped one's heart and mind.

## **Tomorrow's hope**

### *Hallmark 1*

The initial characteristic involves a *permanent foundation*. Christ passionately pursued the lasting fruit of eternity. In His promise, He explicitly looked to an everlasting legacy. Jesus did not have in mind the temporary, the faddish, or the 'here today, gone tomorrow'. He pointed to the church as having a 'forever' relevance.

'I also say that you are Peter, and *upon this rock* I will build My church.' The foundation wasn't Peter, because Christ here distinguishes between a moveable rock/detached boulder (the basic meaning of Cephas and Peter) and the unshakeable, immovable foundation suitable for the church. The word Christ used for 'rock' means bedrock or mass of rock as used by the wise builder (Matt. 7:24-25).



What or who then is the rock? The Old Testament pictures God as a rock in whom we find strength and refuge:

There is no-one holy like the LORD,  
Indeed, there is no-one besides Thee,  
Nor is there any rock like our God (1 Sam. 2:2).

The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,  
My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge ... (Ps. 18:2).

For who is God, but the LORD?  
And who is a rock, except our God? (Ps. 18:31).

Paul identifies Christ as the rock in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:4). Earlier in 1 Corinthians (3:11), the Apostle wrote, 'For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Christ Jesus'.

Interestingly, one verse earlier Paul had claimed, 'I laid a foundation ...'. How did Paul 'lay' Christ as the foundation? Obviously, it had to be in his preaching of Christ (1 Cor. 2:1-2). Now, if Paul's testimony of Christ is the foundation that no one else can lay, then it seems best to understand the 'bedrock foundation' of the church to be Peter's testimony of Christ, 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Matt. 16:16). Remember, Peter's declaration prompted Jesus' promise.

Since it is virtually impossible to separate the testimony of Christ from the reality of Christ, we can identify the 'rock' as Christ Himself in the fullness of His deity, His role as redeemer, and His headship in the church. Christ alone is the rock of redemption upon which the church is being built (Acts 4:11-12).

### *Hallmark 2*

Secondly, Christ promised His *personal involvement*. 'I will build My church.' We have not been left to the task alone. Christ is in us (Col. 1:27), with us (Matt. 28:20), and amongst His church constantly (Rev. 1:12-13, 20).

Paul told the Corinthian church, 'For we are God's fellow workers ...' (1 Cor. 3:9). What a privilege to be partners with Christ in building His church. How comforting to know He built the church before we arrived and He will continue to build long after we're gone. Christ's participation proves indispensable in raising up His church.

### *Hallmark 3*

'I will build My church.' This is no idle dream about what might be. Christ's confident assertion guarantees that the church has a *positive expectation*. In times like these when the future of the church looks bleak and its condition uncertain, this powerful promise should buoy up our spirits. The church will be triumphant because Christ began building the church with the intention of completing her (Eph. 5:26-27).

### *Hallmark 4*

Jesus claimed that His church will have a *powerful advance*. 'I will build My church.' The church experienced an explosive beginning with 3,000 members being added on the first day (Acts 2:41). 'And the Lord was adding to their numbers day by day those who were being saved' (Acts 2:47).

What is contained in one mere sentence in Matthew 16 mushrooms into an expansive reality by the time of John's Revelation. Before the New Testament ends, churches existed across the face of the Roman Empire. They included locations like Rome, Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi, Colossae, Laodicea, Ephesus, Galatia, Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Antioch, Jerusalem, Crete, Cyprus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Caesarea, Berea, and Joppa. His building efforts continue to this very hour, everywhere in the world, just as He intended (Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47).

### *Hallmark 5*

Christ bought the church with His own blood and therefore possesses the exclusive *paid-in-full ownership* of the church

(Acts 20:28). ‘I will build *My* church.’ Christ is Lord; we are His servants (2 Cor. 4:5). Paul writes to the believers in Rome, ‘All the churches of Christ greet you’ (Rom. 16:16). Make no mistake about this – we do not (corporately or individually) have any ownership claim to the church. The church belongs uniquely to its Redeemer (1 Cor. 3:23; 6:19-20). Christ is Head of the church (Eph. 1:22; 5:23). The Chief Shepherd owns the flock that He leads (John 10:14-15).

### *Hallmark 6*

‘I will build *My church*.’ For Christ, the church has a *people-centred priority*. The church comprises an assembly of people who have believed in Jesus Christ for eternal life (Acts 4:32). Jesus uses living stones – individual people – to build His church (1 Pet. 2:5). The mandate of evangelization is to take the gospel to all the nations (Luke 24:47). The goal of edification is to present everyone complete in Christ (Col. 1:28).

The Greek word translated ‘church’ literally means the congregation which has been called out. The New Testament pictures the church as made up of those who have been delivered out of the kingdom of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:13). The Thessalonians had turned from idols to serve a true and living God (1 Thess. 1:9). The church has been called into fellowship with Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:9). Christ has called His redeemed out of darkness into His marvellous light (1 Pet. 2:9).

### *Hallmark 7*

Jesus has *promised success* to the church. ‘I will build *My* church; and *the gates of Hades shall not overpower it*.’

How is this success to be understood? In the Old Testament ‘gates of’ is used with Sheol (Isa. 38:10) and death (Job 38:17; Ps. 9:13; 107:18), both referring to physical death. ‘Death’ is really the only enemy that could ‘potentially’ overpower and defeat the church since she is comprised of people who shall live, even if they die (John 11:25).

The writer of Hebrews encourages us to know that through death Christ rendered powerless him who had the power of death, that is the devil (2:14). Paul wrote this Christian victory song to the Corinthians:

But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:54-57).

When Christ builds the church these seven features will be identifiable:

1. Christ as the permanent foundation.
2. Christ's personal involvement.
3. Christ's positive expectation.
4. Christ's purpose of powerful advance.
5. Christ's paid-in-full ownership.
6. Christ's people-centred priority.
7. Christ's promise of success.

Who could possibly want to build the church any other way?

### **Christ's unfinished work**

Theologians often speak of Christ's 'finished work' on the cross, referring to the work of redemption. Christ cried out on the cross, 'It is finished!' (John 19:30). Truly, Christ's sacrifice need not be offered again (Heb. 7:27; 9:12). This is the finished work of Christ.

However, more is in view for the church than just Christ's death and resurrection. Dr. Luke wrote his gospel concerning 'all that Jesus began to do and teach' (Acts 1:1). Just before ascending into heaven, Jesus told his disciples to be witnesses of Him to the remotest part of the earth (Acts 1:8). Reaching the lost

with the gospel and then adding to the church daily until Christ returns is the unfinished work of building Christ's church.

What we are to be doing and how we are to do it in building Christ's church is the subject of this volume. By God-breathed, infallible revelation, Christ has communicated to us what He thinks about the church. The Scriptures particularize what He commends and specify what He condemns. No-one need ever be in doubt over how to go about the unfinished work of building Christ's church or what the outcome will be.

In the end, our work in building the church on behalf of Christ will be acclaimed as valuable – the allusion to gold, silver and precious stones – or worthless – the allusion to wood, hay, and straw (1 Cor. 3:12). The *quality* of each man's work will be tested by Christ in the end (1 Cor. 3:13). Our eternal reward for service done on earth depends on building the church with biblical excellence in order to please Christ.

In the Academy Award-winning film *Chariots of Fire*, Eric Liddell, famed Olympian and missionary to China, conversed with his sister Jenny on a Scottish moor about the timing of his return to missionary work. His response remains etched in my memory. 'I believe that God made me for a purpose – for China – but He also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure.'

