10

Church

God's Mission

Thirteen points every follower of Jesus should know. A study by Pastor Andy Cisneros.

13 POINTS · 10

Church: *God's Mission*

"Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

Ephesians 5:25

The story of the church is amazing: a handful of Jesus' followers have become, two millennia later, a global phenomenon.

During his life, Jesus promised his small band of disciples, *"I will build my church"* (Matt. 16:18). Following his resurrection, Jesus commanded the church to *"make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you"* (Matt. 28:19 – 20). Just prior to his ascension into heaven Jesus promised those first Christians, *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth"* (Acts 1:8). This was a seemingly grand promise for one hundred and twenty people. But, when that power came at Pentecost, three thousand people *"who received his word were baptized, and . . . were added"* to the church, *"and they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer"* (Acts 2:41 – 42).

These first church members were awed by the miraculous power of God and shared their possessions with anyone who had need. They had favor with all the people of Jerusalem and more and more people joined them. What an amazing experience these people had as the church began! People all around Jerusalem saw the power of God at work and wanted to share in his grace. Furthermore, the first believers loved God and each other as demonstrated by their humble service and generous sharing. This is what church should be.

Tragically, in our day, the common perception of the church is vastly different. David Kinnaman conducted extensive research on how young Americans, people from their late teens to early thirties, believers and unbelievers, perceive the church. The results were quite different from Acts 2. They view the church as homophobic (91%), judgmental (87%), hypocritical (85%), old-fashioned (78%), too involved in politics (75%), out of touch with reality (72%), insensitive to others (70%), and boring (68%). They see the church as male-dominated and negative, with a strong political agenda.

It is curious that if you ask these same people what they think of Jesus, many will say they respect him. They are quite interested in spirituality, but they see the church as very unlike Jesus. To them, the church is quite irrelevant because spirituality is a very personal thing that does not require leaders, buildings, or

programs.

What happened? Where is that dynamic church of Acts 2? Honestly, part of it is bad press. Sometimes the media only reports the most scandalous church activities, while faithful Christians and churches are not well known. Still, a bigger issue is that some churches have become ingrown. They have exchanged mission for institution and have wandered from Jesus' commands for his people. The answer is a simple, humble, and continual return to Scripture to rekindle the love of God, being led in the Spirit in order that we be the church that Jesus intended, for the sake of the world to the glory of God.

What is the Church?

What the church should be can be found in Scripture. The book of Acts is the historical account of the early church. There we see the New Testament church birthed through the preaching of Peter's sermon at Pentecost. Summarizing the church as described in Acts 2:42–47, we get a biblical definition of church as God meant it to be. The local church is a community of regenerated believers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. These believers are placed in the body with Christ as the head. In obedience to Scripture they organize under qualified leadership, gather regularly for preaching, teaching, worship, and to observe the biblical sacraments of baptism and Communion. They are unified by the Spirit, are disciplined for holiness, and scatter to fulfill the Great Commandment and the Great Commission as missionaries to the world for God's glory and their joy.

What Are the Characteristics of the Church?

When speaking of the church, it is helpful to distinguish between the universal and the local church. The universal church is all of God's people at all times and in all places. Someone becomes a member of the universal church by virtue of being a Christian. Local churches are smaller gatherings of the universal church where Christians assemble as God's people. In fact, the word for church in the Greek New Testament (ekklesia) means "gathering," "meeting," or "assembly."

Throughout the centuries, church leaders have characterized the church according to four marks. The church is (1) one, unified by the confession and shared life of Christ through the Spirit. The church is (2) holy by its Christlike character; not just by what it doesn't do through religiously obeying rules, but by actually living out a new life modeled after Jesus by the Holy Spirit's power. The church is (3) universal; the church and its gospel have no limits in time or space because Jesus is Lord of all people, not just a select few. The church is (4) apostolic as it lives under apostolic authority, following the example of faith and life taught by the apostles and given to us in the Bible. In addition to these marks, we have (5) pure preaching and teaching of the Word, (6) the proper observance of baptism and communion, and (7) discipline.

While essential, we believe that even these seven marks are not quite sufficient to capture completely the biblical definition of the church. They omit both the Great Commandments, to love God and neighbor, and the Great Commission, to take the gospel to the whole world.

If we follow the definition of church summarized from Acts 2, we can identify eight key characteristics of the local church. Understanding them will provide standards for planning and evaluating every church.

1. The church is made up of regenerated believers. The Spirit dwells in them and has given them new hearts. The church is a fellowship of true disciples (followers of Christ) who are devoted to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers, and to attending meetings together and fellowshipping in their homes with glad and generous hearts.

There are unbelievers and outsiders, seekers, who participate in the activity of the church and have an important place in the extended community. Hopefully they will come to understand and accept the teachings of the church, become faithful believers wanting to take on their role in the body. Likewise, children are welcomed into the church to be loved, taught and served so that they, too, would grow up to become believers with saving faith and, later, choose to become church members. But the church itself, the body of Christ, is made up of confessing believers who are justified by faith and made new by the Spirit. It is a community manifesting the supernatural life of God.

2. The church is organized under qualified and competent leadership. During those very first years the Apostles (ones sent), those men called by Jesus to follow Him and to carry His message to the world, stepped in to fill that role. In Acts 2 we see them exercising their unique role of teaching the whole church. They led the congregations in wise decisions making about potentially divisive problems. They sent Peter and John to Samaria to confirm the authenticity of the evangelistic outbreak there among gentiles (Acts 8:14 ff). Since the work of the Apostles was primarily to travel across the world spreading the gospel and establishing churches, it was critical that those congregations had adequate leadership after they moved on. In Acts 14:23 we see the appointment of elders, devout men from the congregations that could provide that necessary leadership (see 1 Tim. 3).

