

Welcome to the Church at Bethel, where the gospel brings us together: Jesus in our place. To our guests, everyone joining us online, and our church family—welcome.

Today we continue our series, *Asking for a Friend*, with this question: Do I need the church to follow God? Can I follow Jesus without organized religion?

It is an honest question—especially if the church has disappointed you. Perhaps you encountered hypocrisy. Maybe you watched leaders preach grace while practicing control—or worse. Possibly church felt political, judgmental, irrelevant, or simply exhausting. Somewhere along the way, you began to wonder, *Wouldn't following Jesus be easier without organized religion?*

Jesus understands the damage religious institutions can cause. He confronted hypocrisy, exposed leaders who burdened and exploited others, and pronounced judgment on religious pride (Matthew 23:13–28). He even overturned tables in the temple courts (John 2:13–17). And yet, the same Jesus who overturned tables also promised: “I will build my church (Matthew 16:18).”

Surely Jesus meant the “perfect church.” But the New Testament does not present a perfect church. Its assemblies struggled with pride, division, prejudice, sexual sin, false teaching, financial conflict, and failed leadership (See 1st Corinthians).

But the apostles never concluded that Christians would be better off following Jesus alone. Instead, Scripture tells us to “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together” (Hebrews 10:24–25). Maybe because someone once asked, “*wouldn't it be easier to follow Jesus by myself?*”

Can you believe in God without entering a church building? Assuredly—for the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands.

Can you meet with God beyond the sanctuary walls? Indeed—for heaven and earth are filled with the presence of the Lord.

But can you follow Jesus as he intends while permanently separating yourself from his people? To answer it, we need to reconsider not only what the church is, but also what it means to follow Jesus.

Can I follow Jesus without being part of the church?

Let's start here: Which church are you talking about, the church you see, or the church you are?

The Greek word Ekklesia usually translated “**church**,” occurs 114 times in the New Testament. It most often refers to a local assembly of believers, but it also names the

people of God united to Christ (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 1:22–23; 5:25–27). The New Testament presents the church as both *local and universal, visible and invisible*.

The true church is invisible—not because it is imaginary or hidden, but because only God knows its members perfectly. We see professions of faith, baptisms, worship, and service; God sees the heart. Calvin described the invisible church as the church “as it really is before God,” and the visible church as it “appears to man.” The church may be invisible to us, but never to God: “The Lord knows those who are his” (2 Tim. 2:19). So, it is possible to be present today (visibly) yet not be part of God’s church (invisibly).

The true church is also universal. No single nation, ethnicity, class, denomination, or congregation contains the whole church. By his blood, Jesus has redeemed a people for God “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). Through the cross, he has torn down the walls that divide us and made us one in himself (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:14–16). The risen Christ now sends these reconciled people to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19), because the true church is universal.

Yet the true church is also visible. The people Christ has redeemed gather in particular places around his Word, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, prayer, fellowship, and mission. The invisible church becomes visible when sinners saved by grace confess Christ together and embody his gospel before the world.

So, which church are we talking about?

Can I follow Jesus without being part of the invisible church? No. The church may be invisible to us, but it is never invisible to God: “The Lord knows those who are his” (2 Tim. 2:19).

Can I follow Jesus without being part of the universal church? No. Through his death and resurrection, Christ has reconciled a people to himself—a people drawn from every nation.

Can I follow Jesus without being part of the visible church? That is a different question—and perhaps the word *can* hide the real issue. *Can* asks whether something is possible. *Should* asks whether it is right, wise, or faithful. A person may ask whether it is possible to be a secret/secluded Christian, but Scripture does not present faith in Jesus as a private or hidden affair.

Jesus calls us to acknowledge him before others, warning that whoever denies him before others will be denied before his Father in heaven (Matt. 10:32–33). Paul writes that we are to confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord (Rom. 10:9). Baptism is a visible profession of faith, and the Lord’s Supper is a visible proclamation of Christ’s death until he comes (1 Cor. 11:26). Even the cross itself was a public demonstration of God’s grace.

Therefore, if you have been redeemed through faith in Christ, you already belong to his church. You are known by God, joined to Christ's universal people, and sealed by the Holy Spirit for the day of redemption (Eph. 4:30). The question is not simply whether you *can* follow Jesus apart from the visible church, but whether doing so is consistent with the public, communal faith to which Jesus calls you.

What happens when you belong to a local visible gathered assembly?

You participate in a holy and mutual provocation of love, good works, and encouragement (Hebrew 10:25). *Do you want to help others feel loved?* Just this week, this church surrounded and provided for a single mom when her world was falling apart. Want to do good works? This month, our members gave more than 200 hours serving a local school. Want to be an encouragement? This week, we sent prayer cards, prayed for one another, and sat with those who grieve.

What happens when you belong to a local visible gathered assembly? Love, goodness, and encouragement grows.

What happens when you belong to a local visible gathered assembly? You participate in the power of the Holy Spirit. We exist to bear witness to Jesus Christ—in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). By the Spirit's power, we proclaim the good news that Jesus died for sinners, rose from the grave, and saves everyone who turns from sin and trusts in Him.

Through Bethel, that gospel is going forth in St. Clair County, Montgomery, New Hampshire, the Dominican Republic, and Guatemala. *Through the North American Mission Board, we helped plant 792 churches and saw more than 28,250 people profess faith in Christ. Through the International Mission Board, we support more than 3,500 missionaries who reported 196,497 people turning to Jesus.*

What happens when you belong to a local visible gathered assembly? You participate in the power of the Holy Spirit.

What happens when you belong to a visible, gathered local church? You make a public declaration about what—and whom—you cherish. You show the world that what matters to Jesus also matters to you.

Jesus founded the church: “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). The church belongs to Him because He established her, sustains her, and promises that even the gates of hell will not overcome her. Jesus also purchased the church “with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). Her value is measured not by the beauty of her buildings, the size of her crowds, or the excellence of her programs, but by the infinite price Christ paid to redeem her. At the cross, Jesus gave Himself to rescue sinners, reconcile them to God, and gather them as His people.

Christ also identifies intimately with His church. When Saul persecuted Christians, Jesus did not ask, “*Why are you persecuting them?*” He asked, “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*”

(Acts 9:4). To wound Christ's people is to wound those whom Christ loves. To serve Christ's people is to serve those with whom Christ has united Himself.

If Christ founded the church, we should belong to her. If Christ purchased the church, we should treasure her. If Christ identifies with the church, we should faithfully love and serve her.

What matters to Jesus must matter to everyone who follows Jesus.

So What?

Let us be unmistakably clear: the church does not save you. Jesus saves you.

Jesus Christ came in our place. He lived the righteous life we failed to live, died the death our sins deserved, and rose from the grave in victory. Everyone who turns from sin and trusts in Christ is forgiven, made new, and welcomed into the family of God.

Perhaps the church has hurt you. Jesus sees every wound inflicted in His name, and He will hold unfaithful shepherds accountable. But do not allow the failures of sinful people to drive you permanently away from the Savior's people.

