

January 4, 2014

What is the Church?

Ephesians 3:8 – 11; Acts 2:41 – 47

This morning we are beginning a short four week series on the question of what is the church. And it is a really important question for at least three reasons. The first is that this word or idea has come to mean so many different things to different people that if you put the answers to the question side by side you begin to wonder if you're even talking about the same thing. Sometimes the answer is the church is the universal body of believers in Jesus through all history spiritually united to God in Christ. Sometimes the answer refers to the social institution of organized Christian religion. Others see it as a local group of Christians united around their common faith in Jesus and love for each other; or even simply two or more people engaged in a bible study at Starbucks. Still others view it as the building where Christians can meet and do stuff. Some see it primarily as a particular meeting or event at a building, usually on a Sunday morning, consisting of preaching, praying, singing, giving, and other events.

The second reason this question is important is because the Bible makes it important. Although we don't run into the word 'church' at all in the Old Testament, we encounter that word over 70 times in the New Testament, beginning with Jesus Himself in Matthew 16: *And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.* And then throughout the rest of the New Testament, we run into the word over and over and over again. The book of Acts is all about the history of the early church. Most of the apostolic letters are written to the church. Paul talks about husband/wife relationships in terms of Christ and the church. We hear about the church in people's home and the fact that the church is the body of Christ. We have seven letters in Revelation written to the seven churches. Obviously, we need to understand just what is the church according to the Bible. Evidently it is an important concept here.

The third reason is because there has been a huge rise in the numbers of people who are self-identified Christians opting out of whatever they view as 'church' to do something else. A couple of years ago there was an article in a Christian magazine that took a look at this phenomenon. *An alarming number of Christians are staying home on Sunday mornings and the trend is affecting today's church. Believers who have become "stayaway saints" are alternately worrying and exciting church leaders, pointing to what is being seen as either a serious threat to the spread of the gospel or the actual cusp of a revolution that could usher in the sort of revival many have prayed for and dreamed of for years.* A recent study by The Barna Group, a California-based Christian research organization, found that about 13 million Americans whom the researchers identified as being born again were "**unchurched ... not having attended a Christian church service, other than for a holiday ... at any time in the past six months.**" Revival historian and teacher Andrew Strom found painful evidence of "**a worldwide phenomenon.**" After speaking on radio about what he has dubbed the "Out of Church Christians," and writing about them in one of his e-newsletters, he was bombarded with responses from people around the world telling him, "**Me too.**"

I want to do three things this morning. I'd like to ask and answer three questions: **What is the church? What is the purpose of the church? And what does that look like for us?** What is the church? What is the purpose of the church? And what does that look like for us? First of all, what is the church? What is the Bible talking about when it talks about the church? The word translated in the New Testament as church is the Greek word *ekklesia*, and its primary meaning is simply '**assembly**'. It is synonymous with the Hebrew word in the Old Testament *kahal*, or assembly, which the Bible uses often to describe the gathering of the people of God. At its root, *ekklesia* means '**the called out ones**'. In ancient Greece, when there were serious matters for eligible citizens to consider, they would summon the *ekklesia* – or call the assembly out to the public place of debate, and the word *ekklesia* gradually came to mean the corporate assembly of those individuals. By the time of the New Testament, this is what the word meant – the assembly. The writers of the New Testament were taking their cue from the Old Testament in referring to the people of God – the assembly. The English word we use – church – actually comes from another Greek word, *kuriakon*, which means '**belonging to the Lord**'. And that is a pretty good description of who we are as disciples of Jesus.

The problem with that however, is that the word actually described a holy place or a temple and so the implication was that the church is simply a building. But what the writers of the New Testament were trying to convey using *ekklesia* was the idea of the church as the **people**, not the **building**, of God. They were describing the assembly of the people of God, not a physical structure. This idea runs all the way through Scripture. From Genesis to Revelation, God is all the time dealing mainly with His people, the assembly of God. That's the story from Genesis to Malachai; that's the story from Matthew to the Revelation. God's plan and purpose center on His people, and we read in Genesis about how He created a people for Himself. In the Garden we see a man and a woman who walk with God and talk with God; with whom He has perfect, deep, intimate, and open fellowship. His intention from the beginning was to have a people for Himself. We also see how sin blew all this up. But God didn't abandon His plan. The whole rest of Scripture centers on the redemption and restoration of His people to Himself.