In Acts 15 we read of the first serious dispute within the church, how to deal with the gentiles that were flooding into the fold. A group of Jewish men from the church in Jerusalem who had been Pharisees were determined that they become Jews first, or at least, they obey the Mosaic Law. After all, Jesus was the promised Messiah of the Jews. The Apostles, along with the elders of the Jerusalem congregations, met together in conference to discuss the problem and to determine the solution to it, which they did (see Acts 15:19 – 22).

The Bible also describes the appointment of deacons (Acts 6:1 – 3; 1 Tim. 3:8 – 13). They would lead ministry teams that would look after the physical needs of the people. Both men and women shared in this work.

3. The church regularly gathers to hear God's Word preached and taught and to respond in worship. The church is under the authority of Scripture. In Acts people eagerly devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles (Acts 2:42) not because they had to, but because their regenerated hearts wanted to. They had received the Spirit, saw remarkable miracles, and witnessed an evangelistic event that was history altering. But they refused a simple experience-based Christianity. As disciples, they were keenly aware of their need to continually grow in their understanding of Scripture. So they studied, not just for information, but also for transformation in all of their life. Therefore, the church continues to study Scripture to show its submission to the authority of the Word of God.

Not only is the church to gather to hear the preaching of Scripture, but it also is to respond to God's truth and grace with worship.

In the earliest days of the New Testament church, we witness a worshiping community where believers praised God and had favor with all people. Worship is a response to the revelation of the Lord, for who He is, for what He has done, and for what He will do. It consists of (1) adoration and proclamation of the greatness of God and his mighty works; (2) action, which is serving Him by living out His character in service to others in obedience to the commands of Scripture; and (3) participation in the life God has given and His mission for us. In New Testament Greek it is both *proskuneo*, an expression of one's allegiance to and adoration for God, and *latreia* or *leitourgeo*, which is ministering, or doing work and service in the world in the name of Jesus.

4. The church is where the biblical testimonies of baptism and Communion are performed regularly as visible symbols of the gospel in the life of the church.

5. The church is unified by the confession and shared life of Christ through the Holy Spirit. The unified life is manifested among God's people who live in loving unity together as the church. This unity comes in several concrete aspects.

- **Theological unity**. The leaders and members of the church must agree on what they will and will not fight over. Every church must clarify what it considers to be primary, closed-handed doctrines.
- **Relational unity** means that people love one another and demonstrate it by being cordial, respectful, friendly, and kind in their interactions.
- **Philosophical unity** characterizes ministry methods and style. These are house rules or a ministry philosophy about how the church does things, and they are in many ways the cause of a particular and primary cultural style in a church.
- **Missional unity** concerns the objective of the church. Ultimately, the goal of everyone in the church must be to biblically glorify God in all they say and do, with the hope of seeing the nations meet God and also live to glorify him.
- **Organizational unity** is based on how things are done in the church, such as job descriptions, performance reviews, and financial policies, so that the church can be a unified good steward of the

resources God has entrusted to its oversight.

6. The church is disciplined for holiness. The heart of discipline is discipleship. Leaders use Scripture to teach, correct, train, and equip Christians to be a holy people who continually grow in Christlikeness. When believers sin they are supposed to confess and repent. If someone should fail to repent, the church and its leaders must lovingly enact biblical church discipline in hopes of bringing the sinner to repentance and a reconciled relationship with God and his people.

7. The church obeys the Great Commandment to love. The church is supposed to be a Spirit-empowered, loving community that devotes itself to fellowship. God's people live together in intentional relational community to seek the well-being of one another in every way—physical, mental, spiritual, material, and emotional. This does not mean that everyone is required to be best friends with everyone else, but it does mean that people take care of each other like extended family. The people who make up the church gather regularly for such things as worship, learning, the sacraments, and encouragement. But even when not gathered, the church is still the church. There is a Spirit-bond of belonging and a mission that unites the believers wherever they are, in the same way that a family is still a family even when Dad is at work, Mom is at the store, and the kids are at school.

Not only does Scripture command Christians and churches to love, but it also tells us whom we are to love. First, we are to love God. Second, we are to love our family. Third, we are to conduct ourselves in such an honoring and respectful way that our church leaders find it a joy to pastor us, which is a practical way of loving them (1 Tim.5:17). Fourth, we are to love fellow Christians (1 John 3:14). Fifth, we are to love our neighbors even if our neighbor is a difficult person. Sixth, we are to love strangers. Seventh, we are to love even our enemies.

8. The church obeys the Great Commission to evangelize and make disciples. The church is an evangelistic community where the gospel of Jesus is constantly made visible through its proclamation of the gospel, the witness of the members' lives, and its Spirit-empowered life of love. From the first day, *"the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved"* because they took Jesus' command seriously: *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth"* (Acts 1:8). The church is to be an evangelistic people on mission in the world, passionate to see lost people meet Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Any church submitting to the Holy Spirit and obedient to Scripture wants fewer divorces, addictions, thefts, and abuses and knows the only way to see that happen is to make more disciples. The church loves people and is continually and painfully aware of the devastation that is wrought in this life and in the life to come for those who are not reconciled to God. Therefore, while not imposing religion on anyone, the church of Jesus Christ is to constantly be proposing reconciliation with God to everyone.

