

What is the Church?

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Introduction

Sometimes it is the most simple of questions that do not receive the attention they deserve. Maybe it is assumed that you know what church is - what it is, what it is not. Maybe you have not even really thought much about the question your whole life, and you've have been attending church since birth. Maybe you are well versed and well studied on the topic, and have even taught others about it.

In our current stage of church planting, I thought it would be most prudent to take a few minutes and attempt to give an answer to this simple question "What is the Church?"

I don't want to assume that you know the answer to that question. If you do not, please don't worry. I was baptized in the church when I was 6 years old, I've probably missed attendance of a few dozen Sundays out of 32 years of my life. That isn't bragging, though, because I honestly did not know what the church was or what it event meant to "go to church" or be a part of a church until I was in my 20's. I would venture to say that many people are in the same place, and I am not alone in that.

So let's take a few minutes and dive into the most simple definition that we can find. If we want to see a new church be

birthed in Ocean County, we need to understand what exactly we are doing and most importantly - what the Bible says we should be doing.

Chapter 1: What the Word “Church” Means

The bible was originally written in two languages - the Old Testament in Hebrew, and the New Testament in (koine) Greek. Thus, our english word “church” was not the original biblical word for church, but only a translation of it.

The original greek word for church looks like this - Εκκλησία, pronounced *ek-le-see-a*. It simply means “assembly of people” or “a gathered group of people.” Some biblical examples of its usage are:

1 Corinthians 11:18: For, in the first place, when you come together as a church [assembly], I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, (ESV)

1 Timothy 3:14-15: I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church [assembly] of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. (ESV)

A Group of God’s People

Thus, at its core, the original biblical idea is that the church is a group of people. Specifically defined within its usage in the Bible, it refers to the assembly of God’s people. Wayne Grudem, a professor of theology at Phoenix Seminary, defines

the church as: *"The community of all true believers..."*¹ This definition is helpful, because according to the bible not just any group of people can be labeled as church.

Ephesians 5:25 says this:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, (ESV)

Thus, the church is defined by those people who identify themselves as Christians through Jesus Christ. These are the people that Jesus himself died for. Not just anyone or any group of people can be called a church. *"The community of all true believers..."*

Can any group of Christians be called a church?

There are other necessary things that must be taking place for any group of people to be labeled as a church. Some of them are worship (Colossians 3:16), discipleship (or the training up of others Christians in the faith) of one another (Colossians 1:28), evangelism (telling others about the Good News of Jesus Christ) (Matthew 28:19) the preaching of the word (2 Timothy 4:2), and more. You will hear more about this as we move on.

¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pg. 853

There is so much more we could say. But before we continue too far down the road of definitions, it may be helpful to define what the church is not. Many people have a cursory understanding of what the church is, in many occasions, is incorrect. So lets push pause, and talk about what the church is not.

Chapter 2 - What the Church is not

I would assume that many of us have an improper use of vocabulary when it comes to the word “church.” I don’t want to make a big deal out of it, or make you feel like if you have been or are currently guilty of doing this, and that something is wrong with you if you do.

Nevertheless, it is more than just mere semantics to understand the original meaning of the word “church.” Behind the word should have some reflection in how we use it today. I think we often use it in our vocabulary as if it had an entirely different meaning than “assembly of Christians.” How so? What are some of the wrong usages of the word “church” and how may they incorrectly reflect the biblical definition of a church?

Wrong Usage #1: “I went to church on Sunday”

This usage of the word church makes it sound as if the church is an event that you attend. “I went to church on Sunday” is a very common thing to say. I can almost guarantee that you have said it before, and probably even have in the last few days even if slipped unknowingly.

We never see the word used like this in the New Testament, because the word is referring to a *group of people* who are meeting together for the worship of Jesus. It is not referring to

the meeting itself. Thus, we could lay it out like this:

Incorrect usage: "I went to church this morning."

