

Topic 12: The Church

Realizing Your Need for Community

“I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”

—Matthew 16:18

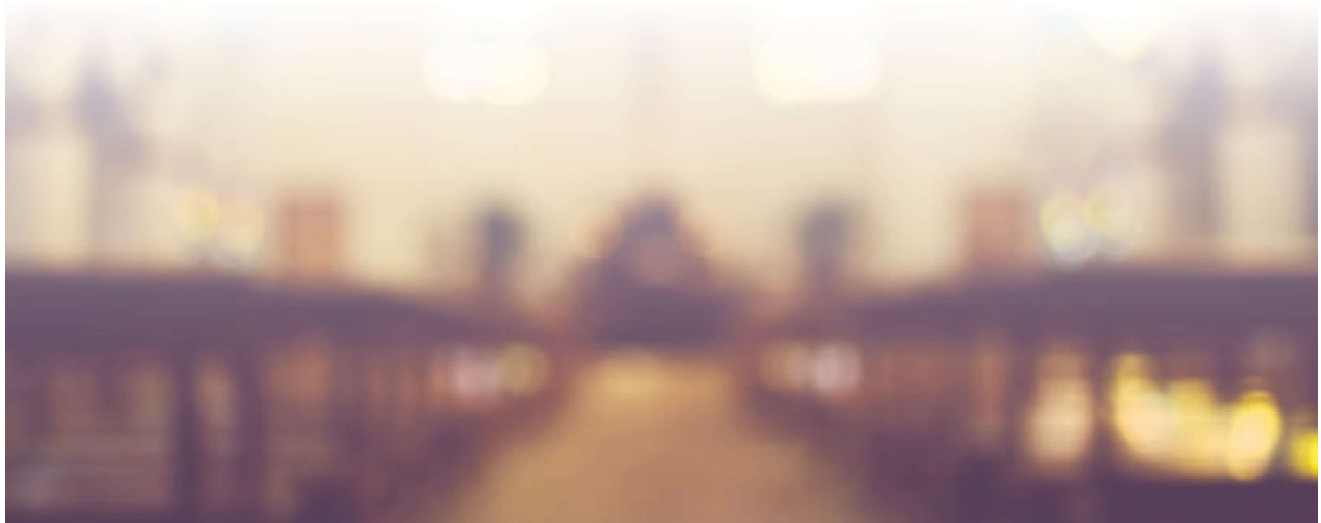
The late great Dorothy Sayers once said that God has suffered three great humiliations:

1. the incarnation—wherein the Infinite became finite
2. the cross—where Jesus took all the sin and shame of the world upon himself
3. the church— In an awesome act of self-denial, God entrusted his reputation to ordinary people

This last one was probably intended as a joke. But for those who’ve had bad experiences with organized religion, mentions of church aren’t humorous.

There is something appealing about a privatized spirituality, an individual faith. And yet Jesus and his original followers said much about church. What’s more, the gospels show that a disciple is one who follows Jesus by faith and *in community*. And let’s not forget the exhortation given in Hebrews 10:25: “Not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Let’s look at it: What is this spiritual community called “the church” and why is it indispensable?





Bible Study

God's Revelation: *What Does the Bible Say About the Church?*

The first occurrence of the word “church” in the Bible is found in Matthew 16:18. Jesus is talking there with his disciples about the various opinions people have about him. Let’s listen in on the conversation:

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

And Jesus said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

“I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.” (Matthew 16:15–18, NASB)

You are probably aware there’s been much debate throughout church history about how to understand this exchange.

- ▶ Roman Catholics believe this was Peter’s installation as the first Pope.
- ▶ Protestants think Jesus was simply affirming Peter’s faith and saying such strong belief in him is the foundation of the church.

Greek scholars note that Christ’s literal words are, “You are *Petros* (the Greek word for “small rock” or “stone”) and upon this *petra* (the Greek word that means “bedrock”) I will build my church.

“Healthy spiritual growth requires the presence of the other—the brother, the sister, the pastor, the teacher. A private, proudly isolated life cannot grow. The two or three who gather together in Christ’s name keep each other sane. Spiritual growth cannot take place in isolation. It is not a private thing.”—Eugene Peterson

1. What do you think this statement by Christ means?



Whatever one's view, 1 Corinthians 3:11 says "No man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." Clearly, Jesus Christ is the church's true and ultimate foundation—their *bedrock*.

