

What is a Church? / COB / 01.08.17

Introduction

- † **[1: church building]** A few weeks ago, I shared with you the attention grabbing learning activity some of our teachers used in the children's class: they asked the children to draw the church. So the children drew a church building. So the teachers said, "Why did you draw a building, we asked you to draw the church."
- **[2: add people]** The children puzzled over this, but then it dawned on them, the church is not the building, it is the people! That was the point of the children's lesson that week. It was a good lesson. Yet that is not the full story, is it? What else is missing from this picture?
 - **[3: add flowers]** Flowers, right? We have to have gardens and shrubs to show we rule over creation as God's image-bearers. And we have to have lots of pavement for the same reason, to show we have conquered the lawn.
 - This still is incomplete though. When the Cub Scouts met in our building, were they the church? No. We had a building, people, flowers, etc., but they were not the church. You might say, they are not people in our church, ok. What if we sold the building to them and they kept having their scout meetings here, would they be a church? Still no.
- † **[4: RetroChristianity]** As we seek to understand what is a church, we will have several short points, which I am taking from the book I handed out to those of you who were here the week before Christmas: Michael Svigel's *RetroChristianity*. I encourage you to read this book. It is not difficult, and I really think we would be a stronger church if we all read this, understood it, and discussed it together. Our broad categories today will be the people, beliefs, and purposes of the church.
-

☛ We have four points about the people of the church.

- † **[5: Ephesians 1.22-23]** **One: The church is not merely a human organization, but the spiritual-physical body of Christ.**
- *Ephesians 1.22-23 NET: And God put all things under Christ's feet, and he gave him to the church as head over all things. Now the church is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*
 - Since the people in the church are believers who are supposed to live as God's image bearers and as Christ's representatives, the church is the body of Christ which represents Christ and does the will of Christ in the world, it is not just an organization or gathering of people. So we as the church should submit to Christ's leadership and do his will and work.
- † **[6: 1 Corinthians 12.27]** **Two: The church is not a supermarket of spiritual groceries, it is a family with covenant commitments.**
- In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul talks about how the Holy Spirit has made us diverse so that we could complement each other and be effective together but not apart.
 - Then in *1 Corinthians 12.27 NET: Now you are Christ's body, and each of you is a member of it.*
 - The Greek word μέλος referred to a part of the human body, like a leg or a nose: they are members of your body. So when Paul says you are members of the church, he is saying you are

an integral part of this body, which is made up of individual members who are committed to function well together to achieve their purpose. So we should covenant or commit to each other as members of this church.

† **[7: Hebrews 10.24-25] Three: The church is not optional, it is essential for spiritual growth.**

- *Hebrews 10.24-25 NET: And let us take thought of how to spur one another on to love and good works, not abandoning our own meetings, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging [or exhorting] each other, and even more so because you see the day [when Christ will return] drawing near.*
- All the instruction in the New Testament is in the context of being a committed member of a local church. And the teachings – especially the forty-something “one another” commands like this one in Hebrews – show us that we need to be in a church fellowship to stay spiritually healthy and to grow spiritually to be more like Christ. So participation in the life of the church should be a priority in our lives.

† **[8: Ephesians 2.19-22] Four: The church is holy.** That means we should be pure and separated out for God’s purposes.

- *Ephesians 2.19-22 NET: So then you are no longer foreigners and noncitizens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints [that is, those who have believed before] and members of God's household, because you have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.*
- We have been set apart for God’s purposes, we are being purified to reflect God’s character. So as we function together in the church, we should shine for Christ with that sense of purpose and character.

☛ **We have four points about the beliefs of the church.**

† **[9: Ephesians 4.4-6] One: The church is one body in unity.**

- *Ephesians 4.4-6 NET: There is one body and one Spirit, just as you too were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*
- There should not be white churches and black churches, Messianic-Jewish churches and Gentile churches. And even if we agree to meet in separate denominations based on our theological distinctives, we affirm other churches if we are in unity about the essential beliefs, whether we are Dispensational, Reformed Presbyterian, Charismatic, Baptist, or whatever. We in the local church are part of something larger.

† **[10: Ephesians 2.19-20] Two: The church is apostolic.**

- Let’s go back to *Ephesians 2.19-20 NET: So then you are no longer foreigners and noncitizens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household, because you have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.*

- Everything we believe and everything we do is based on scripture: the teachings of the Old Testament which the apostles accepted as holy scripture and the teachings of the apostles themselves gathered into the New Testament.
- We can look at other sources of truth, whether that is other early church writings like the *Διδαχὴ* or writings in the fields of science, but we are an apostolic church, *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.*

† **[11: Titus 1.7-9] Three: The church is catholic.**

- I don't mean Roman Catholic, I mean what the term "catholic" originally meant: that the church is a whole entity which shares in a confession and commission that transcend time, place, culture, and language.
- *Titus 1.7-9 NET: For the overseer [the pastor or elder] must be blameless as one entrusted with God's work, not arrogant, not prone to anger, not a drunkard, not violent, not greedy for gain. Instead he must be hospitable, devoted to what is good, sensible, upright, devout, and self-controlled. He must hold firmly to the faithful message as it has been taught, so that he will be able to give exhortation in such healthy teaching and correct those who speak against it.*
- Therefore, we should protect our doctrinal purity and our missional sense of purpose, which are consistent with the believing church everywhere and always since the church began.

