

1 Peter 2:4-10

May 15, 2022

1 Cor. 15:1-5; John 1:11-13

Reason To Be Together

What Is The Church?

A couple of weeks ago I talked about why there is such a thing as the Church. Today we'll consider the purpose of church. Now most think of church as a Sunday thing. A Sunday school teacher asked her little children, as they were on the way to church service, "And why is it necessary to be quiet in church?" One bright little girl replied, "Because people are sleeping." I have several hopes concerning that thought: 1) that I don't put you to sleep, or; 2) if you really need to sleep, that it will be restful.

Just to review: the Church is the Body of Christ – an organism, not just an organization. Church with a capital “C” – meaning the Church established by Christ, the worldwide Church throughout the ages, **is the only entity on earth that carries the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.** Yet the Body of Christ is not invisible, for it is through our local church – church with a small “c” - that the message of truth and grace in Jesus is proclaimed, lived, and passed on. ***For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile, Romans 1:16.*** Now this helps us understand why Christ established His Church. We know that the Church is the “called-out assembly” of those who know Jesus as the Son of the living God, and through whom we have forgiveness of sin and salvation. The Church is God's instrument for sharing this good news – the gospel, the power of God that brings salvation to all who believe.

Is there anything else the Church is or is supposed to be? Let's first clear the air about what the Church is not.

A. The Church is not the building. We say, “Meet me at the church,” and we mean the building. Our church buildings and campus are beautiful. But no matter how lovely it is, the building is not the church and can never be the church. Even if the structure were built of beautiful stones, the stones are dead, and the church Jesus is building is made of living stones - ***you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ, 1 Peter 2:5.*** Just read about Christians in some parts of the world where they gather under a tree, or beside a river, or in a home, and you'll understand that the church is not the building.

The word “church” in the New Testament never refers to a building. It always refers to people. The Greek word **ἐκκλησία** is used in the Bible to describe the community of Christ's disciples. We see this Greek word reflected in Latin languages i.e. “Iglesia,” meaning church. We also learned from Dr. McDonald – at his Wednesday night class - that there is another word from the Bible that has

come down to us to mean church: κυριος – meaning main, Lord, or master - + κον - meaning belonging to = church. That is, “belonging to the Lord.” This is how we got “kirche” in German, “kirk” in Scottish, and “church” in English. We could say church is the gathering where Jesus is the main thing, the Lord, and master. ***God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church... Eph. 1:22.***

B. The Church is not a denomination. Sometimes we speak of the Methodist Church, or the Catholic Church or the Episcopal Church, or the Evangelical Free Church, Nazarene, or Assemblies of God, or Congregational, or Baptist, or Presbyterian, or what have you. That’s a valid use of the English word “church,” but it’s not a meaning found in the New Testament.

Denominations are man-made organizations that allow groups of churches to work together. It’s not bad, nor wrong to be part of a denomination—but the New Testament doesn’t use the word church in this particular way. Maybe you’ve heard the old quip: “What’s the difference between a Baptist and a Methodist? ...” But the fact is, these days most Christians in America pay little attention to denomination. What’s happening at the local church is more important. Foundational beliefs of Christians and practice are more important than denominational identity. In coming days, I believe, it will cost more to be a genuine Christian and we’ll need to know what we really believe and why, because society and culture are fast losing any Christian memory.

Now, let’s take a look at what the Church is (or ought to be). Each of these things I mention today apply to the Church (capital “C”), but they also apply to each local congregation of Christ’s church – of every denomination. Since church is the assembly of those called together by Christ, who is Lord, it is necessary for people to be together, work together, pray together, worship together ... and that happens in the local church. You can’t really practice your Christianity without being in a local church – as distasteful and as hard as that may be.

1. The Church Is: Created By The Good News.

The earliest Christians did not go about arguing for the existence of God or promoting some principles to live by. They spoke about the historical appearance of Jesus and what had happened to them as a result. The Church is really a response to the “good news” of God, proclaimed and enacted by Jesus Christ, and the Church is a part of the gospel, for God desires to save people and to have them in fellowship with one another. St. Paul summarizes it: ***For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 1 Cor. 15:3-5.*** Maybe it’s only those who know in the depth of their souls how great a sinner they are and then have found forgiveness in Jesus, that can appreciate how good the “good news” really is.

The New Testament is filled with references to the Church and it is our best guide for being Church. **We do not glorify the first Christians, but Him whom they glorified.** Because the good news of what God has done in Jesus is still the good news today, the Church still has a vital mission.

