
8 Things Everyone Should Know about Church

01

The Challenge the Church Faces Today

RECENT STUDIES have demonstrated that society isn't as interested in church as it once was. At least in the United States, the majority of Americans are either unchurched (meaning they have not attended a religious service in the last six months), or dechurched (meaning they used to attend religious services but have chosen to stop).¹ Looking ahead, it seems as if the trend toward churchlessness is only going to continue. According to the Barna Group,

Looking to future generations does not paint an optimistic picture for the importance of churchgoing. Millennials (those 30 and under) stand out as least likely to value church attendance; only two in 10 believe it is important. And more than one-third of Millennial young adults (35%) take an anti-church stance.²

Couple this forecast with what has been called the Secularization Thesis, the idea that as a society modernizes, it loses religion (resulting in children viewing church as less important than their parents), and it's not difficult to envision a world where only a fraction of society participates in organized worship.

Although there seems to be a clear connection between the modernizing of a society and its secularization, the Secularization Thesis has recently undergone some serious criticism. You've probably heard someone say, "I'm spiritual, not religious" or "I'm not really interested in organized religion, but I have my own way of worshipping God." These sentiments seem to be on the rise today, and they pose a challenge to the idea that modern societies

necessarily become secularized. In truth, it looks like modernization doesn't always lead to secularization but to pluralization.

As a society progresses and diversifies, it becomes more and more pluralistic. "You worship God however *you* want, but your religious truth doesn't have to be *my* religious truth." Religious pluralism doesn't allow for one true church or religion, and it sees most religious beliefs (granted they don't harm others) as equally valid. This means that Christians aren't just going to be challenged with having to answer the question, "What makes the church *important* in a modern world?" but also, "What makes your church *right*?"

Can you answer those questions for yourself? In this resource, we are going to explore some of what the Bible has to say about the Church. The goal is to gain a better understanding of what the church is and to be able to identify the church when we see it. Of course, no church on earth today is perfect, but long ago Jesus gave this promise to one of his disciples: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

Despite the challenges faced by the church today, we have the promise of Jesus Christ. The good news is that his kingdom—the church—won't be swallowed up by secularism or pluralism. Jesus supernaturally protects his church from destruction, and we can rest assured that right now Jesus' church is thriving throughout the world. Since we have this promise from our Lord himself, our concern isn't whether or not there is such a thing as the "church," but rather, what exactly is the church, and where can we find it today?

¹ <https://www.barna.com/research/church-attendance-trends-around-country/>

² https://www.barna.com/research/americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church/#.VKS_33arTIU



Four Things the Church Is

THROUGHOUT THE history of the Christian church, believers have recognized four characteristic traits of the community of faith established by Jesus Christ. The church is singular, sanctified, spread abroad, and scriptural. It's important that you understand these four attributes of the church because they highlight fundamental truths about the nature of the church.

First, the church of Jesus Christ is singular, or one. Yes, it is true that there are many different kinds of churches, and hundreds of denominations, but there is really only one church of which Jesus Christ is the head. The apostle Paul said, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor. 12:27). Since Jesus is one, and he is the head of the church, there can only be one church, consisting of everyone who truly embraces the good news of Jesus Christ. Hence, Paul could say again, "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6). Our singular unity as a church is grounded in the one faith handed down to us through the gospel and administered to us in baptism.

This singular church is also sanctified or holy. Now, when we look at the church from our perspective, it is sometimes difficult to call it a holy institution. We hear stories every day about churches and ministry leaders doing things that taint the reputation of Christianity. What do we mean, then, when we say the church is holy? The church isn't inherently holy, but she is made holy because of her union with Jesus Christ: because Jesus is the head of the church, and the church is his body—the church is sanctified by her belonging to Jesus, the Holy One. This is why Christians (even ones struggling with sin) are often referred to in the New Testament as saints or holy ones (1 Cor. 1:2; Eph 1:1). The church's holiness is rooted in God's redeeming action,

not her perfection. During the time of the Reformation, there was a slogan that was used to highlight that Christians are simultaneously righteous (justified), and yet still sinful: *simul justus et peccator!* Similarly, the church is holy now through Christ's work despite the sin that still exists in her.

The third characteristic trait of the church is that it is spread abroad or catholic. Sometimes people mistake the word catholic as referring to the Roman Catholic Church. In actuality, the word catholic simply means universal. The true church isn't confined to a corner of the world, or some particular nation (as it was under the Old Testament with the Jews), but it is one, holy, world-wide church that has existed for thousands of years! Jesus indicated that his church wouldn't be relegated to one place when he told the woman at the well, "the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father... the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him" (Jn. 4:21 & 23).