Correct usage: "I met with the church this morning" (also see Acts 11:26 for a good example of this usage)

Wrong Usage #2: "Hey let's turn the car around - I left my jacket at church."

This second example reveals another misconception of the word church. It is not a physical location. Nowhere in the New Testament do you see any sort of building or physical location being referred to as a church. One of the few public places mentioned in Scripture that was used as a meeting place for the early church is found in Acts 3:11 and 5:12 - a section of the Temple in Jerusalem. They weren't gathering at the "church" - but rather there was a group of God's people gathered at the Temple in Jerusalem worshipping Jesus.

You also must remember that for the early centuries, Christians were being persecuted. Thus, they were often driven to have their services and gatherings underground, in caves or other hidden locations, or in people's homes. Buildings or facilities to house the church did not begin appearing till around the 3rd century A.D. when persecution ceased.

Incorrect usage: "Let's meet at the church."

(Technically) Correct usage: "Let's meet at the building where the church gathers²"

Why does this matter? Isn't this just silly semantics?

It matters because to be a part of the church is a matter of identity. You do not *go to church*. You *are the church*. There is no such thing as a Christian that is not part of the church. To be a Christian means that you are a part of the church every day of the week, every hour of the day. You cannot ultimately separate your name from it, nor can you separate your actions from it. With anyone's confession of Christ, you are automatically now a part of God's assembly, the church. As the church began growing at its conception, the book of Acts says that those who believed and confessed Jesus as their Savior were being saved, and thus their numbers were increasing (Acts 2:41). Conversation into Christianity is the beginning of being a part of Jesus' Church.

Even though it is helpful to define all of these things, I do think it would be helpful to pause and define what we exactly do during our Sunday services and why. There is a reason behind everything we do, and we try to aim and make it representative of what the Bible has asked the church to do when the Church gathers together.

² Of course that would be pretentious to say out loud. Please don't do that. I'm merely trying to define our terms so you can understand the idea behind the word "church." It is easy to refer to a facility used for the gathering of a church as "the church building" and that is OK. As long as you understand that the church is *not* the building - my mission accomplished.

Chapter 3: Why We Do What We Do at our Church Services

If you go to a church service, perhaps you are somewhat familiar with the Order of Service (sometimes also called a liturgy depending on the tradition). At Redeemer Fellowship, we usually sing some songs that are primarily about Jesus Christ. Then, we read the Scriptures together, partake in a responsive reading from the Scriptures of a church creed, sing some more, before going into a sermon (or homily) from the Bible. After the sermon, we take communion (or the Eucharist, depending on which tradition you are familiar with), and sing one more song. Then we end with a benediction.

Why do we do this? Knowing that we do not have something that is completely detailed and laid out in the New Testament that tells us exactly what we should do when we gather together in corporate gatherings, we can piece-meal together a pretty coherent compilation of things that the early church did when they were together, and thus, would be helpful for us to emulate³.

As we briefly defined earlier, these things are helpful to define because not just any group of Christians can rightly call themselves a church. There needs to be certain things happening among them when they gather that would make them distinct from, say, merely being a Bridge Club or just some

³ Here it could be helpful to say that some church traditions have essentially a book of church order that often lays out every single detail of every single service. There is no “right” or “wrong” approach to a Sunday morning liturgy - as long as it is about the founder of our faith, Jesus Christ and the salvation he accomplished for us.

friends who all happen to be Christians who spend time together. As simply stated, what do we do when we gather together?

Singing Songs Together

To begin with, in an amazing Scripture found in Zephaniah 3:17, we learn that our God is a God who loves to sing over his people:

“The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing!”

So in mirroring God’s gladness over his people, all throughout the Old Testament, many years before the New Testament was born, God’s people had been shown to sing songs to the Lord, and even command such things (Psalm 33:1-3, Psalm 47:6, Psalm 96:1-2, 1 Chronicles 15:27-28, Nehemiah 12:27-29). The numbers of verses contained in the Old Testament are simply too numerous to count that refer to God’s people singing praises to their Creator and Redeemer.

