

What We Believe – 9. Church

We believe in: *“The universal Church, the Body, of which Christ is Head, embracing all the redeemed, called by God through the gospel, born of the Holy Spirit, and justified by faith; the local Church, comprising such believers, as the expression of the universal Church; and fellowship between such churches, manifesting the unity of the body of Christ.”*

A) Introduction

God created humans to be a community of worshippers. The one thing in the original creation said to be *“not good”* was that *“man should be alone”* ([Genesis 2:18](#)). We are designed so that our lives intertwine, and that we should fill the earth with the knowledge of God’s glory. Each Christian is part of a larger body – the church – and our identity and practice cannot be rightly understood without reference to it.

B) What is the church?

Before any technical definition is understood of the essence of the church, it is right to highlight her quality as God sees it. The church is enormously precious – having been purchased by the Lord Jesus Christ with His blood (see [Acts 20:28](#)). Jesus’ death was not generic in its intent, making people “save-able”; it was intentionally specific, accomplishing salvation. Jesus loves the church and “gave himself up for her” ([Ephesians 5:25](#)).

The church is also unique and unlike any other human institution. She is *“the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth”* ([1 Timothy 3:15](#)). The church exists to honour God’s worth and uphold His Word, and the gathering of God’s people unites them with the glorious assembly of all the saints and holy angels (see [Hebrews 12:22-24](#)).

Grasping the privilege and priority of the church in God’s estimation is vital, especially in a culture of individualism and consumerism where church commitment is seen as an optional extra.

The Greek word translated church, *ekklesia*, essentially means “the called out ones” and refers to God’s people by virtue of their holy calling from God out of the world of unbelief. Whilst it is popular to refer to the Day of Pentecost as the birth of the church, the term is used to speak of the assembly of Israel, both in the Greek translation of the OT (e.g. **Deuteronomy 5:22**) and in the NT (**Acts 7:38**). Pentecost began a new phase of the church’s priorities and mission – the Spirit came to equip her to take the gospel throughout the world.

The church is both organic and organised. It is a living entity – the body of a living head (**Ephesians 1:22-23**), the branches of a living vine (**John 15:1-11**). It also requires structure (such as spiritual leaders and the means of grace – see **Acts 2:42, 6:1-7, 14:23**).

C) Who is the church?

The NT uses the word “church” in differing contexts and meaning slightly distinct bodies of believers. Some passages speak of the “invisible” church – the church as God sees her, comprising all believers throughout time and space (e.g. **Ephesians 1:22-23, 5:25**). Other passages speak of the “visible” church – the church as we see her. For instance:

- The church generally throughout the world (e.g. **Acts 8:3**).
- The church across specific regions (e.g. **Acts 9:31**).
- The local church (e.g. **Romans 16:1-5, Revelation 1-3**).

The invisible church is joined through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. The visible church is joined through the public testimony of baptism and consequent church membership. Whilst not all churches practice the same form of membership, its existence in some form or another is essential to obey the clear teaching of the New Testament (see, for instance, Jesus’ instructions concerning “binding” and “loosing” in **Matthew 16:18-19** and **Matthew 18:15-20**).

D) How is the church?

As neatly summarised by the Nicene creed, the church is:

- **One** – inherently united in Jesus Christ (“*There is one body...*”, Ephesians 4:4-6).
- **Holy** – set apart by God for His special purposes (“*...he chose us... that we should be holy and blameless...*”, Ephesians 1:4).
- **Catholic** – universal, for all peoples across the world (“*...a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages...*”, Revelation 7:9).
- **Apostolic** – founded upon the teaching of Jesus as delivered through the Apostles (“*And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching...*”, Acts 2:42).

E) What does the church?

The church’s primary responsibilities are the adoration of God (see John 4:23-24) and the discipling of the nations (see Matthew 28:19-20) – responsibilities to God and to those made in His image (see also Mark 12:28-34). In order to fulfil these, various activities are essential (and were the clear priority of the NT church):

1. Prayer (see Acts 2:42, 6:4) – without prayer, worshipping God, being disciples and making disciples are impossible. Prayer expresses our desire for, and dependence upon, God.

2. Word ministry (see Acts 2:42, 18:24-26, 1 Timothy 4:13) – God creates through speaking; through His Word He reveals Himself to His people and produces life in His people. Word ministry is much broader than merely preaching from a pulpit – all of God’s people are called to minister the Word to each other.

3. Fellowship (see Acts 2:44-47) – fellowship is a mutual participation in Christ and all His benefits, expressed through sharing ourselves, our gifts and resources with each other.

4. The Sacraments (see [Matthew 28:18-20](#), [1 Corinthians 11:17-34](#)) – Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are essential components of Christian worship and discipleship. Historically believers have identified a true church as a place where the Word was preached and the sacraments were administered (some also added where church discipline is practiced).

5. Ministries of Mercy (see [Acts 6:1-7](#), [Galatians 2:10](#)) – God has a deep compassion and care for the poor (see [Isaiah 61:1](#), [James 1:27](#)) and this ought to be reflected in the attitudes of His people.

In order for the church to be able to fulfil her responsibilities, Christians must fulfil theirs to the church. In an age of consumerism and a distrust of authority and structure, Christians must go against the tide by committing to, and engaging with, a local church. All Christians should be active and servant-hearted church members, giving time and resources to support the work of the church as they are able.

F) Conclusion

The church may often appear disappointing from our perspective, since she is filled with sinners. But from God’s perspective she is “elect and glorious”. God’s purposes for the world centre upon His purposes for the church, and Jesus Christ has promised to build His church, no matter the attempts of the enemy ([Matthew 16:18](#)). We cannot therefore think too highly of the importance of the church and our commitment towards her. Healthy churches require healthy church members.

Recommended Reading

Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*

Kevin DeYoung & Ted Kluck, *Why we love the Church*

David Skull, Andrew King & Jim Sayers, *Pure Church*