

# Foundations of Faith: Church Purpose

**Summary:** *all church members should understand and agree with the following*

**Universal Church:** The universal church represents God on Earth as the body of Christ.

**Local Church:** The local church is an organized group of people who have professed faith in Christ and his gospel message.

**Purpose of the Church:** The church should pursue the Great Commission of making disciples of Christ and the Great Commandment of loving God above all else and others as ourselves.

**Goals of the Church:** From those two scripture passages, we know the church should seek to empower people to develop strong relationships with God and each other, developing lives of passionate worship, sacrificial love, and spiritual development.

**Baptism:** Everyone who comes to faith in Christ should receive the ordinance of water baptism, even if they had been baptized before they came to faith; and the church should baptize only those who have faith.

**Lord's Supper:** All believers who have confessed their sins, and only those believers, should partake in the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, in remembrance of his sacrifice on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins.

**Detail: all teachers and leaders should understand and agree with the following**

**The Universal Church**

The universal church is the body of Christ: it represents Christ and carries on his ministry and gospel mission [Ephesians 1.22-23]. It is the conduit through which Christ intends his work to be carried on by his followers [Matthew 16.18-19; 18.17; 1 Corinthians 12.28; Ephesians 4.10-14; James 5.14]. By Christ’s design, the church is founded on, under the authority of, and guided by the apostolic teachings gathered in the New Testament [Ephesians 2.20; 4.11].

† 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.”*

The universal church is the group of people baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ [1 Corinthians 12.13], one church with a unity of faith [Romans 12.5; Ephesians 4.4-6]. This includes all local churches [such as in Acts 9.31], which is the true meaning of the term “catholic.”<sup>1</sup> As only those who have come to saving faith in Christ are baptized by the Holy Spirit, the universal church is made up of all those [and only those] who have truly come to faith in Christ. Thus we say the church is holy – set apart by God [sanctified] for his purposes – and it should seek to pursue holiness [1 Corinthians 1.2; Ephesians 5.25-27].

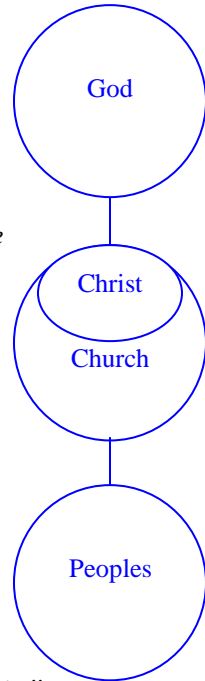
† 1 Corinthians 12.13 [NET]: *“For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. Whether Jews or Greeks or slaves or free, we were all made to drink of the one Spirit.”*

The universal church represents God, with Christ as its head [Romans 6.11-13, 22; John 17.15-19], similar to how Israel represented God with its anointed king at its head. Despite having this in common, the universal church is distinct from Israel in that it is not a nation. Also, God has made promises to the nation of Israel – regarding such things as its future restoration both in the land and in its place as God’s representative people [see for example, Jeremiah 31.27-40] – which have not yet been fulfilled, so we know God has future plans for the ethnic nation of Israel.

† Romans 6.13b [NET]: *“...present yourselves to God as those who are alive from the dead and your members to God as instruments to be used for righteousness.”*

The universal church began at the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came to indwell those who believed in Christ [Acts 2]. Christ had to be resurrected before being placed over the church [Ephesians 1.20-23], he previously had said he would *in the future* build his church [Matthew 16.18], and the church could not function until the Holy Spirit had come [John 14.26; 15.26; 16.7-11] to inaugurate the blessings of the New Covenant which Christ ushered in with his blood [Luke 22.20]. The universal church will include people of every tribe, language, people, and nation [Revelation 5.9; 7.9], including both Jews and Gentiles [Ephesians 2.11-22].

† Revelation 5.9 [NET]: *“They were singing a new song: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals because you were killed, and at the cost of your own blood you have purchased for God persons from every tribe, language, people, and nation.”*



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<sup>1</sup> Use of this term by the early church predated the institution of the Roman Catholic Church. See Svigel, *Retro-Christianity*, 168.

## **The Local Church**

The local church is an organized group of people who have professed faith in Christ and his gospel message [see for example, Colossians 4.15; Philemon 2]. In the New Testament, this ranged from a single house-church [such as in Philemon 2] to a whole network of house-churches [such as in 1 Corinthians 1.2].

Such an organization will have a coherent and functional governing structure. [Details about the model of the early church are given in a separate document.] This structure must submit to Christ's headship of the church [mentioned above]. This structure will include offices of spiritual leadership and a body of committed members.