Nothing will bring Christ greater pleasure than the building of His church. So, aim your life at the bull's-eye mark of His pleasure and you will never miss the spiritual target. You'll not be disappointed, and neither will Christ. Your heart will be filled with a great sense of commitment, as expressed by the words below, to build Christ's church his way.

I rise up to worship, I stand to acclaim  
The King of all ages, Christ Jesus His name.  
I ask you, King Jesus, fulfill this desire,  
Ignite me and make me, a chariot of fire.  
Come rule all my life  
Lord Jesus Christ, be Master and King.  
Come rule all my life,  
Lord Jesus Christ, be my everything.



By Jeramie Rinne

# A Job Description for Lay Elders

**Y**ou were humbled—and a little surprised—when the pastor asked you to serve as an elder. You prayed about it, talked to your wife, and got the input of a few trusted church members. With a mixture of trepidation and excitement you accepted the nomination, and a few weeks later you were voted into office.

Now you sit at your first elders' meeting, waiting for things to start. And a nagging thought arises: "Okay, I am an elder. *Now what do I do?*"

## WELL-INTENTIONED BUT ILL-INFORMED

Lay elders are often godly, well-intentioned men who love the Lord and serve the church faithfully. But they sometimes lack a well-rounded understanding of the biblical job description for elders. Unfortunately, we paid pastors often share in their confusion!

As a result, lay elders sometimes fill the gaps of their understanding with their own life experiences. They assume being an elder is roughly equivalent to serving on a board of trustees for a non-profit organization, or leading a company, or managing a project, or commanding a warship, or supervising sub-contractors. While aspects of those skills and experiences will prove useful, none of them adequately approximates the elder task.

So what is a lay elder's job description? What are they supposed to do? Attend meetings? Approve budgets? Distribute communion?

## SHEPHERD GOD'S FLOCK

Here's the short answer from the apostle Peter: "I exhort the elders among you: shepherd God's flock" (1 Pet. 5:2; see also Jn. 21:15-16 and Acts 20:28). Elders serve the Good Shepherd by providing his local flocks with spiritual oversight. Elders feed, lead, protect, and nurture church members like shepherds do with sheep.

Let's get even more specific. While shepherding is a powerful metaphor for framing an elder's job description, our new elder needs concrete instructions. He needs an answer to his question, "Now what do I do?" Fortunately, God's Word lists very specific duties that help elders put the shepherding imagery to work.

## FOUR PRIMARY DUTIES

Here are four duties that are central to the elder's job description. While this list is not exhaustive, I believe if lay elders devoted themselves to these four things, they would excel as shepherds.

### 1. Teach

An elder must be "an able teacher" (1 Tim. 3:2; see 5:17). He must hold "to the faithful message as taught, so that he will be able both to encourage with sound teaching and refute those who contradict it" (Tit. 1:9). Jesus' under-shepherds feed Jesus' sheep with Jesus' word.

If you're an elder, find venues for teaching the Bible regularly. Teach a Sunday school class, lead a home group, give a lesson to the youth group, or study Scripture with a member over coffee. And if you're offered a chance to preach, take it.

Further, tune in to the church's overall teaching ministry. Keep a finger on the pulse of what's being taught through congregational singing or in the Sunday school curriculum. Listen closely when members talk about what they're reading and be alert for rotten food in their spiritual diet.

Finally, remember that teaching includes training others to perpetuate the church's teaching ministry. As Paul said to Timothy, "What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, commit to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2). So bring along an apprentice teacher whenever you can.

### 2. Lead

Just as shepherds lead their flocks, so elders lead local congregations. The biblical writers also call elders "overseers," a title that highlights their role as leaders (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:1; Tit. 1:5, 7). Hebrews instructs Christians to "obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account" (Heb. 13:17).

Elders, be brave and lead your church. Don't hide among the baggage like King Saul. When you see challenges in your church, face them proactively and plot a course forward.

Courageous leadership might involve reaching out to a frustrated member who's stopped attending, or confronting an unrepentant member through church discipline. Or it could mean wrestling through staffing strategies, budget challenges, or important policies that affect the spiritual identity of the congregation.

As you lead, don't lose sight of the destination. The goal isn't to lead a church to become an efficient organization, as important as that may be. Rather, elders should lead church members toward maturity in Christ. Jesus gave teaching shepherds to the church "to build up the body of Christ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, growing into a mature man with a stature measured by Christ's fullness" (Eph. 4:12-13).

Elders bring the flock to green pastures and still waters when they help members know Jesus more and increasingly reflect his glory together.

### 3. Model

Most importantly, elders lead by example. Shepherd the church “not [by] lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:3). Not surprisingly, the New Testament lists of elder qualifications focus predominantly on character (1 Tim. 3:1-7, Tit. 1:5-9; 1 Pet. 5:1-4). An elder’s most basic job is to say “Imitate me as I also imitate Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).

The mandate to model maturity carries two critical implications. First, modeling means you must guard your godliness: “Pay close attention to your life and your teaching” (1 Tim. 4:16). Continue to live close to the Lord, nurture your wife and children well, resist sin, and love people. Open your life to the loving accountability of the other elders. Modeling maturity is a team project.

That leads to a second implication: modeling requires elders to *be among* the people. It only works if people see you up close. So open your life to church members. Invite them into your home, your hobbies, and your ministry. People need a firsthand experience of how you handle stress, relate to your wife, respond to difficult people, and humbly admit when you blow it.

### 4. Pray

Finally, elders should take up the apostolic shepherding mantle and say, “we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the preaching ministry” (Acts 6:4). Ultimately elders are powerless in themselves to mature anyone in Christ; only the Holy Spirit can do that through God’s Word. The sooner an elder realizes this, the sooner he will hit his knees and plead for a continual work of grace among church members, as well as in his own life.

So if you’re a lay elder (or a paid elder!), strive to be a man of prayer. Build regular prayer into your daily rhythms. Pray over your church’s membership rolls during the commute or while you’re walking the dog. Carve out time as an elder board for concerted prayer. And when you’re talking to a church member, be sure to stop and pray for her right then and there.

## SHEPHERD LIKE JESUS

Maybe we could sum up an elder’s job description this way: shepherd the church members like Jesus shepherds his disciples.

**“Maybe we could sum up an elder’s job description this way: shepherd the church members like Jesus shepherds his disciples.”**

Like Jesus, make teaching central to your ministry, and make Jesus and the gospel the primary content of your teaching. In every decision, lead your people toward knowing and trusting Jesus. Let them see the character of Jesus exemplified in your life. And just as Jesus often turned aside to pray, so you as an elder should join Jesus in interceding for his people.

The under-shepherds of Jesus are at their best when they reflect Jesus, the Chief Shepherd.





By Benjamin Merkle

# The Biblical Qualifications and Responsibilities of Deacons

**W**ho should be a deacon? What does the Bible say deacons should do?

## THE TWO BIBLICAL OFFICES: ELDERS AND DEACONS

Comparing the office of deacon to the office of elder will help us answer these questions. The primary spiritual leaders of a congregation are the elders, who are also called overseers or pastors in the New Testament. Elders teach or preach the Word and shepherd the souls of those under their care (Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9; Heb. 13:17). Deacons, too, have a crucial role in the life and the health of the local church, but their role is different from the elders'. The biblical role of deacons is to take care of the physical and logistical needs of the church so that the elders can concentrate on their primary calling.

