

## PRAISE FOR *GATHERED BY CHRIST*

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Concise. Accessible. Beautifully written. Christa's book is a gift to our church as it reminds us of the gift that is *the* Church. All members should have this on their shelves and return to it when they feel tempted to skip out of any gathering of God's people. Christa delivers her book at a perfect time, when now, more than ever, the Christian has the opportunity to choose virtual services over attending corporal worship and communal reception of the Word. Christa encourages us to meet together, echoing the author of Hebrews, and reveals why we would never want to give up the precious gift of being gathered by Christ.

—STEPHANIE NEUGEBAUER, MA, CONCORDIA SEMINARY, ST. LOUIS;  
PASTOR'S WIFE AND MOTHER

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Petzold gets right at the heart of what it means to be the Body of Christ, skillfully weaving together a case for Christian ecclesiology that uses the tools of theology, history, and a keen observation of our current cultural condition. This text can serve as a bedrock description of the Church's origins and scriptural foundations, but it also presses the reader toward the ultimate telos for which the Church strives. Unflinchingly committed to *sola Scriptura* and *solus Christus*, this book will be a blessing to many.

—DR. JOEL OESCH, PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY AT CONCORDIA  
UNIVERSITY IRVINE, AUTHOR OF *CROSSING WIRES: MAKING SENSE  
OF TECHNOLOGY, TRANSHUMANISM, AND CHRISTIAN IDENTITY*

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*Gathered by Christ* beautifully combines Scripture and Church history to paint a picture of God's design for His Bride, the struggles the Church has faced throughout history, and how these form our view of and our responsibility as the Church today. While acknowledging the pain that sin has caused in churches, Christa Petzold points us back to the Church as a beautiful gift of God through which He continually points us to Christ! In a culture focused on individuality and conflict avoidance, *Gathered by Christ* is an excellent reminder of the community we have in Christ, seeking *sincere* unity in the Church.

—TARA DARLING, DIRECTOR OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION,  
ST. PAUL LUTHERAN CHURCH, MOUNT VERNON, IOWA

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In the midst of deep doubts and confusing misunderstandings about the Church in our increasingly unchurched society comes this delightful, well-written, and incredibly helpful book from a mother, a pastor's wife, and an astute theologian. Christa Petzold reminds us that the Church is far more than an organized association, a Sunday breakfast club, or even a helpful support group. Insightfully grounded in Scripture, informed by ample references to Church history, and illustrated by practical examples, Petzold's book leads the reader to see the Church from Jesus' perspective as the Body of Christ—the very family of God. The reader comes away with a renewed sense of awe, excitement, and hope in being part of this often-overlooked gift we call Church.

—REV. DR. GLENN K. FLUEGGE, DIRECTOR OF THE  
CROSS-CULTURAL MINISTRY CENTER AND PROFESSOR OF  
THEOLOGY AT CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY IRVINE

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# Gathered *by* Christ



*The Overlooked Gift of Church*



CHRISTA PETZOLD

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*To my parents, Robert and Susan Lindstrom*

*Thank you for raising me in a family where*  
*church was a given, not an option.*

~



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# Preface

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What is the Church? What role does the Church play in the lives of her members? For many today, the answers to these questions are not obvious. We no longer live in a world that assumes that being a Christian means participating in the life of the Church. This book aims to provide a biblical study of what the Church is and show why the Church is a necessity and a blessing in the lives of the faithful and in the world.

In a book about what it means to be the Church, it feels natural to include references to Church history. To this end, each chapter starts with a vignette that highlights a writing, Church Father, or theologian from a past era in Church history. The vignettes are presented in chronological order (with one exception) and provide a quotation and basic background information on the individual highlighted.

I included these vignettes for several reasons: First, these Church Fathers have valuable insights that are applicable to our context. Second, they serve as a reminder that the issues we face in the Church today are not new; we can learn from the Church's rich history of addressing such challenges. And finally, Church history is our family history as God's people. It is a beautiful thing to get to know those

who have gone before us and who are part of our story. Numerous individuals and writings could have been highlighted, but I chose examples that seemed to fit with the content of this book. Nothing should be inferred from which Church Fathers are included or not included. Each chapter stands alone without the initial vignette, so if any specific quotation is difficult to follow, the reader can skip it without significantly affecting the flow.

