

Unit 2 Introduction

What Is the Church?

Life-long church attenders come to pastors every day to ask what the church is all about. There are so many questions about what the church does and what it means to be a part of it all. The avenues of possible answers may go down several pathways—numerous sorts of sacred places used for gathering, varying histories of origin, particularities in doctrines, forms of worship, and extent of missionary reach. All of these trajectories do not give the full answer.

To understand the church we should take a closer look at the biblical depiction of the group of Christ-followers gathered in an upper room on a non-descript street in first-century Jerusalem. The book of Acts begins with Jesus' final words to the disciples before His ascension (Acts 1:9-11). The disciples waited in an upper room for prayer and seeking the Holy Spirit (12-14). When the Holy Spirit came into their midst (Christ's presence on earth), the church was born (Acts 2).

In the early chapters of Acts, the first believers initiated key practices in their earliest days that form the basis of what the church is called to be today. The concluding verses of Acts chapter 2 offers a succinct glimpse of what this church looks like. Verses 42-47 reveal believers empowered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4) to represent the risen Christ to one another as well as to the world around them. This early community had several practices in common: they worshiped together (vv. 42-43), they shared the knowledge and sustenance of their lives together (vv. 44-45), and they lived in such a way that was "worthy of the gospel of Christ" (vv. 46-47; Philippians 1:27). The church made known the presence of the resurrected Christ. They worshiped God, taught each other the faith by word and action, and served those around them. This is the essence of what the church was and is to be.

Community Empowered to Worship (Acts 2:42-43)

The early followers gathered to learn from the apostles—the ones first called to follow and learn from Jesus—and were "devoted" in such a way that nothing deterred them. The same devotion continued well beyond the original disciples in Jerusalem into the breadth of the Roman Empire to the far reaches of the known world. In their gathering they learned how to scatter about their community as a seed is spread by the farmer through the fertile soil of the fields.

A worshiping community includes preaching and teaching the teachings of Jesus and the written Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. Preaching the Word persuades and motivates people to action to live for Christ as well as to draw others to Christ. Teaching the Word digs deeper into the meaning of being Christian, revealing all

that it means to be Christlike (John 15:1-8). The intimacy of gathered believers is also fed by the memory of God's saving work through the keeping of shared meals (2:46), especially the Lord's Supper—"the breaking of bread" (Acts 2:42b). Believers receive God's Word and body while also giving back to God words of prayer that enable the faithful to dwell with God. In the first part of the second chapter of Acts, God responded to the prayers of a despondent few hiding in an upper room, who were seeking what to do next (Acts 2:1-2). Prayer is not only a desperate plea, but as life-giving as inhaling oxygen gives life to the body.

The power of God ignites an expectation that not only has God worked in the past, but that God works in the present experience of His children. The "many wonders and miraculous signs" were actions compelled by the Holy Spirit in and through those devoted to the gospel (2:43).

The Gospels depict broken people capable of more than they know. The Holy Spirit fills these cracked earthen vessels with the treasure of this good news (2 Corinthians 4:7). The good news seeps out and becomes visible and the possibility of God's work in transforming lives becomes a tangible sign to a new reality found only among worshiping Christ. This is the life God called His first followers to in the book of Acts, and it is the same call heard today.

Over time, worship has sometimes been confined to particular times and spaces, namely Sunday mornings in church buildings. Worship is defined by cultural expressions of worship particular to these times and spaces, namely types of certain music and media. The church universal is not bound by particular forms such as language or musical instruments. At the same time, the good news needs to be heard and seen in ways in which the message is understood. The church/body of Christ expresses itself through local churches/bodies where the good news is communicated gladly through a diversity of cultures and ethnicities. Right worship is found in the wisdom of the community of believers and depends upon the Spirit indwelling each person and intertwining all into the body of Christ, always teaching the best ways to worship God (John 4:23-24).

Community Empowered to Make Disciples (Acts 2:44-45)

Believers are born again, but disciples are made. There is a growing process for a new disciple of Christ that needs to be nurtured. Discipleship is sometimes distilled into basic forms of teaching and learning; such as reading books, listening to lectures, and maybe at times some deep discussions. Making disciples, like most kinds of

organic growth, require much time and patience. Maybe the metaphor for discipleship should not be education, but horticulture—the growing of plants. It is not a mistake that many parables about the kingdom of God are more familiar to farmers than anyone else (e.g., Mark 4). It is no accident that the origin Latin word for education means “to help grow.”

The church universal is at its core a learning community—every believer on course toward learning more about God and each other. This pathway is illustrated by the resurrected Jesus’ interaction with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). The distraught disciples wandered away from Jerusalem wondering just how their hyped-up ideal for a conquering king were dashed by witnessing their hopeful Messiah crucified like a criminal. Jesus shows up incognito to hear them out, accompanying them on their journey to their home village. Jesus begins to open up the teachings of the Scriptures to explain what they experienced, helping them hear from God’s Word until it became good news for them—that Jesus is truly alive (Luke 24:17, 27)! This pathway takes patience much like tending to plants in a garden—they need light and water but, most importantly, they need time and attention. So do disciples-in-the-making.

Being a disciple is more than book learning, as important as that aspect is. Learning to follow God needs action, such as taking a walk with Him like the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). It is also learning to let go of what is mine and making it ours. The early disciples shared not just scriptural insights with each other, but also everything else. They even went to the extreme lengths to make sure the poorest among them had what they needed: “They had everything in common” (Acts 2:44). When a need arose for one, the rest showed up to meet it. No one was left to their own devices. Everyone had each other’s backs. It was true community. It was (and is) church as it is.

Community Empowered to Serve Others (Acts 2:46-47)

The first Christians met as often as they could. There were no buildings to call their own, but they gathered in the temple courts. It was in this place where educated rabbis and the faithful gathered to hash out the meaning of Hebrew Scriptures. The apostles who first walked with Jesus conveyed the teachings of Jesus to all who would hear. They spoke meaning into the Hebrew Scriptures much like Je-

sus did on the road to Emmaus. It was a time to ask and answer, be heard and listen. To serve a community means to make the faith and ourselves available to onlookers seeking answers to their questions. Public faith is the result of honest truths spoken through gentle persuasion. In the following chapters of Acts, the disciples made their faith known by healing (Acts 3:9-10; 5:12-16) and serving the needy with goods and food (Acts 4:32-37; 6:1-2). The apostles took the lead in bringing together the disciples and engaging the public with the truth of the gospel (Acts 3—4). Their lives were like radiant beams of light shining forth with the message of good news. Christlike living leaves no one in the shadows.

They gathered in smaller quarters, in the homes of the faithful few. Here they served each other. The root word for liturgy, the order of a worship service, is literally “service.” They offered acts of service to God and to each other in gathering and eating together. Their hearts were one, “praising God,” and they were found to have the unity that was and still is the leading identifying marker of what it means to be the church. They were holy in how they took on the message of Christ with their lives. This kind of life drew others to them, as they were “enjoying the favor of all the people” (Acts 2:47). They lived in prayer toward God and fellowship with each other. No one was left out; their message of good news was for everyone. And, everyone knew it: “The Lord added their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

What It Means to Be the Church

The basic definition of church is a group of Spirit-empowered believers with a designated leader gathered for worship, discipleship, and service, while identifying with the church universal in its many local expressions. There is much to be learned about what it means to be the church, the body of Christ—the very presence of God in this world. As a disciple—a person learning to be like Christ—we must continually seek to understand what it truly means to be part of the body of Christ, the church.

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