**“Like the apostles, the elders’ primary role is one of preaching the Word of God. Like the seven, deacons serve the congregation in whatever practical needs may arise.”**

This distinction is based on the pattern found in Acts 6:1–6. The apostles were devoted “to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (v. 4). Since this was their primary calling, seven men were chosen to handle more practical matters in order to allow the apostles the freedom to continue with their work.

This division of labor is similar to what we see with the offices of elder and deacon. Like the apostles, the elders’ primary role is one of preaching the Word of God. Like the seven, deacons serve the congregation in whatever practical needs may arise.

# THE QUALIFICATIONS OF DEACONS

The only passage that mentions the qualifications for deacons is 1 Timothy 3:8–13. In this passage, Paul gives an official but not exhaustive list of the requirements for deacons.

The similarities of the qualifications for deacons and elders/overseers in 1 Timothy 3 are striking. Like the qualifications for elders, a deacon must not be an addict (v. 3), not greedy for dishonest gain (v. 3), blameless (v. 2; Titus 1:6), the husband of one wife (v. 2), and an able manager of his children and household well (vv. 4–5). Furthermore, the focus of the qualifications is the moral character of the person who is to fill the office: a deacon must be mature and above reproach. The main difference between an elder and a deacon is a difference of gifts and calling, not character.

Paul identifies nine qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-12:

- 1. Dignified (v. 8):** This term normally refers to something that is honorable, respectable, esteemed, or worthy, and is closely related to “respectable,” which is given as a qualification for elders (1 Tim. 3:2).
- 2. Not double-tongued (v. 8):** Those who are double-tongued say one thing to certain people but then say something else to others, or say one thing but mean another. They are two-faced and insincere. Their words cannot be trusted, so they lack credibility.
- 3. Not addicted to much wine (v. 8):** A man is disqualified for the office of deacon if he is addicted to wine or other strong drink. Such a person lacks self-control and is undisciplined.
- 4. Not greedy for dishonest gain (v. 8):** If a person is a lover of money, he is not qualified to be a deacon, especially since deacons often handle financial matters for the church.
- 5. Sound in faith and life (v. 9):** Paul also indicates that a deacon must “hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.” The phrase “the mystery of the faith” is simply one way Paul speaks of the gospel (cf. 1 Tim. 3:16). Consequently, this statement refers to the need for deacons to hold firm to the true gospel without wavering. Yet this qualification does not merely involve one’s beliefs, for he must also hold these beliefs “with a clear conscience.” That is, the behavior of a deacon must be consistent with his beliefs.
- 6. Blameless (v. 10):** Paul writes that deacons must “be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless” (v. 10). “Blameless” is a general term referring to a person’s overall character. Although Paul does not specify what type of testing is to take place, at a minimum, the candidate’s personal background, reputation, and theological positions should be examined. Moreover, the congregation should not only examine a potential deacon’s moral, spiritual, and doctrinal maturity, but should also consider the person’s track record of service in the church.
- 7. Godly wife (v. 11):** It is debated whether verse 11 refers to a deacon’s wife or to a deaconess. For the sake of this discussion, we will assume the verse is speaking about the qualifications of a deacon’s wife. According to Paul, deacons’ wives must “be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things” (v. 11). Like her husband, the wife must be dignified or respectable. Secondly, she must not be a slanderer or a person who goes around spreading gossip. A deacon’s wife must also be sober-minded or temperate. That is, she must be able to make good judgments and must not be involved in things that might hinder such judgment. Finally, she must be “faithful in all things” (cf. 1 Tim. 5:10). This is a general requirement which functions similarly to the requirement for elders to be “above reproach” (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6) and for deacons to be “blameless” (1 Tim. 3:10).
- 8. Husband of one wife (v. 12):** The best interpretation of this difficult phrase is to understand it as referring to the faithfulness of a husband toward his wife. He must be a “one-woman man.” That is, there must be no other woman in his life to whom he relates in an intimate way either emotionally or physically.

## **9. Manage children and household well (v. 12):** A deacon must be the spiritual leader of his wife and children.

In general, if a *moral* qualification is listed for elders but not for deacons, that qualification still applies to deacons. The same goes for those qualifications listed for deacons but not for elders. For example, a deacon should not be double-tongued (v. 8, ESV). Paul does not explicitly say this about elders, but no doubt it applies to elders since Paul has said that elders must be “above reproach,” which would include this prohibition.

Still, we should observe the differences in the qualifications, since they either signify a trait that is particularly fitting for the office-holder in order to accomplish his duties, or is something that was a problem in the location to which Paul writes (in this case, Ephesus). This should be more clear as we turn to considering a deacon’s responsibilities.

## **THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF DEACONS**

Whereas the office of elder is often ignored in the modern church, the office of deacon is often misunderstood. Based on the New Testament, the role of the deacon is mainly to be a servant. The church needs deacons to provide logistical and material support so that the elders can focus on the Word of God and prayer.

The New Testament does not provide much information concerning the role of deacons. The requirements given in 1 Timothy 3:8-12 focus on the deacon’s character and family life. There are, however, some clues as to the function of deacons when their requirements are compared with those of the elders. Although many of the qualifications are the same or very similar, there are some notable differences.

Perhaps the most noticeable distinction between elders and deacons is that deacons do not need to be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2). Deacons are called to “hold” to the faith with a clear conscience, but they are not called to “teach” that faith (1 Tim. 3:9). This suggests that the deacons do not have an official teaching role in the church.

Like elders, deacons must manage their house and children well (1 Tim. 3:4, 12). But when referring to deacons, Paul omits the section where he compares managing one’s household to taking care of God’s church (1 Tim. 3:5). The reason for this omission is most likely due to the fact that deacons are not given a ruling or leading position in the church—that function belongs to the elders.

Although Paul indicates that a person must be tested before he can hold the office of deacon (1 Tim. 3:10), the requirement that he cannot be a new convert is not included. Paul notes that if an elder is a recent convert “he may become puffed up with conceit” (1 Tim. 3:6). One implication concerning this distinction could be that those who hold the office of elder are more susceptible to pride because they possess leadership over the church. On the contrary, it is not as likely for a deacon, who is in more of a servant role, to fall into this same sin. Finally, the title “overseer” (1 Tim. 3:2) implies general oversight over the spiritual well-being of the congregation, whereas the title “deacon” implies one who has a service-oriented ministry.

Beyond what we can glean from these differences in qualifications, the Bible does not clearly indicate the function of deacons. Yet based on the pattern established in Acts 6 with the apostles and the Seven, it seems best to view deacons as servants who do whatever is necessary to allow the elders to accomplish their God-given calling of shepherding and teaching the church. Just as the apostles delegated administrative responsibilities to the Seven, so the elders are to delegate certain responsibilities to the deacons so that the elders can focus their efforts elsewhere. As a result, each local church is free to define the tasks of deacons based on their particular needs.

What are some duties that deacons might be responsible for today? They could be responsible for anything that’s not related to teaching and shepherding the church. Such duties might include:

- **Facilities:** The deacons could be responsible for managing the church property. This would include making sure the place of worship is prepared for the worship service, cleaning up, or running the sound system.
- **Benevolence:** Similar to what took place in Acts 6:1–6 with the daily distribution to the widows, the deacons may be involved in administering funds or other assistance to the needy.
- **Finances:** While the elders should probably oversee the financial business of the church (Acts 11:30), it may be best left to the deacons to handle the day-to-day matters. This would include collecting and counting the offering, keeping records, and so on.
- **Ushers:** The deacons could be responsible for distributing bulletins, seating the congregation, or preparing the elements for communion.
- **Logistics:** Deacons should be available to help in variety of ways so that the elders are able to concentrate on teaching and shepherding the church.