Because one's own theological convictions will inevitably show through when writing about this topic, it is helpful for readers to be aware of an author's bias up front. Therefore, I will state plainly that I write from the perspective of confessional Lutheranism. Out of a desire to provide something explicit and helpful, I have not shied away from pointing out the differences in how various theological traditions see the Church. Still, I love and respect my brothers and sisters in Christ in other traditions. As this study grounds itself in Scripture, I believe the message of the Church as a gift from Christ to His people will shine through and be encouraging to readers, regardless of their background.



# Introduction

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*As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,  
so shall your God rejoice over you.*

ISAIAH 62:5

**H**ave you ever heard someone say, “I like Jesus, but I’m not so sure about the Church”? Perhaps you have felt this way yourself. Maybe you know people who say they believe in Jesus and His death and resurrection but do not participate in a church community.

Sometimes people reject the Church because they’ve been hurt. Like all gatherings of humans, churches are full of sinners who fail to live up to God’s standards and cause pain for others. People who grew up in church may stop attending because they no longer believe their church’s teachings or because they fail to see the connection between those teachings and what happens on Sunday mornings. Still others are discouraged and confused by institutional divisions and denominations, feeling that something so fragmented with so much internal conflict cannot be trusted to provide answers to life’s biggest questions.

Such concerns are understandable. Sin, division, confusion, false teaching, and hypocrisy—seeing these in the Church is enough to make anyone want to walk away. This may be how our experiences have led us to see the Church, but how does Jesus see her? While we see the Church as divided, hopelessly fragmented by theological differences and cultural barriers, Scripture tells us that Jesus sees her as one, holy, and unified in Him. We see the Church as full of sinners, but Jesus sees her as a communion of saints washed by His blood and made pure and blameless. We see the Church as existentially threatened by an increasingly secular world, but Jesus sees her as faithful and triumphant in Him, a colony of the new creation that is promised with certainty. We see the Church as defined by what we do as church members, while Jesus sees her as defined by what He has already done.

I am blessed to be married to a pastor, so I have a front-row seat both to the beauty and joy of the Church at her best and to the challenges and heartbreak of the Church at her worst. My husband and I were at seminary when we had our first child, and I remember memorizing “The Church’s One Foundation,” one of my favorite hymns, with the intention of singing it to her every night as I put her to sleep. Here is the first stanza:

**The Church’s one foundation  
Is Jesus Christ, her Lord;  
She is His new creation  
By water and the Word.  
From heav’n He came and sought her  
To be His holy bride;  
With His own blood He bought her,  
And for her life He died. (LSB 644:1)**

One day my mom asked why I chose that particular hymn. I told her that I knew my kids were also going to have a front-row seat to the Church's strengths and struggles. I wanted to imprint upon their hearts and minds that the Church is something beautiful, something founded securely on Jesus Christ, and something objectively rooted in God's Word—not in the sinful words and actions of the individuals who make up our church communities.

When I hear people say, "I like Jesus but not the Church," it drives me to empathy. What pain and life experiences hide beneath such a statement? But I also find myself pondering how Jesus would respond. The Bible describes the Church as the Bride of Christ. If "From heav'n He came and sought her To be His holy bride; With His own blood He bought her, And for her life He died," as the hymn puts it, would Jesus appreciate such a negative sentiment? Saying you like Jesus but not His Church seems akin to saying, "You're welcome here, Jesus, but You can't bring Your wife."

Sometimes in Scripture, Jesus responded harshly to "church" leaders. But He never disparages the Church itself. In Matthew 23, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for oppressing God's people through self-righteous attitudes and legalism. Yet even in His righteous anger against the religious leaders, Jesus did not undermine their authority. He said, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice" (Matthew 23:2–3). "Moses' seat" refers to the Scriptures, the Word of God as given to Moses (specifically, the first five books of the Old Testament). Jesus upheld the authority God gives to His Church through Scripture, even as He condemned those specific religious leaders. The oppressive and hard-hearted Pharisees were the problem, not religion itself.