Perhaps you attend worship but remain on the edges. You watch, but you do not belong. Jesus calls you beyond attendance into covenant love—where you can know others and be known, serve and be served, encourage and be encouraged.

Perhaps you are a faithful member who has grown weary. Remember: your labor is not wasted. Every prayer, every meal, every hour of service, every act of generosity, every grieving hand you hold, and every gospel conversation is part of Christ's work through His people.

Or perhaps you are physically present in the visible church but have never truly belonged to invisible (true) church of Jesus Christ. Today, turn from your sin and trust in Jesus Christ. He died for sinners. He rose from the grave. He will save you, forgive you, and make you His own.

What happens when you belong to a visible, gathered local church? You do not find a perfect people. You find a people being perfected by a perfect Savior. You find sinners who have been forgiven, strangers who have become family, sufferers who carry one another's burdens, and witnesses sent into the world with the good news of Jesus Christ.

Church, Christ has saved us. Christ has gathered us. Christ has sent us.

Exegetical Notes

Can I belong to Christ without belonging to his people?

Conversion is described as being added to a community: “The Lord added to their number” (Acts 2:41–47). Paul says believers are “baptized into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Can private spirituality replace gathering?

Hebrews warns believers not to neglect meeting together, because Christians need mutual encouragement and perseverance (Hebrews 10:24–25).

Why submit to communal responsibilities?

The New Testament gives churches practices that cannot be performed in isolation: teaching, communion, discipline, reconciliation, mutual service and care for the vulnerable (Matthew 18:15–20; Acts 2:42–47; 1 Corinthians 11:17–34; Galatians 6:1–2; James 5:14–16).

Why have leaders or an organized community?

Elders are appointed in local churches, although their authority is explicitly bounded by service and accountability (Acts 14:23; 1 Peter 5:1–4). The New Testament condemns domineering leadership rather than eliminating leadership.

What if the church is corrupt or hypocritical?

Scripture treats this as a serious question. Jesus rebukes religious leaders who exploit others and neglect justice (Matthew 23). Revelation 2–3 confronts churches for lost love, false teaching, compromise, corruption and complacency. Paul condemns churches that tolerate abuse, division or humiliation of the poor (1 Corinthians 5; 11:17–22). The biblical response is not “institutions are automatically trustworthy,” but neither is it “community is unnecessary.”

The generational pattern

Cohort	Formative institutional environment	Characteristic relationship to institutions	Institutional-church pattern
Silent/Builders, approximately 1928–1945	Depression/war aftermath, mass organizations, expanding government, relatively authoritative clergy and professions	Membership and institutional loyalty were treated more as civic and moral duties. Reform usually happened from inside an institution.	Denominational identity, membership, attendance, and financial support were commonly bundled together. The church was a community center and source of social respectability.

Cohort	Formative institutional environment	Characteristic relationship to institutions	Institutional-church pattern
Baby Boomers, 1946–1964	Postwar prosperity followed by Vietnam, Watergate, civil rights conflict and the counterculture	More ambivalent: they challenged inherited authorities but later became the leadership class of many institutions. They may value institutions while distrusting particular leaders or bureaucracies.	Many retained Christian identity but weakened denominational loyalty. Boomers helped produce both mainline liberal reform and evangelical/nondenominational growth.
Generation X, 1965–1980	Watergate's aftermath, corporate restructuring, divorce growth, televangelist scandals and the end of the Cold War	Pragmatic skepticism: institutions are useful but should not automatically be trusted. Loyalty tends to depend on competence and personal benefit.	Less attachment to denominations and greater willingness to change congregations, attend intermittently, or disengage without formally rejecting belief.
Millennials, 1981–1996	9/11, clergy-abuse revelations, the Great Recession, internet culture and intense political polarization	Trust is more conditional and horizontal. Transparency, inclusion, participation and consistency between stated values and conduct matter greatly.	A pronounced separation of spirituality, Christian identity, attendance and membership. Millennials are much more likely than Boomers or Silents to be religiously unaffiliated.
Generation Z, after 1996	Social media, institutional crisis as a normal condition, COVID disruption, racial and gender conflict, economic insecurity	Institutions are evaluated in real time through peer networks. Authenticity, safety and responsiveness may carry more weight than office, title or tradition. This does not necessarily mean rejecting all organizations.	Low inherited attachment and high no affiliation alongside continued spiritual interest. Some enter highly committed religious communities, but the overall cohort remains much less institutionally religious than older cohorts.

These descriptions are averages. Race, denomination, education, geography, gender and political identity can produce larger differences than generation alone.

What the numbers show about churches

The generational membership gradient is substantial. In Gallup's pooled 2018–2020 data, membership in a church, synagogue or mosque was:

- Silent/Traditionalist: **66%**
- Baby Boomer: **58%**
- Generation X: **50%**
- Millennial: **36%**

Early Gen Z results resembled Millennials. Importantly, membership also fell within the older cohorts—by 9 to 12 percentage points among Traditionalists, Boomers and Gen X since 1998–2000. Thus, generational replacement explains much of the decline, but not all of it. Institutions also lost loyalty from people already inside them. [Gallup's church-membership analysis](#)

PRRI's more recent cohort comparison similarly found that **15% of the Silent Generation and 19% of Boomers were religiously unaffiliated**, compared with **25% of Gen X, 35% of Millennials and 34% of Gen Z**. Weekly attendance was reported by 38% of Silents but only 20% of Gen Z. [PRRI Generation Z fact sheet](#)

Pew's large 2023–2024 Religious Landscape Study sharpens the contrast:

- Among adults ages 74 and older, **80% were Christian, 49% attended at least monthly, and 13% were unaffiliated.**
- Among adults ages 18–24, **46% were Christian, 25% attended at least monthly, and 43% were unaffiliated.**

The central difference

The deepest contrast is not that older generations “believe” while younger ones do not. It is a change in the assumed relationship between the person and the institution:

- **Silent/Builder model:** “I belong; therefore, I have obligations to the institution.”
- **Boomer model:** “I belong, but the institution should reflect or accommodate my convictions.”
- **Gen X model:** “I will participate if the institution is useful, competent and credible.”
- **Millennial/Gen Z model:** “The institution must earn and continually retain my participation, and I may seek community, meaning and spirituality elsewhere.”

Lead In – Welcome to the church at Bethel, where we gather because of the gospel: Jesus in our place! To those watching online and our guests here in person – let our round of **applause** be a big welcome to you. Our greatest hope is that you will know Jesus and glorify Him forever.

Israel has two well-known seas: the Galilee and the Dead Sea. The Sea of Galilee teems with life and brings life to communities where you will find fertile valleys full of avocados, bananas, olives, and much more. Galilee is the Sea of life.

The Sea of Galilee receives its water from the northern mountains. It then overflows to the south, forming the Jordan River. The Dead Sea, by contrast, has no outlet — no overflow. The Dead Sea only receives. This creates a stagnant, life-killing environment; even worse, some estimate the Dead Sea will cease to exist soon.

These contrasting seas offer profound spiritual truth. If we receive everything the Lord has for us — salvation, redemption, blessing, inheritance — yet keep it for ourselves, we grow stagnant like the Dead Sea. But if we overflow, we will be like the Sea of Galilee, full of life and blessing for all.