As local churches implement these characteristics of the church, it is vital that the distinction between principle and method be retained. These eight characteristics give us timeless biblical principles that are unchanging regardless of culture. Nevertheless, they also require church leaders to use timely biblical

methods that are changing depending upon culture. This is the essence of what it means to be a missional church that contextualizes its ministry. Paul demonstrated this by not changing his doctrine or principles but often changing his methods, depending upon his audience. Paul explains missional contextualization in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23:

"For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all ,that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings."

This means, for example, that it is fine for churches to meet in different kinds of buildings, or even outside under a tree; have services that take an hour or a whole day, and sing different songs with different instrumentation (if any) as is most fitting for each one's specific cultural background.

We know the church is imperfect and led by imperfect people like us. But, we are thoroughly convinced that the gospel of Jesus Christ through the ministry of the church is the hope of the world. And as these eight characteristics of the church are pursued by grace, we trust that the glory of God will be made visible through lives changed by Jesus Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

What is Jesus' Relationship to the Church?

Jesus wants us to live in the world, but not be "of the world" (John 17:14 – 16). We must not leave the sick and dying world in order to huddle in a secure subculture of Christian safety. He also prayed that we would not simply go with the flow of sin and death in the culture, but rather, we would swim upstream against it by living countercultural lives like Him, guided by the truths of Scripture intended to be lived out by missionaries in every culture at all times. That Jesus' commands for us to be missionaries in our culture as he was in His could not be clearer. In John 17:18 Jesus prayed , *"As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."* And in John 20:21 Jesus said to His followers, *"As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."*

The Gospels give us the story of the Spirit-empowered ministry of Jesus Christ so we would know who He is. Acts gives us the story of the Spirit-empowered ministry of Jesus' people, the church, who worship God and continue His mission through His son. As the church, we follow the example of Jesus by being Spirit-filled and Spirit-led, which defines the mission of the church. This is why Luke is careful to show that the Holy Spirit descended on both Jesus (Luke 3) and the church (Acts 2), empowering the church to continue the mission of Jesus in the world.

As we take the gospel to the world, churches, as communities of Jesus followers, will come together. It is essential that we never forget that Jesus and Jesus alone is:

- **The head of the church**. He is supreme. He is prominent. He is our King. When we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior we are placed in the body of Christ by the power of God. That is the baptism of the Holy Spirit.
- **The apostle who plants a church**. There is no church that comes into existence apart from Him. Apart from Jesus there is no church. Those who are caught up in the hard work of church planting must always remember that Jesus is the apostle. While we can start an organization, only he can plant a church.
- **The leader who builds the church**. Many pastors out of foolishness and pride take on the responsibility of building the church. But it is Jesus alone who ultimately builds the church.
- **The chief shepherd who rules the church** (1Peter 5:4). The Bible is clear that Jesus alone is the senior pastor over the church and that all the other pastors and leaders are supposed to work under His leadership.
- **Present with the church**. Jesus is the one who says, *"I am with you always."* In his exaltation, and through the Spirit, He is with us and we are in Him.
- **The judge of the church** (Rev.2:5). Jesus sometimes shuts churches down when they have become faithless or truthless. Such churches have lost their love for Jesus and others. They refuse to repent, and are shut down because they are doing more harm than good. Jesus himself said that He is the vine and we are the branches (John 15:1 – 5). What Jesus meant is that there is no Christian life for the church apart from Him. There are many branches. Churches are each one of the many branches. What keeps every church alive, healthy, growing, and fruitful is an ongoing rootedness in and connectedness to the living Jesus Christ. Some churches, denominations, networks, and the like, arrogantly act as if they are the vine and everyone else is but a branch. However, when Jesus' teaching is humbly received, we are able to enjoy being fruitful branches and rejoice in the fruit on other branches, since we are all connected to the same proverbial vine.

What is the Church's Testimony (Acts 2)?

The New Testament church was birthed with Peter's preaching of the gospel on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. This gospel is the means by which God's power is exercised both for and through the church. The gospel pattern of Acts 2, as well as of other Scriptures, breaks down into three aspects: (1) revelation, or what God did; (2) response, or what we do; and (3) results, or what God gives.

REVELATION: WHAT GOD DID

Peter begins by affirming that Jesus fulfills the promises of a Messiah, with miracles, signs, and wonders (Acts 2:22). Next, Peter declares that Jesus died on the cross according to God's prophetic purpose (v. 23). Then he proceeds to emphasize the reality that God bodily raised Jesus from death in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (vv. 24–32). Peter concludes with the final acts of God exalting Jesus to the right hand of the Father and pouring out the Spirit in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (vv. 33–35).

RESPONSE: WHAT WE DO

The first thing we are to do in response to God's revelation is repent (vv. 36–38). Repentance is the Spirit-empowered acknowledgment of sin that results in a change of mind about who and what is lord in our life; what is important, and what is good or bad. This is followed by a change of behavior flowing out of an internal change of values. The second response is to accept the revealed message about Jesus by Spirit-empowered faith (v. 41). Faith means taking God at his word and trusting our life and eternity to the truth of his revelation. All of this is seen in the act of baptism, which is the visible expression of our connection with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus through repentance and faith (vv. 38, 41).

RESULTS: WHAT GOD GIVES

Peter immediately announces the gift of forgiveness of our sins, which is the result of the death of Jesus (v. 38). This gift flows into justification, or the charged righteousness of Jesus. Peter goes on to the second gift: the Holy Spirit and the new heart and new life of Christ (v. 38). This regeneration, or the imparted righteousness of Jesus, is for living a new life as a Christian with, like, for, to, and by, the living Jesus. The third gift is membership in the body of Christ, the new community of the Spirit called the church. This community is a supernatural community where God's power and generosity are seen from miracles and supernatural signs to the sharing of possessions among the community members and giving to all in need (vv. 41–47). The fourth gift is participation in the mission of the church to join God's mission to rescue the world from sin and condemnation through the gospel (v. 47). All of this ultimately leads to everlasting life in the age to come, in the kingdom of God (v. 21).