As we get to know the Church through Jesus' eyes, we will meet Christians from other eras and places. The Church is timeless—a community made up of the faithful throughout the world and those

who are now in heaven with Jesus. The final stanza of “The Church’s One Foundation” captures this timelessness:

**Yet she on earth has union  
With God, the Three in One,  
And mystic sweet communion  
With those whose rest is won.  
O blessed heav’nly chorus!  
Lord, save us by Your grace  
That we, like saints before us,  
May see You face to face. (LSB 644:5)**

When we face challenges as Christians, we can take comfort in this legacy of faith: For two thousand years, Christians have encountered struggles of every kind and yet have stood firm on the Word of God. The Holy Spirit has been working through this communion of saints to build up the Church since Pentecost. May the stories and writings of some of those saints at rest, found in the vignettes at the start of each chapter, encourage us as we learn more about how Jesus sees the Church.

I pray this book leads you to reflect not only on what Jesus has done for you as an individual but also on how Jesus’ atoning work crafts us into something new: the Body of Christ. May we learn to see the Bride of Christ through the eyes of her Bridegroom and, in doing so, draw comfort from the knowledge that we are part of the Church, this timeless community of faith rooted in Jesus Christ, her Lord.



# PART I

## How Jesus Sees the Church

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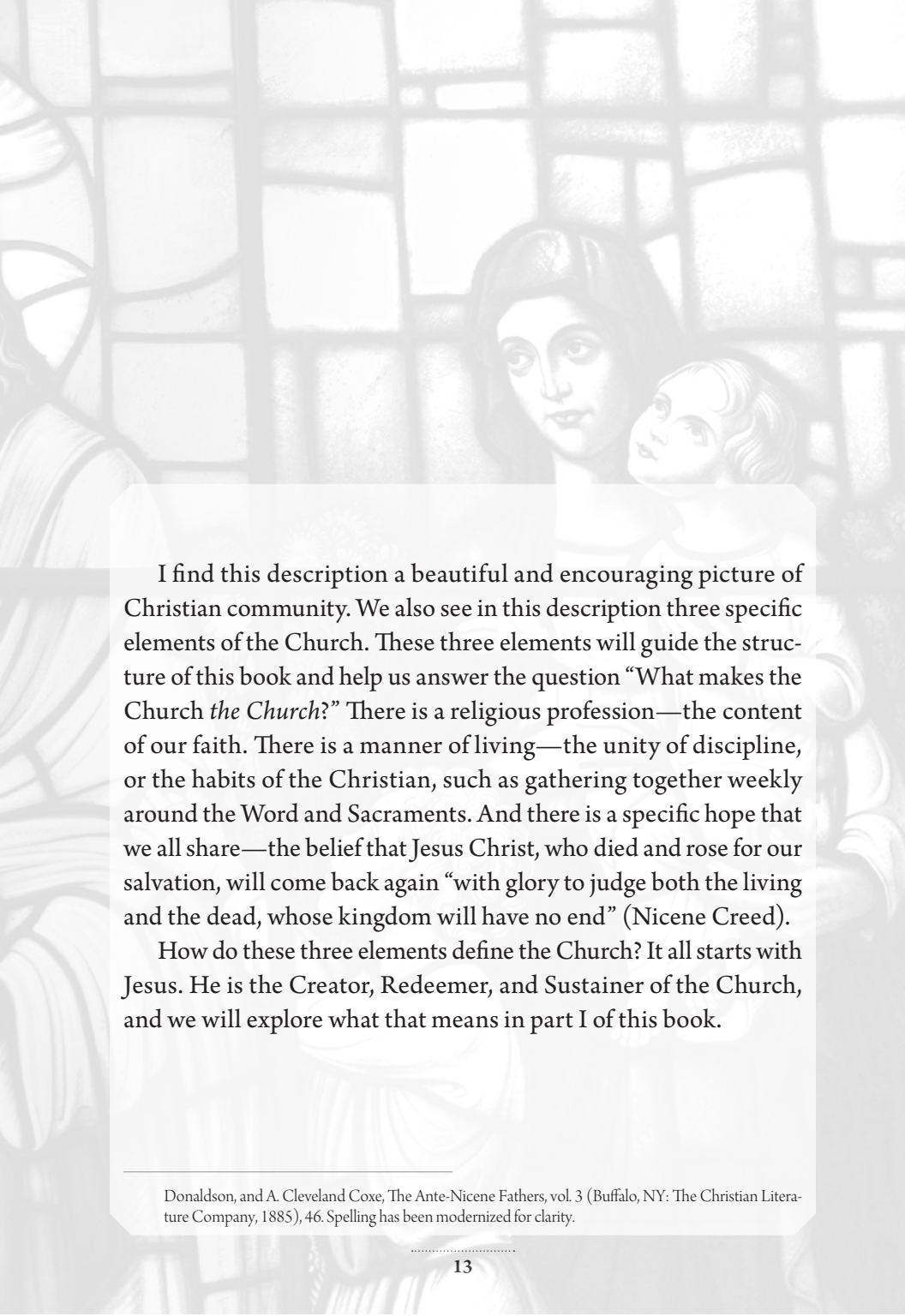
### WHAT THE CHURCH IS