When you look at the grand scope of Scripture, when you follow it from beginning to end, what you see front and center as main players on the stage are the people of God. In the Old Testament we see Israel as the people of God; in the New Testament we see the church as the people of God. We are not talking about two different kinds of people. They have one identity – the people of God. One group lived in the era of the promise of God – the other lives in the era of the fulfillment of those promises. When we follow the flow of redemptive history, and we move from the epic of promise into the epic of fulfillment, God's people are no longer defined genealogically, they are defined Christologically. Once God's people were recognized by their descent from Abraham – now they are recognized by their descent from Christ.

The same language is even used in both testaments. Speaking to His people through Isaiah the prophet, God says: *But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, My friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, "You are My servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off.* And speaking to His people through the apostle Paul God says, *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him.* In both cases, the people of God are those chosen by God to be saved. In fact, contrary to what some people think, salvation for the people of God is exactly the same whether you are from the Old Testament or in the New Testament. Clear back in Genesis we are told that it was by faith that Abraham was justified; just as we are told in the New Testament that our justification too is by faith.

What we should understand is that throughout the Bible you an ongoing revelation of the people of God. A people chosen by Him; called by Him; redeemed by Him; justified by Him; saved by Him; to glorify Him. This is a consistent biblical theme. So to answer the question: What is the church? - we would simply say that **the church is the people of God** – all those whom God has chosen, called, redeemed, and justified – all those who by faith have put their trust in Jesus. It doesn't matter if you attend church services everyday of the week. If you have not put your trust in Christ, you cannot be part of the church. On the other hand, if you consider yourself a Christian but you never or rarely gather with the people of God, you're probably not. And we'll get to that shortly.

That leads us to the question, **What is the purpose of the church?** Again, a big question that would take more time than we have to fully answer. We'll just look one passage here to answer this. Turn to Ephesians chapter 3, starting in verse 8: *To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan [administration] of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that He has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.* There is really a lot here but let me break it down a bit.

Paul is telling us that his job was to preach the gospel – the unsearchable riches of Christ – and by doing that to shed light on something he calls the 'mystery hidden for ages'. In other words Paul preached the gospel in order that the plan of God would be unveiled in history for us to see. The gospel is not just about getting people saved – it is the revelation of the eternal purpose and plan of God. And Paul unveils that plan in verses 10 and 11: *so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that He has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord,* Ephesians 3:10-11

The plan of God is to display, through the church, His manifold wisdom to the rulers and authorities. The word Paul uses here translated *manifold* means *'many colored'*. It seems to indicate that God's wisdom is multi-faceted, many-sided, able to reveal itself in a multitude of forms according to whatever His eternal purpose requires. So the picture Paul paints for the saints is the wisdom of God as an incredibly intricate, complex, and many-colored, universe-sized tapestry that God is, through the church, weaving and putting on display for the rulers and authorities. Once completed, this tapestry will demonstrate the omnipotent, unmatched wisdom of God. You might say that history exists to display the incredible wisdom of God.

And the interesting thing is, the display of His wisdom isn't even for us – it is for those rulers and authorities Paul mentions in verse 10. All the drama of history from creation to consummation is meant to show them the greatness of God's wisdom. We are just part of the tapestry. So who are they? The short answer is that they are both the good angels described in the Bible as the host of heaven, and the evil, angelic powers that are bent on the destruction of God's creation. ***Apparently it is God's good intention to openly display His manifold wisdom to this audience by means of frail, weak, sinful men whom Christ has gloriously redeemed and made holy.*** I don't think there can be any better way of demonstrating God's matchless wisdom than taking dirt and creating something that astounds the angels – and terrifies the demons.

The really important thing to understand from this is that this tapestry is displayed through Christ's redeemed church. **The church is God's culminating project if you will.** The church exists so that the holy angels would stand in awe of the wisdom of God – and the demons of hell would gnash their teeth in impotent rage at the display of His wisdom, and all of heaven would worship in admiration and praise. ***through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.*** The purpose of the church is to be the vehicle through which the glory and majesty and wonder of God is manifested throughout the universe.

If you go to the end of the story you see a marvelous picture of this. In the book of the Revelation, John is given this great vision of the church as the Bride of Christ: *Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.*" Revelation 21:9-11 And then John goes on to describe the beauty of the foundation and the walls, its length and height and breadth; and he says, *The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel...And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.*

So the church is the people of God – all those whom God has chosen, called, redeemed, and justified – all those who by faith have put their trust in Jesus. And the purpose of the church is to display the manifold wisdom of God to the rulers and authorities. So what does that look like for us? How does the church display the glory of God? To see that we'll have to look at one more passage. It is in Acts 2 where Peter has just preached his first sermon on the day of Pentecost, and Luke records: *So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.* Acts 2:41-47

Here's a first-hand description of the what the real church looks like. This is how the glory of God is manifested in the world. When Luke says they were **devoted** to the teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers, that word **devoted** means **that this was their manner of life**. The word means to be constant, continual, steadfast in something. Now these guys didn't suddenly become Christians and say, *'Now what can we do to show that we are really saved. Oh yeah, we should go to church and listen to sermons and have potlucks and communion and pray a lot'*.