If the grace of God flows into your life, but nothing flows out, that's a problem.

This Is Church – Serving (Matthew 20:26-28)

In Matthew chapter twenty, two disciples named James, John, and their mom discover the hard way that Jesus' kingdom is an upside-down kingdom unlike earthly power and might. You don't know what you are asking (20:22). Christ begins. This short interaction with the Messiah shows us that our idea of "greatness" is not always rooted in the gospel.

Take-Home: How often do we come to Jesus or arrive at worship seeking to receive and become great?

So, Jesus uses the opportunity to instruct on true greatness. Whoever wants to become **great** must be your **servant**. **Great (Megas)**- a large quantity, or status — 'much, big, great, extensive.'

The disciples had the **mega-man complex**. They wanted to be significant. Kingdom impact and greatness are not about you but Jesus. Greatness in the community of heaven is not defined by title or talent but by humility and servanthood.

In Christ, greatness is not defined by who you are but by whom you serve. Likewise, gospel impact is not defined by who you are but how you serve!

Take-Home: Want to be great in God's eyes? Serve Him well and serve Him often.

But Jesus did not merely command upside-down service; he fulfilled and modeled sacrificial servanthood. [The Messiah did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom.](#) Our Cornerstone was the greatest servant the world has ever seen. If the Son of man came to serve, how much should we have the same life of service?

Take-Home: Do you want to live a life like Jesus? Live to serve, not be served.

Several days later (John 13), Jesus powerfully modeled servanthood when he washed the disciple's feet at the last supper. It was a breathtaking deed. The Midrash taught that no Hebrew, even a slave, could be commanded to wash feet (Hughes).

Take-Home: You are most like Christ when you give and serve. You can live in this upside-down kingdom because Jesus gave his life as a ransom for you.

If we are commanded to serve, then how do we serve? The overwhelming reminder in the Word of God is that **ministry is not for professionals** but for the **saints!**

1Cor. 12:4 Now there are different gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵ There are different ministries, but the same Lord. ⁶ And there are different activities, but the same God works all of them in [each person](#).

Every person who has placed their faith and trust in Jesus is now dwelt by the Holy Spirit. If you are redeemed by the blood, you have a spiritual gift to use in His church. By holy design, spiritual gifts are exercised among and through the body of Christ.

What happens when you serve? In Ephesians, we have some offices in the church given, and with these positions, the Word gives the purpose and the payoff. **Read Ephesians 4:11-14**

First, Christ gave His church godly leadership to [equip](#). This word is found only here in the New Testament. In classical Greek, equip refers to the refitting of a ship or setting a bone.

The ancient world would bring a ship into the dock to add or replace elements, modify, modernize, or restore parts. After a long journey or a short, difficult trek, the ship could come into port for examination. Most often, the masts or the seams needed repacking with tar or pitch. **What was the purpose of equipping?** To get the vessel seaworthy. The ship was refit for the purpose of sailing. In the same way, *the Holy Spirit has equipped and is constantly refitting you for the [work](#) of ministry.*

Take-Home: Oh, that we would not be ships that always remain in port. These ships are useless for the fleet. My prayer: Lord, you have not equipped me to sit in the dock to dry rot. Today God is refitting you to do mighty things for the kingdom! God purposely equips you to serve.

What happens when you serve?

When you serve, you build-up up the body of Christ. When you serve the Lord, the body of Christ is built up. I still remember the giants of faith in my life: Mrs. Allison Waits and Mrs. Ferguson, Mr. Max Sturdivant. You never heard of them, but they are builders in my life. They built up the body of Christ.

I am reminded of faithful men like Redgy, the first person you see every day when you enter to worship. I rejoice thinking of our home-bound and widows, people you might never ever meet but whose prayers undergird this church. I think of mighty servants who prayerfully rock babies, lead kid's teams, invest in our students, and share the gospel throughout our community.

Take-Home: Why would someone devote so much time to serve Christ and his church? Because they have been *beautifully refitted by the power of Christ*. God wants to use you to build up His church! **Are you a builder?** There is a place for you to serve here. Be a Galilee, not a Dead Sea.

When you serve, you promote unity. Show me someone who serves well, and I will show you a unifying part of the body of Christ. When our hands are filled with the service of Christ, we won't have our hands in others' business.

Spurgeon once said that "if you are idle in Christ's work, you are active in the devil's work." Do you want to be a vital part of the oneness of the faith family? Serve. Do the work that Lord has equipped you to do.

Take-Home: Every time you serve, you become part of Jesus' unifying story in His church.

When you serve, you grow into Maturity. Show me someone who serves faithfully and humbly; I will show you someone maturing in their faith. The sad reality is that churches throughout our nation have people who have been members for years, sat through hundreds of sermons, and never served. Never used the gifts that the Lord gave them to do the work of the ministry. Sadly, a person who never serves rarely grows. May we never be the one man who buried his talent. The Master's reply: You evil, lazy servant (Matt. 25:26). **Instead, may you hear: Well, done, good and faithful.**

Take-Home: May we never be a people who sit, soak, and sour. Instead, may we grow into maturity with a stature measured by Christ's fullness, evidenced by our devotion and service to the King of Kings and His church.

Conclusion

How is this even possible? Because of the power of the Holy Spirit working through the people of Yahweh.

Trying to do the Lord's work in your own strength is the most confusing, exhausting, and tedious of all work. But when you are filled with the Holy Spirit, then the ministry of Jesus just flows out of you. –Corrie Ten Boom (a Dutch watchmaker and Christian who hid Jews in her home during WWII and was imprisoned for her actions).

Some have quit serving Christ because they are worn.

Some have never served because you don't know where.

Some never experience the joy of Christian service because you never hear the why.

Some only serve because they find your **worth**. Jesus makes you worthy; you don't work for your salvation.

Some will never serve because they don't think you are worthy.

27 and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Who are the many? You are. Will you confess- will you believe today?

The Sea of Galilee receives its water from the northern mountains. It then overflows to the south, forming the Jordan River. The Dead Sea, by contrast, has no outlet — no overflow. The Dead Sea only receives. This creates a stagnant, life-killing environment; even worse, some estimate the Dead Sea will cease to exist soon.

What would 2023 look like if you committed to serving Jesus in His church like never before?

What would your life look like if you turned from your sin and found the Savior for the first time?

Exegetical Notes

Our Model

Matt. 20:24 When the ten disciples heard this, they became indignant with the two brothers. **25** Jesus called them over and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them. **26** It must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, **27** and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave; **28** just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Great (Megas)- 59.22 μεγαζα, μεγαλη, μεγα: a large quantity, involving extent — ‘much, big, great, extensive.’

Servant- 1249. διακονος diakonos; of unc. or.; *a servant, minister:* —deacons(3), minister(7), servant(10), servants(9).

Greatness is not defined by who you are but by whom you serve.

Greatness is not defined by who you are but by how you serve.

