

WHY CHURCH?

The Christian church has experienced some significant challenges in recent years—challenges from culture, from bad caricature in some press, and yes, even from some Christians' behavior. Recent statistical research confirms what many pastors and leaders have already sensed: people are not coming to church like they used to (in the United States, at least). Even parishioners who might have been committed to a local church in the past, have changed their custom by showing up only occasionally. A reliable Pew Research Center survey in 2014 revealed that in the seven-year period since the previous survey (2007), overall church attendance in the United States experienced a 3.7% decline in weekly attendance, even though the population in this country grew by 16 million during the same period.¹ Only about 27% of millennials attend church on a weekly basis.² Once considered a necessary part of any local community, the church now struggles to find relevance and have its voice heard.

So why church? Notice that the question does not ask, “Why *go to* church?” The latter question assumes that church is primarily a location; the former question assumes that church is the people of God, not merely a building or location. So why should the church be important for any believer today? Why should Christians continue to gather together as the Body of Christ? It is this question that we shall attempt to answer in the next pages.

What the Church is Not

Before considering the meaning of the church, it will be beneficial to consider what the church *is not*. All of us may hold some false expectations of what the church is or should be. **First, the church is not a collection of perfect people**, but a gathering of followers of Christ who are journeying toward a goal. **Second, the church is not a social club where people of like interests gather.** Instead of engaging with people who are like us and activities that are our preference, the people of God gather in God's presence and from there bring Christ to the world through the power of the Spirit. **Third, the church is not a grocery store where I “shop” to get**

¹ Pew Research Center, “America's Changing Religious Landscape,” 12 May 2015. It may be accessed at www.pewresearch.org

² Ibid.

what I want.³ The *reason* for gathering is not *us*, but God’s glory. Engaging in the life of a Christian community means *primarily* focusing on God together and *secondarily* on others (Matthew 22:37-40). **Fourth, the church is not primarily a hospital**, but a training center for Christians to live and serve in the world. While churches have “emergency rooms” for critical care of the emotionally and spiritually injured, the community of faith cannot exist primarily as a ward of dying patients every Sunday instead of a column of healthy Christian soldiers headed for battle with the enemy. Care for wounds is vital in the church, but if we become a community where the only purpose is to repair wounds, then such an expectation harms the cause of Christ and his kingdom.

What the Church Is

Let’s turn now to examine the authentic nature of the church. Such an answer to the question, “Why Church?” arises out of an understanding of what God intended the Church to be.

1. The Church is the Body of Christ. From this metaphor of the Church as Christ’s body, the imagery from Paul’s words in I Corinthians 12 comes to mind: you all are the Body of Christ—when one member of the body hurts, all the body hurts; every member of the body has equal honor; each member is connected to the other. As the Body of Christ, we are fully aware that Jesus Christ himself is our Head. He alone is worthy of such a title because he alone was God who came to earth, inhabited human flesh, lived as a human being, was crucified and resurrected *for* this Church—this people of God. “You are not your own; you were bought at a price” (I Corinthians 6:19b-20a; NIV). This is Christ’s own body, which means that one purpose of our existence *as a group of people* is to extend Christ’s presence into the world today.

Not only is the intimacy of God’s people expressed through this metaphor of the Body of Christ, but also their origin as a gathering of those who are “called out.” Jesus himself said, “I will build my church [*ekklesia*]” (Matthew 16:18). This shows us that the church *belongs* to Jesus Christ (“my church”) and that it is his responsibility to build it. There remains an intimate *personal* connection between Jesus Christ and every believing Christian through the power of the Holy Spirit, yet there also remains an intimate *corporate* connection between Jesus Christ and all

³ The description of the church as a grocery store comes from Clay Sterrett, “Unrealistic Expectations of the Body of Christ,” *Decision Magazine* (April 1993). An expanded booklet of this article is also available at <http://cfcliterature.com/unrealistic-expectations.htm>. (Accessed April 2017).

believing Christians—local and global. As Christians, we belong to God *and* to each other. We are part of Christ’s great cosmic construction project of gathering and building a people to himself for his purposes (Heb. 12:23).

Against the growing tide of individualism in Western society, Scripture reminds us that God intended us to live, learn, and work together as a community of faith. The Church is not simply a collection of individuals that meet every now and then, but a family of brothers and sisters in Christ, drawn together by the Spirit to grow up in Christ and thereby impact the world for Christ. “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:16; NIV). Just as the human body needs exercise and movement of the muscles in order to grow physically, so too the spiritual Body of Christ demands movement—exercise in love—*as each part does its work*. Without others, the potential for spiritual growth is highly diminished. We need others to guide, warn, and call us up short when we are engaged in activities that demean Christ before others; we need others to ‘bump into us’ while they are exercising their gifts so that we may learn the graciousness of making room for others in our circle of life. This is what it means to grow up into the ‘size’ or ‘measure’ of Christ, who is the head. The leaders in God’s family are to equip everyone in the body to do works of service, so that the Body of Christ may be built up, until every person in the church becomes mature, even to the point of reaching the full measurement of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13). Working together we can experience God’s Spirit working in us to do works of service for others and thereby experience the joy of corporate spiritual growth.

Why Church? We need each other to grow to our fullest potential in Jesus Christ.

2. The Church is the people of God. God desired to have a people of his own possession—ones with whom he could communicate and engage in fellowship. While that role was filled by the people of Israel in the prior covenant, now because of the cross of Christ it extends to all people—whosoever will. Just before the delivery of the Ten Commandments, God told Moses to remind the children of Israel that God “carried you out on eagles’ wings” from Egypt and “brought you to myself” (Exodus 19:4; NIV). If they obeyed and kept the covenant, then they would be “my treasured possession,” and a “kingdom of priests,” and a “holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6; NIV). This very same language is rehearsed for us in the New Testament: “But you are a

chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession...” (I Peter 2:9a; NIV). God’s intention was that humans should live together in community with other members of his family.