Many Christians have lost the understanding of the new life of the Spirit. They do not preach or live the regeneration of believers. Rather than living out a joy-filled life flowing from their deepest desire to be like Jesus, they settle for being sinners saved by grace, obligated to do all they can to keep the law of God by duty rather than by delight.

They have not fully enjoyed the double gift of given or charged righteousness, which accompanies our justification, and the imparted righteousness of the indwelling Spirit, which accompanies our new heart and regeneration. On the cross God did a work for us by saving us through Jesus who died in our place for our sins. With his resurrection He conquered death, bringing to us the power of his life. We then see at Pentecost that God does a work in us through the Holy Spirit at work in our hearts for regeneration. Together, both our eternity and every step along the way can be filled with hope, joy, purpose, and

passion if we see the relationship between the cross and Pentecost. The regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in the heart is the source of the Christian life and Christian church and the powerful result of the gospel doing its redemptive work.

Who Leads a Church?

As we said earlier, Jesus is the head and senior pastor of the church. Because of this, church leaders must first be good sheep. They must learn to follow their chief shepherd, Jesus, very well before they even think about becoming under shepherds leading a flock of his sheep.

The Bible describes three offices believers hold within the church: elders-pastors, deacons, and church members. An office is a position of responsibility and authority, a trust or duty assigned by the church to a person to be performed for the common good, a ministry. On the other hand, it is any function that aids the church in accomplishing its God-given marks and fulfilling its God-given purpose. An office has a permanence that extends beyond the tenure of the person holding the office. A person who holds an office has the responsibility and the authority to carry out the specific stewardship associated with that office. A church should have the three biblical offices. They are also free to have people holding other offices that oversee areas of ministry (worship leader, treasurer, small group leader, usher, etc.) to meet the specific ministry requirements of that local church.

The Bible describes the office of elder-pastor or overseer as the highest office in a local church, a position charged with the responsibility of overseeing the doctrinal soundness and spiritual health of the church (See Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:1 – 2, and 1 Tim. 3:1 – 7). There is no end of confusion over the title pastor. It is often used for leaders of the church who get paid for their ministry, or specifically for the preacher. Negatively, this false understanding separates pastors from elders, the biblical term for senior leaders. Worse, it is often associated with a priestly role of one ordained to perform sacraments, creating a wholly unbiblical sacramental office. The Bible uses the noun (pastor, overseer or shepherd) to refer to Jesus or to a spiritual gift, rather than to an office (Eph. 4:11). Usually it is a verb, to shepherd. Asking for the biblical definition of the office of pastor gets us nowhere. We suggest that it is best to use the noun as synonymous with the biblical term elder, since the Bible uses the two interchangeably. It is similar to how a man is called both father and dad in reference to his one office.

The duties of elders revolve around two major areas of responsibility: pastoral care (including equipping Christians for ministry and oversight of the church) and guiding and guarding the teaching of the church including the preaching of God's Word when the church assembles. The elders are the senior leadership team in a church and as such they bear primary responsibility for the well-being of the church's people, resources, and doctrine. Elders lead not by abusively lording authority over the people but by serving them (Matt.20:25-28); not by domineering but by being examples to their fellow Christians (1Peter 5:3). The Bible says that only men known for humble and sacrificial success in four areas should even be considered as elders-pastors (see Acts 20:18–35; 1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Pet. 5:1–4).

1. An elder is to be a godly Christian man whose life is clearly and faithfully devoted to Jesus Christ.
2. An elder is to be a godly husband, faithful to his wife and a blessing to her.
3. An elder is to be a godly father who lovingly leads his children in the worship of God in all of life.
4. An elder is to be a godly man in all other areas of his life. This includes how he works his job, manages his time, positions, and items, respects the other elders as a church member, serves others in ministry, and so on.

I am for the complementarian view of church leadership, where only qualified men can occupy the office of elder-pastor (as compared to the egalitarian view, in which women can also serve in the office of elder-pastor). The office of elder and the specific functions that are unique to elders are limited to highly qualified and appointed men. Women should use the spiritual gifts and natural abilities that God has given them to their fullest extent, ministering in every way in which other non-elders do (as compared to the hierarchical view, in which women are allowed to minister only to other women and children).

It is important to say that the Bible always speaks of elders in the plural. This follows the New Testament pattern that ministry is to be done by teams so that everyone is under authority, including those in authority. While there will almost always be one man on the team of elders who is the leader of the team, a "first among equals" elder, he does not hold a categorically different office from the other elders. This is the kind of difference Peter demonstrated when, though he was the leader of the apostles and an author of Scripture, he referred to himself as "a fellow elder." 1 Peter 5:1

The Greek word for deacon simply means "servant," and beyond that title we are given little indication of what a deacon should do. When "deacon" is used in an official sense, the concept of service is united with the concept of office. Acts 6 speaks of deacons as those appointed to an official position of leadership in service to others, caring especially for their physical needs. The motivation of the deacon is humble obedience to God and loving desire to benefit the ones served. The primary list of qualifications for deacons is found in 1 Timothy 3:8–13, and it is nearly identical to that of the elders—minus the teaching and preaching abilities. One significant difference between the two offices is that both 1 Timothy 3:11 and Romans 16:1 point to men and women alike serving as deacons, as assistant leaders under the elders, helping them to lead the church.