## CONCLUSION

Whereas the Bible charges elders with the tasks of teaching and leading the church, deacons' role is more service-oriented. That is, they are to care for the physical or temporal concerns of the church. By handling such matters, deacons free up the elders to focus on shepherding the spiritual needs of the congregation.

Yet even though deacons are not the congregation's spiritual leaders, their character is of utmost importance, which is why deacons should be examined and held to the biblical qualifications laid down in 1 Timothy 3.

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# 6 Reasons Why Membership Matters

 [blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/kevindeyoung/2015/05/14/6-reasons-why-membership-matters/](https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/kevindeyoung/2015/05/14/6-reasons-why-membership-matters/)

“Why bother with church membership?”

I’ve been asked the question before. Sometimes it’s said with genuine curiosity-“So explain to me what membership is all about.” Other times it’s said with a tinge of suspicion-“So tell me again, why do you think I should become a member?”-as if joining the church automatically signed you up to tithe by direct deposit.

For many Christians membership sounds stiff, something you have at your bank or the country club, but too formal for the church. Even if it’s agreed that Christianity is not a lone ranger religion, that we need community and fellowship with other Christians, we still bristle at the thought of officially joining a church. Why all the hoops? Why box the Holy Spirit into member/non-member categories? Why bother joining a local church when I’m already a member of the universal Church?

Some Christians—because of church tradition or church baggage—may not be convinced of church membership no matter how many times “member” actually shows up in the New Testament. But many others are open to hearing the justification for something they’ve not thought much about.

Here are just a few reasons why church membership matters.

1. In joining a church you make visible your commitment to Christ and his people. Membership is one way to raise the flag of faith. You state before God and others that you are part of this local body of believers. It’s easy to talk in glowing terms about the invisible church-the body of all believers near and far, living and dead-but it’s in the visible church that God expects you to live out your faith.

Sometimes I think that we wouldn’t all be clamoring for community if we had actually experienced it. Real fellowship is hard work, because most people are a lot like us-selfish, petty, and proud. But that’s the body God calls us to.

How many of Paul’s letters were written to individuals? Only a handful, and these were mostly to pastors. The majority of his letters were written to a local body of believers. We see the same thing in Revelation. Jesus spoke to individual congregations in places like Smyrna, Sardis, and Laodicea. The New Testament knows no Christians floating around in “just me and Jesus” land. Believers belong to churches.

2. Making a commitment makes a powerful statement in a low-commitment culture. Many bowling leagues require more of their members than our churches. Where this is true, the church is a sad reflection of its culture. Ours is a consumer culture where everything is tailored to meet our needs and satisfy our preferences. When those needs aren’t met, we can always move on to the next product, or job, or spouse.

Joining a church in such an environment makes a counter-cultural statement. It says “I am committed to this group of people and they are committed to me. I am here to give, more than get.”

Even if you will only be in town for a few years, it’s still not a bad idea to join a church. It lets your home church (if you are a student) know that you are being cared for, and it lets your present know that you want to be cared for here.



But it's not just about being cared for, it's about making a decision and sticking with it-something my generation, with our oppressive number of choices, finds difficult. We prefer to date the church-have her around for special events, take her out when life feels lonely, and keep her around for a rainy day. Membership is one way to stop dating churches, and marrying one.

3. We can be overly independent. In the West, it's one of the best and worst thing about us. We are free spirits and critical thinkers. We get an idea and run with it. But whose running with us? And are any of us running in the same direction? Membership states in a formal way, "I am part of something bigger than myself. I am not just one of three hundred individuals. I am part of a body."

4. Church membership keeps us accountable. When we join a church we are offering ourselves to one another to be encouraged, rebuked, corrected, and served. We are placing ourselves under leaders and submitting to their authority ([Heb. 13:7](#)). We are saying, "I am here to stay. I want to help you grow in godliness. Will you help me to do the same?"

Mark Dever, in his book [Nine Marks of a Healthy Church](#), writes,

*Church membership is our opportunity to grasp hold of each other in responsibility and love. By identifying ourselves with a particular church, we let the pastors and other members of that local church know that we intend to be committed in attendance, giving, prayer, and service. We allow fellow believers to have great expectations of us in these areas, and we make it known that we are the responsibility of this local church. We assure the church of our commitment to Christ in serving with them, and we call for their commitment to serve and encourage as well.*

5. Joining the church will help your pastor and elders be more faithful shepherds. [Hebrews 13:7](#) says "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority." That's your part as "laypeople". Here's our part as leaders: "They keep watch over you as men who must give an account." As a pastor I take very seriously my responsibility before God to watch care for souls. At almost every elders' meeting the RCA Book of Church Order instructed us "seek to determine whether any members of the congregation are in need of special care regarding their spiritual condition and/or not making faithful use of the means of grace." This is hard enough to do in a church like ours where there is constant turnover, but it's even harder when we don't know who is really a part of this flock.

To give just one example, we try to be diligent in following up with people who haven't been at our church for a while. This is a challenge. But if you never become a member, we can't tell if you are really gone, because we might not be sure if you were ever here! It's nearly impossible for the elders to shepherd the flock when they don't know who really considers them their shepherds.

6. Joining the church gives you an opportunity to make promises. When someone become a member at University Reformed Church, he makes promises to pray, give, serve, attend worship, accept the spiritual guidance of the church, obey its teachings, and seek the things that make for unity, purity, and peace. We ought not to make these promises lightly. They are solemn vows. And we must hold each other to them. If you don't join the church, you miss an opportunity to publicly make these promises, inviting the elders and the rest of the body to hold you to these promises-which would be missing out on great spiritual benefit, for you, your leaders, and the whole church.

Membership matters more than most people think. If you really want to be a counter-cultural revolutionary, sign up for the membership class, meet with your elders, and join your local church.

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forms us in a variety of ways to serve in different places and positions through diverse avenues.

What is constant, though, is clear. As we turn to Jesus, he transforms us. As we die to ourselves, we live in him. He gives us a new heart—cleansed of sin and filled with his Spirit. He gives us a new mind—an entirely new way of thinking. He gives us new desires—entirely new senses of longing. And he gives us a new will—an entirely new way of living.

The will of God is for every disciple of Jesus to make disciples of Jesus. None of us need to wait for still, small voices or random coincidences or supernatural signs in the sky to realize what God wants us to do with our lives. In fact, we don't have to wait at all. Just like new believers in the Muslim country where Matthew was serving, as soon as we follow Christ, we start fishing for men. And as we do, we discover the distinct delight that is found not in searching for God's will, but in experiencing God's will. Even better than this, we discover that we belong to an entire community of brothers and sisters who are all committed to accomplishing the same purpose.

This is a sample chapter from *Follow Me* by David Platt

## CHAPTER 7

# THE BODY OF CHRIST

**THE ROOM WAS PACKED FULL OF PEOPLE**, and the preacher held the audience in the palm of his hand. "I would like everyone to bow your heads and close your eyes," he said, and we all followed suit.

He then declared, "Tonight, I want to call you to put your faith in God. Tonight, I am urging you to begin a personal relationship with Jesus for the first time in your life. Let me be clear," he said, "I'm not inviting you to join the church. I'm just inviting you to come to Christ." As the preacher passionately pleaded for personal decisions, scores of people stood from their seats and walked down the aisles of the auditorium to make a commitment to Christ.