Each local church must submit to apostolic authority, because Christ entrusted the apostles to establish and regulate local churches as part of the universal church and to establish correct doctrinal teachings [apostolic authority is supported in the context of many of the epistles; but see especially Luke 9.1-2; Acts 1.8; 2.42; 6.2-6; 8.14; 15; 16.4; 2 Corinthians 10.8; Ephesians 2.20; 3.5-6; 1 Thessalonians 2.7; 2 Peter 3.2; 1 John 1.1-4; 4.6]. The implication for today is that each local church should use scripture as its guide in all activities.

Each local church, being under apostolic authority and guided by scripture, must promote the essential beliefs of orthodoxy, as handed down by the early church ecumenical councils who were interpreting scripture.<sup>2</sup> These doctrines [detailed in other documents] include the Triune God as creator and redeemer of mankind, the divine inspiration and authority of scripture, the spiritual corruption of mankind, the divine-human identity of Christ, the atoning death and resurrection of Christ, and the literal and bodily future return of Christ to resurrect the dead for judgment and restore the Earth. Also, there is one essential doctrine that emerged clearly only in the Reformation: salvation by grace through faith.

## **Purposes of the Church**

One purpose of the church is to fulfill the "Great Commandment" given by Jesus [Matthew 22.37-40].

- † Matthew 22:37-40 [NET]: *Jesus said to him, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.*

Another purpose of the church is to fulfill the "Great Commission" given by Jesus [Matthew 28.18-20].

- † 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."*

From these two commands of Jesus, we can discern various core pursuits of the church. From the Great Commandment, we discern we are to love, worship, and bring praise to God, and we are to love and care for others, both inside and outside of the church. From the Great Commission, we discern we are to evangelize by making the gospel known to those who do not yet believe and to raise up believers such that they are fully knowledgeable about God, obedient to scriptural teachings, and able to live by this commandment and commission, including "multiplying" by helping others to do the same. A purpose statement for the local church might be, "We seek to empower people to develop strong relationships with

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<sup>2</sup> See Svigel, *Retro-Christianity*, 104-105.

God and each other, by developing lives of passionate worship, sacrificial love, and spiritual transformation.”

The implications of these core pursuits are as follows:

- † We should do all in our power to bring glory and praise to God, through various forms of worship during our worship services, through personal acts of prayer, love, praise, obedience, devotion, dependence, and ministry service, and through each of the following items;
- † We should seek to make the Gospel of Christ known to all people by every means available, including personally sharing the gospel with others in our lives, holding church-wide outreach efforts, and supporting those facilitating church planting and missionary work, both domestic and abroad;
- † We should faithfully observe the biblical ordinances of Water Baptism and the Lord’s Supper;
- † We should study the Bible – God’s written revelation – and teach it to all who will listen in our worship services and in other ministry venues we deem effective, seeking to maintain our own spiritual health and growth, and biblically instructing, encouraging, edifying, and strengthening believers of all ages, to prepare them for effective Christian life, service, and multiplication as leaders;
- † We should provide an environment of true biblical community, such that believers can gather together for mutual acceptance, love, encouragement, accountability, edification, and fellowship; and
- † We should undertake other forms of Christian love, care, and service as the Lord might lead us, to help those in need both inside and outside the church.

The form of our core pursuits can be flexible to meet our needs. While the Bible makes clear the purposes of the church, it does not prescribe much about the form these ministries should take, leaving each local church the flexibility to be creative in reaching its local population. For example, while the Bible says we are to sing praises to God [Ephesians 5.19; Colossians 3.16; James 5.13], it leaves to us to choose the type of music and the forum in which we play it. We should be careful not to choose ministry forms that would lead people into irreverence or distract them from the purpose. We should note that as believers who are a part of the body of Christ, we are called to worship and minister together as part of a local church [Hebrews 10.24-25; Ephesians 4.11-15].

### **Ordinances of the Church**

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. When the church practices one of the ordinances together, they are reminded of what Christ has done for them, which strengthens their faith and comforts them. There are two ordinances: water baptism and the Lord’s supper.

#### *Water Baptism*

Jesus commanded his disciples to baptize all new disciples [Matthew 28.19]. Therefore, we know that all people should receive water baptism when they come to faith and that this is an important activity for the church to administer [see also Acts 2.38-41; 8.12, 36-39; 9.18; 10.47-48; 16.15, 33; 18.8; 19.5].

- † Matthew 28.19 [NET]: *“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit...”*

In the church activities of the New Testament, only people who had come to faith in Christ through the gospel received water baptism [see the same examples as above]. Thus the church should refrain from baptizing children too young to understand and believe the gospel or anyone else who does not believe.

Those who have been baptized in some way before believing in the gospel of Christ should receive baptism again as believers after coming to faith [see example in Acts 19.1-5].