**T**ertullian was a theologian who lived in Africa about two hundred years after Jesus. In his writing, *The Apology*, he describes what Christians do when they gather together:

**We are a body knit together as such by a common religious profession, by unity of discipline, and by the bond of a common hope. We meet together as an assembly and congregation, that, offering up prayer to God as with united force, we may wrestle with Him in our supplications. . . . We pray, too, for the emperors, for their ministers and for all in authority, for the welfare of the world, for the prevalence of peace, for the delay of the final consummation. We assemble to read our sacred writings, if any peculiarity of the times makes either forewarning or reminiscence needful. However it be in that respect, with the sacred words we nourish our faith, we animate our hope, we make our confidence more steadfast.<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Tertullian, *The Apology* XXXIX, in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James



I find this description a beautiful and encouraging picture of Christian community. We also see in this description three specific elements of the Church. These three elements will guide the structure of this book and help us answer the question “What makes the Church *the Church*?” There is a religious profession—the content of our faith. There is a manner of living—the unity of discipline, or the habits of the Christian, such as gathering together weekly around the Word and Sacraments. And there is a specific hope that we all share—the belief that Jesus Christ, who died and rose for our salvation, will come back again “with glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose kingdom will have no end” (Nicene Creed).

How do these three elements define the Church? It all starts with Jesus. He is the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the Church, and we will explore what that means in part I of this book.

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Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3 (Buffalo, NY: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 46. Spelling has been modernized for clarity.









# The Origin of the Church

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## THE DIDACHE

The Didache is an ancient Christian text. While the exact dates are not known, it was written either before or around AD 150, only a few generations after the New Testament books were written. Unlike Scripture, the Didache is not infallible. If you read it in full, you'd likely disagree with some parts or see things that differ from what your pastor teaches. In every era, theologians write about the life of the Church and theology and practice, and just as in our own day, some writings are more theologically sound than others.

Still, the essentials of Christianity have stayed the same throughout the history of the Church. Reading the Didache and other writings like it reminds us of this truth. We also benefit from seeing our faith through the eyes of Christians who lived in an entirely different time and place. Our lives, culture, and assumptions about the world radically differ from those of the first generations of Christians. Yet despite these differences, we see much continuity in the practices and life of the Church.

Knowing we are part of this rich history provides comfort and a sense of security in our faith.

The Greek word *didache* (pronounced dih-dah-KAY) means “the teaching.” The writing is short, the length of an article rather than a book, and it is sometimes called “The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles.” It begins with a section on keeping the Law, in which the “two ways” are contrasted—the way of life and the way of death—and expounds on the two greatest commandments: love God and love neighbor. Next, it describes church practices, covering Baptism, the Eucharist, worshiping on Sunday morning each week, electing bishops and deacons for service in the church, fasting and prayer life, and so on. It ends with a call to watch for Jesus’ return.