Now, what about the word "church"? The Greek word is *ekklesia*—a compound word made up of the preposition that means "out from" and the verb that means "to call." So *ekklesia* means "to call out from." The word was used even in non-biblical literature to refer to a gathering or assembly of people.

In the New Testament it primarily refers to one of two things:

- ▶ A *local* assembly of Christians living in a particular locale—1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; Revelation 1:11. We might think of this as the church—little "c."
- ▶ The *universal* body of believers—all Christ-followers everywhere, even in heaven (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 1:22–23; Colossians 1:18; Hebrews 12:23). We could refer to this as the Church—big "C."

This simple chart illustrates the difference between the two:

The <i>Local</i> church	The <i>Universal</i> Church
Physical and visible, even if very small and informal—even two or three people gathered in his name, according to Matthew 18:20.	Spiritual and invisible
Attendees include believers and unbelievers	Only believers are members
Only the living	All those in Christ whether dead or alive
Many expressions	One entity
Assorted denominations	Transcends denominations
A portion of the body of Christ	The entire body of Christ
Assorted types of government	Jesus Christ is the true and only head

When did Jesus begin his "church building" project? Most Protestant Christians believe the Church officially began at Pentecost (Acts 2), when God poured out his Spirit on the disciples gathered in Jerusalem.

2. Take a few moments to read Acts 2. Note especially verses 42–47. What were the practices of this first group of Spirit-filled followers of Jesus?



This fast-growing assembly of Christ-followers was initially local, centered in Jerusalem, and almost completely Jewish. But as the disciples obeyed the command of Acts 1:8, they moved out into Gentile (non-Jewish) regions. Over time the church became a fascinating mix of people from different nations, races, religious backgrounds, and ethnicities.

The epistles of the New Testament give us little peeks into church organization and practice during the first century. But nowhere do we find even one verse that gives us a concise *definition* of “church.”

Instead what we find in the New Testament are descriptive analogies. Writer Philip Yancey has pointed out that Judaism had always been simple to grasp. It was a distinct race of people, linked by blood ties and cultural tradition. But this new entity called *the church* was radically different. This explains all the metaphors in Scripture for the growing, worldwide assembly of people following the way of Jesus.

New Testament Metaphors of the Church

Church compared to	Scripture
An inheritance	“His glorious inheritance in his holy people” (Ephesians 1:18)
A new humanity	“His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity” (Ephesians 2:15)
God’s household	“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household.” (Eph. 2:19)
A building/temple	“Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.” (Eph. 2:20–21)
A body (with Christ as head)	“And he is the head of the body, the church” (Colossians 1:18)
A living house	“You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5)
A chosen people	“But you are a chosen people” (1 Peter 2:9)
A holy, royal priesthood	“To be a holy priesthood . . . a royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:5, 9)
A nation set apart for God	“But you are . . . a holy nation, God’s special possession” (1 Peter 2:9)
A flock	“Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care” (1 Peter 5:2)
A pure bride	“Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” (Revelation 21:9; see also 2 Corinthians 11:2)



The Church is often referred to as a body. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul develops this metaphor, saying, “The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. . . . Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. . . . some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary . . . if one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad (vss. 12, 20, 22, 26, NLT).

3. What strikes you about the image of the church as a “body”?

4. In what ways is this a difficult metaphor for people in our culture¹ to embrace?

5. Read Ephesians 2:20–21. What’s the Church picture or comparison here and what does it suggest?

¹ A culture that ranks the worth of people and also champions the idea of doing one’s own thing, going one’s own way, blazing one’s own trail, remaining first and foremost “an individual.”



According to the apostle Paul, the Church is God’s epic building project. Picture one of those great and gorgeous European cathedrals that, in some cases, took craftsmen centuries to assemble, stone by stone.