Paul's order is elder and then deacon. This supports the pattern of Acts 6, where the office of deacon likely originated, suggesting that the deacons functioned alongside the senior leaders, but worked under their leadership. Elders and deacons work together like left and right hands, with male elders specializing in leading by their words and male and female deacons specializing in leading by their works.

What is Church Membership?

BAPTISM OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

When Jesus died and was resurrected He said that His disciples would receive the Holy Spirit *"not many days from now"* (Acts 1:5). Ten days later the Jewish holiday of Pentecost occurred. At that time the Apostles, and possibly as many as one hundred and twenty followers of Christ, received the Holy Spirit. This started a new dispensation in time.

The apostle Paul carefully defines the baptism with the Spirit as that act of Christ by which He places believers into His body (Rom. 6:4–6; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27) the church. It is a sovereign, single, unrepeatable act on God's part, and is no more an experience than justification and adoption. Although some view the baptism with the Spirit as the initiation into the ranks of the spiritual elite, that would not be accurate. The purpose of the baptism with the Spirit is not to divide the body of Christ, but to unify it. As Paul wrote to First Corinthians, through the baptism with the Spirit "we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13; cf. Gal. 3:26–27; Eph. 4:4–6). When you accept Christ you accept membership into his body, the church.

FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

Unlike the baptism with the Spirit, being filled with the Spirit is an experience and should be continuous. Although filled initially on the Day of Pentecost, Peter was filled again in Acts 4:8. Many of the same people filled with the Spirit in Acts 2 were filled again in Acts 4:31. Acts 6:5 describes Stephen as a man "full of faith and the Holy Spirit," yet Acts 7:55 records his being filled again. Paul was filled with the Spirit in Acts 9:17 and again in Acts 13:9.

While there is no command in Scripture to be baptized with the Spirit, believers are commanded to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). Church members are to be continuously being filled with the Spirit. Those who would be filled with the Spirit must first empty themselves. That involves confession of sin and dying to selfishness and self-will. To be filled with the Spirit is to consciously practice the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ and to have a mind saturated with the Word of God. Colossians 3:16–25 depicts the results of "letting the word of Christ richly dwell" in us. They are the same ones that result from the filling of the Spirit (Eph. 5:19–33). As believers yield all decisions of life to his control, they "walk by the Spirit" (Gal. 5:16).

Membership is also an office in the church, though many fail to recognize this reality. Church membership is not a voluntary association like membership in a country club or civic organization. Tragically, many churches seem to think membership means simply putting your name on a list that comes with a set of offering envelopes. Church membership is not for selfish people to use the church for their own agendas and felt needs. Church membership is for people who give God all the glory, love Jesus, love the church, and want to help the church bring the message of the Kingdom of God to the world. The Bible speaks of

church membership in relational terms—as members of one body and as members of the household of God—so that God's people live as a gospel community and help one another grow in Christ and reach others for the Kingdom of God.

Church membership is a commitment made by the member to the church and by the church to the member. It is a public, mutual commitment to participation in a community of ministry and mission. Members invest their passions, service, resources, and relationships for the kingdom. They commit to a holy life characterized by integrity and confession of sin. The commitment to membership means active participation in ministry, in worship, in fellowship, and in service for the mission of the church, along with generous giving and evangelistic living.

The church commits to build, equip, strengthen, encourage, and comfort its members. The church must train and release the members to use their spiritual gifts in various ways so that they too are leading the church, behind the elders and deacons, as the priesthood of believers. Those who function as exemplary church members are then qualified to occupy the church leadership positions of deacon and elder.

To become a member of the church (TBC) one must be a baptized believer and take a formal class in order to understand the doctrines, organization, and ministry philosophy of the church. Membership includes signing a written covenant with the elders to do such things as serve in the church, pray for the church, give to the church, read the Bible regularly, love their brothers and sisters in Christ in word and deed, respect the authority of church leaders, including submitting to discipline if necessary, attend church services, and share the gospel with others in word and deed.

While only members are allowed to oversee certain areas of ministry, nonmembers, including nonbelievers in many areas, are intentionally encouraged to serve throughout the church as a connecting point for community and for the gospel. This is important so that the church can act missionally by bringing people into active participation in the life of the church with the intent of seeing lost people become Christians and disconnected Christians become vitally connected to the church and also eventually become faithful church members.

Why is Teaching Important?

God created the world through teaching. We can imagine God's speaking to Adam as a sermon, because it was the authoritative proclamation of his Word. Then, Satan also preached. He twisted God's Word and declared that God's words were a lie. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, believed the Serpent's teachings over God's, and sin, death, and chaos have ensued ever since. The Serpent has continued teaching through false prophets and teachers every day since.

Through the ensuing centuries God appointed prophets to preach; men like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and a host of others, but most of God's people refused to listen, so God punished them. Finally Jesus preached God's message (Heb. 1:1 – 2). His ministry included feeding the hungry, healing the sick, loving the outcast, and

befriending the sinner, as well as bringing people to repentance and forgiveness. But we must never forget that Jesus' ministry began with and centered on preaching and teaching.

When Jesus sent the Twelve on their mission, he told them to preach the message of the kingdom. Peter's sermon was the very first activity of the church after the Spirit came upon them. The rest of Acts records the preaching and teaching ministry of several other leaders of the church. Thus, preaching the gospel in its transforming fullness is a priority ministry of the church. God's mission is accompanied by various other ministries that support, supplement, and sustain the preaching of God's Word in truth and with passion.

