

Title: What is the Church? Pt.1  
Text: John 17  
Theme: The nature of the church  
Occasion: 2-part series on the nature of the church end of 2024 and beginning of 2025  
Prop Stmt: Christ has called his church to be unified, holy, universal and apostolic (faithful to the theological foundation established by the apostles).

Imagine being interviewed by a company for a position in the accounting department. HR shows you the company logo, uniforms, lunch room, pictures of the latest company Christmas party, last summer's picnic, but when you ask them what exactly does the company do, you know, what services they provide, what products they make, they get a puzzled look. No one is exactly sure.

That happens with churches and is happening in our church or will unless we stay laser focused on our purpose and mission as defined by God. Therefore, this week and next I am addressing the foundational question of: What is the church? What we are, determines what we do. What we are determines our purpose, priorities, and goals. So, what is the church? Jesus and the rest of the NT has much to say about this.

Read Text:

## 1. The Nature of the Church

The word for church in the original language of the NT is ekklesia. It occurs 114 times and refers to assemblies or gatherings. In fact Luke uses the word 3x in Acts 19 to describe the gathering of people for a riot. The word is used 1x in Acts and 1x in Hebrews to describe the gathering of people in the OT. But, the other 109x it is used to describe the assembly of Christians. The use of the word, "ekklesia" tells us how important the church is to Christ and Christ is to the church.

### A. The use of the word "ekklesia"

Matthew –	3x
Acts –	20x
Paul's epistles -	66x
Hebrews –	1x
James –	1x
3 John -	3x
Revelation –	20x

Jesus is the founder of the church and he calls it "my church" in Matthew 16.18. Just as Adam named his bride (Eve), so Christ names the church. In Matthew 16.18, Jesus is clearly referring to all of the New Covenant people of God that he calls "my church." But most of the time when the word (ekklesia) is used it refers to specific assemblies in the specific places that gather at specific times. This happens in Jerusalem, Antioch, Derbe, Lystra and Ephesus. Paul also states that Jesus bought the church with his own blood (Acts 20.28).

Paul refers to the churches as the church of God or the church of Christ. Paul refers to himself as one who used to persecute the church (Phil. 3.6; 1 Cor. 15.9). His ministry as an apostle focused almost exclusively on planting churches and building up (strengthening) churches (primarily the ones that he had helped to establish).

Therefore, when Paul writes to the churches (as he does in his epistles) he normally thinks first of an actual assembly of known persons who have professed faith in Christ, have been baptized by immersion at a specific place upon their profession of faith and have joined themselves to and been received by this specific group of people, all of whom have done the same (professed faith in Christ and have been baptized by immersion). There is no on-line church. It does not exist. In Ephesians and Colossians, Paul speaks of the relationship between Christ and the church in terms of a husband and wife and of the head and the body. This tells us not only how important and essential the church is to Jesus, but how essential and important Jesus is to the church.

The book of Hebrews uses the word for church one time in 12.23 where it refers to an earthly assembly with a heavenly destiny. James 5.14 speaks of a local church and her elders. 2 and 3 John were written with a specific congregation and its struggle with false teachers in view. The book of Revelation uses the word a lot in the first 3 chapters and then once in 22.16 which clearly informs us that the message of this book is for the churches.

Summary: The church (**a local assembly of identifiable Christians**) is a major focal point of the New Testament. The church is what Jesus bought, named, died for, is deeply concerned for and will return for. She is his bride and therefore, the church is hugely important. If Jesus is important to you, his church is important to you. If you are Christ-centered, a healthy church will be a huge priority to you. Anyone who says that they follow Jesus but do not prioritize the church are just taking a walk.

## **B. The images that describe the church.**

There is no single description that captures it all, but together we see what God intends for the church to be and do. Here are some of the more popular ones:

Primary ones:

The people of God

The new creation

The fellowship (or communion) in faith

The body of Christ

Others:

The herald (proclamation) of the gospel

The obedient servant

The bride of Christ

A building held together by the Spirit

A temple

The community of people who live in the last days.

The salt of the earth

A letter from Christ  
The family of believers  
The family of God

Taken together these images help us see the variety and richness of the church and how all-encompassing she is.