What happened was their story had been changed by the cross and they **found** themselves doing these things. Luke was not writing a prescription for the perfect church. He was not trying to tell future Christians, '*Now you've got to have these four things: teaching, fellowship, communion and prayer – then you're the church.*' In fact many good theologians who know the Greek, think Luke was saying that they were devoted to the apostle's teaching and the fellowship – **which included** prayer and what we call communion. Some think they were four distinctives of the church, but most of them agree this is **not** a four point program for being the church. Luke was a historian who was simply writing down the visible results of changed lives. And what we see in this passage is a new generation of believers whose lives were now marked by several distinctives. They were devoted to the truth and to the fellowship – and that devotion was seen in their passionate worship, radical generosity, and phenomenal growth.

First of all they found themselves **devoted to the truth – the apostle's teaching**. You can tell the real Christians by the way **they cherish the truth**. The mark of people whose lives have been impacted by the gospel is a devotion to the word of God. Teaching, the word is **didache** – doctrine, dogma, teaching. It really should be translated doctrine here, and if you look at the KJV it is. But most modern translations use teaching because for today's readers, doctrine seems dull and distasteful. I've heard Christians say things like, '*Doctrine divides, Jesus unites, we just want Jesus*'. And that sounds somehow more spiritual and generous. Yes Jesus unites, but who is He? If we can't agree on that, how will we ever be in unity? That 's doctrine. Others will say, '*O I just love the simple stuff – John 3:16 – I'm not into doctrine*' But what does John 3:16 say? *for God so loved the world* – that's the doctrine that God is love, that God is a personal God; *that He gave His only begotten Son* – that's the doctrine of substitutionary atonement – *that whosoever believes in Him should not perish* – that's the doctrine of the justice of God and the depravity of man, it's the doctrine of the love of God for rebellious sinners – *but have eternal life* – the doctrine of glorification. John 3:16 is packed with doctrine – it means nothing if it weren't for doctrine. They were devoted to doctrine.

Secondly, they found themselves **devoted to the fellowship** – they were continually engaged in community, The word here is **koinonia** - and it means fellowship, community, communion, joint participation, the share which one has in anything. Henry Blackaby said: "***In the mind and teaching of Jesus, a church was a vital, living, dynamic fellowship of believers. The Greek word koinonia...is the best way to describe what a church ought to be.***" And Luke says they found themselves constantly in the fellowship - constantly participating in community. Look at the passage – they always wanted to be together. Together in the temple, together in their homes. To put it plainly, people who say they are Christians but don't gather in community, don't regularly attend church, have no passion to be together – those people most definitely are not Christian. They're something, just not Christians. Because when the gospel impacts your life, your story is changed, your life is changed. The life of this new generation is a fellowship life, a community life. **You are devoted to community.**

There wasn't a Chreester among them. You know that's the term for those who only attend church on Christmas or Easter. They're doing their duty, putting in their time, putting on their glad rags and hoping to make a good impression on God. But this isn't a duty – it's not a chore – this is a delight. Christians, real Christians find their real joy in being in the fellowship. Look at what they were doing: *And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.* Acts 2:46-47 This is church – this is community. They were deeply involved in each other's lives. Day by day. In the temple. In their homes. Eating together – praying together – worshipping God together – doing life together – you couldn't keep them away from each other. And those outside this community noticed. The Christians had favor with the larger community. It was attractive. Their whole world view about what is good and right and necessary in life was changed by the gospel. No one had to legislate this – this was spontaneous – this was the Holy Spirit being poured out into their lives.

This fellowship overflowed in the expression of **passionate worship**. They were devoted to two things – the apostle's teaching and to the fellowship – and this devotion spontaneously broke out in worship, the breaking of bread and the prayers. The construction of the sentence here argues that their devotion to the fellowship centered around the celebration of Jesus' death and resurrection and prayer. One of the reasons they always found themselves coming together, fellowshiping together, was to worship the One who had by His death and resurrection, brought them into this new community.