† **[12: orthodoxy] Four: The church is orthodox.**

- This is close to the same thing as Catholic. But just as I was not talking about being Roman Catholic, I am not talking about being Eastern Orthodox. There are a few doctrines which define orthodoxy and heresy. A true church might differ from what we believe in other areas, but they must believe with us in these things or they are heretical, not a truly Christian church. According to theologian Michael Svigel, an early church expert, these doctrines are as follows.
 1. The triune God as eternal Creator and Redeemer
 2. The historical fall into sin and resulting corruption or depravity of all people
 3. The identity and saving work of Christ
 4. Salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone
 5. Inspiration and authority of Scripture
 6. Redeemed humanity incorporated into Christ
 7. The restoration of humanity and creation
- Each of these could be a sermon of their own. So I will not try to provide supporting verses for them now. But these are the doctrines that the early church decided were essential, so we uphold them as essential also.

☛ **We have five points about the church's purpose.**

† **[13: Acts 20.28] One: The church has order.**

- God has established in scripture a system for church governance, to protect sound doctrine, develop believers for service, and coordinate the ministries of the church.

- For example, in *Acts 20.28 NET*: [Paul said to the elders of the church in Ephesus] *“Watch out for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son.”*
- So in the local church, we have a team of pastor-elders who are accountable to Jesus, as they lead in the life of the church. The image we get from scripture is that other spiritual leaders should rise up in the church to help the elders carry out the ministry, and this should be a multiplication cycle, as people come to Christ, grow, serve, and help others do the same, under the authority and coaching of the elders.

[14: Matthew 28.18-20] Two: The church has ordinances.

- An ordinance is an activity for the gathered local church which was commanded by Christ for the purpose of symbolizing something vital to the faith.
- *Matthew 28.18-20 NET*: *Then Jesus came up and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*
- New believers are welcomed into the community of faith in the church through water baptism. This is an act of faith and obedience, publicly proclaiming what has already occurred inside, that this person has been born again by Christ’s grace through his/her faith in Christ.
- **[15: Luke 22.19-20]** *Luke 22.19-20 NET*: *Then he [Jesus] took bread, and after giving thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And in the same way he took the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”*
- The church participates in communion, also known as “the Lord’s supper” or “the Eucharist,” as a regular reminder of what Christ did for us on the cross.
- These are the only two ordinances for the church, and we should hold to them as essential.

† **[16: Acts 1.8] Three: The church pursues evangelism.**

- *Acts 1.8 NET*: [Jesus said] *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the farthest parts of the earth.”*
- The Holy Spirit was about to come upon the disciples. This was a one-time historical event. Up to that time, the Holy Spirit only came upon people like King David for short times to accomplish specific things. However, in that historical moment began the church age, and now this coming upon us of the Holy Spirit happens to each of us when we become a Christian: The Holy Spirit regenerates us to be “born again” spiritually, he indwells us, he baptizes us into the body of Christ, and he is the seal of our salvation.
- So we have this Holy Spirit Jesus was talking about. What did Jesus say we would receive when the Holy Spirit came upon us? Power! And what does this power do for us? Empowers us to be Christ’s witnesses. What is a witness? Someone who tells what he has seen or experienced. So what does Christ expect believers in the church to do with this empowerment? Explain to others what he has done for us, what we have witnessed. Every one of us has what it takes to be effective in evangelism: the Holy Spirit. So we all should work together to witness to others.

† **[17: Matthew 28.18-20] Four: The church pursues edification.**

- We can reinforce the instruction for evangelism and show the command for edification by revisiting the Great Commission in *Matthew 28.18-20 NET: Then Jesus came up and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit [that is, bring them all the way to faith and membership in the church], [and then] teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*
- It is not enough to have people getting saved, as wonderful as that is. We all come to Christ with all the baggage of a lifetime of wrong thinking and wrong behaviors, so we all need edification to heal from that life apart from God and to grow spiritually to be more like Christ.
- For this reason, we all help to teach one another, whether that is two friends living out the proverb that iron sharpens iron, leading a discussion at the men's breakfast, teaching one of our classes, or intentional mentoring. We need sound biblical teaching in the context of fellowship to spiritually grow.

† **[18: Colossians 3.16-17] Five: The church pursues exaltation.**

- In one sense, this means we learn to live as God's representatives, giving him glory with our witness and our good works. It also means we gather weekly to worship. Here is a passage that includes both kinds of exaltation and edification as a bonus.
- *Colossians 3.16-17 NET: Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and exhorting one another with all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, all with grace in your hearts to God. And whatever you do in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*
- The Bible is all about the glory of God; all creation is for the purpose of the glory of God; so our church and our lives should be about exalting, glorifying, worshipping God.

Conclusion

† **[19: church image]** it should be plain that not every group of people, even Christians, is a church.

- Even when we are gathered as a church, we need to ensure we have the attitudes of God's people: that we are holy, the body of Christ; and we are essential to one another, a family in Christ with covenant commitments to each other.
- We also need to ensure we have the beliefs of God's people: that we are in unity on sound doctrine, which is orthodox and consistent with the believing church everywhere and in all ages, because it is apostolic and scriptural.
- And we need to ensure we pursue the purposes of the church: that we have order in our ministry under the authority and guidance of the elders; that we celebrate the two ordinances correctly; that we pursue evangelism by sharing our witness and the good news of the gospel with those outside the church; that we pursue edification by intentionally helping each other to leave behind the ways of the flesh and the world to live out the ways of Christ; and that we pursue exaltation by gathering to sing God's praises and then go out and live as his representatives for the rest of the week too.