This tradition continued into the New Testament. Paul address the church at Ephesus to ...“be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart” (Ephesians 5:19-20). Paul also says that part of the admonishing between two Christians concerning their Christian life is to take place through the singing of hymns and songs to Jesus (Colossians 3:16). James says that if we are cheerful, to

be driven to sing praise (James 5:13). Even Jesus was singing with his disciples before his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:30). And finally, in Revelation, heaven is depicted as full of music before the risen Christ and to him who was seated on the throne. What a mighty chorus is shown in John's vision! (Revelation 5).

Without being too long winded, the early church was known for singing back the psalms during their gatherings as early as 111 A.D. Pliny the Younger, writing to the Roman Emperor Trajan, described the meetings of the Christians of his day.

"they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god⁴."

And every since this tradition has indeed continued.

So what is one thing Christians should do when they are together? We should sing. And how can we not sing before Jesus, who loves us and gave himself up for us?

Reading Scripture Together

"Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture..." (1 Timothy 4:13). Read carefully. Don't read the word "preaching" into the "public reading" of Scripture. Simply reading the Scriptures aloud is was an important part of God's people throughout the Scriptures. Moses was seen reading God's word to Israel after he received it on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:7). At the end of every seven years, God instructed his

⁴ Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, 10.96-97

people to read the Law aloud to Israel (Deuteronomy 31:11). Joshua was found doing so when Israel first entered the Promised Land (Joshua 8:34-35).

The main idea was that Israel needed to remember their story as recorded in the Scriptures, lest they forget all of what God had done for them, and also forget their identity as his redeemed people. Whenever they forgot these things, they strayed from God. In fact, it seems that this practice of reading aloud the Scriptures in the Old Testament was almost entirely forgotten about until Josiah, many centuries after Moses wrote down the first books of the Bible (the Law) found some scrolls containing the Scriptures in the Temple. These scrolls presumably had been lost.

What did he do? He picked them up, and began reading them aloud on a circuit tour throughout all of Israel, which led to a spiritual renewal throughout the land (2 Kings 23:1-2). That custom was carried on into the New Testament. Jesus is found partaking in the public reading of Scripture inside of a synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21). Paul regularly instructed the recipients of his letters to read them publicly before other churches (Colossians 4:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:27).

And we revisit Paul telling Timothy to devote himself to the public reading of Scripture (1 Timothy 4:13). We also need to be reminded of God's story in the Scriptures, because our "spiritual" story, if you will, is found throughout its pages. We must not forget it. And we must hear it in its entirety, and give space for the Scriptures as the inspired Word of God to speak

for itself. Its words are powerful, Spirit-filled, and sharper than any two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12).

Praying Together

Prayer is another mark of the Church. All throughout the Old Testament, prayer colors the lives of God's people that it would be unfathomable to consider a Church that does not pray!

The early church is first described as a group that devoted themselves to prayer on a continual basis (Acts 1:14). After the Spirit of God fell on the Church, these early Christians were described as people who devoted themselves to prayer (Acts 2:42). Paul begged for other churches to pray for him throughout his journeys (2 Corinthians 1:11). And when Peter was released from prison by an Angel, he stumbled upon a prayer meeting between Christians at the house of Mary the mother of John (Acts 12:12).

Even a small glance at the two-thousand year history of the church will reveal a multitude of men and women who were known for continual prayer, both together and alone. Our heritage of prayer in the church could scarcely fit into a multiple volume written account - it would take a household of books and many lifetimes of writing to record it all!

Therefore, the minimum we can do is to stop and give space in our Sunday services in silent prayer and also corporate prayer. This cannot be understated, and it simply cannot be done too much! Prayer *must* take place as Christians are together. The entirety of our Christian life is one of continual dependence on God by the help of his Spirit. Our Christian life

began by his doing, and not our own! Must we gather as Christians and worship as if we do not first need to pray to him, to express our needs, our worship, our adoration?