There is a definite article there in the Greek which is translated **the breaking of bread**, and it indicates this was not just a coming together to have a potluck. Most Biblical scholars agree that this was an indication that their fellowship always included remembering the Lord's death and resurrection, and we have come to call that communion. Which is great because that's fellowship.

And what that is, is a continual, regular **rehearsing of the gospel**. The single most defining thing about a Christian is the love and the joy and gratitude he has for the One who came down from His glory to suffer and die for him. When these people were cut to the heart by the gospel, the center of their world changed forever. Before they were self-centered and consumed with what concerned them. Now the center of their world was Jesus, and everything, even their common meals, were saturated with joy and generosity and praise toward God. They saw everything had to do with Him. They couldn't get enough in the temple and it spilled over into their homes. They were **passionate about remembering the Lord**, the truth of who He was, what He did, His awesome mercy and grace, the gospel. This is perhaps one of the strongest arguments for celebrating the Lord's Table every time we gather.

And they were **persistent in the prayers**. Passionate persistent prayer is the mark of a changed life. The wording here seems to indicate the Jewish custom of regular times of prayer. Religious Jews prayed formally at least three times a day – morning prayers, afternoon prayers and evening prayers. And it was the custom for those in Jerusalem to go to the temple at these times to pray. In fact in the next chapter we see Peter and John headed to the temple around three for their regular afternoon prayers. But unlike a majority of Jews, this was not a duty for these Christians – it was a spontaneous outflow of the joy and gratitude they felt as they were drawn into this new community. For the first time perhaps, prayer made sense. For hundreds of years the Jews prayed to a God who was far off and unreachable – now He had come in the flesh and died for their sins and they were in fellowship with a God who was near. They had a sense of His real and immanent presence among them. A sense of awe was so thick you could almost cut it. And they couldn't help but pray.

Their attitudes about money and possessions underwent a radical change. They became **radically generous**. Look at verse 44 and 45: *And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.* Acts 2:44-45 This was not, as some believe, a primitive form of communism or even communal living. In communism everything belongs to the State and the State doles out everything. And it wasn't communal living because they were still going house to house, which meant they still had houses to go to, and they still had property and possessions to sell. In fact there is a story in chapter five about a guy named Ananias and his wife, Saphira, who pretended to be Christians and that didn't turn out so well.

But here it is clear that individuals, whose lives had been impacted by the gospel, viewed their possessions primarily as assets to help other people, and **they** saw the need and **they** sold their possessions, not the State. This was radical. The whole culture of that day was just as materialistic, just as bent on individual success as ours is today, and yet here you have people who were one moment just like the surrounding culture, much like ours today with its emphasis on Me first, and the next moment, selling their stuff to help those in need. You want to know what a Christian is? **He's someone whose wallet has been saved. That's a Christian.** It is someone whose heart has been so impacted by the gospel, so changed by being brought into a new community with a brand new story, that there is a dynamic and fundamental change in the way he handles money and possessions.

The interesting thing is, no one has to pass the plate in this church. Look at the description Luke gives in chapter four: *Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.* Acts 4:32-35 People whose lives have been truly impacted by the gospel do not need to be compelled to give. Their hearts are so filled with gratitude toward God that they overflow in radical generosity. [Change in offerings]

At the end of the day, this is what it looks like. This is the church that displays the glory of God to the principalities and authorities; this is the people of God that display the glory of God to the watching world. A church devoted to the word of God and to each other; a church that overflows in passionate worship, persistent prayer and radical generosity. When this is what the church looks like, God's glory is manifested. Luke says, *And awe came upon every soul*, Acts 2:43

Paul tells us in Ephesians five that this is why Christ went to the cross: *Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that He might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.* Ephesians 5:25-27 **At the heart of God's plan and purpose is His church.** This is holy; this is sacred; this is why Christ died for your sins and mine – this is why His body was broken so that we might be one – this is why His blood was spilled so that we might be cleansed. This is the glory of God that we proclaim and display as we share the Lord's Table together – the church, the people of God, chosen by Him; called by Him; redeemed by Him; justified by Him; saved by Him; that we might display the manifold wisdom of God.

Our gracious God and heavenly Father,

Thank you for this great revelation of the church, Your Body, Your Bride, a chosen people for Your own possession. Come Holy Spirit fill us, renew us, revive us to be Your church – a people who delight in the truth of Your word; who are devoted to You and to one another; who worship You with a white-hot passion; whose money and possessions are at Your disposal; and whose lives are marked with the indelible stamp of Your image so that the world would see and come to know and give glory to the God who saves, we pray in the powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

***May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto you;
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.***