That’s the idea here, only with the Church, God is the builder (and occupant!) and we believers are *living stones* (1 Peter 2). As we saw in the previous lesson about the Holy Spirit, God lives inside each of his children—dwelling in each individual part of his temple. But the world gets the clearest and best picture of God’s love and beauty in the overall structure, which is the Church.

6. Read Ephesians 5:22–33. What does this analogy teach you about the Church?



We have all been to weddings. We've all seen a beautiful bride, making her grand appearance at the start of a lavish ceremony. We gasp! She is stunning! She's never looked this good in all her life!

Ah, but if you had seen her late the night before or earlier that morning—*before* the make-up and hair care crew arrived, and before she put on that exquisite dress—it would have been a different story.

That's a great picture of the destiny of the Church. The bride we see right now is—ahem—“not quite together.” We are not as beautiful as we will be one day. Just you wait!

Our Response: *So what should we do in light of these truths?*

We need to THINK rightly about the Church.

Look carefully at the following chart:

What Church Is Not . . . and What It Is

The church is not	The church is
A physical building or a place	A living body and a people
A man-made organization	A divinely built organism
A group of people who “have it all together” and look down their noses at those who aren't as “together”	A group of broken but redeemed people who are full of love and concern and who don't play favorites and/or assign rank or worth to others
A self-serving enterprise	A God-serving and world-serving entity
A calendar of activities	A community devoted to ministry
A religious resort or club	A spiritual emergency room
Meant to be internally focused	Meant to be eternally and externally focused
Where I go to see how well others meet my needs	Where I go to see about serving others, trusting that my needs will get met in the process
A disposable option for Christians	The beloved bride of Christ

7. Based on those biblical observations, what mistake in thinking is present in each of the following situations?

- ▶ Saying, “I love Jesus, but I can't stand church!”



- ▶ Driving past the building where you worship on Sunday and saying, "That's my church!"

- ▶ Looking for a perfect church or picking a church solely on the services it offers.

- ▶ The children's rhyme that uses fingers and hands to say, "Here's the church and here's the steeple. Open the doors and see all the people."

- ▶ Saying, "I'm going to church."

Take-Home Reflections

We need to LIVE rightly as the church.

To summarize, disciples of Jesus believe the following about the Church:

The Church is the community of Christ-followers through which the triune God is carrying out his will on earth today.

Here's a quick list of some of the ways the Bible commands us, as members of Christ's body, to engage with our brothers and sisters in Christ individually, and with the people of God corporately. How well are you living out your calling? Check the appropriate box for each example.

Command	Consistently	Occasionally	Infrequently
Showing sacrificial love to fellow Christians John 13:34			
Honoring brothers and sisters in Christ Romans 12:10			
Living in harmony with fellow believers Romans 12:16			
Refusing to judge other Christians Romans 14:13			
Accepting other believers as Christ accepted me Romans 15:7			
Showing warmth to fellow disciples Romans 16:16			
Making the effort to be agreeable 1 Corinthians 1:10			
Encouraging other Christ followers 2 Corinthians 13:11			
Serving fellow believers Galatians 5:13			
Being patient and forgiving toward other believers Ephesians 4:2			
Working to preserve unity with other believers Ephesians 4:3			
Doing the work God has appointed for me Ephesians 2:10; 4:16			
Being truthful in my interactions with others Ephesians 4:25			
Trying to build others up Ephesians 4:29			



Command	Consistently	Occasionally	Infrequently
Demonstrating kindness and compassion Ephesians 4:32			
Submitting to others Ephesians 5:21			
Being humble and servant-hearted Philippians 2:5-8			
Forgiving Christians who sin against me Colossians 3:13			
Warning other believers who are straying Colossians 3:16			
Inspiring other believers to do good Hebrews 10:24			
Meeting together regularly with other Christians Hebrews 10:25			
Resisting the urge to talk ill of other believers James 4:11			
Refusing to grumble and complain against others James 5:9			
Practicing hospitality toward fellow Christians 1 Peter 4:9			
Giving gladly to the needs of other believers 2 Corinthians 9:7, 12			
Seeking to grow up in my salvation 1 Peter 2:2; 2 Peter 3:18			
Using your gifts to grace others 1 Peter 4:10			
Worshiping with other believers Acts 13:2			
Following the leadership of pastors and elders Hebrews 13:17			

8. What about the above exercise surprises, encourages, or concerns you?



Life Application

An important part of discipleship is learning how to apply God's truths to your life. Below are just a few ways you can start thinking about what you've learned and apply it to your daily life.