Lastly, the church of Jesus Christ is scriptural or apostolic. Paul said that the church was built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20). The message of Scripture, rooted in the teaching of the apostles, is the foundation of the church. That teaching, sometimes called the rule of faith, consists of the cardinal apostolic doctrines handed down to the church concerning the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To say that the church is apostolic is to say that it exists in continuation of the apostolic faith grounded in the gospel.

To be a part of the church is to be a part of this one, holy, catholic and apostolic community!

03

Three Markers to Find the Right Church

NOWADAYS IT isn't hard to find what you're looking for. We have smartphones that can track down the location of the nearest gas station or supermarket. If we're looking for a good restaurant, the Yelp app is just a click away, and in no time we can be dining at a top-rated eatery. So long as you know what it is you want, satisfying a need or a craving is easier than ever. Picking a church, however, isn't like picking a restaurant. Sure, we might have particular preferences, *I like this kind of worship music, or prefer these kinds of programs*, but locating Jesus' body on earth isn't as simple as choosing between Mexican or Chinese (as complicated as *that* decision can be at times!). There are three primary factors you need to consider when choosing a church, and these are sometimes called the *marks of the church*.

First, biblical churches are churches that faithfully teach the Scriptures. It is absolutely imperative that this particular marker be present in the church. One could even go as far as to say that churches that don't faithfully teach the Scripture *should not be considered churches*. This is because the word of God creates and sustains the church. Just as God created the world through his speech (Gen. 1:1-3), God speaks the church into existence through the proclamation of the gospel.

- "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (Jn. 17:17)
- "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17)
- "You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23)
- "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (Js. 1:18)

Do you see why having the word is so important for the church, and why the church cannot exist apart from it? Through the word we are given spiritual life! A wordless church is a *dead church*.

Second, biblical churches are created by the word *and nourished by the ordinances Jesus left for his flock*. These two ordinances are Baptism and the Lord's Supper, or Communion. Both Baptism and the Lord's Supper were immediately instituted by Jesus Christ as signs of his gracious work on our behalf (Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 11:23). These divine signs are used by God to seal his grace to us in a tangible way. I like to use the analogy of a wedding ring. When two people get married, they exchange rings as a sign of their love and commitment to each other. These rings are a tangible reminder of the promise they have made and will keep. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs of God's promises to us—namely his promise in the gospel to forgive our sins and nourish us with the body and blood of Jesus by faith. This second mark of the church is integral to our growth in godliness. The word of God creates faith in us; these signs continue to nourish and sustain the faith created by the word.

Third, biblical churches practice what is called church discipline. This idea comes from Jesus' words in Matthew 18:15-20. Every Christian plays a role in this insofar as each of us is commanded to "exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that no one may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:12-13). When looking for a church, don't settle for a congregation that doesn't take sin seriously by neglecting this crucial mark of the church established by Jesus. Churches that are afraid to preach against sin and don't exhort the members of their congregation who have fallen into sin are bound to be overrun by sin (1 Cor. 5:6).

04

The Structure of the Heavenly Assembly

ACCORDING TO the Bible, the church is a manifestation of God's kingdom on earth (Isa. 9:7; Matt. 13:47; Col. 1:13). A helpful way of thinking about this is with the analogy of a foreign embassy. Foreign embassies are stationed in different parts of the world to represent their home nation to the country wherein they reside. The church is an earthly manifestation of God's kingdom under the Lordship of Jesus that represents God's will and work in the world.

Because God has always ruled over his people, he has manifested his kingdom in different ways throughout the history of the Bible. When we open the first few chapters of the Bible, we read about Adam and Eve, God's first "kingdom representatives" called to care for the creation (Gen. 1:26-27). Over time God set his kingdom up among the Israelites, and he governed them by kings and prophets. In the New Testament, Jesus sent out his apostles to establish local "kingdom outposts" under the oversight of elders and deacons. Healthy, established churches, should have elders and deacons.

Elders are men who are *called, competent,* and have godly *character* (1 Tim. 3:1-7). They are called first and foremost by God. This call often manifests itself through an internal desire to serve the church by caring for the spiritual needs of the people gathered there. This "internal call" should be confirmed by the church community. Ordinarily, as an individual serves the spiritual needs of the church, others are able to observe and affirm them in their desire to serve as an elder. The prerequisites for being legitimately called are competency and character. The Bible teaches that elders must be *able to teach*. Some elders are particularly set apart to this

task (often the primary preaching pastor, for example). This means elders must be grounded in the Scriptures in order to instruct in sound doctrine. Competency isn't enough, however. It is necessary that elders be men of character, respected by both believers and unbelievers for their upstanding life of faith and charity.