The Preaching of the Bible

The early Christians who were devoted to prayer were also devoted to the teaching of the Apostles (Acts 2:42). Timothy was asked to devote himself to the public reading of Scripture, but also to its teaching and exhortation (1 Timothy 4:13). The first thing Peter does when the Holy Spirit fell on Pentecost was to preach a sermon (Acts 2). The longest sermon in the Bible was preached by Stephen (Acts 7). Paul was continually seen traveling from city to city preaching sermons and exhorting from the Scriptures (Acts 13:16-41, 14:3-7, 17:22-35, 20:17-25, 22:1-21, 23:1-6, 24:10-21, 26:2-23, 28:17-20).

Jesus' entire ministry was filled with exhortations from the Bible and also teachings of the New Kingdom he was establishing. Many of the New Testament letters, especially Romans, Hebrews and James (amongst others) read like written sermons. The Old Testament is dotted and filled with examples of preaching from the Scriptures.

So not only do we need to allow the Bible to speak for itself through its public reading, but we must also exhort from it, or in other words - call people to its application in their lives.

Taking Communion (Eucharist)

One of the famous texts in the Bible concerning the taking the elements is found in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, which reads:

"For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

Paul is quoting from the story known as the Last Supper, found in Matthew 26:26-28. This originally took place (probably) within the Passover meal between Jesus and his disciples. The early church maintained the nature of Communion (or the Eucharist) as being a meal - often called "Love Feasts" (Jude 12). These were simply a meal shared by Christians that also took time to enjoy the bread and the wine as a memorial of the death of Christ.

These meals were central to the early church's fellowship together. Jesus and his life and death are central to the church's existence, and also are the origins of our salvation. Therefore, although the modern day "Love Feast" has been reduced to mere bread taken with juice, we must keep the memorial of Christ's death as central to our gatherings. Like the motivation behind the public reading of Scripture, upon belief on Jesus Christ our story has now been wrapped up in his (Galatians 2:20). We must never forget that he is why we gather each week, and his death and resurrection has given us life.

Paul was clear that there was no time limit as to when or how often you take it. He simply said "Do this as often as you

drink it in remembrance of me." At Redeemer Fellowship we take this seriously, and thus each week we take communion.

This has been just a snap shot of our Sunday services at Redeemer Fellowship, and the biblical basis behind them. Much more could be said. Concerning our hope, we only want you to see that each element of our Sunday service has been thought through, and great pains have been given for it to reflect the biblical mandate of what should be taking place when Christians gather together.

Remember: The Church is not a Sunday service

The danger of defining all of this in detail can leave you with the impression that this is all the church does. No! The church devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2:42). Then it says that day by day they were together, and with one another breaking bread in their homes, full of glad and generous hearts (2:46). Much will be said of this later on, but we must remember that *the church is more than our Sunday meeting!* The early church surely was.

Chapter 4: The Leadership of the Church

How is the church to be led? Maybe you have attended church where they call the leader a priest, an elder, or a pastor. Some have bishops. Others have none at all, while some have multiple pastors and multiple elders.

Knowing the purpose of this book (to keep it short and readable), I cannot get into the specifics of this. But I can give an explanation as to how Redeemer approaches church leadership. Much of the following can be found on our church's website, but here is a snippet from our church's doctrinal statement:

We believe each church is to be led by a plurality of godly men who function as pastors ([Acts 14:23](#), [1 Titus 1:5](#)). We believe the role of pastor to be one and the same with the biblical terms overseer, elder (see interchanging use of these terms to refer to a single role in [Acts 20:28](#) and [1 Peter 5:1-4](#)). Among the plurality of pastors, there is a recognition of differing giftedness and abilities in leadership that may set some apart from others in function, but not in authority.