To Serve- 1247. διακονεω diakoneo; from 1249; *to serve, minister:* —administered(1), administration(1), cared for(m)(1), contributing to the support(1), deacons(2), do the serving (1), employ in serving(1), minister(3), ministered(2), ministering(3), servant(1), serve(5), served(3), serves(5), services he rendered(1), serving(3), take care(m)(1), wait on(1), waited on(m)(3).

Several days later (John 13), Jesus powerfully modeled servanthood when he washed the disciple's feet at the last supper. It was a breathtaking deed. The Midrash taught that no Hebrew, even an enslaved person, could be commanded to wash their feet (Hughes).

Attitude

Phil. 2:5 Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus, **Phil. 2:6** who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited. **7** Instead, he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man,

This hymn is called the “Christological centerpiece and jewel of the book” (Hughes, 83).

The Greek word order for the expression just noted is, “This be ye constantly thinking in you which also was in Christ Jesus.” The pronoun “this” position is emphatic and shows that the exhortation reaches back basically to 2:2–4, while the pronoun “who” in 2:6 connects the exhortation with the illustration in 2:5–8.

Philippians 2:5

Have this mind in you (τουτο φρονειτε εν υμιν [*touto phroneite en humin*]). “Keep on thinking this in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (ο και εν Χριστω Ιησου [*ho kai en Christōi Iēsou*]). What is that? Humility. Paul presents Jesus as the supreme example of humility. He urges humility on the Philippians as the only way to secure unity.

Literally – have the same mind as Christ

2:6- the idea is that he did not hold on to his equality with God as something to use for his own advantage (Hughes, 84).

Form- is the outward appearance that reveals the inward nature. The form of God is the glory of God, and the form of a servant is the exact opposite of glory: a slave does not have a high position. The contrast points to the extent of Christ's self-emptying.

Ministry

Eph 4:11 And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, **12** equipping the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, **13** until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ's fullness.

In this verse is noted the office of ministers; in the next, the aim of the saints; in the 14th, 15th, and 16th, the way of growing in grace. And each of these has three parts, standing in the same order. *For the perfecting the saints*—The completing them both in number and their various gifts and graces. *To the work of the ministry*—The serving God and his church in their various ministrations. *To the edifying of the body of Christ*—The building up this his mystical body in faith, love, and holiness (John Wesley)

For the perfecting (προς τον καταρτισμον). Only here in the New Testament. In classical Greek, of refitting a ship or setting a bone. The proposition denotes the *ultimate* purpose. Ministering and building are means to this end. Hence its emphatic position in the sentence. For *perfecting*, see on *mending*, Matthew 4:21; *perfected*, Matthew 21:16; Luke 6:40; 1 Peter 5:10. Compare 1 Corinthians 1:10; Hebrews 13:21. The radical idea of *adjustment* is brought out in ver. 13.

Ver. 12.—**In order to the perfecting of the saints.** The ultimate end for which the gifts bestowed (comp. Heb. 12:1). A work of completion is in hand, which must be fulfilled (see ver. 13); the saints, now compassed about with infirmity, have to be freed from all stain (ch. 5:26, 27), and as instruments towards this end, the ministers of the Church are given by Christ; they are not mere promoters of civilization, men of culture planted among the rude, but instruments for advancing men to complete holiness. **For the work of the ministry.** The proposition is changed from πρὸς to εἰς, πρὸς, denoting the ultimate end, εἰς the immediate object (comp. Rom. 15:2); the office of the Church officers is not lords, but διακονοί, servants, as Christ himself was (Matt. 20:28). **For the building up of the body of Christ.** Bringing bone to its bone and sinew to its sinew, increasing the number of believers, and promoting the spiritual life of each, carrying on all their work as Christ's servants and with a definite eye to the promotion of the great work which he undertook when he came to seek and to save the lost.

Renewing the saints— For the renewing of the saints. In this version, I follow Erasmus, not because I prefer his view, but to allow the reader an opportunity of comparing his version with the Vulgate and with mine and then choose for himself. The old translation was (ad consummation) for completeness. The Greek word employed by Paul is katartismos, which signifies literally the adaptation of things possessing symmetry and proportion, just as, in the human body, the members are united in a proper and regular manner; so that the word comes to signify perfection. But as Paul intended to express here a just and orderly arrangement, I prefer

the word (constitutio) settlement or constitution, taking it in that sense in which a commonwealth, or kingdom, or province, is said to be settled, when confusion gives place to the regular administration of law (Calvin)

For the work of the ministry (εἰς ἔργον διακονίας). Rev., much better, *unto the work of ministering*. Εἰς *unto*, marks the *immediate* purpose of the gift. He gave apostles, etc., *unto the work of ministering and building, for the perfecting*, etc. The prevailing sense of διακονία *ministry*, in the New Testament, is the *spiritual service of an official character*. See Acts 1:25; 6:4; 20:24; Romans 11:13; 1 Timothy 1:12; 2 Timothy 4:5.

Edifying (οικοδομῆν). Rev., *building up*. See Acts 20:32. Notice the combination of *perfecting* and *building*. *The building* defines the nature of the work of ministry, and *perfecting* comes through a process.

For the work of the ministry. God might himself have performed this work if he had chosen, but he has committed it to the ministry of men. This is intended to anticipate an objection. "Cannot the church be constituted and properly arranged without the instrumentality of men?" Paul asserts that a ministry is required because such is the will of God (Calvin)

The word διακονία, *service*, may express that service which one man renders to another—Luke 10, 40, "with much *serving*;" or especially the service rendered to Christians, 1 Cor. 16, 15, "addicted themselves to *the ministry* of the saints;" or the official service of the ministry. Hence the phrase εἰς ἔργον διακονίας may mean 'to the work of mutual service or kind offices' or to the work of the ministry—in the official sense. The latter is the common interpretation and is to be preferred not only on account of the more frequent use of the word in that sense but also on account of the connection, as here, the apostle is speaking of the different classes of ministers of the word.

Until we reach unity

In the unity of the faith. But ought not the unity of the faith to reign among us from the very commencement? It does reign; I acknowledge, among the sons of God, but not so perfectly as to make them come together. Such is the weakness of our nature that it is enough if every day brings some nearer to others and all nearer to Christ. The expression, coming together, denotes that closest union to which we still aspire, and which we shall never reach, until this garment of the flesh, which is always accompanied by some remains of ignorance and weakness, shall have been laid aside (Calvin)

Till we all—And every one of us. Come to the unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God—To both an exact agreement in the Christian doctrine and an experimental knowledge of Christ as the Son of God. *To a perfect man*—To a state of spiritual

manhood both in understanding and strength. *To the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ*—To that maturity of age and spiritual stature wherein we shall be filled with Christ, so that he will be all in all (John Wesley)

Growing into maturity

Into a perfect man. This must be read in immediate connection with what goes before, as if he had said, "What is the highest perfection of Christians? How is that perfection attained?" Full manhood is found in Christ; for foolish men do not, in a proper manner, seek their perfection in Christ. It ought to be held as a fixed principle among us that all that is out of Christ is hurtful and destructive. Whoever is a man in Christ is, in every respect, a perfect man (Calvin)

Illustrations

Welcome to the church at Bethel, where **we have one mission:** to bring the whole gospel to the whole person and the whole world! We believe everything in the Word is good for your soul. We believe that Jesus will change everything about you. And we believe every person in the entire world needs this good news.