Deacons must also be persons of character who are called and competent (1 Tim. 3:8-13). The primary difference between elders and deacons is that the elders oversee the spiritual needs of the congregation, focusing on moral and doctrinal matters for the health of the church, while deacons zero in on the physical needs of the congregation. Deacons are a special class of *servants* within the church, and side-by-side with the elders, they make sure the church is holistically provided for.

We might call elders and deacons the *officers* of the church. They aren't the only officers, though! Every baptized Christian participates in what is known as the general office shared by all believers. We are a *royal priesthood*, called by God himself to use our gifts in the service of the King. God gathers his people into his heavenly embassy week-by-week, and then he sends us out into the world to represent our King as his ambassadors.

This is the church structure that we find in the New Testament. Jesus is the ultimate king of the church (not the senior pastor!), and he rules over the church through officers, elders and deacons who care for his kingdom on earth. These officers are meant to serve *you*, the believer, reminding you of God's gracious promises in Scripture, and ministering to you during times of spiritual and physical need.

05

Bricks and Body Parts

DID YOU know that each member of the church is vitally important for the church's corporate health? When the New Testament talks about an individual Christian's participation in the church, it treats that participation as something necessary for the structural soundness of the kingdom God is building on earth. Two metaphors bring this out in the Scriptures: the metaphor of the church as a new temple, and the church as Christ's body.

If you were going to build a temple for God, what kind of materials might you use? Of course, if we had unlimited resources we might create something similar to Solomon's temple, bathed in gold and littered with precious stones, a work of master artistry.

Right now Jesus is building God's temple on earth, and the materials he has chosen to use might come as a surprise to you. He's not building with golden bricks or precious diamonds, Jesus' temple-on-earth is being constructed with very ordinary looking *living stones*. Peter said, "As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 2:4-5).

Stop and think about this for a moment. Christ is building a glorious temple on earth *right now*, and you're one of the bricks that helps to make the building stand out. This highlights the importance of being connected to the corporate church. Individually, you are just one stone, a part of something much larger. Imagine a house that had a strong foundation but was missing some of the walls. Would anyone want to live there? The temple is God's house, where he chooses to live, and together individual Christians make up the bricks of the edifice. It's only *together* that the building begins to take shape!

You aren't just a brick, but you're also a body part. After

making the point that the *one* body has many different parts (hands, ears, eyes, etc.), each of which plays a very important role, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12:21-26:

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

No member of the church is dispensable because each of us have been gifted by God in unique and complimentary ways in order to encourage and build up our family in Christ. A person who wants to serve Jesus while separated from the local church will be as effective as a severed hand or runaway foot! God has placed you in his body as an integral part with a special function.

This point is so important that it's repeated again in the New Testament. Paul said, "Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love" (Eph. 4:15-16).

Every brick in Jesus' temple is important; each part is integral to the whole!



The Church's Mission Statement

DOES YOUR church have a mission statement? You know, a short blurb that describes the purpose for which it exists. Without a clear mission, we can begin to slip into what's called *mission creep*. Mission creep happens when the church (or any organization, for that matter) begins to lose sight of its original purpose. When this occurs, we begin to invest in things that are at the periphery of our ultimate objective. Having spent some time thinking about what the church is and how we can find it, it's important that we now explore the mission of the church.

Bible professor Edmund Clowney asked, "What mission does the church have? Is it called to save the planet? To heal the sick of the world? To join wars of liberation and overthrow oppressive regimes? Our answer, as believers, must come from the Word of the Lord."¹ Fortunately, when we open up the Scriptures, we have a clear mission for the church delivered to her by none other than Jesus himself. It's sometimes called the Great Commission:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Mt. 28:18-20).

First, it's important to note that the church's mission is rooted in Jesus' authority and presence. As the King of heaven and earth, wielding all authority, Jesus sends his subjects out into the world as his ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20). That might sound a little daunting, but we also have the promise of the King to comfort us: *I am with you always*. Jesus sends his people into the world and is present with us through the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14:16).

Under the authority of King Jesus and by the grace of the Holy Spirit, the church has one primary objective: *to make disciples*.