This excerpt from the Didache discusses worship and the life of the Church:

**And concerning baptism, thus baptize ye: Having first said all these things, baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living water. But if thou have not living water, baptize into other water; and if thou canst not in cold, in warm. But if thou have not either, pour out water thrice upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit. . . .**

**Now concerning the Thanksgiving (Eucharist), thus give thanks. First, concerning the cup: We thank thee, our Father, for the holy vine of David Thy servant, which Thou madest known to us through Jesus Thy Servant; to Thee be the glory for ever. And concerning the broken bread: We thank Thee, our Father, for the life and knowledge which Thou madest known to us through Jesus Thy Servant; to Thee be the glory for ever. Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one,**

so let Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy kingdom; for Thine is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever. But let no one eat or drink of your Thanksgiving (Eucharist), but they who have been baptized into the name of the Lord; for concerning this also the Lord hath said, Give not that which is holy to the dogs. . . .

Whosoever, therefore, cometh and teacheth you all these things that have been said before, receive him. But if the teacher himself turn and teach another doctrine to the destruction of this, hear him not; but if he teach so as to increase righteousness and the knowledge of the Lord, receive him as the Lord. . . .

Appoint, therefore, for yourselves, bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men meek, and not lovers of money, and truthful and proved; for they also render to you the service of prophets and teachers.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the cumbersome translation, we can easily recognize the Word preached and Sacraments observed in the first century after Jesus' death. We see practices such as Baptism (either by pouring water or by immersion), only communing baptized members in good standing, and vigilance about the purity of doctrine to be taught within the Church. Readings like this help us see how much of church life has remained constant throughout time and across cultures. This points us to a comforting truth: God is the one who preserves and sustains His Church.

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2 Selections from Didache 7–15, in *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 379–81.

## God Calls His People

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From the backstories of our favorite fictional characters to the draw of movie prequels to the joy of swapping life stories with a new friend—who doesn’t love a good origin story? We all see the value in knowing how we got to where we are. To understand someone or something, we must go back to the beginning and ask, “How did this all start?”

Understanding the origin of the Church is no different. Was the Church created by religious leaders a few hundred years after Christ? Was it created by popes, councils, or bureaucrats? Did Jesus mean

In many New Testament passages, Jesus assumes the authority of Scripture. One such passage is Matthew 5:17–18: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” The phrase “the Law and the Prophets” refers to the books of the Old Testament. “The Law” was shorthand for the first five books, written by Moses; “the Prophets” encompassed the other Old Testament authors.

to found a religious movement? These are important questions, and people have answered them in various ways. Scripture provides the true origin story of the Church: a community of faith gathered by God and called to be His people since the beginning of time. This is what the historic Christian Church believes about herself.

Why does Scripture dictate what the Church believes? Because Jesus says so. The Christian Church revolves around one person: Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was a real person who lived and was crucified by the Roman authorities around AD 30; this is not disputed even by unbelievers.

We have eyewitness accounts of many people seeing Him alive after His crucifixion, and it is a fact that His disciples were transformed within the span of a month from men hiding and afraid in a locked room to men willing to be killed for the sake of their testimony that Jesus was truly God and had risen from the dead. Since the time of Jesus' resurrection, the Church has consisted of people who profess the truth that Jesus is God, that He died to atone for the sins of the world, that He rose from the dead in the flesh, and that He will come back again and His kingdom will have no end. Jesus considers Scripture to be authoritative. Therefore, Scripture's testimony is central to our understanding of God and of ourselves.

The Church's origin story is embedded in the world's origin story. The first chapters of Genesis tell of God creating and calling His people. When God created Adam and Eve, He designed them to be in community with Himself and with each other. By giving them the command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God gave them a way to worship Him. With this one command, God introduced Adam and Eve to His Law: the reality that He was God and they were not.

But instead of keeping His Law, Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the fruit, destroying the communal relationship between mankind and God. But God reacted with compassion. He promised Adam and Eve right there in the garden, with the bitterness of the first sin still hanging in the air, that He would fix this (see Genesis 3:15). From that moment, Scripture tells the story of God calling His people out of a fallen world, making them His own, and dwelling among them while working throughout history to restore what was broken and make all things new.

The theme of God calling His people and making them holy echoes throughout the Bible. Before the great flood (see Genesis 6–8), God called Noah to build an ark of protection from the judgment that would be sent on the earth. God Himself shut Noah and his

family in the ark (see Genesis 7:16). He was the one acting to call Noah out from among the sinful people of the world, saving Noah and his family from death.