To those watching online and our guests here in person—**let our round of applause be a big welcome to you.**

Today we wrap up a series entitled – **this is the church** – focusing on the core identity of God’s people. Two weeks ago, our friend Danny Courson explicated our identity as worshipers. Last week, we examined our kingdom-minded servant role. If serving is an inward manifestation of God’s mercy, evangelism is an outward display of His grace. So today, we answer the question, “**Now what?**”

“The church, if it expects to rouse from lethargy, must know why it exists and what God expects it to accomplish.”

This Is Church – Now What? (Acts 1:4-8)

Luke, the writer of the book of Acts and the Gospel bearing his name, is the only NT author to describe the **ascension** of our Lord. Without the ascension, your picture of the Messiah is incomplete. Without the ascension, you fail to see that the head which bore the crown of thorns is now crowned in splendid glory.

Gospel Authority (1:4-6) Did you hear the final words and command of the Risen Christ to his church? **Wait for the Father’s promise.** This command exudes Gospel Authority.

Take-Home: Simply put, if you are a follower of Jesus, He has complete authority in your life.

And with divine authority, the Lord speaks. **Wait!** What a radical and infuriating command. I have yet to meet a person who admits that they wait well. MIT operations researcher **Richard Larson**, the world's leading expert on waiting in lines, discovered the psychology behind our waiting. Essentially, we tolerate "occupied time" (for example, walking to baggage claim) far better than "unoccupied time" (such as standing at the baggage carousel). Give us something to do while we wait, and the wait becomes **endurable**. This is why, so often, waiting on God feels like an unoccupied moment to us, but waiting on the Father is anything but unoccupied time.

Take-Home: You never waste one-second waiting on the Lord. **Wait on the Father’s promise**, Jesus says. The promise was the Holy Spirit. The early church knew that being filled with the Spirit was mandatory for Christians. This is why the earliest deacons were **men full of the Spirit.**

Take-Home: Spirit-filled living requires God's direction and enablement.

Gospel Identity (1:7-8) So, following the Lord's instructions, the disciples gather (Mt. of Olives) and ask, "are you restoring the kingdom at this time?" Jesus offers little information but clarifies the **mission**, "there are things to do in the meantime." However, He promises you something much more. Twice in this verse, Jesus says, "**you will.**" Very few times in His life did the Messiah say, "you will" to an individual.

Luke 5:10 To Peter, Jesus proclaimed, "Don't be afraid," Jesus told Simon. "From now on, **you will be catching people.**" Much later, to the same disciple, Messiah said, in **John 1:42** "You are Simon, son of John. **You will be called Cephas**" (which is translated "Peter"). And upon the cross, the crucified Lord extolled to the thief **Luke 23:43** "Truly I tell you, today **you will be with me in paradise.**"

Take-Home: Jesus gives you a new beautiful, redeemed identity.

Gospel identity begins with the Holy Spirit. To all who now believe in His name, Jesus reminds us that you will receive **power** when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. The presence and power of the Holy Spirit mark the era between the ascension of the Lord and his second coming.

We have sought to circumscribe the ministry of God's Spirit, despite the fact that it is depicted in terms of two of the most uncontrollable aspects of nature – wind and fire. We have settled for adequacy when God's purpose for us is abundance. – Begg

Take-Home: Does the power of the Holy Spirit define your life?

There is a second mark of Christ's identity upon your life. The Holy Spirit empowers you to be His **witness**. The work of the spirit-filled life is the work of witness-bearing. Followers of Jesus who gave their lives for the sake of their faith are called **martyrs**, the same Greek word from which we get the noun *witness*. In essence, a witness and a martyr are the same things; one was a witness until the very end.

Take-Home: You are a witness every time you recount your faith in the resurrected Messiah. There is no such thing as a non-witnessing Christian.

You are a witness by what you say. The Christian life includes verbally sharing the gospel. There is no such thing as a silent witness, and the most loving thing you can do for others is to share the good news of hope!

Take-Home: Who will you share the gospel with this week and year?

You are a witness by the way you live. But, first, the gospel upon your mouth must be undergirded by a demonstration of spiritual and moral transformation that springs from a personal commitment to the risen Lord.

Take-Home: Who will your life impact this week and year?

You are a witness by the places you go. Jesus gives coordinates to our faith: [Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth](#). This paradigm is geographic and ethnic in scope and includes all locations and people groups. Rather than staying in Jerusalem and waiting for the world to come to them, Jesus' followers are to move out from Jerusalem to reach the nations for the sake of the Gospel.

Today there are [7,400 unreached people groups, with over 3.3 billion people who have never heard the name of Jesus Christ](#). This is why we have active partnerships in the Dominican Republic, Zambia, Bulgaria, and New Hampshire, in the foster community, school systems, and a local food ministry to share the hope that Jesus saves!

Take-Home: Where will you **go** share the gospel?

Gospel Activity (Read 1:9-11) While He was going up, two angels began questioning the disciples. [Why, do you stand looking up?](#) This question remains penetrating and relevant two thousand years later.

Take-Home: Church, why do you stand still, looking up into heaven?

Jesus' ascension means that we have **work to do**. Gospel **identity** always leads to gospel **activity**. [You will never find a list of apostolic succession in the New Testament](#). Instead, you see a legacy of faithful witnesses passed down from Jesus to His disciples and now His church.

The church is to be active in the world, knowing that Jesus' return and redemption are assured. Friend, standing still and gazing into heaven is inappropriate because of the Savior's instructions and His eternal promises.

Now What – Are you active in the Savior's work?

Listen to how the persecuted church around the world speaks about their faith: [Persecution \(against the church\) stops immediately where there are no faith and no witness. The reason for persecution, then, is that people keep finding Jesus and refuse to hold Him to themselves.](#)

They (and you and I) are just as free to share Jesus today in Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Communist countries as you and I are in America. It isn't a matter of political freedom. It is a simple matter of obedience. The price for compliance might differ in different places, but it is always possible to obey Christ's call. (Insanity of God, 307)

Who will you pray for this year to know Jesus? Who will you actively share with? Who will your life impact? Where will you go?

Maybe today, you realized that you are spiritually powerless. Will you surrender to the risen and ascended King today? You can talk to him using words like this:

*Jesus, today I **recognize** it is because of my (sin) bad actions that I need you. I **believe** Christ came to live, die, and was raised from death—to rescue me from my sin. **Forgive** me. I turn from me and put my trust in You. I declare that Jesus is Lord and King of all, and I will **follow** Him. **His promise?** He will save you.*

Nothing pleases our Lord better than to see His promises put in circulation -Spurgeon

Exegetical Notes

The book of Acts has been aptly called the ‘Acts of the Holy Spirit’ for all that the church achieves is through the Spirit (Fernando, 52).

W/out the ascension, the picture of Jesus is incomplete. W/out the ascension, we fail to see that the head of crowns is now crowned in glory.

The ascension displays Jesus’ current and future authority. Such executive power involves the distribution of salvation’s benefits now and the exercise of judgment in the future (Bock, 68).