In the same way we are to preach the Word of God, the good news of what God has done and will do in the future. Our message is not to be merely good spiritual advice for better living. It has the power, and must be intended, to save and bring people to maturity (1 Thes.1:5). The power of preaching and teaching does not come with clever stories or wordly advice, but with the power of the Spirit and the answer to prayer. Preaching brings faith for hearers (1Cor. 2:4-5) and must be spiritual food to nourish God's people (1 Peter 2:2).

Paul warned that times would come when people would not tolerate sound doctrine (2 Tim.4:3-5). While God's people have always viewed preaching as something to be done when the church gathers, they only wanted to hear things that made them feel good. But Preaching must be proclaiming with authority and passion the truth of God's Word. In preaching, the authority of God's Word is upheld and God's people are collectively led and taught according to the Scriptures. The willingness of Christians to sit under preaching is an act of worship, as they are humbly submitting to Scripture and the pastor, who is preaching on behalf of the elders. Preaching is among the most essential ministries of a church because the authoritative preaching of Scripture informs and leads God's people in the rest of the church's ministries.

The Bible tells us to simply "preach the word," but does not tell us exactly how this is to be done, thereby leaving some creative freedom for preachers. A church following the word of God will always have sound preaching and teaching. The preaching will be (1) **biblical**, focusing on what Scripture says; (2) **theological**, teaching what Scripture means; (3) **memorable**, practically speaking to the lives and culture of people; (4) **transformational**, leading to repentance, response, and spiritual maturity; (5) **missional**, explaining why this matters for the mission of God and the salvation of lost people.

Faithful gospel proclamation, which began with God in Genesis, is to continue by faithful gospel preachers until the gospel is consummated at the return of Jesus, to whom all biblical preaching points.

What Are Baptism and Communion?

Baptism and Communion are visible presentations and testimonies of the gospel performed regularly by the church. Churches perform these special ceremonies to celebrate the transforming reality of the gospel. Christians call them sacraments (i.e., sacred and holy rites) because they are visible symbols of

invisible spiritual realities. Some Christians would disagree with us, but we believe that water baptism is for those Christians who have already received Spirit baptism, making them part of the church. In water baptism Christians are immersed in water, which identifies them with the death and burial of Jesus in their place for their sins. Coming up out of the water identifies them with the resurrection of Jesus for their salvation and new life empowered by the Holy Spirit. Altogether, baptism identifies a Christian with Jesus, the universal church, and the local church.

When we speak of baptism we must remember that we are talking about more than a simple rite that people undergo. As a sacrament it is a symbol of something far bigger. It is a visible declaration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Being baptized expresses the believer's death to sin, burial of the old life, and resurrection to a new kingdom life. It also serves as a witness to others of their intent to live and serve in the body of Christ. Jesus and the apostles commanded that all Christians be baptized as an initial act of discipleship. In the book of Acts and in the early church, baptism was administered most of the time upon conversion, though not always. We think that believers should be baptized immediately upon accepting Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

The second sacrament that constitutes the Christian church has several names. When calling it Communion, we emphasize the fellowship we have with God and each other through Jesus. Calling it the Lord's Table emphasizes that we follow the example Jesus set at the Last Supper Passover (Seder) meal he ate with his disciples. The name Eucharist (meaning *thanksgiving*) emphasizes our thankfulness and the joyful celebration of God's work for us, in us, through us, and in spite of us. The real issue is not the name, but the meaning of the sacrament itself. It is a dramatic presentation that (1) reminds us of the death of Jesus Christ in our place for our sins; (2) calls Christians to put our sin to death in light of the fact that Jesus died for our sins and it compels us to examine ourselves and repent of sin before partaking; (3) it shows the unity of God's people around the work of Jesus; and (4) anticipates our participation in the marriage supper of the Lamb when his kingdom comes (Matt. 26:26 – 29; 1 Cor. 11:23 – 34).

It should be an occasion when God's loving grace impacts us so that the gospel takes a deeper and deeper root in our lives. Grace is unmerited favor, or God's goodwill. It is His helpful enabling for life and service, and a transformational power from the Spirit that brings blessing to us. Each of these aspects of God's grace is connected to the partaking of Communion.

The Bible does not give us instructions as to how often this sacrament should be performed. Some churches practice it every week. Others do it just once a year, usually at Easter. Here at Timberland, in order to keep it from becoming meaningless repetition yet often enough to keep it fresh in our minds, we partake of it once a month on the first Sunday.

The sacraments are great gifts that help the church stay gospel centered, repentant, and on mission. In preaching and teaching, the gospel is spoken. In sacrament, the gospel is seen. And in discipline, the gospel is defended.

What is Church Discipline?

Church discipline is one of the most misunderstood and yet most needed ministries within the church. We do not believe that it is an optional ministry of the church, but one required of us in Scripture for the glorifying of God, guarding of the gospel, and good of the people. What most people think of when they hear “church discipline” is excommunication, the final stage of the biblical process. Excommunication is what happens when discipline fails to result in repentance and reconciliation. Biblical discipline is, first and foremost, a means for learning and growing (something we all need to continue to do). To be a disciple of Jesus means to live a *disciplined* life which requires a willingness to receive discipline as needed. There are two major kinds of biblical discipline: Two words are often used when I study this topic. Formative and restorative. Formative discipline is primarily positive, instructive, and encouraging. Restorative discipline is corrective.

Every person (except Jesus Christ) is a sinner, both by nature and by choice. The question is not whether people will sin, but rather, how they will deal with that sin. Christians who sin should go through the stages of (1) conviction, the work of the Spirit and the church, to recognize the sin; (2) confession, telling God and people about the sin and taking responsibility for it; (3) repentance, changing one’s mind and values about what is really true with a resulting change of behavior; (4) restitution, restoring things to their original state or making good any loss where possible; and (5) reconciliation, the rebuilding of trust and relationship.