Yet there was a problem in all of this. These people had been deceived. They had been told that it is possible to make a

commitment to Christ apart from a commitment to the church. The reality, however, is that it's biblically impossible to follow Christ apart from joining his church. In fact, anyone who claims to be a Christian yet is not an active member of a church may not actually be a follower of Christ at all.

To some, maybe many, this may sound heretical. "Are you saying that joining a church makes someone a Christian?" you might ask. Absolutely not. Joining a church most certainly does not make someone a Christian.

At the same time, to identify your life with the person of Christ is to join your life with the people of Christ. To surrender your life to his commands is to commit your life to his church. It is biblically, spiritually, and practically impossible to be a disciple of Christ (and much less *make* disciples of Christ) apart from total devotion to a family of Christians.

But so many people think it is possible—and they try to live like it's possible. It has even become a mark of spiritual maturity today for some professing Christians to *not* be active in a church. "I'm in love with Jesus," people will say, "but I just can't stand the church."

Really?

Isn't the church the bride of Christ? What if I said to you, "Man, I love you, but have I ever told you how much I can't stand your wife?" Would you take that as a compliment?

Similarly, isn't the church the body of Christ? What if my wife said to me, "David, I love you, but I can't stand your body"? I can assure you that I wouldn't take that as a compliment.

It's impossible to follow Jesus fully without loving his bride selflessly, and it's impossible to think that we can enjoy Christ

apart from his body. Jesus goes so far as to identify the church with himself when he asks Saul on the road to Damascus, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"<sup>1</sup> Saul hadn't persecuted Christ himself, but he had persecuted Christians, so in essence Jesus was saying, "When you mess with them, you mess with me."

To come to Christ is to become part of his church. Followers of Jesus have the privilege of being identified with his family. As we die to ourselves, we live for others, and everything Christ does in us begins to affect everyone Christ puts around us. Recognizing this reality and experiencing the relationships that God has designed for his people specifically in the church are essential to being a disciple and making disciples of all nations.

### WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

Unfortunately, as we have diluted what it means to be a Christian in our day, we have also skewed what it means to be a church. The majority of people in America associate a church with a physical building.

"Where is your church?" people may ask, or "Where do you go to church?" It is common today for a pastor to spend millions of dollars renovating and rebuilding his "church." Construction teams of Christians travel overseas to impoverished countries to build "churches." Planting a "church" in our day has become almost synonymous with finding or erecting a building.

We not only identify buildings as churches; we also classify churches according to the programs they offer. This church has a creative children's program, that church has a cool student ministry, these churches have great resources for married couples, and



those churches have helpful group meetings for people who are divorced. Churches often revolve around programs for every age and stage of life.

Association and identification of the church with buildings and programs reflects an overtly consumer-driven, customer-designed approach that we have devised for attracting people to the "church." In order to have an effective, successful "church," we need an accessible building with nice grounds and convenient parking. Once people get to the building, we need programs that are customized for people's children, music that is attractive to people's tastes, and sermons that are aimed at people's needs. When taken to the extreme, this means that when people come to "church," they need a nice parking space, a latte waiting for them when they walk through the door, a themed preschool ministry with a custom-built slide, a state-of-the-art program that provides entertainment for teenagers, a top-notch band that plays great music, and a feel-good presentation by an excellent preacher who wraps things up in a timely fashion at the end of the morning.

But is all of this what God had in mind when he set up his church? Better put, is *any* of this what God had in mind when he set up his church? Identification of churches with buildings may seem common to us, but it's foreign to the New Testament, where we never once see the church described as a physical building. Similarly, the New Testament never once portrays the church as a conglomeration of customized programs. So much of what we associate with the church today is extrabiblical at best (it *adds* to what God's Word says) and unbiblical at worst (it *undercuts* what God's Word says).

When you turn through the pages of the New Testament, you see a very different picture of the church. Instead of a building, you see a body made up of members and a family made up of brothers and sisters who together have died to themselves and are living in Christ. Christians are joined together by Jesus' death, his Spirit, his gospel, his sufferings, and his life.<sup>2</sup> Biblically, a church does not consist of people who simply park and participate in programs alongside one another. Instead, the church is comprised of people who share the life of Christ with each other on a day-by-day, week-by-week basis.

This is the pattern that was set between Jesus and his disciples from the beginning. Jesus loved these twelve men, served them, taught them, encouraged them, corrected them, and journeyed through life with them. He spent more time with these twelve disciples than he did with everyone else in his ministry put together. They walked together along lonely roads; they visited together in crowded cities; they sailed and fished together on the Sea of Galilee; they prayed together in the desert and on the mountains; and they worshiped together in the synagogues and at the Temple. During all of this time together, Jesus taught them how to live and showed them how to love as he shared his life with them.

In the same way, the New Testament envisions followers of Jesus living alongside one another for the sake of one another. The Bible portrays the church as a community of Christians who care for one another, love one another, host one another, receive one another, honor one another, serve one another, instruct one another, forgive one another, motivate one another, build up one another, encourage one another, comfort one another, pray for

one another, confess sin to one another, esteem one another, edify one another, teach one another, show kindness to one another, give to one another, rejoice with one another, weep with one another, hurt with one another, and restore one another.<sup>3</sup>

All of these “one anothers” combined together paint a picture not of people who come to a building filled with customized programs but of people who have decided to lay down their lives to love one another. On behalf of Silas, Timothy, and himself, Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica, “We live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.”<sup>4</sup> Paul, Silas, and Timothy had given their lives to see these Christians stand firm in Christ. Similarly, he called the Philippian Christians “brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown.”<sup>5</sup> The church is a community of Christians who love one another and long for each other to know and grow in Christ.

#### A DIFFERENT KIND OF COMMUNITY

This picture thus leads the church to approach community very differently from the rest of the world. Interestingly, in the Gospels, Jesus only talks with his disciples specifically about the church on two occasions. The first time is in Matthew 16, when Peter confesses Christ as Lord and Jesus responds that the church will be built on that confession. Then, two chapters later, Jesus’ only other instructions concerning the church pertain to church discipline and restoration. According to Jesus, when a brother or sister is wandering into sin, caught in sin, or unrepentant in sin, then the church should confront that person and pull him or her back to Christ. In Matthew 18, Jesus outlines a process for such restoration that eventually leads to removing unrepentant sinners

from the church altogether, if necessary (a process we see enacted in places like 1 Corinthians 5).

Jesus’ teaching on church discipline and restoration should jump off the pages of the Bible in front of us. This is not number 100 on a list of 101 things that Jesus says we should do as his people. This is at the *top* of the list, right after the importance of confessing him as Lord. Church discipline is not supplemental for Christians; it’s fundamental. Church discipline is not optional; it is essential.

Yet we treat it like it’s optional. Images of holy police on the prowl looking for anyone who gets out of line convince us that this is just not a good idea. So we easily create all kinds of reasons for ignoring discipline within the church.

It’s legalistic, we say. It contradicts God’s grace. Don’t you know Matthew 7:1, where Jesus says, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged”? Who do you think you are to point out sin in someone else’s life when your own life is far from perfect? And won’t people leave the church if we start disciplining disciples of Jesus? It’s probably not a recommendation at the top of the church growth plans for a church to start advertising, “We’re a church that disciplines sinners.”

I was eating lunch with a fellow pastor recently, talking about how we were trying to implement a process for church discipline and restoration in the church I pastor, and he said to me, “I’d love to hear how that goes. Give me a call in a few weeks if you’re still there.”