Luke’s gospel closes with Jesus’ ascension to heaven. Where Luke ends, the book of Acts begins. The narrative has made one thing clear: God has vindicated Jesus and has taken him to share in the promised rule of the kingdom with its accompanying promise of salvation through forgiveness that comes in response to repentance and the gifting of the indwelling, enabling Spirit, who gives life. Theophilus can be assured that Jesus is who he claimed to be and is what the church proclaims about him (Bock, 79).

Luke is the only NT author to describe the ascension (Bock, 204).

The ascension stands as a key divine act vindicating Jesus and placing him in authority at the right hand of God.

Other allusions:

1 Tim 3:16 And most certainly, the mystery of godliness is great: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

1 Pet. 3:21 Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you (not as the removal of dirt from the body, but the pledge of a good conscience toward God) through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

What the early church said and did was rooted in and connected to activity in which the risen Jesus was involved. Without Jesus and his work, one cannot make sense of the church’s existence and activity (Bock, 53).

For Luke, the death and resurrection of Jesus are important but more important is his reign, both presently and in the age to come. For Luke, Jesus is not passively sitting in heaven awaiting his return. He lives, administers the benefits of salvation, and rules in anticipation of a more visible rule to come (Bock, 205).

Acts 1:4 While he was with them, he commanded them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for the Father's promise. "Which," he said, "you have heard me speak about; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit in a few days."

The mission command provides the direction for the church, and the Spirit gives the enablement (ECNT, 56).

Wait

The time was now drawing near when the words of John would be fulfilled. According to OT prophecy, the days of fulfillment would be marked by a widespread outpouring of the Spirit of God. John's water baptism not only prepared his repentant hearers for the coming judgment but also pointed them on to that spiritual baptism of which the prophets had spoken (Bruce, 35).

Joel 2:28 After this I will pour out my Spirit on all humanity; then your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will have dreams, and your young men will see visions. **29** I will even pour out my Spirit on the male and female slaves in those days.

This is the only time Jesus uses the word wait and also the only time this specific word is used in the New Testament.

The apostles were to wait because Jesus' heavenly exaltation had to take place before the promised gift of the Spirit could be poured out (2:33). They were to wait in Jerusalem because of the historical and theological significance of that city in God's dealings with Israel (Peterson, 107).

Baptized. The reference is to the unique, unrepeatable event at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples in a visible form like fire (Polhill, 83).

Throughout Acts, new converts experience repentance, Baptism, and the gift of the Spirit (Polhill, 83). All three are essential elements of the conversion experience. Although the Spirit cannot be tied to a mechanistic pattern, these patterns show that repentance and the gift of the Spirit are essential to the conversion experience.

Baptism of the Holy Spirit

The traditional evangelical explanation is that, while in Acts, there were unique experiences of this baptism with the Holy Spirit, for us today, such a baptism takes place at conversion, and the term baptism is used for initiation into the body of Christ and the resultant experience of the Spirit.

Some see this baptism as a second definite work of grace, distinct from conversion, one that usually takes place sometime after conversion. Wesleyan holiness emphasizes the holiness of heart and life. Charismatics and Pentecostals: power for witness and sign

gifts. D.L. Moody and Torrey” emphasized power for service. Lloyd-Jones seems to use this expression to refer to revival when the power of God comes on groups of people through the outpouring of the HS (Fernando, 54).

One of the strongest arguments for the conversion-initiation position is the apparent use of this expression for every in 1 Cor. 12:13

1Cor. 12:12 For just as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of that body, though many, are one body—so also is Christ. **13** For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and we were all given one Spirit to drink. **14** Indeed, the body is not one part but many.

The danger with the conversion-initiation interpretation is that it can take away a yearning for God’s fullness and create a class of half-baked Christians who are not experiencing everything that God wishes them to enjoy (Fernando, 63).

An emphasis on mission can neglect the great command for holiness. The Wesleyan position can give rise to unhealthy perfectionism with unbiblical measures (Fernando, 63).

2nd century: Spirit was the agent of apostolicity

16th century: Spirit witness to interpret the Word

20th century: because of a renewed study of Luke-Acts: missionary character.

The early church showed that being filled with the Spirit was mandatory for Christians by making it a basic qualification for those who were to administer the distribution of food (Acts 6:3).

Whatever one may call it and however one may enter it, all Christians must experience the fullness of God’s Spirit and power in witness.

Spirit

Effective ministry requires God’s direction and enablement. The mission command provides the direction for the church, and the Spirit gives the enablement (Bock, 56).

Acts 1:6 So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, are you restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?”

The verb, the noun, and the adverb of their sentence all betray doctrinal confusion about the kingdom. The verb restores shows that they were expecting a political and territorial kingdom; the noun Israel that they were expecting a national kingdom; and the adverbial clause at this time that they were expecting its immediate establishment (Stott).

The coming of the Spirit does not mean the completion of the kingdom promise. Acts 2-3 will make this quite clear (Bock, 61).

Verses 6-8 are closely linked together. In v. six, the disciples asked Jesus about the time of the kingdom. In v.7, Jesus rejected speculation about ‘times’ altogether, and in v.8, they replaced this with the relevant subject—the Christian task in the interim period before the kingdom’s coming (Polhill, 84).

Jesus corrected the disciples by directing them away from the question about ‘times or dates’ (v.7).

End-time restoration begins with the pouring out of the promised Spirit and the bringing of God’s salvation (Peterson, 110).

Acts 1:7 He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.

Jesus did not rebuke the question but interpreted it in terms of the gift of the Spirit and the fulfillment of prophecies about the restoration of Israel as a servant community (Peterson, 109).

This knowledge I reserved to the Father alone (Mark 13:32).

Jesus makes no commitment at all as to when the end comes; He simply points out that there are things to do in the meantime (Bock, 62).

The disciples’ calling, concern, and mission are not to focus on the timing of the end. Rather they are to receive the enablement that God will give in the Spirit (ECNT, 63).

Set

The verb in the middle active voice means to fix or establish something. His disciples are in no position to predict the time of the end, and it should not concern them. How foolishly this warning has been ignored across the centuries (Peterson, 110).

⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

This progression, going as far as Rome, is what Acts will cover (with Jerusalem and Syria Antioch as hubs).

Power

The Spirit is tied to power which refers here to being empowered to speak boldly by testifying to the message of God’s work through Jesus (ECNT, 63).

The term power appears ten times in Acts, sometimes referring to miracles or other effects of power and other times to enablement. The enablement is in word and act (ECNT, 63).

The disciple's direct and real experience of Jesus and his resurrection qualify them as witnesses, but the Spirit will give them the capability to articulate their experience with boldness (ECNT, 64).

The period between the ascension of Jesus and his return (1:11) is to be marked by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit (Peterson, 110).

Witnesses

Witnesses, empowered by the Holy Spirit, are sent out from Jerusalem in various directions (Witherington, 111).

As Jesus had been anointed at his baptism with the Holy Spirit and power, so his followers were anointed and enabled to carry on his work (Bruce, 36). This work would be a work of witness-bearing.