So let's put this in simple terms. Redeemer does not believe in a "Senior Pastor" model of church government. In saying that, I have many good friends who attend churches that do. I also have pastor friends who call themselves "Senior

Pastors." They are still Christians, and their churches are not bad churches.

Nevertheless, at Redeemer we understand, without pretension, that there is only one pastor who deserves to be called the "Senior " or "Chief" pastor, and that is Jesus Christ. The Greek word behind pastor simply means "Shepherd." I want to quote this at length and help you understand a few things concerning Peter's understanding of biblical government. Peter says beginning in 1 Peter 5:1,

"So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder..."

Peter himself was a fellow elder. He was usually known as the spokesman of the apostles, and he himself was a disciple of Christ, brought into the inner-circle with James and John, and presumably had a very close relationship to Jesus. Yet, here Peter refers to himself along with these other pastors as a "fellow elder." He wasn't even senior among them! He continues on admonishing the pastors to care for his flock (1 Peter 5:2a), exercising loving oversight (5:2b), because they want to and not because they have to (5:2c), not to gain anything in this world (5:2d), not pastoring like a jerk or a tyrant (5:3). And then Peter says,

"... And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory" (5:4).

Jesus is the Chief Shepherd. He is the Senior Pastor. And we are all mere under-shepherds of Jesus.

Also, according to Peter, all pastors need to see themselves on equal footing before Jesus. We call this a "plurality" of elders. The goal for every Redeemer Fellowship is to have a plurality of men who lead the churches. We do not allow any one pastor of a church to have a "veto" card, or one that can be laid out to overrule the other elders if there is a disagreement on board. Sometimes there is a deferment given with a trust that a certain elder's gifting qualify them to run with something that not all the elders agree with, but the goal is to maintain a working team of men prayerfully pursuing Spirit-filled leadership together.

Can Women Pastor at Redeemer Fellowship?

Although many churches and denominations around us ordain women, Redeemer Fellowship understands this not to represent the biblical mandate for male leadership. Paul refers to the qualifications of an elder to be the "husband of one wife" (Greek literally reads "a one woman man", 1 Timothy 3:2). Historically the church has always appointed male leadership until recent times (beginning in the 19th century), and we hold

that this male requirement is not culturally specific to the New Testament church, but rather extends to all churches to all time.

Chapter 5: The Mission of the Church

In this final chapter, we will discuss this all important question: what is the mission of the Church? In other words, why is the Church here? I was raised in a culture of Christianity that treated belief in Jesus as almost primarily a type of hell-insurance, full of the anticipation that one day we are going to leave this world when we die and go to heaven to be with Jesus forever and ever. “Do you want to go to hell?” “No!” “Then believe in Jesus! And you will be in heaven forever and ever.”

Certainly that is true⁵. But it is the not the primary point of our faith. Our faith is far from this type of escapism mentality. “The world is a terrible place! I can’t wait to get out of here, and to convince other people to get out of here with me!”

Rather, when Jesus came, he came preaching something that seemed quite the opposite: he came preaching that the Kingdom of God had come upon his appearing, and that he was seeking to install some sort of new way of life on this world.

We must understand all of the moral teachings of the New Testament in this life. It is all a sort of “resurrection” theology. This is what I mean: whenever we see that the church needs to be living this way or that, Paul is merely saying that a Christian who has been born again has been given way of life to live that is a response to our salvation in Christ. The old person is dead.

⁵ although technically according to Revelation 21:1, heaven, like the earth, will not be a permanent space. Rather, one day it appears heaven will meet earth, and the two together will be the renewal of all things after we are resurrected and given new imperishable bodies. So technically, with belief in Jesus you will not be in heaven forever and ever. You will not be in spirit forever and ever. You will be in a new body in a new heavens and new earth for all of eternity.