Well, by God’s grace, I’m still here, and though the church I pastor has a long way to go in fully implementing this process,

I'm more firmly convinced than ever that such discipline and restoration is essential for every disciple of Christ and every church that claims his name. Sure, if it's handled wrongly, it can become legalistic. But if handled biblically, church discipline and restoration is one of the clearest expressions of the love of God on earth.

We live in a day when it's easy, popular, and even preferred for people to sit back and say, "Well, what other people do is between them and God. Their sin is their life, their decision, and their responsibility." But aren't you glad this isn't how God responds to us? Aren't you glad that God pursues us despite our sin and pulls us away from that which destroys us? And don't we want people in our lives who will love us enough to look out for us when we begin to walk down a road of sinful destruction?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "Nothing can be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to his sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a brother back from the path of sin."<sup>6</sup> In his classic book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer addresses the easy believism that had run rampant in the church in his day, and he calls Christians back to what it really means to follow Christ. He writes about the preciousness of God's love, grace, and forgiveness for sinners, and he describes how these realities mustn't be cheapened by casual approaches to sin in the church. He says:

If the Church refuses to face the stern reality of sin, it will gain no credence when it talks of forgiveness. Such a Church sins against its sacred trust and walks unworthily of the gospel. It is an unholy Church, squandering

the precious treasure of the Lord's forgiveness. Nor is it enough simply to deplore in general terms that the sinfulness of man infects even his good works. It is necessary to point out concrete sins, and to punish and condemn them. . . . It is essential for the Church to exercise [discipline], for the sake of holiness, for the sake of the sinner and for its own sake. If the Church is to walk worthily of the gospel, part of its duty will be to maintain ecclesiastical discipline. Sanctification means driving out the world from the Church as well as separating the Church from the world.

But the purpose of such discipline is not to establish a community of the perfect, but a community consisting of men [and women] who really live under the forgiving mercy of God. Discipline in a congregation is a servant of the precious grace of God.<sup>7</sup>

God is a gracious Father who seeks after his wandering children, and we reflect his grace when we care for brothers and sisters who are caught in sin.

People may reference Matthew 7:1, but we need to keep reading all the way down to Matthew 7:5. After warning his disciples not to judge "the speck" of sin in someone else's eye when that same sin is "a plank" in their own eyes, Jesus then tells them, "First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." Obviously, God alone has ultimate authority to judge. Yet in Matthew 7:5, Jesus tells his disciples to remove sin in their own lives and then help others

remove sin from their lives. The last thing we need to do when a brother or sister is continually walking into sin is to say, "Well, it's not my place to judge."

I know I have blind spots in my life, and I know I am prone to sin, so I have told the people closest to me, "If you see me walking into sin, caught in sin, or being pulled into sin, please don't use super-spiritual jargon as an excuse for not helping me. Pull me back!"

In 1 Corinthians 5, we learn about a man in the church who was involved in unrepentant and gross sexual immorality (he was sleeping with his mom). Paul told the church at Corinth that they needed to confront this man concerning his sin, and if this man continued to be unrepentant, he needed to be removed from the church altogether. What's particularly interesting in this passage is the way in which God holds the members of the church accountable for that man's sin. Certainly, the members of the church were not accountable for committing the sexual immorality, but they *were* accountable for not addressing it in their midst.

This clearly goes completely against the grain of the way we think. We take a much more individualistic approach to sin. "That sin is that brother's problem," we say to ourselves and each other. But that's exactly what the church at Corinth was saying, and Paul rebuked them for it. This man's sin was that church's problem.

This reality is central to understanding the beauty of biblical, Christ-centered community. In the church, we belong to one another and care for one another in such a way that we are responsible for one another. Being a member of a church means so much more than standing next to someone else and singing some songs

once a week. Being a member of a church means realizing that we are responsible for helping the brothers and sisters around us to grow as disciples of Jesus. In the same way, they are responsible for helping us. We desperately need each other in the daily fight to follow Christ in a world that's full of sin.

But won't some people leave the church (or avoid the church altogether) if we start practicing discipline the way Jesus talks about? Possibly, but we need to remember that the church is *Christ's* body to grow, not ours. I can think of all kinds of things to do that will draw a bigger crowd in the church I pastor. Soften the message. Play cool, secular music. Pass out money. Do a series on sex (seems to be the new fad today). Do something innovative and catchy to draw them in. We can spend our time and resources in the church trying to do what we think is best, or we can spend our time and resources in the church trusting that God knows what is best.

I think about Jesus' words in Matthew 18 and wonder why his initial instruction concerning the church wasn't about creating an environment where people feel warm and welcome, but instead about creating a community where sin is confronted simply, openly, and severely.

Likewise, I wonder why, at the very beginning of the church in Jerusalem, God would actually execute a couple of church members on the spot for their sin. Have you ever noticed Acts 5? In the early days of the church, when it was growing like wildfire and thousands of people were coming to Christ, we learn about Ananias and Sapphira, who were struck dead for their dishonesty. Talk about discipline! God dealt directly with sin in his church,

and we can only imagine the effects. You're probably not going to draw a lot of new (or old) people to your church when people are dying during your offering.

"How do you make the church grow?"

"Oh, you have God kill a couple of people during the offering. That will do it every time."

When I read this story, I can't help but think, *What is God doing? Is he trying to prevent the church from growing?*

But then I read Acts 5:13-14, and I am astounded by what it says. Right after Ananias and Sapphira died, Luke tells us, "No one else dared join [the believers], even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number." This is how God grows the church: through holiness in Christians. God grows his church by creating disciples who are serious about reflecting the righteousness of God and honoring the holiness of God.

We must not buy into the ludicrous ideas that we need to make it easy for people to join the church, hide a commitment to holiness from members in the church, or dumb down talk about the seriousness of sin in the church. If we do these things, we may draw a crowd, but we will miss the very point of the church. Anybody can draw a crowd, but the church is distinct.

All throughout history, God has purposed to raise up a people who by his grace are so holy and so pure and so abandoned in their obedience to him that they dread the thought of disobedience. A people who are so serious about sin that they help each other to avoid it at every turn because they know how dangerous and deadly it is. God has determined to display his character through

a distinct people who show a watching world that he is great, holy, powerful, and pure.<sup>8</sup>

Some may ask, "Well, where is grace in all of this talk of discipline?" And the answer is clear: God's grace is at the heart of church discipline. As disciples of Jesus, we have died to indifference to sin in our own lives and in the lives of people we love. We know that Christ has paid the ultimate price for our sins, and the last thing we want to do is to treat his death as if it is not most precious to us. When we tolerate sin in our lives or in the church, we trample on the sacrifice of Christ. We don't just follow a Savior who pardons our sin; we follow a Savior who purifies us from sin. And we treasure his death enough to treat sin seriously in his church.

For far too long, we have disregarded Christ's commands in the name of church growth. We have ignored passages like Matthew 18, Acts 5, and 1 Corinthians 5, pretending that our catchphrases and creative programs are more effective means for drawing people to the church. As a result, the credit for growth in contemporary Christianity today most often goes to the most pioneering pastor with the most innovative church and the most appealing worship service. It is high time for this to change so that credit for growth in the church can only go to the great and holy God of the universe who displays his glory by inexplicably drawing sinners to himself through the purity of people who've been bought by his blood.

### DATING THE CHURCH

The church is a community of Christians who care for one another enough to discipline one another in sin and restore one another in Christ. But if we're honest, we are extremely hesitant to share our

lives like this. As a result, Christians today are slow to make any commitment to meaningful membership in the church.