While everyone sins, not everyone deals with it in a proper manner, and the result is a need for church discipline. Discipline is the responsibility of the church body, which includes Jesus Christ and the elders, deacons, and members of the church. It cannot be overstated that when rightly done and humbly received, church discipline is good for the sinners, their victim(s), their church, and their witness to the watching world.

Each potential case of discipline is weighed on its own merits and dealt with according to the following scriptural examples:

- When a Christian sins against another Christian and it cannot be overlooked in love. Prov. 19:11; Matt. 18:15–22
- W hen a Christian who professes faith lives in sin without repentance. 1 Cor. 5:1–13; 2 Cor. 2:5–11; Gal. 6:1–5
- When a Christian continually blasphemes God. 1 Tim. 1:18–20
- When someone encourages or promotes false doctrine. Acts 20:25–31; Gal. 1:6–9; 1 Tim. 1:4–7; 4:1–8
- When a Christian is sincere but deceived. 2 Cor. 11:3–4, 13–15.
- When a teacher is in moral sin or doctrinal error. James 3:1
- When an elder is in moral sin or doctrinal error. 1 Tim. 5:19-21

- When a Christian appoints himself or herself to leadership. John 9-10
- When a Christian is divisive. Titus 3:10-11
- When a Christian is an idle busybody. 2 Thess. 3:6,11
- When a Christian promotes legalism. Gal. 5:7–15, Phil. 3:2–3
- When a Christian refuses to obey civil laws. Romans 13:1-7
- When an alleged offended Christian seeks legal recourse.1 Cor. 6:1-8
- When a Christian has repeatedly rejected counsel by a church elder. Heb. 13:17; 1 Thess. 5:12–13; 2 Thess. 3:14–15
- When a Christian is not purposely consistent in community. Col. 3:16; Heb. 10:24–25
- When a Christian leaves the church to pursue sin or heresy. John 2:19

When sin has occurred, the Bible gives five steps to be followed by those who have been sinned against. Each of these steps is very important. If they are not followed the result can be division in the church. This is a tragic loss since unity is gained slowly but it can be lost quickly. During seasons of discipline unity can be most difficult. Perhaps one of the reasons church discipline is so seldom practiced is that it is so seldom taught. It seems reasonable to expect that if Christians understood how to undertake church discipline practically, they would. To that end, the following five steps are offered.

Step 1: Consider the Crime

Sometimes the offense, or sin, is also a criminal act. If so, then the police need to be called so that we are obeying the governing authorities and their laws as Scripture states (Rom. 13:1-7). If a law (like in the case of molestation) has been broken the authorities should be called. “Paul also has some things to say regarding the involvement of secular courts in Christian disputes (1 Cor. 6:1–11 and Rom. 13:1–7). We have an incredibly combative society. Things were not much different in Paul’s day, since Greece, home of the world’s first democracy, had a bustling court system. The question Paul seeks to address on this issue is how a Christian should relate to the secular court.

Paul says that trivial cases should be handled within the church by appointed, impartial people who love God and His justice (Romans 13:1-7). The distinction between trivial and weighty matters in our day is marked by the distinction between civil law and criminal law, which covers such things as treason and murder.”

Christians are welcome to pursue justice on civil matters if they believe they have been wronged, but, they are to do so within the church if at all possible. Criminal matters must be brought to the attention of the government.

Step 2: Weigh the Offense

Someone who has been sinned against should consider whether to simply forgive the person(s) involved, overlook the sin, and let it go. It is worth stressing, however, that we cannot simply overlook an offense if doing so is motivated by our cowardice, fear of conflict, and/or lack of concern for others' sanctification. In the end, it is the glory of God, the reputation of Jesus, the well-being of the church, and the holiness of the individual that must outweigh any personal desires for a life of ease that avoids dealing with sin biblically.

Step 3: Advise

If a sin seems too serious to overlook, we are to go to our brother or sister in private and discover the truth, and if sin is present, appeal to that person with a spirit of reconciliation to repent. In this we trust God to be faithful and convict his or her conscience of sin. We desire that he or she would respond with confession, repentance, restitution, and reconciliation as was discussed earlier in this chapter. In this step, those who have been offended must be careful not to ascribe guilt to others without faithfully seeking the truth about what was done or said. Hearsay and secondhand reports from one person do not qualify as a credible charge.

Step 4: Reprove

If the one who has been confronted will not respond to repeated personal appeals, we are to take one or two other believers to the unrepentant one so that they too can urge the sinner to turn back to God and serve as witnesses that every effort is being made to lovingly bring the sinner to repentance. If the Christian persists in sin, we may seek the formal involvement of the church, initially by obtaining assistance from the elders, and, if necessary, the elders may inform and invite the prayers and assistance of the entire congregation. Specific elders must be appointed to investigate the situation and work for repentance and reconciliation.

Mediation and arbitration may be used at this time to help reconcile two opposing parties. Mediation means bringing another person along to help resolve conflict and explore solutions if the conflict cannot be resolved through private peacemaking. Arbitrators can also be appointed to listen to both sides and render a binding decision about substantive issues. In all of this, it is imperative that both sides of the dispute agree to submit to the findings of the mediator or arbitrator if the process is to be a worthwhile use of time and energy. Most important – all is to be done in love.

Step 5: Separate

If these efforts do not bring a believer to repentance and reconciliation, or if a person refuses to be reconciled, Jesus commands us to treat the person as *"a Gentile and a tax collector."* (Both were despised by the Jews in Jesus' day) This means we no longer have normal, casual fellowship with the believer, but instead use any encounters to bring the gospel of reconciliation to him and lovingly urge him to repent and turn back to obedience to God. Although rejection and disassociation may seem harsh, these

responses are simply a means by which the individual in question may come to an acknowledgment of his sin and repent. The idea is not that we stop caring for him, but rather, when he sins and refuses to repent we treat him as if he were an enemy of the gospel.