The promised the disciples two things: power and witness (Polhill, 85).

The role of the apostles is that of ‘witness’ (martyrs).

The Spirit is tied to power which refers here to being empowered to speak boldly by testifying to the message of God’s work through Jesus (Bock, 63).

The idea has OT roots in the concept of witness (Numbers 35:30; Deut. 17:6-7). A witness, in this sense, is someone who helps establish facts objectively through verifiable observation.

Luke indicates that effective Christian witness involves both a sharing of the apostolic testimony to Jesus and a demonstration of spiritual and moral transformation arising from a personal commitment to the risen Lord (Peterson, 112).

Gospel work is the work of witness-bearing.

In Acts, we do not find an apostolic succession in the ecclesiastical sense, nor a succession of orthodox tradition, but a succession of witnesses to Christ, an apostolic testimony in Jerusalem to the self-styled leaders of Israel until they finally reject it, and an apostolic testimony from Jerusalem to Rome and the Gentile world of Luke's own day (NICNT, 36).

Ends of the Earth

This phrase is geographic and ethnic in scope, inclusive of all people and locales.

The geographical scope of Acts 1:8 provides a rough outline of the entire book: Jerusalem (1-7), Judea Samaria (8-12), and the ends of the earth (13-28).

Rather than sinking roots in Jerusalem and waiting for the world to flood in, Jesus' followers are to move out from Jerusalem, through Judea and Samaria, and ultimately, to the ends of the earth (Peterson, 112).

So, what does the promise mean for you (1:8)? Listen carefully to the words of Christ. You will receive power and my witness. For every Jesus follower in the NT, three essential elements occur repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Spirit. Have you repented of your sins? Have you boldly proclaimed your faith through baptism? If not, would you make a commitment to Christ right now? If so, cling to the promise that the Holy Spirit lives in you.

Other “you will” statements by Jesus:

Luke 5:10 and so were James and John, Zebedee's sons, who were Simon's partners. “Don't be afraid,” Jesus told Simon. “From now on, you will be catching people.”

Luke 6:35 But love your enemies, do what is good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Then your reward will be great, and **you will be** children of the Most High. For he is gracious to the ungrateful and evil.

Luke 23:43 And he said to him, “Truly I tell you, today **you will be** with me in paradise.”

John 1:42 and he brought Simon to Jesus. When Jesus saw him, he said, “You are Simon, son of John. **You will be** called Cephas” (which is translated “Peter”).

THE ASCENSION

Acts 1:9 After he had said this, he was taken up as they were watching, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

It is Luke's mention of this period of 40 days that is responsible for the arrangement in the Christian calendar by which Ascension Day falls on the fortieth day after Easter (Bruce, 37).

One should not get the picture that the ascended Christ is was no longer active among believers. He continued to reveal himself to such as Stephen (7:56) and Paul (9:5).

Cloud

The transfiguration (Luke 9:34-6), the ascension, and the Parousia (Mark 13:26) are three successive manifestations of Jesus' divine glory. The cloud in each case is to be understood as the cloud which envelops the glory of God (The shekinah) that cloud which, resting above the Mosaic tabernacle and filled Solomon's temple, was the visible token to Israel that the divine glory had taken up residence there (Bruce, 38).

The cloud is not merely a vehicle for their ascension but probably is also a sign of God's heavenly glory or divine presence (Bock, 67).

¹⁰ While he was going, they were gazing into heaven, and suddenly two men in white clothes stood by them.

More attention is paid in this narrative to the response of the apostles and the words of the angelic messengers than to the details of the ascension itself (Peterson, 115).

Luke intends his readers to understand these men to be angelic messengers, like the two men who appeared to the women at the empty tomb of Jesus in dazzling apparel (Luke 24:4). Two was the minimum number for credible witness-bearing (Bruce, 38).

¹¹ They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you have seen him going into heaven."

Jesus was taken up in the clouds; two angels declared he would return in the same manner as he departed. Luke alone narrates this ascension and its picture of being the reverse of the return. Christ is ascended, but his abiding presence and energy fill the whole book of Acts and the whole succeeding story of his people on earth (Bruce, 39).

A mild rebuke is expressed in the question, "why do you stand looking into heaven?" His departure means that they now have work to do.

The angels do not answer the disciples' question of when, but it assures them that a return will complete the messianic task.

In sum, there is one central application for the unit: the church is called to engage in a mission to the world, knowing that Jesus' return is assured.

Christ is ascended, but his abiding presence and energy fill the whole book of Acts and the whole succeeding story of his people on earth (NICNT, 39).

Such gazing into heaven was inappropriate because of Jesus' instructions and his promises about the Spirit (Peterson, 115).

Illustrations

'Waiting Expert' Shares What Makes Waiting Difficult

In a *New York Times* article, journalist Alex Stone tells the story of how executives at a Houston airport faced and then solved a cascade of passenger complaints about long waits at the baggage claim. They first decided to hire more baggage handlers, reducing wait times to an industry-beating average of eight minutes. But complaints persisted. This made no sense to the executives until they discovered that, on the average, passengers took just one minute to walk to baggage claim, resulting in a hurry-up-and-wait situation. The walk time was not a problem; the remaining seven empty minutes of staring at the baggage carousel was. So, in a burst of innovation, the executives moved the arrival gates farther away from the baggage claim area. Passengers now had to walk much farther but their bags were often waiting for them when they arrived. Problem solved. The complaints dropped.

For the same article Stone interviewed MIT operations researcher Richard Larson, the world's leading expert on waiting in lines to discover the psychology behind our waiting. What happened at the Houston airport makes for a perfect illustration. According to Larson, the length of our wait is not as important as what we're doing while we wait. "Often the psychology of queuing is more important than the statistics of the wait itself," says Larson. Essentially, we tolerate "occupied time" (for example, walking to baggage claim) far better than "unoccupied time" (such as standing at the baggage carousel). Give us something to do while we wait, and the wait becomes endurable. This is why, so often, waiting on God feels like unoccupied time to us. We wait, but what is really happening behind the scenes of our life? Is God actually doing anything? Waiting on God implies developing a new perspective of what God is doing while we wait on him.

Source:

Rick Lawrence, Skin in the Game (Kregel Publishers, 2015), pages 105-107

Biblical Foundations: The Church

Every gathering we will center our discussion around four main questions:

1. What does the Bible say?
2. What has the church believed?
3. How does it all fit together?
4. How does this doctrine impact the church today?

A theology for the church would be incomplete without a theology of the church.

Perhaps the popular disinterest in ecclesiology results from the understanding that the church itself is not necessary for salvation. Cyprian of Carthage famously said, “No one can have God for his father, who has not the church for his mother.”

The church must be regarded as important to Christians because of its importance to Christ. Jesus founded the church (Matt. 16:18), purchased it with his blood (Acts 20:28), and intimately identifies himself with it (Acts 9:4).

What does the Bible Say?

The church is the body of people called by God’s grace through faith in Christ to glorify him together by serving him in this world.

People of God in the OT: Israel

God’s eternal plan has always been to display his glory not just through individuals but through a corporate body (Gen. 12).