2. The Church Is: Created By The Resurrection.

If there was no Easter we wouldn't be here. The impact of Jesus' crucifixion was shattering. Some of his followers fled, others gathered behind locked doors, afraid. But then came the unexpected, un-hoped for experience of Jesus alive again. His appearances varied, but He was alive and in their midst they had no doubt. His resurrection meant that God was the victor over sin and death, that they could be in constant personal relationship with a risen Lord, and they traveled the entire Roman Empire and beyond to proclaim these truths.

And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith, 1 Cor. 15:14.

3. The Church Is: Based On The Activity of the Holy Spirit.

For many Christians there is nothing more mysterious than God manifesting Himself right now in peoples' lives as transforming power. The Acts of the Apostles (in the N.T.) could be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit, for the early Christians attributed their power and energy to the Holy Spirit, promised by Jesus. ***And I will give you another Counselor to be with you forever - the Spirit of truth, John 14:16.***

You may have heard it said that the Church's birthday was when the Holy Spirit came upon believers gathered on Pentecost (this year on June 5). The Church is not maintained by the men's group, or women's group, or the pastors, or the choir or anything else, but the power of God at work in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is found in the true Church, and He uses men and women who find Him to help others find God the Father Almighty and Jesus Christ His only Son. ***...the Counselor, the Holy Spirit ... will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you, John 14:26.*** And if we do not make room for the Spirit, the Spirit will not be found among us.

4. The Church Is: A Royal Priesthood.

As it says, ***...you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light, 1 Peter 2:9.***

God's people have a mission: to proclaim God's great mercy in Jesus Christ who gave Himself to atone for our sins and receive us into His own family. We tell others this great truth by word and deed - in all our living. Again, the Bible is our best guide for how Christians are to be God's chosen people, a holy nation, a royal priesthood. As they had one Lord, one faith, one baptism, so do

we. **As they proclaimed, Jesus Christ is Lord, so do we.** As they sometimes failed to live as they ought, we do also. But as God forgave, restored, and empowered them through the life of the Spirit, He does so likewise with us.

5. The Church Is: The Household of God.

Scripture tells us that all people are God's creation and have been created in the likeness of God.

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, John 1:12. Only through receiving and believing in Jesus do we become true children of God. That is because Jesus was and is the only Son of God who can heal us of our sinful nature and regenerate the image of God in us. God's family consists of those who have experienced a spiritual rebirth through Jesus and are now on the path of being made more in the likeness of God's Son. ***Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known." But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is, 1 John 3:2.¹***

Since the Church is the family of God, we do not get to select the other members ... it's like your brothers and sisters ... you didn't choose them. In God's family we must operate on the basis of relationships, offering grace to one another ... even with those we don't like. Our model is Jesus and how He relates with the Father, the Apostles, and with us. ***Do not speak harshly to an older man, but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers, to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters - with absolute purity, 1 Tim. 5:1-2.***

6. The Church is a Fellowship.

Flowing from God's household is fellowship – a togetherness that is stronger than simply sharing work or activities. We often think of potluck meals, food and fun. Certainly sharing meals is "breaking bread." ***They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers, Acts. 2:42.*** But it's the prayer and devotion to the apostles' teaching that really adds substance to our souls and our time together. Fellowship is a gift of God given to believers to really make them family and effective in their mission. **Fellowship involves prayer and support for one another, sharing of burdens in service to the Lord, building harmony and unity. *Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers, Gal. 6:10.***

Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind, 1 Peter 3:8, and as St. Paul writes ... making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, Eph 4:3.

Never Forget

Although we know that we are a new creation in Christ, we still struggle to put aside our sinful and selfish natures. We still get distracted from our purpose as church: distracted by our particular ministries, our particular likes and dislikes, or the other members of God's household that we don't get along with. It is so easy to make idols out of preaching, music, buildings, or any other thing we do or have in the name of Christ. That's why **we must never forget by whom, how and why we have been formed. ...you are ... God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light, 1 Peter 2:9.** We're not God's special possession because we're especially wonderful, or talented, or good. Never forget that we have been redeemed from the darkness of sin, not because of what we've done, but because of what God has done for us through Christ. Never forget to declare praises of Him and that we're on the winning team.

Let us never forget that: *Once [we] were not a people, but now [we] are the people of God; once [we] had not received mercy, but now [we] have received mercy, 1 Peter 2:10.*

¹ See also Heb. 2:10-12.