A disciple is like a pupil or apprentice. There is a *holy education* which the church offers to the world, and the curriculum centers on Jesus Christ. Jesus alludes to this when he says, "*teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*" In other words, the church isn't just passing on this education so that pupils can grow in knowledge, but that they can grow in love. In the Bible, observing doesn't just mean watching or hearing, but following. The church makes disciples of Jesus by teaching the whole world the good news of salvation and how to live as a part of Christ's redemptive kingdom in the present. Whatever pithy statements churches come up with to describe their mission, one thing is clear: they must emphasize Jesus' word and works on our behalf, helping us to live in light of them.

Here we also see the close relationship between the mission of the church and the marks of the church which we looked at previously. Faithfulness to the Word and ordinances of Jesus is central to the mission of the church. This is why Jesus included *baptizing* in the Great Commission: it's an inseparable part of the church's work in making disciples.

If you have been baptized, you are a pupil in the school of Christ, and you get to participate in the great work of enrolling others into the heavenly university! That doesn't necessarily mean you need to go and start teaching classes on the Bible. Remember, each brick and body part has its own distinct role in the church! You might contribute to the making of disciples by opening up your home in hospitality or giving generously to missionaries, but *all of us* play an important role in the church's mission!

¹ Edmund P. Clowney *The Church* pg. 158

Do I Have to Go to Church?

I RECENTLY heard someone explain that they were a part of the church and therefore didn't need to be a part of a church. After all, if I am one of the bricks in the temple, do I really need to go to a particular building to worship God? And what about membership; do I need to go through some process of officially joining a church? Increasingly, the answer to these questions among professing believers seems to be no. Many Christians have a network of affiliations with various ministries and churches, but they themselves aren't attached to a particular body of believers. Does God want you to be a member of one local church?

Although there isn't a verse in Scripture that says, "And the people of Ephesus took the five-week new members' class and were received as official members!" What we find in the New Testament clearly demonstrates that individual Christians were a part of local congregations where they had some type of official status or membership. Through baptism, they were identifying not only with Jesus but with Jesus' family, the church. The newly baptized entered into a binding relationship with God *and* his people. This set the stage for being able to fulfill the various calls in the New Testament to the Christian community. Calls like:

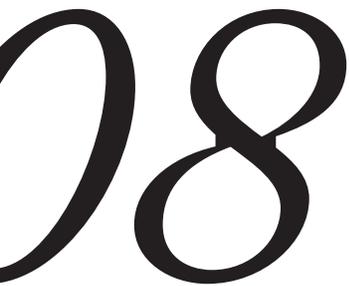
→ "Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb.3:13)

→ "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Heb. 13:17)

→ "Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality" (Rom. 12:9-13)

→ "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2)

For the New Testament believers, weekly Christian fellowship under the apostles' teaching was a non-negotiable (Acts 2:42). It provided the foundation for fulfilling the various exhortations to serve one another within the church. It also allowed for accountability and submission to qualified and ordained leaders (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-16). To forsake this is to set aside what the apostles themselves delivered to the church as the normal structure God ordained for discipleship. Being connected to a church through membership, under the oversight of elders, is something every Christian should long for, and church on Sunday is integral to our Christian growth.



A Word to the Wounded

IF YOU'VE EVER been hurt by the church, I'd like to speak to you. It's easy to be disillusioned when hearing about a unified, sanctified, heavenly embassy, if your experience of a Christian church is the opposite. Unholy division and even abuse at the hands of Christian leaders is an all too common occurrence. With the rise of social media, it's a problem we are becoming increasingly aware of. For some people, the last place on earth they want to be is in a church because of some horrible experience they've had there. If that doesn't describe you, there's a good chance it describes someone close to you. Is there any hope?

Individual churches, if they depart from the gospel, will degenerate and eventually die. In the book of Revelation, Jesus gave a series of warnings to local congregations that were straying from the truth (Rev. 2:1-3:22) and in danger of being discarded (Rev. 2:5). Paul told the Galatians that they were turning away from the gospel and near to being severed from Christ because of their unbelief (Gal. 1:6; 5:4). The fact is, individual churches can fail and may have even failed you. This doesn't mean that Jesus is through with the church as a whole, though.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus promised that he would build his church and that the gates of hell wouldn't prevail against it. One day he is going to present the church to himself as a beautifully adorned bride (Eph. 5:27). What this means is that Jesus isn't done with the church, and you shouldn't be either. Others may not be able to understand the depths of your pain, but Jesus can.