When I was a junior in high school, I hadn't had much success on the relationship front. Truth be told, I hadn't had *any* success on the relationship front. Until this one girl came to a camp I attended. Word got around that she thought I was cute, and I thought, *Hmmm . . . there's a girl who thinks I'm cute. What should I do?* I started talking to her, and then I got the nerve up to ask her to go out with me and some friends. By God's grace, she said yes.

We started dating, which consisted of talking on the phone every day and spending time together in different settings, and everything was going well until one night. I decided that I wasn't up for talking on the phone every day anymore, and I didn't really want to work at this relationship. I had plenty of other things going on in my life, so I told this girl that God, my family, and my schoolwork were more important to me than her. Yes, *schoolwork*. Needless to say, my lone dating experience didn't last very long.

That is, until this girl started dating a close friend of mine. Then I thought, *What was I thinking?* Thankfully, in the days to come, I had the opportunity to get to know this girl all over again, to the point where we eventually became best friends and decided to marry each other. Ever since that conversation one night many years ago, my bride has proved very patient with me.

But what about the bride of Christ? There's a trend that has developed known as "dating the church." There's even a great book by Joshua Harris (who, by the way, has written some excellent things about dating in our culture) titled *Stop Dating the*

*Church!* This phrase "dating the church" is a reference to how in our consumer-driven church market we've developed the practice of hopping from one church to the next, attending this church or that church based on how we feel on that particular Sunday morning, or maybe just substituting other spiritual activities for the church in our lives. After all, we're Christians. We're a part of the church around the world. Why would we need to commit to one local church, anyway?

We date the church for a variety of reasons. We're independent, self-reliant, self-sufficient people, and the thought of mutual submission, accountability, and interdependence seems foreign, if not outright frightening. In addition, we're indecisive. We date different churches because we can't decide on the one we really like. It's a consumer mentality applied to church shopping: looking for the best product with the best price on Sunday morning. We're always looking for the better deal, which often leads to a fairly critical attitude toward the church. We can find something wrong with every church we visit, and even when we do settle down somewhere, we're ever cognizant of the things we don't like.

On the whole, we're often indifferent. Is joining and committing to a local church really that big of a deal? Isn't it just a formality, and an unnecessary formality at that? Many professing Christians simply have no idea why dating the church would be wrong and why devotion to the church would be necessary.

It seems like the church itself has contributed to this mentality, though it hasn't always been this way. There have been times in church history when membership in the church was extremely important for Christians. Today, however, scores of people would



tell me that the last thing I need to be talking about in this book is church membership (assuming that I want anyone to read this book). They would tell me that church membership just doesn't mean much today. For example, one of the largest Christian denominations in the United States boasts over forty-three thousand churches with a total of sixteen million members. Yet the average weekly attendance in all of those churches together is approximately six million people. That seems like a lot of people sick every Sunday. Clearly, church membership doesn't mean that much.

In light of all these factors, a lot of people conclude that we should just do away with the whole church membership thing. But according to the Bible, this would be a serious mistake.

#### MEMBERS OF A BODY

All over the New Testament, the church is described as a body in which Christians are parts, or members. In 1 Corinthians 12 alone, Paul refers to Christians ten different times as members of a body: "Just as the *body* is one and has many *members*, and all the *members* of the *body*, though many, are one *body*, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one *body*." He continues, "The *body* does not consist of one *member* but of many. . . . God arranged the *members* in the *body*, each one of them, as he chose. . . . As it is, there are many parts, yet one *body*." Then he concludes, "Now you are the *body* of Christ and individually *members* of it."<sup>9</sup>

At this point, you might think, *Well, of course, we're all members of the body of Christ, meaning the universal body of Christ. Everyone who believes in Christ is a part of the global body of Christ.* And that's

true. Whenever we come to faith in Christ, we join with followers of Christ all over the world and throughout all history. But is that all that Scripture teaches?

It doesn't seem so. Yes, the Bible often talks about the universal church, referring to all Christians of all time. Take the book of Ephesians, for example, where Paul includes nine separate references to the universal church. He writes, "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!"<sup>10</sup> Clearly, Paul is praying that God would receive glory in all believers who are united together in the church throughout all generations.

But references like this in Ephesians to the universal church are nowhere near as common in the Bible as are references to local churches. Out of the 114 times that we see the primary word for the church, *ekklesia*, in the New Testament, at least ninety of them refer to specific local gatherings of Christians. For example, the book of Acts includes the phrase "the church in Jerusalem," 1 Corinthians references "the church of God in Corinth," Galatians addresses "the churches in Galatia," and Paul writes two of his letters to "the church of the Thessalonians."<sup>11</sup> Other times, the Bible even talks about churches that meet in certain homes.<sup>12</sup> Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 16:19, "The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house."

These references to local churches who gather together in specific locations are especially interesting because the Bible never refers to them as part of the universal church or a section of the

global church. Paul never writes “to the part of the church that meets in Corinth.” Instead, he writes “to the church of God in Corinth,” demonstrating to us all throughout the New Testament that believers are joined together in local bodies of Christ that are tangible, visible expressions of the universal body of Christ.

The implication is clear. Believers in the Bible were joined together into local bodies. We never once see the New Testament addressing followers of Christ who don’t belong to a local church. The letters that fill the New Testament are addressed to particular people who have identified as a church in particular places. As a result, any disciple of Jesus who honestly reads the New Testament finds him- or herself asking the question, *To which local body of believers do I belong? If Paul were writing a letter to me today, which church would I be associated with as a member?*

### COMMITTED TO A CHURCH

This association as a member of a local church is massively important for a Christian’s life. Listen to Jesus’ words from Matthew 18, which we considered earlier:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.<sup>13</sup>

Notice Jesus’ reference to “the church.” Jesus certainly isn’t saying that if a believer continues unrepentant in sin, then his sin should be told to the universal body of Christ around the world. Instead, Jesus is referring to a specific local body of believers of which that brother is a part, or member.

Likewise, when Paul addresses the unrepentant brother we considered earlier from the church at Corinth, he says, “Expel the wicked man from among you.”<sup>14</sup> Paul is talking here about removing a brother from the church, and the picture of membership is abundantly clear. A believer is either *in* the church at Corinth (as a member of that church) or *out* of the church at Corinth, and to be out of the church at Corinth (not to be a member of that church) was an extremely serious thing.

The importance of every Christian being a member of a church is also clear when the Bible talks about church leadership. In Hebrews 13, Christians are commanded, “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”<sup>15</sup> This verse illustrates the importance of church membership on two different levels.

For church leaders, this verse is a reminder that God has entrusted certain believers into their care in a local church. This verse reminds me personally that I have an accountability before God for the Christians he has entrusted me to pastor. So who does that include? Am I accountable to God for the care of every single follower of Christ in the universal body of Christ? Surely not in the same way that I am accountable for every single follower of



Christ in the local church that I pastor. As a pastor of The Church at Brook Hills in Birmingham, I am humbled daily by the unique responsibility and accountability that I have before God to watch over the souls of the brothers and sisters who are a part of this particular church.

Similarly, from a Christian's perspective, Hebrews 13:17 is commanding followers of Christ to obey their leaders. Does this mean that every Christian is accountable to follow the direction of every Christian leader in the universal body of Christ? Surely not. This is a specific command for Christians to follow leadership in the local church of which they are a part.

That may make many Christians uncomfortable, though. *Obey my leaders and submit to their authority?* As soon as we hear "obey" and "submit," our minds wander toward images of authoritarian leaders who force their leadership upon people or abusive leaders who misuse their positions to take advantage of those they lead. The church is certainly not blameless on this level in light of seemingly countless stories of church leaders who have been caught stealing money, committing sexual immorality, or indulging their own pride at the expense of God's people. Unfortunately, it is likely that you have been affected personally by such a story.