In Genesis 15, God established a covenant with Abraham to make him into a great people and to give him a land to possess:

**And He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then He said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” And he believed the LORD, and He counted it to him as righteousness. And He said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.” (vv. 5–7)**

The promise God made to Abraham had two components: offspring that cannot be counted (a great people) and a land to dwell in and possess. Abraham did only one thing as his part of the covenant—he believed the Lord, and God counted that as righteousness. All that Abraham contributed to the relationship was believing the Word of God, and that is exactly how God wanted it.

Abraham eventually tried to help God bring about the promised blessings by having a child with his wife’s servant, Hagar. But this was not God’s desire or plan. Rather, Abraham was in God’s grace when he passively received the promises, trusting God to create and call His people. Despite Abraham’s mistaken attempts to seize control, God still kept His covenant with Abraham.

Hundreds of years later, God delivered Abraham’s descendants out of slavery in Egypt, giving them His Law and renewing His call to be His people. He continued to promise that they would be His people and have a land of their own.

God’s promises are tangible and always involve Him creating a community and planting that community in a promised land. From Adam and Eve, who were in fellowship with God in a garden,

to Noah and his family stepping off the ark onto dry land to the Israelites entering the Promised Land, God approaches His people collectively and benevolently, always.

## A House for David

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**W**e tend to think of church as what we do for God. In reality, the Church is what God does for us. King David learned this lesson in 2 Samuel 7 when God made a covenant with him. This is yet another instance of God establishing His people through His own strength, design, and plan. David presided over God's people during a time of peace and prosperity in the Promised Land. As David looked around at the blessings God had granted him, he was moved to do something for God in return:

**Now when [King David] lived in his house and the LORD had given him rest from all his surrounding enemies, the king said to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent." And Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that is in your heart, for the LORD is with you."  
(2 Samuel 7:1-3)**

In the very first line, we read that God was the one who gave David rest from his enemies. David does not get the credit; God's people residing peacefully in the Promised Land was a gift from God. David wanted to repay God, to bring glory to God's name, by building Him a temple. This seems like a noble goal, but God had different plans.

In the next verses of this chapter, God sent the prophet Nathan to remind David of all that He had done in David's life. God is the one who took David from the pasture, made him king, defeated David's enemies, and used David's rule to appoint a place for His

people, Israel. God also reminded David that in all the days since He delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, He had never demanded a house of cedar. God desired to be worshiped not according to David's plans but according to His Word and instruction.

God went on to promise David even more blessings. While David had desired to build a house for God, God turned the tables and insisted He would build a house for David:

**The LORD declares to you that *the Lord will make you a house*. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish His kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of His kingdom forever. . . . And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before Me. Your throne shall be established forever. (2 Samuel 7:11–13, 16, emphasis added)**

God fulfilled His promise in two ways: first through the reign and legacy of Solomon, David's son, and ultimately through the promised Messiah. The throne that will be established forever is Jesus' throne. God did allow Solomon, David's son, to build a temple for Him, but David learned here that God is the one who establishes His people. He establishes their house, not the other way around. David, feeling good about himself, resolved to build something for God, and God turned it around and taught David that this is not the way it works. We can do nothing for God. He builds everything for us.

In this account from David's life, we learn with David that our relationship with God is based not on what we do for Him but on what He does for us. The Church is the community that God Himself physically gathers together, calls out from the peoples of the world, and establishes into an eternal kingdom. This is the kingdom of God that Jesus teaches about throughout the Gospels. As God taught



David, the Church is not created, sustained, or built up by man. God does all the work. God alone creates, calls, and gathers His people; God alone teaches them and makes them holy. Human pride often causes us to overlook this simple truth: God builds the Church.

## The Head of the Church

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God's promise to David to establish his house forever found its ultimate fulfillment in the Messiah. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we are made into this long-awaited community—the Body of Christ. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians says this about Jesus' fulfillment of the Old Testament promises:

**He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent. For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross. (1:15–20)**

In this text, Paul records an ancient hymn that articulates the relationship between Jesus and the Church. The structure of these verses suggests it was used liturgically in a church setting. The hymn may already have been in use in Colossae when Paul wrote this letter, or Paul may have been the author. The composition suggests it was written by someone with exegetical and liturgical training.<sup>3</sup>

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3 Paul E. Deterding, *Colossians*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 43.

