

What is the Church?

Our vision for Life Groups flows out of the biblical teaching on what the Church is and does. As Christians, we aren't defined by what we do, but by what God has done for us through the person and work of Christ. The consistent pattern in the New Testament letters is: Who God is and what God has done in Christ --> Who we are because of Jesus --> What He has saved us and created us to do. The motivation for what we do as a church should come out of who God is and what He has done for us in Christ. We want to constantly remind the Church that we are who we are because of what God has done and is doing through Jesus.

What do the New Testament writers tell us about the identity and purpose of the Church? Below are five biblical themes that inform our understanding of what God has designed and redeemed His Church to be:

1. The Church exists for the praise of God's glory (Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14).

The Church exists for the display of God's glory because *all things* exist for God's glory (Romans 11:36). Those of us who trust in and follow Jesus are caught up into something much bigger than ourselves. We have been graciously knit into God's redemptive purposes in the world, which is to unite all things -- things in heaven and on earth -- in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:10).

From Genesis to Revelation, we see that in all God is doing, He is working to display and lift up the infinite riches of His own glory (Isaiah 11:9, 1 Corinthians 15:28). The main way that God is now displaying His glory in the world is through His redeemed people. The Church is God's showcase by which He is making known the riches of His grace and wisdom (Ephesians 3:10).

2. The Church is a people united by God's grace (Ephesians 1:3-14, 2:18-22)

Identifying the Church as *a people* means that church is not a place people go, or an event people attend. The Church is a congregation, a gathering together of people who have been saved and transformed by God's grace. Peter says that those who come to Christ in faith are "like living stones being built up as a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:4-5), the temple of God (Ephesians 2:21).

In the Old Testament, the temple is where God's presence dwelt most powerfully. Paul is saying that God dwells in His people more and more powerfully as we're built together into one another's lives. When we have tasted the life-transforming power of the gospel, our lives are naturally cemented together with others who have experienced that same joy in Christ, producing a dynamic community of love and fellowship (see Philippians 1:3ff).

Putting these together, the Church is a people who have experienced God's grace in Christ, producing in us a longing to magnify the greatness of Jesus in all things (Philippians 1:20-21,

Colossians 3:17). We are called and sent to be the Church on a mission to bring God glory all the time, whenever we gather, wherever we go, and whatever we do.

3. The Church is the family of God (Ephesians 2:19, Galatians 6:10)

From the beginning of Scripture, God has always desired a people -- an earthly family -- who would live in such a way that the world would know what He is like. In Ephesians 1:5, Paul writes that those who are a part of the Church have been predestined for adoption through Jesus Christ. By faith, we have become the children of God (John 1:12-13), which makes us brothers and sisters with those who have also become God's children through faith in Christ. The Church is not a bag of marbles, but a cluster of grapes; not a collection of individuals who gather for meetings, but an organic whole that is united together as a family.

Because the Church is God's family, we are committed to sharing our lives together as extended family. We make decisions with regard to the implications for the Church, and we make significant decisions in consultation with the Church. We spend time with one another, care for one another, exhort one another with the gospel, pray with one another, bear one another's burdens, and take the initiative to resolve conflict with one another. Church life is family life.

4. The Church is the Body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-16, 3:6, 1 Corinthians 12)

In Ephesians 4, the aim of the Body metaphor is to describe the Church's use of its gifts to corporately help one another to grow increasingly into the image of Christ. As followers of Jesus being renewed into His image, we do whatever He leads us to do, whenever He tells us and wherever He wants us to do it. And it's the responsibility and privilege of every member of the Body to be engaged in helping the others to grow into Christ's image.

Gospel ministry is not limited to a professional elite or people in "full-time ministry". Rather, it belongs to all God's people. Our different gifts and personalities complement one another, and it's only as every member does its work that the Church is built up in love. The role of leaders is not to do gospel ministry on behalf of others, but to equip and prepare God's people for gospel ministry in ordinary, everyday life.

5. The Members of the Church are Ambassadors of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23, 2 Corinthians 5:17ff, 1 Peter 2:9-12)

While the Body metaphor is used in Ephesians 4 to describe the church's mutual care and ministry to one another, in chapter 1 Paul uses this metaphor to describe the church's mission in the world: "And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, *the fullness of him who fills all in all*" (Ephesians 1:22-23).

Jesus is filling every sphere of existence everywhere in the universe. Jesus will be seen and honored as supreme in every crack and crevice of the universe. And the way He is now

accomplishing that mission is through the Church. God is filling the universe with the glory of His Son by putting His Church on display as the embodiment of His Son.

The Church is a family committed to bringing the entirety of their lives together under the good and wise reign of God. The reign of God is a reign of life, justice, peace, blessing and freedom. But the good news that Jesus is King is not received as good news by a world that has chosen self-rule over submission to God's rule. The Church is meant to so live under the reign of God that the world sees that God is good and that His reign is good news. We explain and commend the gospel through our lives (Titus 2:10), and especially through our life together in Christian community (John 13:34-35, 17:20-23). So as we experience family life together, we want to continually be inviting unbelievers to observe and share in this common life.

So what is the Church? It is a family of missionaries united by the shared experience of God's grace to us in Christ, committed to one another's growth in Christ and together displaying the fullness of Christ's glory to those who have not yet experienced His grace.

Church Life is Experienced in Life Groups

We are committed to Life Groups because we believe they are the most realistic way that a church of 250+ people can truly experience what it means to live as the Church, as the life of the Church is described in the New Testament.

Life Groups are small groups of believers (8-12) who come together to live ordinary life as the family of God, committing themselves to the "one another's" of Scripture, to ministering the gospel to one another in word and deed, and to reaching out together as missionaries making Christ known in their neighborhoods, workplaces and other spheres of influence. They are regular people, living ordinary lives, with great gospel intentionality.

Our desire is for every Life Group to prayerfully consider how God is calling them to live together as family, and what unbelieving people God has brought into their lives to reach out to together, then to reorient their life together around discipling one another and those who they are sent to. Our goal is that one group of 8-12 might multiply to two groups, then four, then eight, until God births a new church out of this one group. That is how we hope to fulfill the vision, flowing out of Jesus' charge in Matthew 28, to make disciples of Christ both here and in other nations, and forming them into healthy, reproducing churches that are passionate to do the same.