Further, the idea of submission implies inequality in many minds. People assume that someone who submits must be inferior, and someone who leads must be superior. But this is not how Scripture views submission. The Bible talks about how the Son submits to the Father and the Spirit is sent out by the Son, but God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all equal in value. Similarly, the Bible exhorts children to submit to their parents,

but that doesn't mean children have less inherent worth than their moms and dads.

Instead of authoritarian abuse or gross inequality, the Bible gives us a picture of loving leaders who selflessly serve the church. Jesus tells his disciples that "whoever wants to be first must be slave of all."<sup>16</sup> Authority in God's Kingdom is always a servant authority.<sup>17</sup>

According to Scripture, church leaders are servants of Christ, and they are responsible for teaching his truth, not their own thoughts. Hebrews 13:7 says, "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you." Leaders in the church only have authority to lead inasmuch as they are teaching God's Word, and this is why the author of Hebrews says, "Obey your leaders." If leaders are teaching God's Word, then it only makes sense for followers of Christ to obey leaders in the church. In doing so, they will be obeying Christ. But as soon as church leaders begin to teach anything other than God's Word, they lose their authority to lead God's people.

Such leaders don't just teach God's Word, though; they're set up by God to show what his Word looks like in action. The rest of Hebrews 13:7 says, "Consider the outcome of [your leaders'] way of life and imitate their faith." So God has given leaders to the church not only to communicate his Word, but also to convey what it looks like in practice so that Christians have a model for what it means to follow Christ. This is why the qualifications for church leaders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are so clear: a church leader is intended to be an example worthy of imitation by other Christians.

So is it a good thing for you and me to commit to a church under the leadership of pastors who are faithfully teaching God's Word and consistently modeling God's character? Absolutely. According to Scripture, it's necessary. This is God's good design for every disciple of Jesus.

We could continue to explore the importance of church membership in the New Testament, seeing how church members are accountable for choosing and appointing leaders in a particular local church (Acts 6:2-6), for making sure the gospel is preached in their local church (Galatians 1:6-9; 2 Timothy 4), and for sending out missionaries (Acts 13:1-3). Hopefully, however, it's clear enough at this point that the Bible is flying right in the face of American individualism and church consumerism, bringing every single follower of Christ to ask the question, "Am I an active, accountable member of a local church?"

The question is not simply, "Is my name in a church membership list somewhere?" or "Do I attend a church somewhere?" The question is, "Am I committed to a local church where I am sharing life with other followers of Christ in mutual accountability under biblical leadership for the glory of God?" And according to the New Testament, if I am casually dating (or altogether ignoring) the local church, then I am living contrary to God's design for my life as a Christian. It is impossible to follow Christ apart from commitment to a local church.

#### **LOCAL CHURCH, GLOBAL PURPOSE**

And why would we want to live the Christian life apart from the church, anyway? Sure, churches are not perfect and they have all

kinds of problems, but isn't that because we're in them? If you find a perfect church and join it, be assured that it won't be perfect anymore.

If you claim to be a follower of Christ, I encourage you to consider your present commitment to a local church. Are you sharing your life with other believers in a New Testament kind of way: loving one another, serving one another, caring for one another, and watching out for one another, even to the point of disciplining and restoring one another when necessary? Are you serving Christ under the leadership of good, godly pastors who teach God's Word clearly and model God's character faithfully?

I'm humbled and overwhelmed to even ask these questions, for as a pastor I sense the weight of Christ's design for his church. As men and women die to themselves and live in Christ, God brings them together as brothers and sisters in a family of faith. This community of Christians worships with one another regularly, serves one another selflessly, guards one another graciously, gives to one another generously, and cares for one another compassionately. In such community, we find ourselves living to see each other stand firm in the Lord.

Further, as we lay down our lives for one another in the church, we express the love of Christ to people in the world. Jesus told his disciples, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."<sup>18</sup> God has said that the world will recognize disciples of Jesus by their distinct love for one another. When Jesus prayed for his followers before he went to the cross, he said to the Father, "I pray . . . that

all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”<sup>19</sup>

According to Scripture, when people in the world see the life of Christ in the church, they will believe the love of God for the world. This is yet one more reason why every follower of Christ must be committed to the church: so that the glory of God might be made known to the world. And even *beyond* the world. In the book of Ephesians, which focuses heavily on unity in the church, Paul prays that “through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.”<sup>20</sup> God’s design is to show the greatness of his character to angels and demons alike through the portrait of his church. His plan is to take men and women like you and me, who were once objects of his wrath, and transform us into objects of his affection. God brings us to life, forgiven of sin and filled with his Spirit, and he raises us up to reign with Christ as an eternal pronouncement to the hosts of heaven and the devils of hell that he is all-wise, all-loving, all-powerful, and worthy of all praise from all people for all time.

This is the ultimate reason why every follower of Christ must be a member of a church: because every disciple of Jesus desires the glory of God. You may be tempted to think, *Well, can’t I live for God’s glory on my own?* And there’s certainly a sense in which we are intended to display the glory of God in everything we do. But the message of God’s Word is that God’s glory is most majestically displayed not through *you* or through *me*, but through *us*. God raises up the church and says to all creation in the heavens,

on the earth, and under the earth, “This is the bride and body of my Son, bought and purchased by his blood, to be my people and receive my power and enjoy my presence and declare my praise forever and ever.”

It is a privilege to be a part of the church. To come to Christ is to become a member of his community. It is biblically, spiritually, and practically impossible to be a disciple of Christ (much less *make* disciples of Christ) apart from total devotion to a family of Christians. For as Christians lock their arms and lives together with one another in local churches, nothing has the power to stop the global spread of God’s gospel to the ends of the earth.

# Parkview Church

## Mission

Equipping people to extend the Gospel together  
for the good of our neighbors and our world.

## Vision

Helping people experience the hope and healing power of the Gospel.

## Plan

We equip people to follow Jesus through teaching His Word and building missional community, transforming people to become servant leaders who  
LOVE GOD, LOVE OTHERS, and SERVE THE WORLD.

## Strategic Objectives

### ✓ **Community Groups**

A key part of our mission is to have people living on mission together in community groups. We believe biblical community is essential for every Christian trying to grow in the image of Jesus. According to Parkview Church, a community group is a family of disciple-makers who strive to obey God's Word, care for one another, and live on mission as the sent people of God.

### ✓ **Discipleship Pathway**

Our mandate as a church comes from Jesus' Great Commission. Our desire at Parkview is to have a clear pathway for anyone who comes to Parkview to follow to become a fully devoted follower of Jesus reflected in a life of multiplication.

### ✓ **Care**

We long to be a church where people are cared for by the hope and healing power of the Gospel. While our community groups will serve as the primary place for physical, emotional and spiritual care, we realize there will be some needs that exceed what a community group may be able to provide. We want to put a system of care in place to assist with the next level of care or a concurrent place of care for those in community.

### ✓ **Multiplication**

Our vision is to help people experience the hope and healing power of the gospel. We need to evaluate how we are doing at leading people to Jesus individually and corporately. To accomplish this, we must be individually and corporately be a church that takes what God has given us and shares it with others. Our desire is that each Parkview attendee would experience the joy of helping others discover the hope and healing power of the Gospel. Our desire as a movement is to multiple community groups and worship venues throughout the Iowa City area.