1. Memorize our memory verse, Matthew 16:18.
"I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."
2. Ponder the statements under "Wise Words About Church Community." These quotes are from an assortment of Christian leaders about why it's so vital for each of us to be deeply involved in a local church community.
3. Wrestle with one or two of these questions:

▶ Respond to this statement:
"Because we are 'the body of Christ,' Christians are eternally connected, permanently attached, linked together with Jesus Christ and with one another. Our future and our fortunes are tied together. We are different, but we're interdependent. We desperately need each other to function healthily in this world." Do you agree? Why or why not?

"Healthy spiritual growth requires the presence of the other—the brother, the sister, the pastor, the teacher. A private, proudly isolated life cannot grow. The two or three who gather together in Christ's name keep each other sane. Spiritual growth cannot take place in isolation. It is not a private thing."—Eugene Peterson

- ▶ Jean Vanier has said: "There is no ideal community. Community is made up of people with all their richness, but also with their weakness and poverty, of people who accept and forgive each other, who are vulnerable with each other. Humility and trust are more at the foundation of community than perfection." Do you agree? Why is this so hard to develop?
- ▶ Someone has observed that in more than twenty centuries of church history, it's only been in the last century that believers have stopped saying, "I *belong* to such-and-such a church" or "I'm a *member* of _____ church" and started saying "I *go* to _____" or "I *attend* _____ church." Do you see any problems with this change of vernacular? What does it say about how people relate to their church?
- ▶ Do you have a church family? A faith community to which you belong, people to whom you are committed and accountable? If not, what holds you back?



Wise Words About Church Community

“Let him who is not in community beware of being alone. Into the community you were called—the call was not meant for you alone; in the community of the called you bear your cross, you struggle, you pray. You are not alone even in death, and on the Last Day you will be only one of the great congregation of Jesus Christ.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

“Communion is strength; solitude is weakness. Alone, the free old beech yields to the blast and lies prone on the meadow. In the forest, supporting each other, the trees laugh at the hurricane. The sheep of Jesus flock together. The social element is the genius of Christianity.”

—Charles Spurgeon

“Many Christians have been infected with the most virulent virus of modern American life, what sociologist Robert Bellah calls ‘radical individualism.’ They concentrate on personal obedience to Christ as if all that matters is ‘Jesus and me,’ but in doing so miss the point altogether. For Christianity is not a solitary belief system. Any genuine resurgence of Christianity, as history demonstrates, depends on a reawakening and renewal of that which is the essence of the faith—that is, the people of God, the new society, the body of Christ, which is made manifest in the world—the church.”

—Chuck Colson, *The Body*

“You can sit in a sanctuary and listen to a sermon, and have the best intentions in the world about doing something about it, but if you don’t have somebody who can say next week, ‘Did you act on that?’ you can bet you will fail to do it.”

—Roberta Hestenes

“I’m convinced that spiritual growth happens best in an environment of intimacy. And intimacy is not going to happen in the congregation, where people look at the back of one another’s heads. The Bible shines best when its truth is being pressed up against the wall of real-life scenarios and situations. You can’t get that very often in the sanctuary.”

—Gordon MacDonald

“When people are in small groups where someone knows them—where they can ask the threatening, embarrassing, naïve questions, and share where they are—then they can take giant steps in their faith. That just doesn’t happen in a church service of 200 or 500 people.”

—Howard Hendricks

“Can I be a Christian without joining other Christians in the church? Yes, it is something like: being a soldier without an army, a seaman without a ship, a business man without a business, a tuba player without an orchestra, a football player without a team or a bee without a hive.”

—Mrs. William P. Janzen

“It is the lone member of the congregation, who holds himself aloof from a more intimate Christian fellowship, who is likely to stunt or damage his spiritual progress.”

—John R. W. Stott

“The virtuous soul that is alone . . . is like the burning coal that is alone. It will grow colder rather than hotter.”

—St. John of the Cross