When Jesus was on earth, religious authorities constantly mistreated him. They mocked his mother,

suggesting that she slept around (Jn. 8:41); accused him of performing his miracles by the power of Satan (Mt. 12:24); ridiculed the company he kept (Mt. 11:19); lied about him (Mk. 14:57-58); and condemned him (Mk. 14:64). When Jesus was at his most vulnerable point, shamefully crucified, the religious leaders continued mocking him. "He saved others; he cannot save himself!" (Mk. 15:31). No person has endured more violent abuse at the hands of "church leaders" than Jesus did, and because of that he can comfort you like no one else can. Other people may be unaware of what you've had to endure, but Jesus isn't. He has wounds, too (Rev. 5:6), and promises that through his suffering you can find healing (Isa. 53:5).

The Lord who was crucified at the hands of organized religion didn't abandon organized religion but bled to give life to his church. Of course, if you're in an abusive church where leadership uses its power to coerce, intimidate, or take advantage of you and others, *it's time to leave*. True shepherds are servants who model Christ's love and affection for the sheep. False shepherds use and abuse the flock (Eze. 34). But Christ the chief shepherd raises up true shepherds to care for his people (Eph. 4:11). Get plugged into a church where the word is faithfully taught, where the ordinances of Jesus are administered properly, and where everyone *including the leadership* is subject to the church's care and discipline. Proper accountability provides safety for everyone, and healthy churches are a blessing from God. If you've been wounded by one church, don't give up on the church altogether. So long as Christ is her midst, the church can always have hope.

Discussion Questions

1. THE CHALLENGE THE CHURCH FACES TODAY

- Spend some time trying to define secularism and pluralism. Where do you see these ideologies posing a threat to the church today?
- What are some other challenges you believe the church is up against today?
- At this early stage in our study, how might you answer the question, "What exactly is the church?" Write down a list of traits that you believe should characterize the church, then share together as a group.

2. FOUR THINGS THE CHURCH IS

- Think back to the first group of discussion questions. How did the traits you listed for the church match with or differ from the four attributes of the church described here?
- Of the four attributes of the church, which one of them do you have the most difficulty with?
- What do you think of that Reformation slogan *simul justus et peccator*? Do you ever feel the tension in your own life between being a child of God, and yet still struggling with sin? How does this play out on the larger scale when considering the church as holy?

3. THREE MARKERS TO FIND THE RIGHT CHURCH

- If you were to make a list of the marks of the church prior to reading this section, what would they be? Are there any that you would add to these three, and why?
- Do you think one of these marks is more important than the others for the health of the church? Which one, and why?

- Have you ever seen a church practice the third mark, discipline? Why do you think church discipline is so uncommon in our day today?

4. THE STRUCTURE OF THE HEAVENLY ASSEMBLY

- Should individuals be able to call themselves to the ministry? What's the danger in having someone claim they're called without having the affirmation of the church?
- What's the danger of having church leaders who have competency but not character? What about ones who have character but not competency?
- Read through the list of qualifications for elders and deacons in 1 Timothy 3 and discuss the various requirements given by Paul.

5. BRICKS AND BODY PARTS

- When Peter calls us living stones in God's house, he's drawing from the Old Testament concept of the Jerusalem temple. What are the similarities and differences between the temple in the Old Testament and the temple Christ is building now through us?
- Read Ephesians 4. Discuss the various gifts outlined in that passage. What gifts do you see in your church? What gifts might you have that God has given you to serve others with?
- Paul stresses that every member of the body plays an important function. Is this your current understanding of church participation? Do you see yourself as an integral part of the body of Christ? If not, why do you think that is?

6. THE CHURCH'S MISSION STATEMENT

- Pretend you are on a planning committee for a brand-new church plant, and you're tasked with coming up with a mission statement for your church in less than 10 words. Spend some time crafting a statement, then share it with the group.
- What kind of things does being a disciple emphasize? Would you say that churches today are more focused on making converts than they are disciples? What's the difference?
- What are some ways that you think you personally participate in the Great Commission?

7. DO I HAVE TO GO TO CHURCH?

- Evaluate this statement: *Don't just go to church, be the church!* What are the strengths and weaknesses of this line of thinking?
- Have you ever been an official member of a church? What were some of the challenges and benefits that came along with this?
- Think through some of the "one another" passages in the New Testament. What are some practical ways you can grow in these exhortations?

8. A WORD TO THE WOUNDED

- Take a moment to pray for those who have been hurt by the church. If you feel comfortable sharing and asking for prayer, go ahead. If you have someone in your life who you think needs prayer for this, pray for them.
- What safety structures do you think churches need to have in order to protect from spiritual abuse?
- What's the difference between a local congregation failing and the church as a whole failing? How can we help people who have been hurt by particular churches to feel safe returning to a worshipping community?