Israel is called God’s son (Exod. 4:22), spouse (Ezek 16:6-15), vine (Isa 5:1-7) and flock (Ezek 34).

Distinctions between the OT and NT people of God are obvious. God’s people in the OT are ethnically distinct, live under their own government, and require circumcision as a sign of covenant and communal identification.

Continuities between OT and NT are more debated.

Gal. 6:16 May peace come to all those who follow this standard, and mercy even to the Israel of God!

Rom. 9:6 Now it is not as though the word of God has failed, because not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.

Though Israel and the church are not identical, they are closely related, and they are related through Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:12-13). **12** At that time you were without Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world. **13** But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Revelation is one of the greatest links between the OT and NT people of God.

Rev. 11= two witnesses

Rev. 21= New Jerusalem contains the 12 gates of Israel x 12 foundational walls of Apostles

People of God in the NT: Church

In the NT the English word church can be used to describe both a local congregation and all Christians everywhere. The word *Ekklesia* occurs 114 times in the New Testament and overwhelming describes Christian assembly.

Four major image clusters of the church in the NT:

1. People of God. Peter used the title to encourage readers of his first epistle. The people of God are based on him and his act, deriving their identity from him uniquely.
2. New creation. New creation imagery is individual (2 Cor. 5:17) as well as corporate (1 Cor. 15:20).
3. Fellowship. Fellowship among Christians in the church is based on the Christian's union with Christ. According to the NT, Christians live with Christ, suffer with Christ, are crucified with Christ, die with Christ, will be raised with Christ, and are glorified with Christ.
4. Body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:17).

Scripture teaches us that Christians should not approach the church as consumers but as members of a body: committing to one another, depending on one another, honoring one another, and caring for one another (1 Cor 12)

Imagine you have moved to a new country or city and are looking for a new church. What 5-10 things would you look for?

We must treat the less honorable and presentable parts of our physical bodies with special honor, which means we should treat the "less honorable" members of the church with special honor (vv. 22-24) .

God has deliberately arranged the body this way, giving honor to the parts that lacked it, in order that the body would be unified and that the various parts would care for one another (vv. 24-25).

Vital for any church is **unity** and **care**.

The Living Church

The church is a living organism composed of spiritually alive, growing Christians. Therefore, the members of local churches should expect, encourage, and equip other members to grow spiritually.

Growth does not happen in isolation; God's people are designed to grow together (1 *Thess 1:2-6*).

How should the expectation that members are growing spiritually shape: small groups, preparation, leadership, conversations after worship, weekly life?

The Growing Church

Christians grow as we buildup and are built up by other members of the body of Christ. According to Scripture, the way we attain Christian maturity is through the church.

Ephesians 4:11-16

Every member of the church is to build up the body (growth).

We must have expectations of leadership in the local church. See vv. 11-12. What are some of these expectations?

Paul warns the church in Ephesus against false teaching as a threat to the church's health. False teaching is not always obvious but can be crafty and deceitful.

The body of Christ Grows when:

1. We speak truth in love
2. Every joint holds the body together
3. Each part works properly

This passage teaches us a lot about church growth

1. Pastors equip the saints for ministry
2. Christian growth means growing in the knowledge of Jesus
3. Speaking truth in love means we help others
4. Christian growth is thoroughly corporate
5. Growth is always from Christ

Attributes of the Church

One, holy, universal, and apostolic (Nicene Creed). The church has always been characterized by its oneness and unity. Jesus demonstrates that his people are set apart from the world. Although local gatherings of faith display the visible nature of the church (i.e. Bethel), the church is universal in nature and transcends all natural barriers. The church is apostolic because it is founded on and is faithful to the Word of God given through the Apostles.

Marks of a healthy church

1. **Expositional preaching.** Does the pastor preach God's Word, or his own ideas? Does he allow Scripture to set his preaching agenda, or does he pick topics by some other criteria? (2 Tim. 2:15, 4:2-2)
2. **Biblical theology.** Does the church openly confess key biblical doctrines? Do the leaders consistently teach sound doctrine? (Tit. 1:9-11)
3. A biblical understanding of the **gospel.** Does the church clearly proclaim the good news about what Jesus Christ accomplished for sinners in his death and resurrection? Consistently? (1 Cor. 15:1-4)
4. A biblical understanding of **conversion.** Does the church teach that people must be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:1-8)? Does the church teach that in order to become a Christian, a person must repent of sin and trust in Christ, both of which are ultimately gifts of God? (Acts 11:18, 20:21)
5. A biblical understanding of **evangelism.** Does the church preach the gospel to non-Christians and encourage its members to do the same? Does it understand that it's *our* responsibility to preach the message of salvation, yet *God* is the only one who can do the saving? (Matt. 28:18-20; Eph. 2:1-10)
6. Biblical church **membership.** Does the church take membership seriously by seeking to ensure that its members faithfully attend? Does it encourage members to fulfill the biblical "one-another's" with each other? (Heb. 10:24-25; Eph. 4:11-29)
7. Biblical church discipline. Does the church lovingly, patiently practice church discipline? (Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13)
8. Biblical **discipleship** and growth. Does the church expect and equip its members to grow spiritually (2 Pet. 1:3-11)? Does the church encourage its members to disciple one another (Rom. 15:14)? Growing as a Christian should be normal, not exceptional.
9. Biblical church leadership. Is the church led by godly, qualified men? Does the church look to Scripture to determine its leadership structure? (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-11)

What has the church believed?

First, and most significant for the church around the world, has been the dispute about whether there are a prescribed order and polity for the universal church as there is for the local church. The RCC maintains a universal order exists. The Greek Orthodox and many Protestant groups maintain that certain structures have developed, which are useful. Congregationalists, like Baptists, maintain that the NT prescribes no structure for the universal church.

Before the 16th century, the church was more assumed than discussed.

The Reformation made the gospel, not the ecclesiastical organization, the test of the true church.

Denominations, as they are known today, arose largely in the 17th century, though their roots are earlier. Most of the denominations popularity known in America today initially grew up in the United Kingdom.

History of the Ordinances of the church

It is sadly ironic that the very actions that Christians are commanded to share commonly—acknowledge “one baptism” (Eph. 4:5); celebrate the Lord’s supper together (1 Cor. 11:18)—have been the focus of so much dispute and division through the church’s history.

Between the 5th-12th century, there was not an agreed-upon number of sacraments. Numbers ranged from two all the way to thirty or more. Since the 13th century, the RCC acknowledged seven sacraments: baptism, Eucharist, confirmation, confession, marriage, priesthood, last rites (extreme unction).

Some groups, Quakers and Salvation Army, maintain that no ritual ordinances should be observed today.

History of church membership

Given that the NT restricts baptism to believers, Baptists have concluded that church membership is restricted to individuals who have made a credible profession of faith.

The profession of faith should include submitting to believers’ baptism and making oneself accountable to a particular local congregation with whom the profession believer regularly communes.

By the 17th century, church covenants continued in use not only among independent congregations in England and America, but Baptists adopted their usage.

Over the last century, church covenants have had little role in the life of most Baptist congregations.