But when people do not understand what the church really is, then they will come up with their definition of what it is and what makes it that and how we should attempt to create that. That is why many view the church as a religious business formed by marketing, meaningful events, attractive and magnetic leaders, and positive experiences. There is a lot of emphasis upon organization, consumerism, image, presentation, marketing, entertainment, engagement and voluntarism. So much of what passes for a church, is unrecognizable by Christ and the apostles.

When you look at how Jesus describes what it means to follow him (Matthew 19.16-30) and how the early church lived that out (Hebrews 10.32-39) you will realize that genuine conversion to Christ leads to a commitment to the body of Christ (the local church) which involves a change of mind that now sees brothers and sisters in Christ as people for whom they are responsible. Jesus is very clear on this: (Matthew 12.46-50). For people with a Muslim background, Russian, Ukrainian, American, southern, 1<sup>st</sup> Nations, American Indian, African American, etc. we all need to realize that the highest authority in life is now Christ and our highest community is now Christ's community. The church is the means by which God is displaying his gospel to the nations. No people will be reached with the gospel without the lasting presence of healthy churches. So, how do we form and pursue healthy churches and what are some of the marks of a healthy church? The doctrine of the church, articulated in the NT, is part of a long line of teaching that the Bible does on God's plan from the very beginning.

God made the world as a reflection of his glory, and to be a place for people. Humans are the highest order of his creation and we were made in his image and after his likeness. Humans were made with the capacity to relate to God and reflect God in a way that no other aspect of his creation could. We were made in his image. But why? Why did God make us in his image?

God the Father delights so much in God, the Son, that God the Father wanted to create a kingdom for his Son, with citizens in that kingdom who would look like His Son because His Son is so glorious that He is worth imaging and reflecting. So, because the Father delights so perfectly in his Son, he made the world to be a kingdom for his Son's rule and glory. He made us to be a people as image bearers who would delight in his Son and live in happy submission to him. But Adam (and all of us) rejected the Ruler and we rebelled against God. The punishment for our rebellion is death and judgment. How can God accomplish his plan to have a kingdom for his Son and people to live with and enjoy when all we like sheep have gone astray?

God would be completely just to punish us for our sin, but that would condemn us forever because it is more than we can bear and more than we can pay. So, God sent his own Son, Jesus to come into this world and become one of us. Jesus did what Adam did not do and Jesus did what everyone of us could not do. Jesus lived a perfect life in our place and then died as the full and final payment for the sins of every single person who would ever believe on him. When you

by faith alone turn from your sin and trust in Christ alone, you become a Christian. You become a follower of Christ. There is nothing for you to pay, Christ paid it. There is nothing for you to do. Christ did it. When you trust in Christ, you are born into the family of God and made a citizen of his kingdom. God has chosen to redeem sinners to be citizens of his eternal and righteous kingdom. That is the big picture. Right now, the kingdom of God is seen and displayed through faithful churches.

People who follow Christ are called to follow Christ together with other Christians and form churches. (Repeat) A true and healthy local church makes the gospel visible, puts Christ on display and helps its members follow Jesus better. The church began in Acts 2 with the baptism of the Spirit. This event was the fulfillment of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel who prophesied about the New Covenant that God was going to make with his people. We are the New Covenant people of God. We are here to not only make the gospel visible but we are here, in this world as representatives of another kingdom. Jesus is going to return and establish his kingdom. God has raised up the church to be a preview of that kingdom. We are to enjoy relationships with other believers now in such a way that our lives point them to the kingdom of God that is coming. The local church is an outpost of the kingdom that is coming. A local church is an embassy of another nation, and we are ambassadors of the earth's true king – Jesus Christ.

But faithful and healthy churches will not naturally occur just because you have a group of people who profess faith in Jesus. Faithful and healthy churches tend to be unusual because establishing and protecting a healthy church is hard work. But the church is the bride of Christ and Jesus is worth a beautiful bride.

God's Word calls us to make disciples in order to establish churches and God has called churches to be the homes and farms that grow disciples. You simply cannot have disciples of Jesus who follow him well without churches. But, that is the challenge isn't it? People trip us up. People can frustrate us. People disappoint us and hurt us. And we do not always agree on everything. Oh yea, but that is why we need each other because people reveal things about our hearts that we otherwise would not know or would not be forced to reckon with. The church is the means that God ordained for your growth.