Church discipline is for all members of the church, including leaders. In fact, teachers are held to a much stricter standard than other Christians. The Bible warns of fierce wolves that will speak twisted things, false apostles, false prophets, and false teachers who bring destructive heresies in their deceptive words. Paul tells the church not to admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. But if the elder persists in the personal sin or if he commits a sin against the office of elder, he must be rebuked publicly or removed from the office, depending upon the severity of the sin. The goal of these corrective measures is to make every effort for Christians who love their fallen brother or sister to show their overwhelming sorrow and concern in an effort to compel the sinner toward repentance and reconciliation with God and his church. The words of Romans 12:18 are important to remember. They instruct us to be at peace with everybody if we are given the chance. People who know how much they have been forgiven should be willing to forgive anybody who earnestly repents of anything they have done.

Why Should Christians Join a Church?

Some selfish people refuse to join a church because they do not want to learn, obey, serve, or give. Other selfishly join a church primarily to use it for their personal gain. This can be anything from a political or social agenda to a business endeavor. Either way, selfish people are more takers than givers, and the more selfish people a church has, the less healthy it will be. Sadly, selfish people also suffer because they fail to mature as generous stewards and humble servants of Jesus Christ.

There are ten primary reasons why a Christian needs to become an active member of a local church.

1. Salvation means forgiveness and new life in the community of the Spirit. Salvation is not merely a personal relationship with Jesus that allows us entrance into the Kingdom of God. It is also a communal relationship with the church to live on mission for Jesus and his kingdom in this life and when he returns. The Kingdom will not fully be established until Christ returns, but the Kingdom has started in our hearts. And the kingdom begins its reign in the church.

2. Being a Christian means being a Jesus follower, a disciple. His call to “follow me” means come join a group of disciples who together are the people of God. The New Testament uses several metaphors to describe the church of God. They include flock, temple, body, and family or household. Each of the images communicates the same big idea that God’s people are to remain together. Sheep die individually but live as a flock, fed and protected by a shepherd; a building falls down if too many bricks are removed; limbs die if removed from the body; a family is destroyed if its members do not live in love together.

3. Real disciples commit to the church because they know they need the help of others to keep following Jesus. They know that fellow members will expect them to attend meetings, and they know they need this kind of incentive and accountability to strengthen their spiritual lives. They know they need to be under the loving protection of other Christians. They are humble and honest enough to know they need the correcting, strengthening, encouragement, and comfort of others following Jesus. This fact only becomes amplified for those who have the additional responsibility of a spouse, child, or grandchild, or find themselves in a tempting or difficult season of life.

4. Paul's favorite metaphor for the church that we find in the New Testament is the body. If you are a hand in the body of Christ, then you need an arm and a head to do what the Spirit has gifted you to do. Paul's long exhortation in 1 Corinthians 12 helps us see the value of the complementary diversity of the body that makes everyone effective and fulfilled in the work of Christ. Those who care about living fruitful lives for the advancement of the gospel know that the church with all its gifted people is essential.

5. Disciples know they need to be equipped for ministry. Only in the community of other believers can we be joined together so that every part works properly. Only then will the individuals and the body build itself up in love. Apart from the church, there is no way to be trained adequately to do the ministry of the church or truly live a life of love.

6. If you are wise, you know how easy it is to fall into deception apart from the protective work of wise leaders and the insight of other Spirit-led believers. Fools will stand confidently on their own wisdom and eventually find that the power of fine arguments, smooth words, and flattery lead them astray from devotion to Christ. You need elders to watch over your spiritual health, to be responsible for you before God (Hebrews 13:17). They provide spiritual protection for you and care about your growth in Christ.

7. Jesus' followers join churches because they want to be like Jesus. They will risk loving others and opening themselves up to other believers. Don't ever deny the pain of this risk and naively think that truly living in community as the church with sinners is easy. Church squabbles do injure innocent people. Church leaders do disappoint when they don't live up to their calling. Other believers do betray trust and cause disillusionment. Every Christian both suffers these pains and causes others to suffer them. To love is to risk and grow through pain, and those who want to love well choose to suffer pain rather than self-protect by abandoning church.

8. Disciples know that though the church is imperfect, Christ calls them to strengthen it by their presence rather than criticize it by their absence. The old saying rings true: "If you do find the perfect church, don't join it, for then it would no longer be perfect." Spirit-led Jesus followers recognize that they are imperfect Christians working with other imperfect Christians to serve a perfect Christ. When we love and give to one another, then we grow as individuals and as the family of God. Remember, it's not just what you get by being a part of the church, but what you can do for others.

9. Christians join churches because they know it is the right thing to do. From the beginning, God said it is not good to be alone (Genesis 2:18). As God's image bearers, church community is essential and nonnegotiable.

10. Jesus' heart for and His commitment to the church should compel us to love and serve the church. In Ephesians 5:25 Paul says, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." The context in which Paul speaks is marriage, and without overstating the analogy he is saying that the church is like Jesus' bride, whom he loves and serves despite all her faults and flaws. Those who ignore the church, criticize the church, despise the church, or even harm the church must seriously question whether they truly love Jesus and are his followers, since true Christians love and serve the church because Jesus does.

JOURNAL

Notes & Reflections

What stood out to you in this study? Write down questions, verses to look up, and what God is teaching you.