Water baptism is meant to be by immersion into the water [Matthew 3.16; Acts 8.38-39], but the early church recognized that there were times when this was not practical, and so allowed pouring of water three times over the person [*Didache* 7.3]. It now is common to immerse only once, but an implication of the teaching of an alternative being to pour water three times is that immersion was three-fold as well, and this was standard practice by the second century [Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 21.12-18; note also the plural “baptisms” in Hebrews 6.2].

† Matthew 3.16 [NET]: *“After Jesus was baptized, just as he was coming up out of the water, the heavens opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming on him.”*

Water baptism involves a confession of faith in the Triune God. The church baptizes new believers in the name of God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit [Matthew 28.19], but this is not merely ceremonial. Rather, the one being baptized confesses faith in each member of the Triune Godhead, in response to questions from the pastor baptizing [evidence of this early church practice comes from Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition* 21.12-18]. The church must give adequate theological instruction to all new believers before baptism, so that they understand to what they are confessing and to what they are committing [see *Didache* 7.1].

Water baptism symbolizes our unity with Christ in his death to sin and in his resurrection to new life with God the Father [Romans 6.1-10; Colossians 2.12-14]. In baptism, we are identified with Christ, this being the believer’s public confession of faith in, and dependence on, Christ’s work for him. Thus the church must ensure the new believer fully understands what Christ has accomplished for the believer through his death and resurrection.

† Romans 6.3-4 [NET]: *“Or do you not know that as many as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him through baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too may live a new life.”*

Water baptism is a commitment to repenting from a life of sin and into a life of following Christ in submission and obedience [Matthew 28.20; *Didache* 7.1 and earlier].<sup>3</sup> It is easy to see from Scripture that believers are called to make this shift in lifestyle that reflects their shift at salvation from dwelling in darkness to dwelling in light [Romans 6; Ephesians 5.8; Colossians 1.13; 1 Peter 2.9]. While the new believer will not be very mature in walk at the time of baptism, it is important to make a commitment [1 Peter 3.21] to living the sanctified life at this time, before becoming a member of the church [Martyr, *1 Apology* 61].

† Romans 6.12-13 [NET]: *Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its desires, and do not present your members to sin as instruments to be used for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who are alive from the dead and your members to God as instruments to be used for righteousness.*

Water baptism symbolizes our unity with each other as the body of Christ [1 Corinthians 12.13; Galatians 3.27; Ephesians 4.5]. In baptism, we are identified with each other as the church; the mystical Spirit

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<sup>3</sup> Svigel says, “The waters of baptism, according to Peter’s imagery [1 Peter 3.20-22], “save” a person from a lifestyle of sin, because baptism marks the moment of that person’s official, solemn abandonment and release from the sin that once characterized his or her life...”; “Floating with the Elephant—Toward a Fuller Doctrine and Practice of Water Baptism (Part 2 of 3),” at [retrochristianity.org](http://retrochristianity.org).

baptism that occurs at salvation unites us spiritually, and water baptism, as a symbol of that unity, formally unites us in practice. Thus the church must educate the new believer in what it means to be a part of the body of Christ, and to be a part of this specific local church. The believer should be ready to commit to the church, just as the church commits to the believer.

† 1 Corinthians 12.13 [NET]: *“For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. Whether Jews or Greeks or slaves or free, we were all made to drink of the one Spirit.”*

#### *The Lord’s Supper*

Jesus commanded his disciples to do as he showed them regarding a time of remembrance [Luke 22.19-20; 1 Corinthians 11.23-29].

† Luke 22.19-20 [NET]: *“Then he 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.’”*

This time reminds us of Christ’s death for the payment of our sins and the inauguration of the New Covenant blessings, as we see the broken bread as Jesus’ body broken for us and the cup of wine as Jesus’ blood shed for us [Matthew 26.26-28; Mark 14.22-24; Luke 22.19-20; 1 Corinthians 11.23-29].

† Matthew 26.26-28 [NET]: *“While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after giving thanks he broke it, gave it to his disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat, this is my body.’ And after taking the cup and giving thanks, he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, that is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’”*

The Lord’s Supper is only for believers who adhere to the gospel of Christ, and who are not burdened by unconfessed sin [1 Corinthians 11.26-31]

† 1 Corinthians 11.26-31 [NET]: *“For every time you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. For this reason, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself first, and in this way let him eat the bread and drink of the cup. For the one who eats and drinks without careful regard for the body eats and drinks judgment against himself. That is why many of you are weak and sick, and quite a few are dead. But if we examined ourselves, we would not be judged.”*

At the Passover meal in which Jesus inaugurated this practice, he would have been using unleavened bread and diluted wine [Matthew 26.26-28; Mark 14.22-24; Luke 22.19-20; 1 Corinthians 11.23-29]. While it is always ideal to follow the practices of Jesus, the nature of these elements were related to the Passover celebration of the Jews, which Jesus was associating with himself. It is better to use unfermented grape juice than to risk harm to the many who struggle with addiction today.