It was Jesus who said that he was going to build his church (Matthew 16.18) and the rest of the NT follows the life of the apostles (Paul in particular) and focuses upon the establishing and ongoing work and ministry of a healthy church. God's plan is to have a Church that is so beautiful, so pure, so faithful, so glorious that He actively shows it off to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 3.10). So, how can a local church be a church that God actively shows off to the principalities and powers as a reflection of his glory? We can be this as we pursue unity, purity, universally and sound doctrine. This is what we are called to be. The church is to be One, Holy, Universal and Apostolic (believing and following sound doctrine)

## 2. **Unity matters because the Church is One.** (John 17.11, 21, 22, 23)

Unity matters because the church is one because God is one! In this beautiful prayer of Jesus for us, he repeatedly prays for our unity because our unity is an expression of the unity that God enjoys as God. So, our unity is not only a desire of Christ for us, it is a reality that will be

accomplished in us. This is a prayer that is guaranteed to be answered. How should we understand this and why does this matter so much?

When your vision for a church is driven by a business or marketing plan, then you understand unity and harmony as a nice thing because people generally do not like conflict and if your church is marked by arguing and bickering then people will not want to come back. But the importance of unity is way deeper than that. It is not simply a good idea for attracting people, unity is convictional and therefore critical and necessary because the church comes from God who is Triune.

**a. The church is a people because God is TRIune.**

God's plan from the very beginning of time is to have a people that he would live with and enjoy forever. The church is a people. A man was telling me one day that he didn't need the church because he was the church. He said, "I am the church." But, that is not true. The church is not one person. Jesus did not say that where you are, there's the church. The NT church always refers to a people because God is a 3-person God. A plurality of people displays the character of God better than one person. But, this 3-person God is one God. Therefore,

**b. The church is one because God is triUNE.**

What does it mean to display God's glory or to live for the glory of God? It means that the way we live is a reflection of God himself. That is why unity among God's people is SO very important to God.

God is a unity of plurality. The unity of God is the loving, joyful, harmonious relationship that God enjoys as God because the Father, Son and Spirit each delight in the others and in the relationships of the others. That is why Jesus keeps appealing to this unity in his prayer as the cause and motivation for the unity of his church. Unity matters because God is one and God is our source, our goal, our pattern and our means. We have a membership class in which we point out that one of our values as a church is unity and we follow a process in order to address problems because that process reflects our commitment to unity. Joining the church is based in part on a promise to protect the unity and we reaffirm this every time we repeat our church covenant when we say, "We will work and pray for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." We say that because unity takes work. It does not happen naturally. Disunity happens naturally. There is nothing supernatural about not getting along. But, when people who are natural born enemies love one another, delight in one another, serve one another, prefer one another, honor one another, help one another, pray for one another, understand one another, have empathy for one another, and even sacrifice for one another, then we are living out what it means to be the body of Christ. The body, the reality of Christ, the visibility of Christ is displayed by our protecting and pursuing our unity. When we fail to guard the unity of the church we are failing as a church because we are misrepresenting God. Now, here is some encouragement.

**c. Already the church is One.**

What I mean is that positionally we are one. Just as, already you are fully justified in Christ. Already, you are seated with Christ in the heavenly places. Eph. 2.6. Already the church is one. Jesus said so. There is one flock. John 10.16 “There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” In Galatians 3. 27-28, Paul said that it doesn’t matter whether you male or female, whether you are rich or poor, whether you are this ethnicity or that “ –you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Already the church is one. However,

**d. Not yet is the church experiencing all of that oneness.**

We will experience that oneness perfectly one day. But we are not home yet. This prayer that Jesus prayed for our unity will be answered. Therefore...

Conclusion:

How should this affect our thinking about the church? On one level, I could say that some (many, in fact) of you should be more faithful in attending, commitment, investment and involvement. But I want you to think deeper. Who are you? How do you answer this question: Am I a genuine follower of Christ? Do I seek to follow Christ the way he defines it as being part of a local assembly of Christians? How am I pursuing the unity of my local church?

Since unity puts God on display in such a beautifully attractive and compelling way, we should expect that our unity to be attacked. I need to be committed to the unity of my church and help others think and act the same way. Some tend toward peace-breakers and some tend toward peace-fakers. We are called to being peace-makers and we can have peace between each other because of the gospel and the implications of the gospel.

So, what is the church supposed to be? She is supposed to be one. And one of the attacks to our unity is sin. Therefore, the church is supposed to be holy.