Why Church? God desires to have a people to live together on earth and to live with him eternally.

3. The Church is a community of fellowship in the Spirit. If we are truly the people of God, then we should reflect something of God’s transformative presence in our midst. In other words, the people of God should reflect the nature of their God. Who is this God? God is Triune, that is, God lives (and always has lived) in rich fellowship as Father, Son, and Spirit. Although God is One, God is never lonely or solitary; God is always full of the richness of give-and-take relations between Father, Son, and Spirit, creating a divine society that is characterized by self-surrender to the other. Father, Son, and Spirit “make room” for the other. It is this self-giving nature that the people of God are called to reflect in their church lives. This type of fellowship is more than meeting together for food or fun; it is more than meeting together once a week—or once in a while. True fellowship that reflects the fellowship of our God is one of *mutual respect and reciprocity*. Since the Triune God is ‘social’ at the core of his being, Christians have the privilege of reflecting that divine sociality within our fellowship with others. By learning to enjoy the company of other believers (first) and then by extending that love outward to those who do not know our God, we come to imitate the nature of our own God’s society of love where reaching outward to others is essential to his very nature. We first learn to love within the context of God’s people with whom we are committed to live and work together to grow up into Christ; then we learn to love others—even the radically other, that is, those most unlike us—by walking out our vertical relationship with God into the horizontal relationships with other human beings. To do this requires being in each other’s lives during the week, not just at a Sunday gathering where we wave “hello” from across the sanctuary (See Acts 2:42).

Why Church? God desires his people to live on this earth in joyous fellowship with him and each other.

4. The Church is a gathering of the people of God for worship in God’s presence, for listening to God’s voice, and for hearing the Scriptures read and proclaimed, where the gifts and fruit of the Spirit are openly shared. Perhaps it is here that we come closest to responding to the question, “Why go to Church?” The Scripture provides us the example of Jesus

himself with respect to attending synagogue: “[Jesus] went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom” (Luke 4:16; NIV). There is something important about the people of God making it a habit to gather together regularly in imitation of Jesus’ own custom. Habits have a way of molding our character—either for good or bad. Regularly gathering with God’s people for the purpose of worshipping, hearing the Word, and working with and for others is one of the most important ways to become more like Christ. The writer to the Hebrews warned his hearers (who were facing persecution) not to give 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” (Hebrews 10:25; NIV).

When believers gather in a local fellowship, they anticipate the presence of God by his Spirit in their midst. It is the Spirit of God who causes unity among believers and who creates sacred space in our gatherings for God’s presence to dwell among us. When the Spirit is in the midst of God’s people, gifts flow from one to another for the benefit of all. Yet the foundation for such manifestations of the gifts of the Spirit is the fruit of the Spirit in full evidence. The character of Christ, our Head, is rooted in us by the Spirit so that we, too, share love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22; ESV). Upon the basis of this loving fellowship, the Spirit prompts whomever he chooses (Hebrews 2:4; I Corinthians 12:11) within the congregation to share a word of knowledge or wisdom, a manifestation of healing or miracles, prophecy and distinguishing between spirits, as well as tongues and interpretation (I Corinthians 12:8-11). This distribution of gifts throughout the Body of Christ that is gathered for worship is solely the responsibility of the Spirit, yet it requires openness in the congregation to receive and to share what God is providing for the building up of the whole body.

Why Church? God intends his people to gather regularly for offering worship, hearing the Word, sharing and receiving gifts of the Spirit, and spurring “one another on toward love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24; NIV).

5. The Church is a people on a mission—the mission of God. From rich fellowship of gathering together in worship of our God, we leave together to reach out to people in the world. It is the love of Christ that constrains us to offer the ministry of reconciliation (first) and then actions of service (a “cup of water in Jesus’ name,” Mark 9:41). How could this be done as

effectively if done separately and by ourselves?⁴ Think of what benefit God has for the world by binding us together in action! We are a people “on a mission” because God is a “missionary God,” that is, God is so full of rich love and inner fellowship that this explodes into outreach. God’s mission to others—indeed, to those radically other, who were still in their sins when Christ loved them—is the Church’s own mission today (Romans 5:5-7). We have the privilege of being ambassadors of Christ to the world, proclaiming a ministry of reconciliation (II Corinthians 5:12-21). Our mission is a continuation of God’s own mission to reach out to those unlike him.⁵

Why Church? God has a purpose for the Church today, namely, to fulfill his own mission in the world through the people of God.

Conclusion

Local churches can become silos in our communities—standing tall with steeples and crosses, but never really engaging the society around them. In such cases, the building becomes more important than the people. Why Church? It is really quite simple: God wants to have a *people* and intends that people to live in community together, growing in Christian discipleship so that his mission of loving outreach begun by Christ may be continued in the world today through them. That is both the privilege and the challenge of being the Church—the people of God.

Submitted to the Doctrine & Polity Committee of the Church of God
by Terry L. Cross (29 Nov 2017)

⁴ In “The Finish Commitment” of the Church of God, the third goal is to “network with others to reach everyone.” This is precisely what we are emphasizing in this section: we can do so much more together than apart.

⁵ This aspect of the church continuing Christ’s mission on earth today is surely the impetus beyond the Great Commission and the recent Church of God initiative, “The Finish Commitment.”

For Further Reading:

Cross, Terry L. *The Church: A People of God's Presence and Power*. (Forthcoming from Baker Academic, fall 2018).

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