This hymn beautifully professes the faith of the Early Church and demonstrates the link between their faith and their worship. These verses affirm that Jesus is the Head of the Church, and they also model what church hymns should do: proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ.

The hymn declares that Jesus “is the image of the invisible God” (v. 15). To image something is to represent it completely and perfectly. Because Jesus is “of one substance with the Father” (Nicene Creed), we encounter God Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. The mystery and beauty of the incarnation is that through Jesus, God comes to us physically, tangibly, and bodily. Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, is the one we encounter with our flesh. He is also “the firstborn of all creation. . . . By Him all things were created” (vv. 15–16). Everything that exists owes its creation and continued existence and thriving to Jesus. These verses profess a faith in Jesus as the one who makes every aspect of our lives meaningful in every way. He is central to all reality. That is what is meant by “that in everything He might be preeminent” (v. 18).

Read Colossians 1:15–20 again slowly. Notice how the hymn acclaims Christ as our Creator, Sustainer, Savior, and Reconciler. He was there at the beginning, He was there for our redemption, He will be there at the end. And at the center of this hymnic, credal passage, we read, “He is the head of the body, the church” (v. 18). In his commentary on Colossians, Paul Deterding writes:

**Although Christ is the head over the entire creation . . . , only the church is called his body, and Christ as the head is connected to the church as his body. Therefore, the apostle’s designation of the church as the body of which Christ is the head indicates that the church stands in a unique relationship to the one who is head over all things. This unique relationship is one of salvation, for it is a result of Christ’s redemptive work. . . . Paul uses this terminology of head and body**

**to emphasize the oneness of the church, a unity which already exists as a gift of grace and which cannot be created by any effort on the part of believers.<sup>4</sup>**

Jesus rules over all of creation, and everything exists in Him according to His mercy and will. And yet, the relationship between Jesus and the Church is much more intimate than the relationship between Jesus and all creation. The oneness that the Church has in Christ is not metaphorical. It is given to us in real, tangible ways. Just as God called out His people in the Old Testament and promised them a physical place to be united in Him, so also Jesus' Church is united in Him and given His true and real presence in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. God has promised complete reconciliation, that all things will be made new, beautiful, and perfect when Jesus returns. But while we wait for that day, we are not alone or cut off from our Lord. Jesus has left us physical connections to His forgiveness and mercy in the Sacraments. The relationship that each member of the Church has with her Head, Jesus, and with one another is created in Baptism and sustained in the Lord's Supper. As the Head, Jesus creates the Church, sustains the Church, saves the Church, and will reconcile all things to Himself through His Body, the Church.

The next verses in Colossians continue:

**And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, He has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before Him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. (1:21–23)**

4 Deterding, *Colossians*, 58.

At this point, Paul makes it personal. He tells us where we fit into the story of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. Our condition before encountering Jesus was “alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds” (v. 21), but this is what it means to be the Church: we are now “reconciled in His body of flesh by His death” (v. 22). Just as God called His people out of slavery in Egypt, He now calls us out of our slavery to sin. As His holy and blameless people, we are above reproach if we continue in this faith and hold on to the hope we have received. This is the Church!

In this passage, the original Greek text makes clear the collective nature of the Church. The Greek language has different words for *you* singular and *you* plural. In English, we have only the one word *you*; we rely on context to determine whether a text addresses a single person or a group. In Colossians 1, Paul uses *you* plural. We may read the New Testament and assume the writers are speaking to their audiences personally in an individualistic way, but that would be a mistranslation and would fail to recognize the communal nature of the epistles. It isn’t “And you, Christa, who once was alienated . . . , He has now reconciled.” It’s “And *you all*, Christians of Colossae, who once were alienated . . . , He has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present *you all* holy and blameless,” and so on. This passage shows that we are all reconciled to Christ together as a body—as *His Body*.

This translation challenge is not unique to Colossians 1. Many of the New Testament Epistles are addressed to entire congregations. When we read the whole letter, including the introduction and the salutation at the end, the group nature is obvious, but we can miss this context when we read only a few verses at a time. We learn more about the nature of the Church when we realize these verses speak not only to us as individuals but also to the Church as a whole.