And therefore, when the Spirit of God dwells in the Christian, he brings new life to your heart, because that old person is dead.

Therefore, every time a Christian masters sin in her life, we get a glimpse of this “new person” that Jesus is creating continually by the power of the Holy Spirit. This “new person” is only a glimpse of the perfect and imperishable future we have when he returns and rids the world of sin and death forever.

Think of the Lord’s prayer through this lens: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:9b).

Jesus wanted his people to pray that that glimpse of heaven will be brought down to earth. Indeed, it will one day when he returns. But today, we are to be a shadow of it. He wanted us to pray that the same things happening in heaven will be happening down here. Thus, his people through all of Jesus’ teachings and parables, as also found in all of the other letters of the New Testament, are ways in which God’s people by the help of his Spirit relate to this world in a new way. We are to live as “resurrection people” - bringing down glimpses of heaven to this earth by our lives, our actions, our words and our deeds.

Therefore, we can describe the mission of the church as a *group of Christians who are seeking to embody the past salvation they have received Jesus by living out the future realities that he will one day bring.*

How does the mission of the church actually look?

While Jesus was here, he preached the Good News (Matthew 4:17), breaking break with the disenfranchised and hated of society (Mark 2:15-18), healing people of their

sicknesses and diseases (Mark 3:1-6), casting out demons (Luke 11:14), teaching with great authority (Mark 1:21-22), and so much more. He did so as a sinless, perfectly virtuous man before God (Hebrews 4:15).

So what does this mean for the mission of the church? We should seek to mirror what Jesus was doing. We need to also preach the Good News of the coming Kingdom, break bread with the lonely and poor, help to heal and care for the hurting and spiritually oppressed. We also need to teach the Good News with great authority. And we need to do so as we pursue (although imperfectly) a holiness inspired by our love for Jesus - a holiness that mirror his.

As we embark on such a journey, we are aiming to give our world a glimpse of the kind of world God is seeking to one day bring in. This is not only telling others about Jesus and being virtuous, Christ-like people, though. Far from it! Jesus did so much more than merely preach and teach and live a sinless life, as we see above. He was out in the community serving the poor, the lowly and the helpless. He was out working and active! Certain branches of the Christian Church can be really good at preaching the Good News, but fail to embody this message by loving and caring for our neighbor.

Historically, yes, Christians have been known for their preaching of the Good News of Jesus and a call of repentance from their sin. But they have been known for much more. Christians have been highly active in creating hospitals to heal and care for the sick, even unto this day⁶. Christians have been

⁶ Even today, 1 in 14 hospitals in the USA can be identified as Christian funded and supported. Please see <https://www.fiercehealthcare.com/healthcare/number-catholic-hospitals-us-has-grown-22-since-2001>

responsible for institutions like the Salvation Army and the Red Cross. Nearly every ivy league school in our nation began as a Christian seminary for the training of pastors, among a host of other schools as well, showing a vast contribution of Christians to education⁷. The Christian church's impact locally amongst communities through the assistance of benevolence to the widows and poor cannot be measured. This list can continue on and on. Even as Paul met the Apostles for the first time, as he left they "only asked [him] to remember the poor" - the very thing he was eager to do! (Galatians 2:10).

As we gather together to worship Jesus, preach the Good News of his death and resurrection every single week, we are to live out the Gospel through making new disciples among all nations (Matthew 28:16-20). As we do this all important task, we are to, just as Jesus did, seek to give this world a glimpse of the Kingdom that is to come through loving and serving our neighbors and communities in every way we can.

⁷ Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, Oxford, Cambridge, University of Pennsylvania, Rutgers, Columbia, just to name a small percentage.

Conclusion

As we went through this booklet, I hope that the idea of a church has been somewhat simplified to you. Maybe you are still confused, and if that is the case, please let one of the pastors know. We would love to sit with you and help you to understand exactly what the Christian Church is, and if you are a member of the Church, exactly what is expected of you.